Students with Learning Disabilities in an Inclusive Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This article presents a case study on two fourth grade students with learning disabilities in two different writing situations: writing for test preparation and writing for digital stories. The students' writing behaviors, processes, and products in these two settings are contrasted. The differences in the students' writing experiences suggest that classroom teachers need to transform our teaching of writing by drawing on students' home literacies to ignite their passion and creativity. The research findings demonstrate that a test-driven teaching approach tends to limit students' ability as learners. Also, in contrast, instruction that values students' technological expertise energizes students' learning, helps them to reach their potential, and ensures their school success. The article concludes by advocating for change in classroom teachers teaching methods and curriculum by inviting students' home literacies into school, valuing their interests, and preparing them to be literate citizens for the 21st century.

Key words: learning disabilities, writing, digital literacies, home literacies

Writing is difficult for many students, and poses special challenges for students with learning disabilities (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). These students have historically been disadvantaged (Berry, 2006; McPhail & Freeman, 2005) through education in classroom settings away from most peers their age. In resource rooms, teachers group students diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD), where they often work on isolated skills and do not gain a broader picture of the complexities of writing (Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, & MacArthur, 2003). Year by year, these students continue to fall behind their peers in regular classrooms (Van Kraayenoord, Miller, Moni, & Jobling, 2009). Teachers, researchers, and parents have challenged this kind of homogeneous grouping practice because students with LD are separated from mainstream education, limiting interaction with their mainstream peers and often receiving inferior instruction. Research has indicated that students with LD benefit from learning in an environment that engages them in peer-interaction and authentic literacy learning activities (Graham & Perrin, 2007).

In order to provide students with LD equal learning opportunities and an effective learning environment, several researchers have recommended an inclusive model (Cole, Waldron, Majd, & Hasazi, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000) since the late 1990s. The inclusive model aims to educate as many students with disabilities as possible in regular classroom settings while still meeting their unique needs based on the least restrictive environment (LRE) provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). LRE means that, to the maximum extent possible, school districts must educate students with disabilities in regular education classrooms and provide them with appropriate support such as curriculum modification, an itinerant teacher with special education training, or computer-assisted devices as examples. IDEA requires that school districts have a continuum of placements and services available to accommodate the needs of all children with disabilities ranging from care facilities to regular classroom settings with support services. The students' needs as determined by the Individual Education Program (IEP) and each individual student's IEP team drive the degree of inclusion. It is important to point out that the inclusive model alone does not guarantee academic gains; however, students with mild LD who are educated along with their peers in an integrated educational setting have been found to benefit academically, socially, and emotionally (Ferretti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2001; Waldron & McLeskey,1998).

Many students with LD face greater challenges than their education peers without LD when learning how to write. Writing is a complex process that requires the integration of many cognitive and social processes and comprehensive language skills. Students with learning difficulties struggle with generating topics, planning and organizing, editing, revising, monitoring the writing process, and transcribing words (Patel & Laud, 2007; Troia, 2006). They have fewer strategies with writing, less knowledge about writing, and behavior and motivational factors that impede success as school writers (MacArthur, 2009). Scholars who study effective techniques for teaching and learning have found considerable evidence that a process approach to writing combined with direct strategic instruction has been beneficial in improving writing skills of children with LD (Graham & Harris, 2005).

This article presents a case study, part of a larger study, of the writing experiences of students with LD in a fourth grade inclusive classroom. We, the authors, chose two children with LD to demonstrate how an inclusive model setting helped them to progress as writers despite two significant obstacles: their diagnosis of LD along with an environment pressured by standards

and test preparation. Eleven children in the class had special needs and accommodations. Four of these children were diagnosed with LD and language impairment, and two, Julia and Tyrone (pseudonyms), of whom were chosen for this case study. Both of them repeated a grade because of their academic struggles and were a year older than their peers.

The Case Study

This case study took place in a K-4 school, Millhopper Elementary (pseudonym), located in a small rural town in north central Florida. The school enrolled approximately 500 students, 49% of whom received free or reduced lunch. In the state of Florida, standardized test scores in reading and math are assigned percentage points and then converted into a school grade. Millhopper Elementary was an 'A' school (out of a possible A-F scale). In spite of its top score, the school failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)[1] and received state and federal funds to purchase reading, math, and science materials to supplement before and after school tutoring and to provide extra training for staff through professional development. In 2007, the school began integrating all students with LD into regular classrooms with accommodations and support services, rather than separating them from others in resource rooms. This research was conducted in Mrs. Lane's (pseudonym) fourth grade inclusive model class. In Florida, all fourth graders are required to take a writing test named Florida Writes (2011). Our research explored how the students with LD grew as writers in an inclusive classroom, in a grade with high-stakes test pressure.

