**Motivating Students to Want to Write: A Case Study of a Fourth Grade Teacher**

**Introduction:**

Johnny, a fourth grade student had been doing horrible in Mrs. Smith’s class, he never wanted to do his work especially when having to write and the teacher practically had to beg him to do his work until she found a way to motivate him. Mrs. Smith learned what Johnny liked to do in his free time and what kind of activities motivated him most, she learned that little Johnny really enjoyed football and soccer. After learning this, Mrs. Smith designed a writing activity where students could write a narrative using their favorite icon whether it be a famous sports icon or a famous icon in history. Students had free range of who they wanted to use in their narrative. When Mrs. Smith received the completed papers, she was astonished at how in depth and well thought out Johnny’s narrative was and thus succeeded in helping Johnny find the motivation to want to write. How many students are motivated to participate in class? Moreover, how many students are actually motivated to write?

Motivation is defined as “the condition of being eager to act or work” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. More particularly, a student who is a motivated writer is one “who values writing as a means of expression, communication, and elaboration, and is willing to write to the degree to which a writing task enables him or her to express ideas and feelings” (Boscolo & Gelati 62). Although little research exists on the development of motivating students to write, the current research shows how motivating students has always been a struggle for teachers in the past and in today’s society. With this struggle being known, teachers and researchers have created effective activities and established techniques to help the diminishing motivation of students and to improve students’ motivation to want to write. For example, in the article “Putting the Heart Back into Writing: Nurturing Voice in Middle School Students,” Barb Ruben and Leanne Moll state that students feel “most motivated when they have a sense of autonomy or control” (14). Although past literature has given some valuable insight as to how to motivate students and their writing and also activities that will help students develop motivation, there is still a large amount of research to be done. We as teachers need to fully understand what student motivation is and be given an array of techniques and concepts to reference to when creating writing activities and/or writing prompts to help motivate students. Current and future teachers foremost need to have examples of effective activities to look upon and to use when trying to help troubled students and motivate them in their writing.

In an effort to continue establishing effective approaches to maximize motivation, this case study is interested in the following questions: How do teachers motivate students to want to write? What types of activities do teachers use to motivate students to become avid writers in and outside of the classroom? And lastly, will recognizing good work help motivate students and their writing? During this investigation, I have gained great insight on motivating students through activities performed and concepts used through the use of observations of a fourth grade class, an interview with a fantastic fourth grade teacher, Ms. Brittany Johnson, and lastly, studying past research performed on the topic. This essay is important to not only English teachers but teachers of every subject because writing is used in not only every subject but in every aspect of life in and outside of school. Students need to be motivated to write to be able to not only gain the grade they desire but to be able to succeed in life past their academic careers.

**Methods:**

First, I began my case study by using outside research on the subject of student motivation. I found two very detailed and thorough articles that enhanced my knowledge on past research and what had been discovered about motivating students to write. After meticulously reading through the material, I decided the best methods to use for this case study. First, I observed real life students, both struggling students and successful students and their teacher and her approaches to help motivate her students to write. I observed a fourth grade classroom at Columbia Elementary School in a small town in South Carolina. I observed this class for five hours, going once a week for an hour at a time. I visited the class five consecutive weeks allowing me to have very diverse observations. Every week I went, the students were working on a new assignment which allowed great variety in my observations. When I went to observe, I sat at a table close to Ms. Johnson’s desk, in one corner of the classroom. I did not disturb the students but instead sat quietly at the table and recorded everything I saw the students and Ms. Johnson do and things that I heard that I thought were interesting.

I complemented these observations by interviewing with Ms. Johnson, the fourth grade teacher whose class I was observing. I interviewed her during her planning period so we would not be disrupted by students and so she could speak freely about not only her students and their backgrounds but also about her teaching methods and her ideas behind those methods. In the interview I asked her a total of eleven questions which was broken down as follows: four questions on background information about herself; two questions about her students; and lastly, five questions about her thoughts on motivation and the practices she has used. The interview included questions about herself, for example, how long she had been teaching and what degree(s) she had, and about the demographics of the class. Once I had enough background on Ms. Johnson and her fourth grade class, I asked her five questions about motivation and her practices, including questions like, what is your definition of motivation? How do you motivate your students to want to write? What type of activities have you used to motivate your students? How did you come up with these activities? After the interview, I asked Ms. Johnson if she could share with me pieces of her students writing who she believed had motivation to write and those who did not have motivation to write in able to a better look at how motivation effects student writing. In total, she showed me three pieces of students’ writing which she then allowed me to take pictures of and use as examples and to reflect upon.

I chose these three methods because of two reasons. First, I needed outside research to become better acquainted with the topic and the information already produced. Next, I used observations and an interview to get real life examples and learn from a functioning classroom that has a hardworking teacher who has a variety of ways and techniques to motivate her students to want to write. These three methods are appropriate for this case study because motivation in the classroom is a problem for every teacher and the only way to find ways to help this problem is to observe and ask teachers who are successful in doing so how they mastered motivation and the methods and practices they use. Lastly, these methods worked perfectly for my case study and everything went as planned.

**Background:**

Ms. Brittany Johnson is a fourth grade teacher at Columbia Elementary School whom I interviewed. She graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and later went back and received her Master’s degree in teaching. Ms. Johnson is also National Board certified. She has been teaching nine years, three of those years at Columbia Elementary. During her nine years of teaching, she has taught second grade for five years, second and third grade ELA and Social Studies for one year, third grade for one year, and fourth grade for the past two years.

