Introduction

I lived to ride horses from about the time I was five. I wanted to be a professional rider when I grew up. I would do just about anything in order to have time in the saddle. Three horses lived in a field a mile up the street from our house. Dr. Davenport owned the three thoroughbreds—a somewhat trained eight-year old named Nordic and two barely broken younger horses. He needed someone to ride them, and at age twelve, I jumped on that challenge, literally and figuratively. I rode those horses in a field with holes. I used his saddle that was too big for me, his stirrups that were too long for me, and a bridle with the wrong type of bit. We built jumps out of whatever we could find, and Dr. Davenport had no idea how to teach a rider or train a horse.

Between the environment, the equipment, and the instruction, there was more of a chance that I'd get killed than become a better rider. Luckily for me, the turning point happened when I broke my finger from gripping the reins too hard, and my parents decided that lessons and leasing a horse through a reputable stable would be a better idea than risking other broken bones under Dr. Davenport's supervision.

My equine adventures remind me of the experiences some of our writers have in classrooms. I'm not talking about all writers. For the most part, I'm envisioning the writers who may be facing instructional obstacles in their processes. While some people think of these students as strugglers or high-need students, for the rest of this book, I will refer to them as our striving writers. While I grapple with *any* term, striving implies effort, and I want to believe that everyone is wired and willing to *try*; people don't *choose* to struggle.

Striving writers might have obstacles in their learning pathways that get in the way of their cognitive engagement. In addition to learning disabilities or processing disorders, they could also have inconsistent or incomplete skill sets from previous years. Our strivers may have missed out on instruction for various reasons, such as receiving some sort of intervention during writing time. Maybe they moved from a district without a strong writing program. Maybe they didn't master an earlier concept that was foundational to the development of other skills. For instance, many of the skills within writing are developmental, and a striving writer might have been not quite ready to learn how to form letters when this was taught, and without that skill, they missed

out on how to create words and sentences. Whatever the case, a gap starts to form within the writing life of these students, and without intervention and targeted instruction, that gap has the potential to widen. We cannot allow this to happen. If you've seen that gap start to form or widen in your own students, you've come to the right place.

Before we go a step further, though, we must agree to believe two things:

1. All children can learn to write.

2. It is a fundamental imperative that we do everything in our power to teach the students in our care how to express themselves through words and through writing.

Frank Smith, a contemporary psycho-linguist, wrote *Writing and the Writer* in 1994, and I return to his beautifully written statement to fortify my own conviction that all children can write: "It is unproductive to regard writing as a special kind of activity that requires unusual talents or lengthy training and can only be used for a few specialized ends, which perhaps do not concern many people. It is wrong to regard writing ability as a particularly esoteric skill that only a few can achieve, and then usually with a great deal of effort. The power of writing could be open to anyone who can use speech" (Smith, 1994, p. 17). In other words, I hope that this book will help you find ways for all of your students—especially the ones who struggle—to find access and success with writing.

Nordic was unsafe for me as a young rider. The hurdles were too many and too high. The more figurative hurdles in our writing classrooms might not break fingers, but they break spirits—and they crush any interest in the power of written words. For our striving writers to overcome their hurdles, we must change their course, recognizing that learning can happen at a different rate and from a different place.

Why Our Work Matters

While I was writing this book, I attended a breakfast for a local foundation whose mission is to serve as a catalyst for change in the lives of women and girls. The keynote speaker shared her experiences of teaching high school women how to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, how to manage personal finances, and what to think about insofar as managing money. As I sipped my cold coffee,

everything she did sounded important—and so quantifiable. I haven't been able to quantify my writing instruction in terms of dollars. What is the value of composing a coherent email? Weaving stories into a cover letter? Writing instructions for a process?

Later that afternoon, I had a conversation with myself—I do that—reminding myself of the importance of my work. I even wrote about it in my notebook that night. Just as managing finances falls into the realm of critical life skills, so does writing. Written expression is a gateway into opportunities and personal impact.