Mrs. Lane had certification in special education with ten years of teaching experience. She taught in self-contained classrooms for most of her career and started to teach an inclusive class two years prior. She loved to write as well as teach writing. This year, her fourth grade class had 23 students, 11 of whom received accommodations for special needs in math, reading, and writing. The school employed a full-time aide that was available during the morning writing time to work with the four students with LD. In addition, a special education teacher came to the class four afternoons a week for 90 minutes during the reading block to help students who needed one-on-one assistance. Due to her responsibility for students in other classrooms, she was not available during morning writing instruction for Mrs. Lane's class.

The demands of high-stakes testing drives most of the children's writing in school today (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006), and Mrs. Lane's classroom was no exception. Writing for test preparation began the first week of school. The school district required fourth grade teachers in the county to use a test-preparation writing curriculum to prepare students for expository and narrative prompt writing. Writing instruction occurred from 8:00 to 9:00 am on a daily basis. Lessons designed to help students learn the test format included decoding the prompt, using a graphic organizer to plan writing, writing interesting sentences and paragraphs, and elaborating with details.

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[1] Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a system used in the state of Florida that measures student achievement based on results on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) as well as several other indicators. Achievement is broken down by racial groups, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged. Groups must reach their goal for the school year to make AYP.

Rather than experiencing restrictions by test-preparation requirements, Mrs. Lane brought her personal passion for writing, and her belief in writing as a powerful communication tool, to her class. She took a course in writing children's books and participated in a school wide writing group that focused on using writing process methods guided by *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy Calkins (1994). She regularly shared her own writing in class to model herself as a passionate writer to her children. Instead of drilling her students relentlessly, Mrs. Lane alleviated the stress of the test by helping the children connect writing with their life experiences, and empowered them through finding their own voice while learning to be skilled and competent writers.

The Students with LD Chosen for the Case Study

Four students in the class were learning disabled. We, the authors, selected two of them, Julia and Tyrone, as the case study's focus based on similarities with their struggles with language processing and learning. Julia was 11 years old and lived with her grandparents because her mother had problems with substance abuse. Julia attended church on the weekends, was active in the youth group, and sang in the choir. She was very social and enjoyed friendships with several girls in the class. Julia had an IEP for LD and language impairment. Julia struggled with planning, organization, sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. She had difficulty working independently, and her hand was often the first one to go up for help. Without help, she would not be able to get started on her writing. Her educational priority as stated in her IEP was to increase her language skills in order to be able to participate more fully in school and gain access to the curriculum.

Tyrone was an 11-year-old boy, small in size, and very quiet in class. He interacted easily with his peers and was a friend to all, but often preferred working alone because he found it difficult to concentrate in a noisy atmosphere. Tyrone lived with his mother, 9-year-old brother and 16-year-old half-brother. He began attending Millhopper Elementary in third grade after attending two other elementary schools. Tyrone had an IEP for LD and language impairment. He would often sit quietly without being able to start writing. He had trouble generating and articulating ideas and gave up writing easily. He struggled with language fluency and questions involving higher order comprehension. A speech language pathologist worked with Tyrone twice a week on language development. His Exceptional Student Education (ESE) teacher came to the class daily during the afternoon to monitor his progress and assist him with his classroom work.

LDs and Writing

Although faced with standardized test demands and the diverse needs of her students, Mrs. Lane integrated approaches that took into consideration the children's individual learning styles to create a writing curriculum that gave all her students space to grow as writers. While many teachers struggle with keeping students engaged during test preparation, Mrs. Lane worked to increase her students' interest in writing and motivation to write by providing diverse writing opportunities, allowing children to work with each other, and ensuring time for sharing their work. She focused extensively on writing for meaningful expression. Mrs. Lane "understood the cultural boundaries separating her from her students" (North, 2009, p.39), built on their prior knowledge and stretched their abilities beyond what was familiar (Routman, 2004). She guided

her students to revise their work on multiple drafts and nudged them to try newly learned skills on each draft. Students were taught a "cut and paste" strategy in revising their work so they would not have to rewrite an entire draft. Frequently she showed them how to revise their work by adding actions, feelings, similes, metaphors, and using active verbs and precise nouns to engage the reader with vivid description. On several occasions, she came out of the classroom closet with a funny mask or wig and asked the children to use their imaginations to write for a few minutes. Once, she brought in ingredients for a "writer's soup." Students came up and added ingredients (broth, carrots, and beans) to make a delicious soup. As students ate the soup for lunch, Mrs. Lane revealed that adding details to writing is like adding ingredients to make a good soup, and quality writing needs good details.

