Mr. Principal:

As you are well aware, as a district we are currently required to use Lucy Calkin’s *Units of Study for Primary Writing* as our writing curriculum. I was trained in this method of writing instruction 4 years ago by the district and at the beginning of my teaching career found this scripted curriculum very helpful in planning my lessons in each genre. However, each year that I have been teaching, I find myself branching further and further away from the mini lessons planned for each genre due to the needs of my students. While I do make sure to cover the main ideas of each unit of study, I have found that in order to help all of my students be successful and fully understand each genre, more lessons are required. The unit of study that I find myself supplementing the most for is the personal narrative unit. This is due to the performance of my students. Using the Calkin’s approach, I find my students struggling to zoom in on one moment and an inability to add quality detail. Thus, I have spent the past view months studying narrative writing and planning supplemental lessons/materials that would help my students understand/write their small moment stories. I believe that by spending more time on prewriting, teaching student’s to set goals, utilizing more mentor texts, and teaching lessons on various ways to add detail will strengthen our district’s student’s writing.

One of the most common reasons my student’s struggle with personal narrative stories is due to writer’s block. On a daily basis my colleagues and I hear, “I don’t know what to write about.” Comments like these tell me that students are going into workshop unprepared to write. “We need to help them see that although their adventures may be small, even the smallest can be worth writing about (Hillcocks, 2007, pg. 37). Our student’s have in their minds that stories need to be about exciting, dramatic stories in order to be “good”. Thus, I believe that before we can even begin utilizing Calkin’s unit, first us teachers need to help students develop lists of possible ideas for stories from their lives so that they not only see their lives are full of small moments, but also to help them refer to their lists throughout the unit to alleviate the time our students spend staring off into space or talking with their peers because they don’t know what to write about. I have created a list planning sheet for my students that I am attaching for your reference. In addition, I have also created a planning sheet for each small moment they write. This way, students are planning out the structure of their papers before starting their drafts so that they can save time and reduce the stress of starting a new piece (Duke University, pg. 1). According to Duke University, “the advantage of this mapping idea is that it allows the writer to see “the big picture” without immediately committing to the more rigid organizational structure of an outline” (pg. 3). By planning out key components of their writing a head of time, I found that my students were more likely to include them in their drafts, thus making a stronger piece of writing.

Once my students are set for writing, many of them often feel overwhelmed by all that is apart of a strong personal narrative. One way to help them overcome this is to utilize the idea of goal setting within our conferring sessions with students. According to Siegle, “setting and measuring goals is probably the most effective classroom modification teachers can make to increase student confidence” (paragraph 1). If a student feels more confident in their abilities, they are more likely to perform better. By focusing on one goal at a time, it seems easier for a student to reach and easier as a teacher to create teaching points to use when conferring with that student to help them reach their goal. According to Albert Bandura and Dale Schunk (1981), students that divide larger goals into smaller, more obtainable goals, progressed rapidly in self-directed learning, achieved substantial mastery of skills, and developed a sense of personal efficacy and intrinsic interest in the task (pg. 587). By creating small, specific goals during conferring in our narrative units, our students will achieve more and feel more confident.

Another area that needs to more attention paid to it in order to make students feel more confident and be successful in writing is the use of mentor texts in the personal narrative unit. I strongly agree with Ralph Fletcher who says “that you need to see somebody doing something in order to do it well yourself, whether it's baking bread, whether it's skiing, whether it's writing” (2011). Small moments are not something that our students have heard much of, or have been pointed out to them. Thus, in order for them to be able to successfully write small moments, they need to hear lots of small moments. According to Fletcher, “every writer, no matter how skilled you are or how beginning you are, encounters and reads something that can lift and inform and infuse their own writing (2011). Though we can tell students to use dialogue, thought shots, or personal action, using mentor texts gives examples to students of what this looks like and how to utilize it so that they can incorporate it into their own writing. While the Calkin’s program utilizes mentor texts, what I found was their suggestions were too advanced for my students. Because the writing of these mentor texts was so much higher than my students writing, such as the writing in A Chair for my Mother, my students were not able to pull much out of the text and utilize it in their own writing. When I used more age appropriate mentor texts in my classroom, I found that my students were frequently referring back to these texts to help them with their writing or telling me they added something to their text just like one of our mentor text authors did. They were also coming up to me with other texts and pointing out different strategies that I have taught them, showing me a deeper understanding of a given topic. They then were transferring their knowledge to their own writing using strategies to add detail that brought their stories to life.

The biggest area lacking in the Lucy Calkin’s unit on personal narrative is teaching children how to add details to their writing. According to Hillcocks, “the problem is that teachers do not spend time teaching the strategies that enable writers to generate the kinds of concrete detail that make writing effective” (pg.9). Before teaching strategies to my students, I often felt frustrated with my student’s lack of details. I read them mentor texts, and pointed out the great details, but only my higher achieving students were adding more detail. What I discovered is that my first graders do not understand what details are. Reading to their partners helped them to become aware of their audience and give them ideas of what to add to their stories, but they didn’t know how. Thus, I found that in order to have my students writing the stories I want them to, I had to create lessons that teach my students how to add dialogue, inner thought (thought shots as I call them), setting, character action, and what I call show don’t tell. Hillcock’s agrees that these are important skills to teach during a narrative unit, but what he always found was that giving examples and praising specifics on the rare occasion had little or no effect and only helped the writers who were already flourishing (pg. 11). Thus, when teaching these lessons, I gave my students topics or items to write about. Then once they practiced a skill in isolation, I encouraged them to include them in their own writing. While not every student was able to apply all five strategies to all of their pieces of writing, I soon found my lowest students adding dialogue and thought shots. Thus, improvement was being made and my students were creating knew schema on narratives that would help them the following year once they had more skills and practice.

My main goal as a teacher is to meet the needs of all of my students. Using only the Lucy Calkin’s program helped my high students flourish but did nothing for my lower achieving students. Thus, I felt frustrated because what we are required to use was not helping me do my job. While I believe there are a lot of great pieces in the Calkin’s program and I do and will continue to follow her main ideas, I believe that adding the lessons on prewriting, goal setting, specific strategies, and adding more age appropriate mentor texts will help my students write better personal narratives and thus score better on writing tests as well as be better more aware readers of personal narratives. You can read though all of my lessons and planning sheets that I have attached.

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