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*Whose Class is it Anyway?: Observations of Writing Instruction in Fourth Grade*

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What college senior would not like the chance to “try on” a job to see how it fits? As a senior studying Elementary Education at the University of Alabama, I got to do just that. For my final University Honors Program course, I completed an independent study on an elementary school teacher, Ms. Ann Marie Corgill. What began as a simple one-hour course ended up being so much more than that. In studying her teaching philosophy and techniques, I learned how to conduct a democratic classroom, which in turn teaches elementary students to be independent. More importantly, I learned what separates a good teacher from a great teacher. Ms. Corgill is the latter, and I was inspired.

Ann Marie Corgill is a highly regarded teacher nationally. Currently teaching fourth grade at Cherokee Bend Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, she has also taught in other Birmingham schools, as well as at The Manhattan New School in New York, New York. She is an experienced teacher who has worked with many diverse groups of children. Through her experience, Ms. Corgill has learned how to successfully engage a classroom. During my time with her, I observed Ms. Corgill’s unique and non-traditional techniques and teaching style. In addition to shadowing Ms. Corgill, I studied her book, *Of Primary Importance* (2008) and her ideas about how to structure the daily routines of the classroom so that there is time for the
important and effective ways to engage children in content. Ms. Corgill believes that writing should empower students, and it should be something they enjoy and look forward to, instead of disliking and dreading. What follows is a discussion of two topics unique to her teaching style: methods for establishing her classroom atmosphere and routines and her views on writing instruction, and how they both have the ability to create a thriving classroom. First, I will examine her methods for setting the tone in her classroom at the beginning of the school year.

Non-Traditional Atmosphere

Everybody is familiar with the caricature of a traditional elementary school classroom. A set of strict rules hangs on the wall, including “sit in your assigned seat,” “raise your hand if you have something to say,” and “no talking.” The teacher sits at a desk in the front of the class, far-removed from students. Basically, this style of classroom was not a democracy, but a dictatorship with the teacher in the role of dictator. However, in recent years school administrators, teachers, and parents have been pushing for more democratic classrooms, where students are allowed a louder voice when it comes to their desired learning style. “Democracy is participatory in nature, and should be participatory in the classroom as well” (“Democratic Classrooms”, 2008, n.p.). Resources abound for studying and implementing such “classroom democracy.” One example includes A Democratic Classroom, by Steven Wolk, where he shared his views of how this kind of classroom can succeed. Another educator, Judith Gray, Ph. D., agrees. In one of her articles, “Whose Classroom Is it?,” she stated, “We must seriously reconsider the notion that the teacher is in command of the learning environment - a benevolent autocrat…. ” (2001, n.p.). She also offers examples of classroom activities to encourage moving toward greater democracy in the classroom. One positive result from a change to democratic classrooms is that teachers have learned to make school, as a whole, more hands-on and exciting. Ms. Corgill’s students, for example, write with a goal in mind. Instead of writing randomly, their work will take the form of a book written and illustrated by them. When the project is completed, each student can proudly claim to be an author. Other teachers have instituted similar practices for subjects other than writing, with The Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) (Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative, 2013, n.p.) Put in place by the Alabama Department of Education, AMSTI was started to improve math and science teaching in Alabama, and it involves hands-on instruction and learning.

As a senior studying elementary education, I have seen my fair share of elementary teachers. I have seen great lessons, where students are begging for the lesson not to end, but I have never been able to shake the feeling that there was something missing, even though I could never quite put my finger on what that missing puzzle piece might be. It took this summer, researching and shadowing Ms. Corgill, for me to finally understand the element I was missing - the element of the real world.

From day one, Ms. Corgill explains that “[T]he classroom is not mine, but ours” (Corgill, 2013b, p. 3). This was evident in the decorations in her classroom, more specifically, the lack of decorations. She does not waste time making her room “cutesy” and “perfect” for her students. Instead, she leaves it bare so that the students can personalize the classroom in a way that fits them best. Upon entering the classroom on the first day, the students’ faces registered shock. They were hesitantly curious and wondered why the room looked differently than rooms they
had been in in the past. However, I knew why Ms. Corgill had designed her room this way, and I also knew that ultimately, the students would appreciate being able to decorate the bare walls with their own work. The classroom would take on the personality of its students, and its walls would reflect their progress during the year. Once the students recognized that the blank space was for them, there was a total investment in the room, not being "Ms. Corgill’s room" but "their room" that would grow and come to life as they grew.