While preparing for the test through constant practice with prompts for expository and narrative essays, Mrs. Lane focused most on best practices to improve her diverse students' writing. Her typical writing class would include a ten to twenty minute mini-lesson, thirty minutes of writing time, and ten minutes for students to share their writing. She taught students to analyze the prompt, plan their writing using graphic organizers, write a first draft, and revise their writing based on feedback. Mrs. Lane was flexible with how students worked through their writing, and was able to provide individualized feedback. On some days, students practiced timed-writing to get used to the test taking conditions, but most of the time they worked through their writing at their own pace. The expectation was to complete a certain amount of writing for a designated period. Mrs. Lane used a holistic grading rubric based on the Florida Writes scoring system that she developed for the test preparation writing; it assessed focus, organization, support, and conventions on a scale from 1-6 (Appendix A). Mrs. Lane included comments on students' writing to guide their revisions and monitored Julia and Tyrone's progress through this holistic writing assessment process. Along with their peers, Julia and Tyrone worked hard, and made steady progress with their writing throughout the school year.

Julia's Progress as a Writer

Julia was not afraid to ask for help with her writing. She had the ability to work alone to get started on planning or writing a first paragraph, but inevitably needed Mrs. Lane's help to move further. After talking through her areas of trouble and getting some direct help from the teacher, she would go back to work. That was her typical writing pattern. One day in October, Mrs. Lane gave the class was a new prompt, a test-prep writing assignment. For this assignment, she gave a ten-minute mini-lesson on using a graphic organizer for expository writing, asked students to analyze the prompt carefully and use a graphic organizer to plan before they started writing their first draft. She suggested that students take no more than fifteen minutes for planning. The students had fifty minutes to complete this writing. The prompt was as follows:

> *Everyone has a favorite holiday. Think about your favorite holiday and explain how you celebrate it.*

Julia wrote:

> *Everybody has a favorite holiday. Mine is easter[sic]. I like to paint the eggs. I like to find the egg's to[sic]. that's[sic] what I like about Easter.*

I like to paint the eggs different colors you can paint difernt[sic] pictures on them to[sic]. Once I painted A[sic] egg orange and blue whitch[sic] is the gator colors. then I painted A gator on the front.

I like to Hunt for eggs. Sometimes when I find an egg I find a couple of dollars in there. I get a lot of candy on easter[sic]. In 2003 I found a big red egg whith[sic] 20 dollars inside it. That was my favorite easter[sic] ever.

For a student who had barely written anything in her previous school years, this writing was a big improvement. Despite many errors in conventions, her teacher pointed out the positive aspects of her work: she stayed on the topic and included good details. Julia earned a 2.5 out of 6 on this piece. Through daily practice, encouragement, peer interactions, and direct guidance from her teacher, Julia worked diligently on several pieces and made visible progress each month as a writer. In January, for the following prompt:

Everyone has someone who is very special to him/her. Before you begin writing, think about someone who means the world to you. Explain to the reader of your paper what makes that person so special to you.

Julia wrote the following, the longest piece she ever wrote for school:

Everybody has someone that's special in there[sic] life time. My mom is special in my life time. My brother Cameron and I got serperated [sic] from our mom. My brother and I got adapted by our grandma. so really only what my brother Cameron and I have is each other. I pray almost every night to ask God to help my mom were she can get better, and for Cameron and I go live whith[sic] her. My mom had No choice she had to give Cameron and me up. Cameron and I cryed[sic] 24-7 each day thinking that will Never see our mom again. but stuff changed we got to see her. My mom broke Camerons[sic] and my heart all the time by not going to our birthday. Cameron and I would always be looking on the road hoping she would come, but she never did, but she turned everything around she did started coming to mine and Camerons[sic] birthday! My mom fixed everything and tried not let the Devil to force her to go get alcahall[sic] and drugs in my opinion I think she's doing a great Job at that. Now you pretty much see why my grama[sic] had to adapt my brother and me.
Now my mom would start to come over to our house like on the weekends and stay the night and go to church whith[sic] us. I love my mother whith[sic] all my heart and soul. but I hate my guts because Every time my mom came over I would always be a hog and I would not let my brother talk to her one bit and that's why I hate my guts. Now you pretty much know a lot of stuff about my mom, my brother, and me.