Ms. Johnson’s fourth grade class is the class I observed. In this class at Columbia Elementary School, there are twenty one students, fourteen boys and seven girls. The class is composed of three Caucasian students, seven ESOL students, and eleven African American students. Furthermore, there are four students who are served with ESOL, two students who go to resource, and one student who goes to all three, ESOL, speech, and resource. Ms. Johnson fourth grade class is a very diverse group not only in demographics but also in their academics.

**Findings:**

There are many ways for us teachers to motivate our students. First, we must learn methods to motivate our students. One method to help motivate students is to structure writing activities “around something fun” (Johnson) as much as possible instead of telling the students to sit down and write a paragraph about what they know about a topic. This allows students to develop intrinsic motivation and will help them associate writing with something fun. For example, in Mrs. Johnson’s class when the students were studying habitats, instead of writing information about each habitat, the students had to make a board game and thus show their knowledge in a written form without it actually feeling like sitting down and writing an informational text. The students were so excited about this idea and really took to the assignment.

Another method us teachers can use to help motivate our students is to give the students “an opportunity to write different genres and to write in different formats” (Johnson). Let’s face it, even when we write as adults, writing in the same genre and using the same format can get boring and uninteresting. Students have even less patience when it comes to writing in the same format and genre all the time, therefore Ms. Johnson suggest giving the students opportunities to write using different formats in an array of genres. She has used an assortment of different writing activities to keep the students interested and motivated to write such as writing an email, creating a twitter or blog post to using hashtags. All of these worked very well when looking at a traditional paragraph written by a student. When compared to one another, the traditional paragraph lacked in content and analysis while the other formats and genres showed mounds of content and enthusiasm by the students.

The last method to help assist teachers to motivate their students to write is to teach that “writing is less about just getting something on paper but that writing has a purpose” (Johnson). Everyone in the world writes for a purpose whether it is to communicate or to express their feelings, thus when students understand that their writing has a purpose they are more apt to put more effort into it and to have the motivation to do well. For example, in Ms. Johnson’s fourth grade class, her students had to write a letter to Governor Haley about why South Carolina should or should not celebrate Columbus Day and if not then suggest a famous explorer who should be celebrated on that day. After the students conducted careful research and learned about all of the explorers, the students became very passionate about the subject and in one student’s subject line of an email it read, “Christopher Columbus = LIAR” (Johnson) thus showing how passionate and motivated the students were to want to write and express themselves. Lastly, showing student’s that their writing has a purpose and is more than just getting a grade motivates them because they feel as if they play an important role in society and that more than one person will read their letter.

Next, there are a variety of activities that we can use to motivate our students to want to write. Although a few activities are mentioned above, there are many more. An activity that all teachers can use in every age group is using social media in a writing activity to motivate our students to want to write. For example, Ms. Johnson decided to use technology to help motivate her students to write, to teach main ideas and help students figure out their main ideas, she used hashtags. She got the idea from the famous social media website, Twitter. During this activity, the students were to write a “twitter post” telling the differences between slavery and indentured servitude and at the end of the post the students were to “add a hash tag and a word or phrase that tells the main idea of the post” (Johnson). The students were so intrigued with the idea of getting to write a twitter post and use hashtags that they were ready to start right away, thus showing their motivation to write. Ms. Johnson made the writing activity fun by giving them another format to write with rather than the traditional paragraph hence making the students eager to try something fun and motivate them at the same time.

Moreover, another great motivational activity for writing is the activity mentioned above. Teachers can use writing a letter or email to a person of a high stature or just another person as an activity to motivate students to write. Ms. Johnson had her students write letters to Governor Haley and argue whether Columbus Day should be celebrated or if it should not be celebrated. Johnson states, “they really got into it” and she goes on later to discuss how one student who hated writing loved this activity and wrote one of the best persuasive essays in the class. This activity is especially worthy of pulling in motivational strategies because again, the students are not only writing to write or writing for a grade but better yet writing for a purpose in the real world.

Finally, recognizing good work helps motivate students and their writing immensely because it shows them that when they do well, their work is appreciated and well known. In Ms. Johnson’s class, when a student does an exceptional job on a writing assignment, theirs is then used as the class example of the correct way of doing something. Johnson tells about a student who did well on an assignment and how she used his as an example and put it on the board for all to see. As a class, they went through the student’s paper and discussed all the things done well by the student. Later Johnson states, “I heard students asking the student who did well, ‘Can I see how you did that?’ ‘Can I see yours again?’ And I could see the student’s face light up instantly when the others were coming to him asking for help” (Johnson). Lastly, recognizing good work not only motivates that one student to do well on assignments especially writing assignments but also motivates the other students to do well so their work will also be recognized.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, student motivation is a necessity when it comes to writing well, and a teacher has to find methods and activities to enhance student motivation to the fullest. Every teacher at some point in his or her career has a group of students or maybe just one student who lacks motivation when it comes to writing and through this case study, teachers can not only learn methods to motivate student writing but also activities to enhance student motivation and how recognizing exceptional work can increase a student’s motivation to write. Additionally, student motivation to write is a highly important topic because writing is a part of students’ daily lives in and outside of the classroom and will be an important characteristic to possess past their academic careers because writing is the way the world communicates. Lastly, these findings will help all teachers ensure their students will have the motivation to want to write and thus be successful throughout their lives academically and professionally.

Work Cited

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