**Teaching personal responsibility.** My personal experience has always been being a part of a teacher’s classroom, not having a classroom that was part mine. For this reason, the image that immediately enters my mind is marker all over the walls, sword fights with pencils, spitballs flying everywhere, and out-of-control children running around in circles. Ms. Corgill explained that it is not like this at all. When her students walk into the classroom on the first day of school, she explains to them that they are responsible for their own actions. She tells them that she is trusting them to learn how to become autonomous individuals, who learn to solve problems independently, as well as collaboratively with their peers. She goes further saying that all this work happens over time, but it is necessary for the children to know on the first day that they are valued as thinkers, learners, and people. She is not "in control" of their learning or behavior, but rather, is a facilitator of their new understandings, both academically and socially. Basically, Ms. Corgill gives the students the privilege of being in charge because they will have to learn this skill in order to survive in the real world. She states it simply, “School routines need to make sense and connect to the work and learning students will do for the rest of their lives” (Corgill, 2013a, p. 1).

**Establishing expectations.** Although her students are elementary school age, Ms. Corgill uses her classroom as a road on their journey toward adulthood. There are four main techniques that Ms. Corgill uses to encourage her students to learn responsibility through “real life” expectations of behavior. First, there is no assigned seating in her classroom. In an elementary school, this concept is extremely rare. Ms. Corgill wants the students to decide where they should sit, based upon their desire to succeed in the classroom. She wants them to make the right choice and choose not to sit by someone who might get them in trouble. For example, a student might have fun sitting beside a close friend. Yet, that same student will know that he/she will be more successful if he/she sits by a different student, where excessive talking will not be as much of a temptation. Second, there is no hand raising in her classroom. This, specifically, was very intriguing to me. She explained that she wanted her students to learn how to make their voices heard. She went on to say that when she goes to dinner with friends, she does not raise her hand when she has something to tell them. Instead, she waits until it is her turn to talk. By replicating this real life situation in her classroom, Ms. Corgill is again giving the student the chance to make wise choices. In the process, that student will learn a skill that will have positive repercussions in the real world. Third, Ms. Corgill loves to interact with her students. One way this is evident is that she often conferences with them and spends a large part of class time walking around looking at their work. For example, during one of her conferences, I overheard her asking her student where he found all of his information in his “Natural Disasters” PowerPoint. He asked her what she meant, not knowing that he was responsible for citing any information he included that was not his own. She explained to him what citing sources meant, as well as plagiarism. She also asked him if he would be willing to share with the class what he learned. Finally, Ms. Corgill proved the importance of interaction with students by explaining
that she does not even have her own desk. She prefers a “Teacher area that avoids sending messages of importance,” as well as one that “…is not always off limits to students during work time” (Corgill, 2008, p. 30).

**Teaching students to take ownership.** While none of these three techniques are very traditional for a classroom, they still seem to work. Ms. Corgill wants her students to be prepared for the real world, so she has designed her classroom to be more like a real world situation. In treating her students more like adults than teachers have in the past, she is letting them know that she has high expectations of them. From my observation, her students respond accordingly. For example, in Ms. Corgill’s classroom there is a large library. It was very unorganized and messy, but it still housed hundreds of books. One of the jobs Ms. Corgill gave her students was to organize the class library. She did not care how they did it, but they were to work as a class to organize it in the way they found most effective. The students immediately started blurtong out ideas - the room erupted into complete chaos. However, Ms. Corgill did not intervene. Instead, she let the students solve the problem on their own of how they were going to discuss the task, as well as how the books should be divided. After a few frustrating minutes, a leader emerged from the students and helped direct the process. Overall, I was very impressed by the way the students worked together. From this simple assignment, I could see that the students learned several lessons in addition to organizing a classroom library.