In this piece, we can see and feel Julia with her passionate voice, true emotion, honest wishes, prayers, and reflections. Julia loved her mom regardless of her faults. Mrs. Lane assessed that

this piece, despite mechanical errors, flowed well and had strong emotion. Julia scored a 5 out of 6 on this piece. She had grown in her ability to focus and organize her writing with smooth transitions, to add details and descriptions, to add feeling and words that create a picture in her reader's mind, and finally, to use conventions of writing. It was a moving story and showed the tremendous growth that Julia had experienced as a writer who was learning to write for meaningful expression. Even though Julia still felt challenged by the writing, she was rapidly advancing with her writing skills, enabling her to pass the state writing test with a 5 out of 6, one of the highest scores achieved in her class.

Tyrone's Progress as a Writer

In contrast to Julia, Tyrone was a more independent writer and did not like to ask for help during writing time. Whenever asked how his writing was going he would respond, "Great." In spite of his struggles with language, he maintained a good attitude. Tyrone started fourth grade with very weak writing skills and was clearly at risk of failing the state test. He repeatedly received failing grades on his prompt responses during the beginning months of the year. Early in the school year, for the prompt:

> *Everyone looked forward to having a day off from school. Think about what you do on a day off from school. Now, write a story about a time when you had a day off from school.*

He had a hard time writing a cohesive story:

> *I would read a book. play vido[sic] games with my brother. I would play football with my friends. Then I will watch a movie with my mom and brother. Me my mom and brother will go to The pool because it's always hot outside but sometime[sic] we go to the pool on Sundays. Me and the whole family went on a vacation we went to Daytonna[sic].*
>
> *We went to are[sic] hotel it was cool inside The hotel. We went to are[sic] room and it had a desk, tv, bed, and window view we can see the beach from up thierd[sic]. We got out the hotel and went to The beach we was[sic] having fun. We made sand catles[sic] and we wnet ot[sic] the water. We pack are[sic] things and went back home.*

Tyrone received a 2 out of 6 on this assignment. Mrs. Lane praised Tyrone for his effort and the details of the activities he wrote about, but she wanted him to improve his writing conventions, organization, and focus. She always found time to help him one-on-one, and worked with him on writing strategies such as using a graphic organizer to find a focus, adding feelings, and using variety of words and sentence structures. Tyrone had a quiet determination and worked steadily on his writing, making small gains over time by developing his ideas, organizing his writing, finding a focus, and improving his use of capitals, end marks, and spelling. Gradually, Tyrone was able to add creativity, interesting language, and feeling to his writing. He imitated examples that the teacher provided, worked with a friend in class, and made progress from one prompt to another. He benefitted from learning alongside his peers and receiving the same quality

instruction to help prepare him for the upcoming test. By January, Tyrone had made so much progress that he scored a 5 out of 6 on the following prompt:

> *Everyone has someone who is very special to him/her. Before you begin writing, think about someone who means the world to you. Now explain to the reader of your paper what makes that person so special to you.*

Tyrone wrote:

> *Do you have a person that's special i[sic] do it's my grandma. I have a few thing why i[sic] think she special. Grandma is funny she tells me and my brother jokes she have[sic] good jokes too she told me this good joke too I laugh so hard I could[sic] stop laughing my brother stop laughing neither sometime she do some action that's very funny[sic]. Grandma bring us to the park every Monday to feed the ducks she always watching[sic] me doing flips she push my brother on the swings she watch my brother on the monkey bars.*
>
> *Granma[sic] favorite subject is fish we love fishing to but its[sic] not my favorite subject. Grandma love catching fish she like catching a catfish that's her favorite thing to catch she is good catching fishes I cot a mudfish we didn't like mud fishes so we throw[sic] it back in fishing is fun when your[sic] with grandma. The final thing about grandma is she make[sic] sure if were[sic] hungry she like cooking some ribs on the grill sometimes she cook chilly[sic] I love grandma's cooking your taste bus[sic] will call out more! More! That's all the thing[sic] why I think grandma is special I love Grandma joyce[sic] because she's there for me.*