So many students pass through our schools without learning how to assemble their ideas in writing, how to express themselves to the world in a literate and permanent way. We excuse ourselves from teaching some of these students to write, falling back on their labels, their behaviors, or their unavailability. Just because a child has an IEP doesn't mean that they should have a scribe

Pause FOR PD

When I first envisioned this book, I proposed the title *Who Keeps You Up at Night?* While this title didn't last, these are the students I'm talking about—the ones who you think about at night, wondering how you can meet their needs, what you can do to make learning seem more possible.

- Make a five-column chart. Down the left side, write the names of the students who you would call your striving writers, beginning with the second row.
- Across the top, beginning with the second column, write the following headers:
  - What do you know about them as people?
  - What do they do well as writers?
  - What could be holding them back?
  - What could you do to make writing more accessible to them?
- Fill out the chart as best you can

Over the course of reading this book, my hope is that your chart will develop and that you will revisit, reflect, and develop your knowledge and understanding of your students as people and as writers and your repertoire of tools and strategies for developing them as writers.

and be excused from creating their own written work. Likewise, fine motor skills shouldn't excuse a child from writing their own ideas. Behavioral issues that happen during writing are often caused by feelings of incompetency and vulnerability. Maybe those children would benefit from different entry points and invitations into the process.

Throughout this book, I will ask you to "Pause for PD" with a recurring text feature that presents a short exercise of professional development. Here's your first one, as I ask you to think about the striving writers who exist within your classroom, within your reach, within your impact.

Regardless of genre, regardless of platform, students need to develop their voices as writers and then use these voices to entertain, inform, and change the world. We have a responsibility as educators to teach students to write. Furthermore, we have a moral imperative to ensure that we provide pathways for *all* students to learn to write. We must teach our students to express their ideas so that they can share them with others. We must equip our students with courage, skills, and tools to do this. Communication is imperative, not only for careers and work but also for participation in a modern democratic society.

Entry Points, Bridges, and Pathways

It's common to get caught up in standards and what we are supposed to cover within our curriculum. In this mindset, when we sit down with a young writer, we see more that's wrong with their work that what's right. Our reaction sends a message to the writer. If we are going to correct everything on that page, our inadvertent messaging tells them to only put what's perfect on that page. That's paralyzing. If we are going to grow writers, we have to encourage imperfection. We have to invite our young writers to take risks and discover what works and doesn't work for them. This concept can be elusive and difficult to grasp, especially since so much of the writing we read is published and has the benefit of many drafts and revisions. We see the final perfect product, as opposed to the messy process that preceded it. This introduction was overhauled, revised, and wordsmithed several times before you were able to read it. If I thought that everything I wrote had to be perfect, I would freeze. This introduction, let alone this book, would not exist.

In order to let go of perfect, our striving writers need safe environments and accessible entry points. Sometimes these entry points are at different levels,

and they may be different than other students' writing gateways. Our striving writers need bridges as well—various structures that can scaffold them and provide access from their entry points to other points further along their writing pathways. When we provide these entry points and bridges, we open up new pathways for our striving writers—pathways that lead to courage and risk-taking, growth, and achievement.

OUR SHARED BELIEFS ABOUT WRITING INSTRUCTION

For the first seven years of teaching, I worked in a residential school for emotionally disturbed students. Rather than embroil ourselves in constant power struggles and behavioral challenges, we teachers were always on the lookout for ways to engage and inspire our learners. It was 1992, a few years after *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy Calkins had been published. The work of Donald Graves in and around children and writing workshops was well under way, and my colleague, Ann, and I signed up for a week-long course about writing instruction from Katie Wood—before she was Katie Wood Ray.

Many of the ideas behind that course boiled down to choice and process. Within all components of our writing instruction, we empowered our students to make decisions for themselves, to work their way toward a possible product by celebrating the growth and learning that happened through the process. Choice and process led to higher levels of engagement than Ann and I had ever experienced with our students—and they grew as writers.