**Focus on Writing**

A discussion of Ms. Corgill’s views and specific techniques for writing instruction is the second focus area of my study. Ms. Corgill is a gifted teacher. One of her valuable strengths is the ability to teach writing. Throughout Of Primary Importance (2008) she paints a perfect picture of what writing should look like in an elementary classroom. She also warns the reader that effective writing instruction is not for sissies. It is made up of many components, and it requires dedication and consistency over the entire school year. Yet she also writes with confidence that her students’ success is such a great reward that it is worth the effort. Other scholars support these ideas. For example, Jones and East (2009), found that, “Educators play a vital role in the writing process” (p. 121). They also took one of Ms. Corgill’s points even further. Not only does the students’ success produce a great reward for the teacher, but for the students as well. The students become empowered, allowing them to gain confidence that can “…spur them to write and begin to view themselves as expert writers” (p. 121). Donald Graves (2004) agreed that the students’ success in writing “…reveals to them what they are actually capable of achieving” (p.91).

**The six As of teaching writing.** Ms. Corgill begins her book by discussing the six As: analyze, ask, applaud, assist, assess, and advocate. She believes that teachers who follow these six steps will be those who are most successful in training young writers (Corgill, 2008). First is analyzing. This requires the teacher to know the students – their likes and dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and passions. In order to guide students optimally, the teacher must know the best way to reach and teach each one of them. This is time-consuming and may be difficult, because each student is unique. What works well for one student may not work as well for another. Second is asking. Students are taught to ask questions when they need answers. Teachers
should also be willing to take the time to ask questions of their students. This is extremely helpful in finding a topic for writing assignments. When the teacher knows what the students are thinking about, it is easier to assist them in choosing topics that interest those students. Next comes applauding. Sometimes students will write silly and inappropriate, off-topic things. The teacher should not make fun of this writing, but instead, “...applaud the child for taking a risk” (Corgill, 2008, p. 10). Creativity can be killed when a student believes that all writing must be done “inside the lines”. Fear of ridicule discourages efforts in this area. Fourth is assisting, which means exactly what it says. Although children in the classroom are being treated like adults, that does not mean they know the answer to everything and can complete their work on their own without help. Often, students need a little assistance. Assisting is a special step because often, the assistance can come from other students in the class. Students are sometimes more willing to ask for assistance that comes from their peers. Similarly, students who assist other students enjoy increased self-esteem. This creates a win-win situation for all students involved. Next is assessing. In order for teachers to know if their teaching methods are effective, the students must be assessed in some form. These assessments should be honest. Teachers should not be discouraged by the outcomes, but instead look at them as an opportunity to grow and become an even better teacher. The last step is advocating. This ties in directly with step one - analyzing. Advocating for students involves knowing what needs to be taught and teaching it the way that works best for the students and the teacher. Ms. Corgill also believes that eliminating unnecessary material can be beneficial and allow more time to cover material that really matters. In this way, she believes in putting students’ needs first – ahead of any pressure to follow the lead of other teachers. By following these six steps, teachers become the best writing teachers possible. These steps teach teachers to be “…groundbreaking, goal-reaching, mandate-questioning, child-advocating” teachers for their students (Corgill, 2008, p. 16).

**Building on a firm foundation.** The six steps described above are the major outline of how Ms. Corgill believes writing should be taught. However, this in itself is not the complete picture. There are additional “behind the scenes” ideas that Ms. Corgill encourages if teachers are to see their students grow as writers. First, teachers can implement all six steps, but if they do not teach their students to love writing, they are not going to get very far. One common reason that students struggle with writing and therefore do not like it is because they are not used to having to do it. Just like everything else, practice makes perfect.

Teachers have the ability to make writing enjoyable for their students. According to Ray (2004), teachers must know that before they can “…ever expect students to care deeply about how they write, they must care deeply about what they are writing” (p. 101). This can be accomplished by allowing students to make their own decisions regarding their desired writing topic, materials they want to use, and where they want to work. By giving students choices, the teacher allows them to take ownership of their writing. As a result, they are much more likely to grow to love writing.