Similar to how we, the authors, felt about Julia's piece on a special person, in Tyrone's piece, we could also feel the joy and love he had for his grandma. When he writes, "I love grandma's cooking your taste bu(d)s will call out more! More!" we shared the feeling! Tyrone was able to extend his writing, describing his grandma's sense of humor, going to the park, and cooking on the grill with her. Tyrone's early writing was disorganized, lacked elaboration and personal engagement. In this piece, though, Tyrone led readers to know his grandmother as a lovely, warm and funny lady through vivid language and examples. He made progress in the focus and organization of his writing by adding descriptions and supporting his ideas with examples. He used specific vocabulary to create a mental picture, and improved his spelling and punctuation. He was beaming at his success and gained confidence in writing.

Despite his tremendous effort and evident progress, Tyrone scored a 2.5 out of 6 on the state writing exam, a failing grade (3.5 is passing). Mrs. Lane maintained her focus on the growth Tyrone was making and continued to support and encourage him to become a better writer for the remainder of the school year.

By working on writing daily along with their peers in a writer's community, Julia and Tyrone made progress as writers in many significant aspects of the writing process: planning, focus and organization, adding details, learning to revise, conventions, writing from their hearts and personal experience, and working with their peers. With daily practice in writing, Mrs. Lane's

one-on-one guidance, constant encouragement, and their peers' direct and indirect influence, Julia and Tyrone were gradually gaining self-confidence and skills as writers.

Digital Storytelling

In order to engage students' expertise and home literacies, Mrs. Lane brought digital storytelling into her classroom as she prepared her students for the high-stakes test. Digital storytelling combines narration, visuals, and sound through technology. After students learn the rigors of drafting, revising and editing written scripts, the final publication is a digital media production such as an iMovie, MovieMaker, or PhotoStory. Students often discover personal power and creativity in writing stories and using digital tools to present their voices to a larger audience. Students use visual images, record their stories using technology applications that they are often proficient with in their out-of-school literacy practices (Kadjer, 2006), and feel a sense of competence working out difficulties they may encounter. Using visual materials may help students, especially the students identified as LD, to elicit language and find new ways of representing their thoughts and words (Rose & Meyer, 2002). When students with LD write for digital stories they not only build upon and extend skills in literacy learning, they also develop skills that help them to be successful in today's information age. This type of activity creates space and opportunity for transforming writing experiences, while also, meeting the state standards for technology integration in the curriculum (Routman, 2004).

While learning to navigate the complexities of print, visual, and audio texts, students drew on personal experiences to create stories in a digital domain and developed skills that could be used both inside and outside of school. Mrs. Lane used the writing and technology standards as an opportunity for intensive and varied writing instruction. She taught her students to write authentically and meaningfully, while working hard to meet the test demands.

Tall Tales for Digital Stories

In February, a month before the test time, the students in Mrs. Lane's class were learning to write tall tales and create iMovies, short digital stories of their tales in the afternoons while still preparing for prompt writing in the mornings. Tall tales are fictional stories that are often humorous with exaggerated or mythical events. During this unit, Mrs. Lane connected to the test preparation writing that students had been engaged in by encouraging students to find a focus for their tall tale, to organize their writing, to write with supporting details, and to use conventions of writing. In her mind, this writing exercise was another way to practice and improve their abilities, the main difference being that they could choose their own topics. After reading *The Tale of Pecos Bill* as a model text, the class worked on writing scripts for their tall tales for three weeks, then created narration and visuals to complete their iMovies. Every afternoon when Mrs. Lane announced it was time to work on tall tales, there was a tremendous amount of excitement in the class. Children rushed from their seats to get a laptop and find a place to sit with a friend and work, a contrast to the serious atmosphere of test preparation time where everyone worked quietly and individually. In this learning community, Julia and Tyrone, like all their peers, wrote tall tales by drawing on their personal knowledge. Julia wrote about her church choir and her love of music while Tyrone created a character named Rockin' B Road who liked adventures. This activity engaged students' creativity, imagination, and passion for writing.