When I returned to teaching after staying home with children for several years, I worked as a special education teacher within a district dedicated to workshop practices. I went on to become the elementary writing coordinator, and my current work entails training new teachers and planning professional development around workshop philosophy, strategies, and practices. Our district works closely with staff developers from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP), and I pay close attention to their research and latest thinking around literacy practices. Therefore, many of the concepts within this book have been developed within the structure of a workshop with a minilesson, independent writing time, and a share time. A sense of authentic purpose and choice guide the work I do within writing classrooms.

With that said, I have tried to provide on-roads for a variety of instruction and classrooms. You don't have to be a workshop teacher to access the concepts

within this book; there are many different ways to teach students to write. The important thing is that we all share these guiding principles:

- A commitment to standards-based instruction: My practices are based on the Common Core State Standards, but no matter where you teach, you also have a set of standards guiding your work.
- A quest for differentiated instruction that provides access points for learners who have a variety of strengths and needs: We want to meet kids where they are.
- A belief that all students want to learn and can succeed when given the right learning conditions.
- A willingness to relinquish the need for perfection in favor of process and choice.

The opening line of *Visible Learning for Literacy, Grades K–12* by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Hattie is "Every student deserves a great teacher, not by chance, but by design" (2016, p. 2). My hope is that you will find inspiration within the following chapters to reach for greatness when it comes to providing writing instruction for all students—that you will envision and then design a classroom in which every student can write and feel successful, that it's not left to chance.

How This Book Is Organized and What I Hope You'll Gain From Reading It

Madison, a third-grade student who admittedly did not like writing, did everything but listen to the instruction. She took a while to gather her materials. Then, she went to the back of the classroom to get a drink before heading to the front of the classroom where the instruction was taking place. Once she was there—midway through the lesson—she drew in her notebook and whispered with other students. Her teacher addressed her behavior, but her disruptions continued.

After observing this a few times, I invited Madison to have a conversation.

"You weren't listening to much of that instruction," I said. "Why not? What was in your way?"

Madison stared at me for a minute, maybe evaluating in her head if I was serious about my question (I was), maybe figuring out how to respond. I waited.

And then she answered.

"I need lessons that are at my level," she said.

I need lessons that are at my level.

Madison's statement has stayed with me. Many striving writers are not ready for lessons that their peers understand and integrate; how do we manage our classrooms and instruction to accommodate and differentiate for those children? If they're not paying attention, then they're not learning. It is my hope that the chapters in this book can help you reflect, identify changes that could be made, and implement some different processes so your students can become more confident, competent, and courageous writers.

Engagement is greater in classrooms where tasks are hands-on, challenging, and authentic (Marks, 2000), but as with so many things in life, we have to balance challenges with opportunities for success. Sometimes the balance is tenuous, and sometimes those entry points are elusive; my hope is that you'll gain confidence in discovering and differentiating entry points for striving writers through my mistakes, reflections, and repeated attempts.

Another hope is that the framework of these chapters affirm and validate predictable problems. The concepts underlying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) support guiding principles about the instruction of writing and the ideas and strategies I share that serve as bridges and alternative pathways for striving writers. UDL is a relatively recent framework in the history of learning and education. Anne Meyer and David Rose, researchers and educators, have led the work of the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) and laid out the principles of UDL in the 1990s. The main commitment of UDL is to make learning accessible and effective for all. The three principles of UDL are that learners should have multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression.

Let's think about what these three things—engagement, representation, and expression—might look like for our striving writers. They may need alternative ways to understand the reasons for learning and to stimulate interest and motivation for learning. They may need information presented in different ways, and they will likely benefit from having multiple ways to express what they know and are able to do.

If students can't do a task without us, then they can't do it. Our job requires that we expand our teaching repertoire, providing students with multiple means for engagement, representation, and expression so that they can do more and more at higher and higher levels—without us. The early chapters of this book focus on the conditions we need to establish within our classroom environment and management, so that all students can access our instruction and develop a mindset for learning.