Second, teachers should establish a writing routine on the first day of school and stick to it. “The more you have your students write, the easier it will become” (Corgill, 2008, p. 19). Jones and East (2009) concurred, saying, “…writing should occur daily” (p. 114). Even on the hectic first day of school, Ms. Corgill managed to incorporate writing into the day. She explained to the
students that throughout the course of the year, they were going to become authors. This really intrigued the students and got them excited about getting started. Their expectations were high as they pictured themselves achieving the goal of being authors. She captured their imagination from the first day! Ray (2004) also noted the importance of planting the idea of becoming an author in students’ heads. Ray believes that students need time to grow and develop their “…sense of self as writers, as well as personal writing processes that work for them” (105).

Also, Ms. Corgill told them they would write about many different topics, as well as learn how to complete a writer’s workshop. Finally, she told the students that every morning when they walked into class, they were to begin working on their writing. Whether they were brainstorming ideas, working on a rough draft, peer editing, or finalizing the last draft, they were to always work on writing when they entered the room in the morning. Not only had she laid out a vision for them, she had also showed them a process by which that vision would become a reality.

Third, teacher-student conferences are very important when it comes to the growth of the writer. Not only does this help improve the students’ writing, but it also lets them know that you care about their progress. Jones and East (2009) believe, “Consistent feedback is critical” (p. 114). By giving each student individual time, students see that their teachers care for them and their success as a writer. Graves (2004) wrote that teachers should take the student’s writing as is, and with the help of that student, turn it into something better. Also, during this time, each child should be told one aspect they need to work on, as well as one thing they are doing well. By complimenting the student, the teacher is more likely to see the student “…go off and try to improve their writing” (Corgill, 2008, p. 51). In addition, the teacher is “…demonstrating what the students need to appreciate in their own writing” (Graves, 2004, p. 91). Last, students should always be given time to share their work. Whether all students are present, or just one, whether the students have five minutes, or thirty seconds, students need time to “show-off” their hard work. Ms. Corgill let one student share her work right before the class went to lunch. Although she had only one minute, the student was thrilled to share her personal narrative on what she planned to do over Thanksgiving break. If teachers are going to emphasize the value of writing, students should be allowed to share their creations. As ability and confidence grow, what child would not be thrilled to say, “Look what I can do?” Ms. Corgill puts it perfectly, “[S]o much teaching and learning about writing is held in the final pieces, and that writing deserves an audience and a celebration” (Corgill, 2008, p. 152). These few ideas are crucial to the success of writing instruction in an elementary classroom. Together, they help the overall process run smoothly, while “…embodying high expectations for independence and effective self-evaluation” (Graves, 2004, p. 92).

**Final Thoughts**

Throughout this experience, I gained knowledge that will make me a better teacher, not only in writing, but also in other subjects. Through the shadowing experience and studying the reading material, I have gained new insights that will be valuable when I have my own classroom. First, when it comes to Ms. Corgill’s interesting teaching techniques, there are some that I cannot wait to try, such as eliminating a teacher desk. I see how this can provide instant benefits to classroom atmosphere. It takes away the feeling that there is a barrier between teachers and
students, and instead it presents teacher and students as equals working together. However, I am a little skeptical to try the no hand-raising idea; I am concerned that it might create too much chaos. At least at the beginning of my teaching career, I will be more comfortable sticking with tradition in this area. Second, I gathered plenty of helpful information about writing instruction. In all of the readings I noticed some great tips, such as getting to know my students, frequently giving them choices of what they want to write about, participating in conferences, and allowing them to share their work.

Teaching is Ann Marie Corgill’s passion. One only has to spend a short time in her classroom to see the form that her passion takes. The atmosphere is electric, yet orderly. Creativity abounds in the midst of organization. Her students exhibit self-discipline and excitement at the same time. How is this possible? It is possible because Ms. Corgill has discovered a formula that works. She provides a democratic atmosphere, incorporating elements of high expectations and personal responsibility. She balances established, proven teaching techniques with the right amount of goal-oriented practice and motivation. The result is students who learn to write, in a classroom that they proudly claim as their own.

References