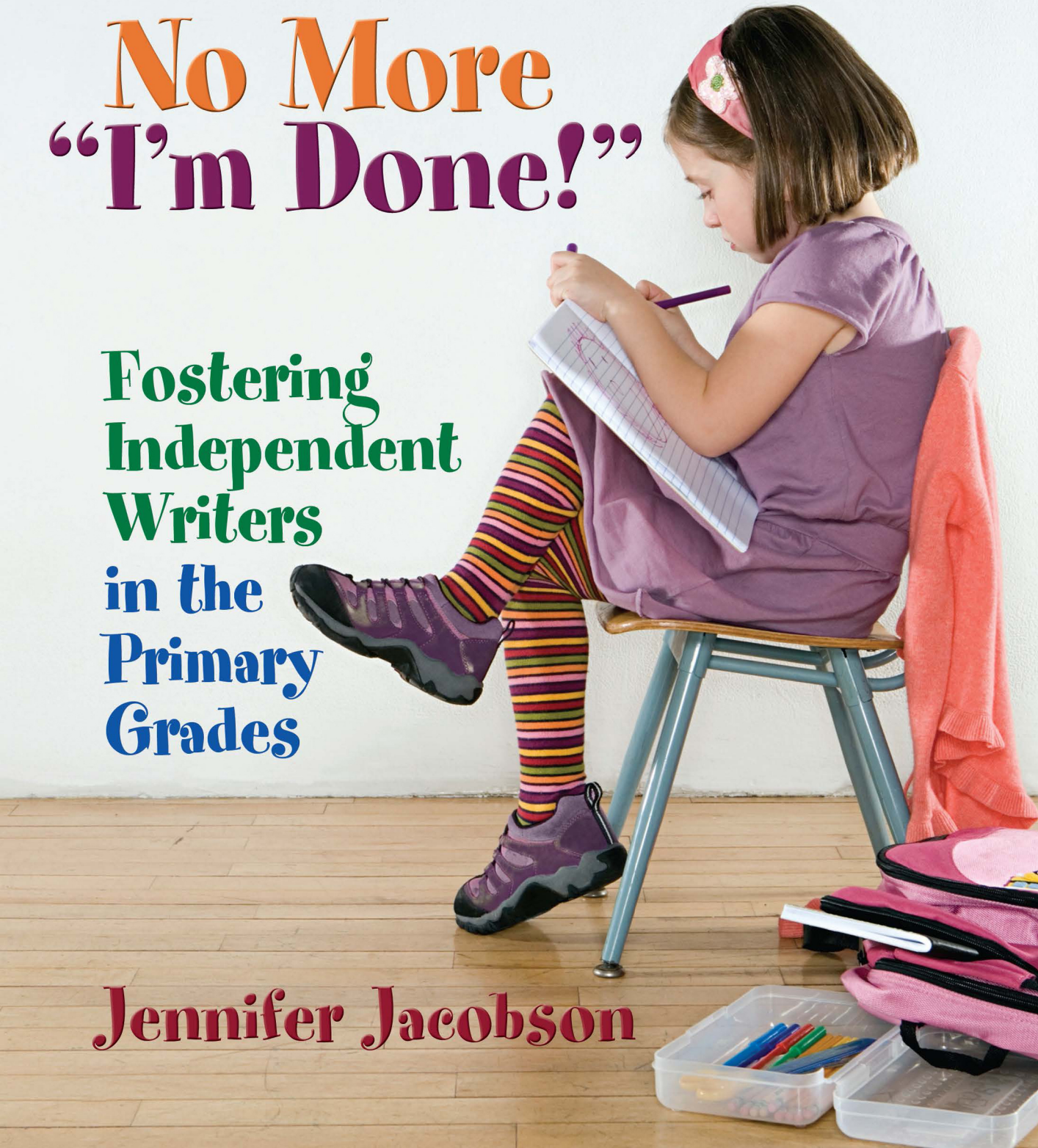
No More "I'm Done!"

Fostering Independent Writers in the Primary Grades



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For Holly and Erik

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Introduction

In 1986, I accepted a first-grade teaching position in Yarmouth, Maine. I was moving from private school to public and from an administrative position back to the classroom. I knew several things. I knew that I wanted, once again, to be working directly with young children. I knew, having been fired up by the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Paula Flemming, and others who had piloted writing programs in nearby New Hampshire, that I wanted to establish a daily writer's workshop in my classroom. And I knew that I dreamed of becoming a children's writer.

I told my students on the first day of school that I was going to teach them everything I knew about writing, that I hoped they would teach me everything *they* knew about writing, and that together we'd all grow into the very best writers we could be. I no longer have my own classroom, but I'm still following the course I established on that September day. I embrace the dual identities of writer and teacher.

While trying to break into the children's field, I wrote magazine articles, textbook lessons, teacher resource books, and emergent readers for reading programs. Finally, years after setting my goal, I sold

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my first picture book. (And my aforementioned first graders? They were entering high school!) Since that sale, I have published many books for children—from beginning readers to young adult novels. I write, and I observe myself as writer.

As a literacy coach and author-in-residence, I continue to teach writing in the classroom. My students (including many fabulous teachers), teach me. We all grow in new directions.