Julia's Tall Tale: *All in All, Open the Eyes in My Heart Lord*

Drawing on her church experiences and her participation in the youth choir, Julia worked with enthusiasm and ease to write her tall tale. She found freedom in moving to a new genre of writing where she could choose her own topic. Julia took pleasure and pride in her writing and stopped complaining as she had before. She added details, gave specific examples and worked hard to create images with words. In one section, she wrote:

> *My brother Cameron and I jumped out of the car ran inside I grabbed my guitar Cameron grabbed his guitar and we ran back outside. I stand by our youth leader Joel. Cameron stand[sic] in front of me. We are playing fore[sic] songs Halliaugh[sic], how great is our god, All in All, open the eyes in my heart Lord, And last but Not least Im[sic] singing by myself playing the guitar at the sam[sic] time is Jesus take the weel[sic]. So we practice two hours later we did the real round in front of hundreds and hundreds of people.*

Julia's story continues with an exaggeration—her youth leader's hands suddenly start playing the guitar extremely fast! Once Julia wrote her story, she was enthusiastic to learn Garage Band software to record her story and to work with friends on recording the narration and drawing the visuals. During the publishing process, she worked with her friend Anna, to work on word choice in her story and find the right voice and tone for recording. Julia was well aware that she would share her iMovie with others in her class and worked hard to perfect her story for her audience. What was most evident during this time was that Julia exchanged expertise and information with her friends and peers. In front of the computer, she was an expert who could sing, practice reading her work with expressions, and navigate computer applications. Julia's struggles with literacy seemed to melt away. She benefitted from collaborating with others about her writing and from using digital tools to present her story. Julia was plugged in—socially, academically, and technologically---to this writing community.

Tyrone's Tall Tale: *Rockin' B Road*

Tyrone took time to plan out his tall tale and created the following list:

> *Rockin' b Road*
> *He's funny*
> *He have big smile*
> *He's fast*
> *Green hair*
> *Tall*
> *Thin*
>
> *He's tall as a pole*
> *He likes adventures*

Tyrone had no trouble beginning task of writing and expressed his excitement for writing a tall tale as a digital story, because "you get to draw pictures and add your own voice." His character, Rockin' B Road drew on Tyrone's interest in popular culture. He clearly used his imagination to create his character in this piece:

> *My character play's Gutiar[sic] he is good a Gutier[sic] Because he's in the Band. My character is tall, fast, funny, green spike hair. He have[sic] a big smile. He likes Adventures. He live[sic] in New York. He travel[sic] around concers[sic]. My characters[sic] name is Rockin'B road. He is rockin' it out to night. He is loud he dream to be a rockin'roll kind of person.*

To represent his story visually, Tyrone created unique cartoon-like drawings with captions. Tyrone loved technology; he had a Facebook page, played the Xbox, Wii, and PlayStation, had a DS and a cell phone. He loved to tell people what he could do with his digital toys. His confidence with using technology enabled him to immerse himself in the process of creating his tall tale. He enjoyed practicing his recording and took great pleasure in creating the visuals. The chance to use digital technologies during a school project connected to Tyrone's love of, and expertise in, multiple technologies that he used at home. He felt like an expert in this writing community and was extremely proud of his accomplishments as a writer among his peers.

Tyrone and Julia made further progress as writers during the digital storytelling unit. Independently they were able to draw on their knowledge of how to organize, plan, revise, provide details, and express feelings in their stories. They no longer felt they were disabled learners, but were able to work well to capture their ideas using personal experience and their imaginations in their digital story writing. During digital production, they continued to revise and make improvements, striving to find a voice to convey their thoughts and emotions. Julia delighted in working with her close friend and adding popular music to her presentation, while Tyrone discovered that he was talented at drawing visuals and captions. In this inclusive class, these two students were *abled* users of 21st century literacies that combined print, visuals, and sound, rather than students who were *dis*abled learners who struggled with language and learning.

Conclusion

This case study shows that students with LD benefit from the inclusive model classroom where they learn alongside their regular education peers. In this setting, students with LD have a chance to reach their full potential in an inclusive instructional model and geared to academically support and challenge students with and without identified disabilities (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Children with LD need the same high-level instruction that their peers receive and need practice working out the difficulties of writing with direct and explicit instruction in writing strategies (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009). Focusing on students' strengths and teaching writing as a process can give children with LD confidence to work through their struggles with writing and find success as authors.

