

Ellen Mathis is baffled. She is a new teacher trying to teach creative writing to her third-grade class, but things are just not going the way she'd hoped. Her students are not producing much, and what they do write is not very imaginative and full of errors. For example, she recently assigned a composition on "My Summer Vacation," and all that one of her students wrote was "On my summer vacation I got a dog and we went swimming and I got stung by a bee."

Ellen wonders whether her students are just not ready for writing and need several months of work on such skills as capitalization, punctuation, and usage before she tries another writing assignment. However, one day Ellen notices some compositions in the hall outside of Leah Washington's class. Leah's third-graders are just like Ellen's, but their compositions are fabulous. The students wrote pages of interesting material on an astonishing array of topics. At the end of the day, Ellen catches Leah in the hall. "How do you get your kids to write such great compositions?" she asks.

Leah explains how she first got her children writing on topics they cared about and then gradually introduced "mini-lessons" to help them become better authors. She had the students work in small groups and help one another plan compositions. Then the students critiqued and helped edit one another's drafts, before finally "publishing" final versions.

"I'll tell you what," Leah offers. "I'll schedule my next writing class during your planning period. Come see what we're doing."

Ellen agrees. When the time comes, she walks into Leah's class and is overwhelmed by what she sees. Children are writing everywhere: on the floor, in groups, at tables. Many are talking with partners. Leah is conferencing with individual children. Ellen looks over the children's shoulders and sees one student writing about her pets, another writing a gory story about ninjas, and another writing about a dream. Marta Delgado, a student who is Mexican American, is writing a funny story about her second-grade teacher's attempts to speak Spanish. One student is even writing a very detailed story about her summer vacation!

After school, Ellen meets with Leah. She is full of questions. "How did you get students to do all that writing? How can you manage all that noise and activity? How did you learn to do this?"

"I did go to a series of workshops on teaching writing," Leah said. "But if you think

about it, everything I'm doing is basic educational psychology."

Ellen is amazed. "Educational psychology? I got an A in that course in college, but I don't see what it has to do with your writing program."

"Well, let's see," said Leah. "To begin with, I'm using a lot of **motivational strategies** I learned in ed psych. For instance, when I started my writing instruction this year, I read students some funny and intriguing stories written by other classes, to arouse their curiosity. I got them motivated by letting them write about whatever they wanted, and also by having 'writing celebrations' in which students read their finished compositions to the class for applause and comments. My educational psychology professor was always talking about **adapting to students' needs**. I do this by conferencing with students and helping them with the specific problems they're having. I first learned about **cooperative learning** in ed psych, and later on I took some workshops on it. I use cooperative learning groups to let students give each other immediate feedback on their writing, to let them model effective writing for each other, and to get them to encourage each other to write. The groups also solve a lot of my **management problems** by keeping each other on task and dealing with many classroom routines. I remember that we learned about **evaluation** in ed psych. I use a flexible form of evaluation. Everybody eventually gets an A on his or her composition, but only when it meets a high standard, which may take many drafts. I apply what we learned about **child development** just about every day. For example, I adapt to students' developmental levels and cultural styles by encouraging them to write about things that matter to them: If dinosaurs or video games are important right now, or if children are uncomfortable about being Muslim or Jewish at Christmas time, that's what they should write about!"

Ellen is impressed. She and Leah arrange to visit each other's classes a few more times to exchange ideas and observations, and in time, Ellen's writers are almost as good as Leah's. But what is particularly important to her is the idea that educational psychology can really be useful in her day-to-day teaching. She drags out her old textbook and finds that concepts that had seemed theoretical and abstract in her ed psych class actually help her think about current teaching challenges.

Example taken from Slavin's (2018) Educational Psychology: Theory and Practice

According to Slavin (2018), no book on educational psychology will tell a teacher exactly how to teach creative writing to a group of third-graders, or any other subject to any other group of learners, nor guide them through problems related to teaching. However, as in the situation above, one can see how some concepts of educational psychology helped Leah in motivating her students, adopting to their needs and solving the problems she encountered.

Educational psychologists carry out research on the nature of learners and learning to provide practitioners with the information they need to think critically about their craft and make teaching decisions that will work for their students.