Teachers who provide clear expectations and instructions, strong guidance during lessons, and constructive feedback have students who are more behaviorally and cognitively engaged (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Engagement matters to learning, but how do we create that elusive concept for our students, especially our striving writers? How we set the stage matters, and the beginning of this book explores how we can create optimal environments for instruction and learning. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, believed that the environment plays such an important role in the learning lives of children that it serves as a third teacher, along with teachers and parents. We can adapt Malaguzzi's thinking to elementary classrooms at both lower and upper levels. Students must feel safe in their classrooms, but they also should recognize the tools and resources they can access in order to be independent, self-directed learners.

With a safe, supportive, and inspiring environment in place, we can think about management. How do we set up systems, routines, and expectations so that we maximize the minutes we spend with our students? And once we do that, how do we respond to the learning needs of our students, welcoming them into the learning process with expectations and entry points that align with their present levels of functioning? Chapter 2 provides actionable strategies for maximizing instruction as well as independent writing time for all writers, especially our strivers.

If the difference between what a student writes independently and what that same student writes during class time is significant, then it could be that you are doing too much of the coaching, which means the expected product is too far away from the student's current independent processing level. If we have to teach so hard that the work is more ours than theirs, then we're not creating an optimal learning situation. On the other hand, when we aim instruction at that place just beyond what students can do independently and we cheer on

approximation, we have a much better shot at high learning rates. This place coincides with what Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) identified as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Chapter 3 addresses many of the ideas around how ZPD has the potential to increase the impact of our instruction by helping us find entry points for our striving writers.

Once we relocate entry points for learners like Madison, we can begin to think about bridges, which is what we'll start to do in Chapters 4 and 5. In other words, how do we provide platforms and scaffolds that support our learners, albeit temporarily, so that they can develop skills and confidence? The middle of this book evolves into these sorts of structures. Chances are that at some point, the striving writers who show up in our classrooms weren't ready or weren't present for instruction during previous years, and we have to bridge those gaps, filling in holes and rebuilding foundations of skills and knowledge so that they can access the next levels of expectations.

Ultimately, we want students who can forge their own pathways in their learning process. I have designed Chapters 6 and 7 to take you along my thought process as I work to help striving writers discover their own pathways to independence. We don't want to minimize the importance of their eventual written products, but we do want to maximize the value of their process. Each individualized process should forge pathways of growth and achievement, as well as an understanding of and appreciation for the importance of writing in their lives as productive and contributing citizens. This is how writing skills transfer—how students start to own their learning and think of themselves as writers.

Because all writing leans on spelling and conventions—elements that Smith refers to as transcriptive components (Smith, 1994)—Chapter 8 delves into how we can incorporate spelling and punctuation lessons into the lives of our striving writers. How can we automatize some of those skills and processes so that the cognitive demand can balance between developing and communicating ideas and doing so in a way that readers can experience without translation? I admit that in my focus on process over perfection, I tend not to dwell on these elements of writing, but I know they are important.

The final chapter of this book presents a case study from a third-grade classroom in which I worked with a teacher to overcome some of the obstacles her striving writers were facing. In a relatively short amount of time, we were able to improve

the writing scores of many of the students and provide them with momentum to keep growing their skills and feeling success. While I could not incorporate every concept, idea, and strategy from the preceding eight chapters, you will read about how many of the components come together in order to create a learning experience where students begin to see themselves as writers—begin to believe Frank Smith's conviction that the power of writing is available to everyone.

Throughout all of the chapters, you will come across some recurring text features, like the "Pause for PD" above. You will also encounter "Tips," where I offer pointers from my own experience. Closely related are the "Thinking Out Loud" boxes, where I share some insights and related thinking to what I've written about. There are a few "Lesson Plans," where I have created a lesson to demonstrate a skill or concept you can teach to students. While my instruction centers on workshop practices, these lessons could be given through various instructional practices.

My hope is that you will use my tools and ideas, but also tinker with them. Revise them, modify them, change them up entirely in order to engage, inspire, and empower the striving writers who sit near you. Every child can write—sometimes they just need different entry points, bridges, and pathways to find success.