When instruction focuses on best writing practices such as revising, encouraging creativity, learning conventions of writing, and working on a variety of genres (Higgins et al., 2006), it

alleviates the stress of standardized test preparation. Mrs. Lane gave her students intensive daily practice and exposure to multiple genres of writing throughout the school year. Julia and Tyrone benefitted from this writing instruction and grew as writers in their inclusive class. Writing digital stories gave Julia and Tyrone the chance to utilize out-of-school multiple literacy practices, giving them confidence and allowing them to build their writing and technology skills (Kadjer, 2006) while working with digital texts in which they had expertise. The digital story writing went beyond the mandated curriculum by supporting writing skills that were broader in scope, giving students strategies that were more applicable to a larger variety of school and real life situations. Both students were becoming competent as writers with tools of technology, an aspect of literacy they need to be successful in the world. The children felt their contribution was valued regardless of how the education system had diagnosed their learning abilities. Rather than feeling undermined and alienated, they experienced connections with their peers and were able to bridge their personal life and literacy with their schooling (McLaren, 1994).

Good writing instruction focuses on learners, and enables all learners to make steady progress despite their learning abilities and styles. To support the growth and creativity of students, to help them find their voice as authors, and to foster the critical and independent thinkers, educators must take caution in how they interpret standardization. Schools and teachers must implement required pedagogy in a way that benefits students rather than hampers and confines them through narrowly defined instruction and goals. Julia and Tyrone left their fourth grade class as empowered learners and individuals, and with the skills that enable them to advance their education as equals among their classmates (Freire, 1970; Macedo, 2006; Shor, 1996).

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Appendix A

Florida Writes Rubric

Name:_____ Date:_____
My Score:_____ Teacher Score:_____

FOCUS: Are you clear on whether your essay is expository or narrative?

1) Poor	2) Below Average	3) Almost There	4) Passing	5) Excellent	6) Outstanding
*off topic OR confused expository and narrative	*wrote with correct style, but most of the writing was off topic	*most of the writing was on topic *main ideas were unclear	*writing was on topic * two main ideas or events	*writing was completely on topic w/*two focused main ideas or events	*all sentences were on topic with a focused connection among ideas

ORGANIZATION: Clear beginning, middle, end? Used transition words/phrases to connect ideas and paragraphs?

1) Poor	2) Below Average	3) Almost There	4) Passing	5) Excellent	6) Outstanding
*unorganized *confusing *no transition words/ phrases	*confusing beginning, middle &/or end *no transition words/ phrases	*clear beginning, middle, & end *some transition words *confusing at times	*clear, organized ideas, connected by transition words/phrases *a little choppy	*organized ideas, connected with smooth transitions from 1 idea to another throughout	*strong & well balanced introduction, middle, & end with very smooth transitions throughout

SUPPORT: Did you use details and personal experiences that were on topic? Higher vocabulary? Did you include elaboration and descriptions that make a clear picture in the reader's mind?

1) Poor	2) Below Average	3) Almost There	4) Passing	5) Excellent	6) Outstanding
*few, if any details or descriptions *no examples or feelings *boring words	*some specific details &/or descriptions, but some don't make sense *no examples &/or feelings *ordinary vocabulary	*some specific details and descriptions that don't give the reader a clear picture *1 ex. &/or feeling *some higher vocabulary words	*several details/desc. that were very specific *several ex. &/or feelings *created a clear picture in the reader's mind *several higher voc. words	*many details, desc., examples, feelings, & high voc. words that made a crystal clear picture in the reader's mind	*supportive details, ex. & feelings with precise vocabulary that makes a rich & meaningful picture of all main ideas and events

WRITING CONVENTIONS: Handwriting neat? Did you capitalize beginning words + proper nouns? Correct spelling, different kinds of ending marks, + complete, longer sentences? Did you proofread + add words with carets, cross outs, + other editing marks?

1) Poor	2) Below Average	3) Almost There	4) Passing	5) Excellent	6) Outstanding
*handwriting is hard to read *short sentences w/missing words *missing capitals & ending marks *most words misspelled	*simple sentences with some missing words *capitals and ending marks *many words misspelled *no punctuation	*capitals, ending marks, some punctuation *basic words spelled correctly *simple sent. *little signs of proof-reading or editing	*capitals, ending marks, some punctuation *indentation for para-graphs *punctuation *correct spelling *longer sent. *signs of proofreading and editing	*capitals, dif. kinds of ending marks *indentation of paragraphs *punctuation *correct spelling *longer sent. *signs of proofreading and editing	*capitals, dif. kinds of ending marks *lots of diff. punctuation *correct spelling *longer sentences *signs of proofreading & editing like carets, and cross outs for higher vocab.