This combined work has taken me down many wonderful paths of discovery but has in recent years come full circle to focus once again on the development of primary writers. How do we honor the varied developmental stages of our youngest students while teaching necessary skills? When is the appropriate time to introduce writing conventions? And perhaps most importantly (and what this book will aim to address most closely), how can we help primary students become independent writers?

No doubt the teaching of writing can be challenging at any grade, but particularly in the primary years when both skills and attention spans seem to be in short supply. Nevertheless, I've come to believe that primary teachers, with the very best of intentions, inadvertently train their students to be *dependent* rather than *independent* writers. Story starters or writing prompts, fill-in-the blank sentences or waiting until January to begin a writing program (when the students "know their letters") are just a few of the ways we communicate to students that they are not capable of writing and thinking on their own.

"Establishing a community of writers" is a phrase that has been overused, but I still promote the concept. I believe that in the most productive writing environments, the teacher and learner are one. Despite my high expectations for primary students and their ability to choose their own topics, identify and create organizational structures, and hone their language to meet the needs of their audience, I am always surprised by just how far young writers can go.

Two years ago, I was invited to do a weeklong author residency in Cupertino, California. The school is a public magnet school—parents are required to select and support its child-centered philosophy—but it has retained diversity on all fronts. I was in a first-grade room on my initial day, looking over students' shoulders as they wrote. My first glance at a journal frightened me. Edits covered the page: spelling corrections, cross-offs, arrows, insertions. I moved on to the next child and saw the same thing. I couldn't imagine in that moment how this

heavy-handed teacher and I were going to join in our understanding of how children, or anyone for that matter, learn to write.

And then I watched something that astounded me. I watched a six-year-old boy, as he read his own work, pick up a pencil and cross off two whole sentences he had written. He wasn't being nudged by the teacher or a peer editor; he was making assessments about his own writing. The marks on all of these pages were not those of the teacher, but of the students. I learned a lot that week.

More commonly, when visiting classrooms I hear student comments along the lines of "How many sentences do I have to write?" or the premature "I'm done!" Both signal an unnecessary lack of independence and engagement in the writing process.

Teachers postpone student independence for a number of reasons. They claim children lack the necessary knowledge or language skills to write effectively, or that they're at the mercy of standards that require all students to demonstrate specific conventions by December. But I don't think these are the core problems. Supporting independence in writing means a slow but steady release of control—or of teaching practices that help us to believe we're in control. It means allowing students to be in different places: writing about different things at different times while using different materials. It means allowing our students to move through the writing process at their own pace and not in syncopation—never an easy thing to do when you have twenty or more active, curious, slapdash, impulsive students to teach. Nor is it easy to do when you're teaching something as complex as writing.

This book is an invitation for you to examine your own practices, both big and small, that foster independence in writing—especially for emergent writers. Guiding students toward independence takes time and a focus on the goal but is essential for the successful growth of writers at any age.

The book is organized chronologically, from setting up a classroom environment and establishing routines that foster independence to celebrating your students' initiative when they make important decisions around revision. You will find that this is not an offering of assorted ideas to pick and choose from, but a series of practices that build upon one another—each offering the basis for or an integral piece of what's to come. Therefore, I will not only try to present the benefits of each suggestion but also will explain what is lost if the idea

is rejected so you may substitute or adapt the procedure to meet your own needs.

So turn the page and join me in the process of providing our youngest students with a vision of independence and, even more important, the desire and confidence to achieve it.

Chapter 1

Letting Go: Teacher-Directed Writing Versus Writer's Workshop

Today, Hannah has invited me into her classroom to observe her writing time. She bravely admits that this is her least favorite time of day. In fact she considers writing such a challenge, she often "lets it go," allowing something that feels more pressing to take its place. I love her honesty.

She reads aloud *Beast Feast* by Douglas Florian (1994) and pauses to point out lively, playful words. Then she stands and writes a prompt on the board: "Describe your pet." Anticipating the response of students without a pet, she quickly adds, "or a pet you wish you had." She asks the students to use words that create a picture.

As Hannah hands out lined paper, students at the first table engage her with questions and needs.

"Mrs. Mackie, Mason took my pencil."

"What if I had a cat, but it died?"

"Do we have to write the date on the paper?"

"I don't want *any* kind of pet," says a clearly decisive girl.

Hannah responds with the patience known only to primary school teachers and growers of extremely rare orchids. She resolves the pencil conflict, sensitively encourages the student to write about her

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deceased cat, reminds everyone in class to put the dates on their papers, and brainstorms an alternate prompt for the student who does not want any pet—though none of Hannah's other suggestions seem to satisfy the girl either.

Responses to questions and troubleshooting continue as Hannah moves around the room. Before she can reach the last table of students—kids who are having a lively conversation about who has the biggest muscle—she has stretched out the sounds of three words, reminded a student of the shape of the letter *h*, and dictated the spelling of *gerbil*.

There! Finally each and every student has a sheet of paper and all, for a few brief moments, are engaged with the task at hand. Hannah has two lovely conversations about the use of strong verbs, reminds one student to use his finger to mark spaces, and then the most dreaded words are uttered by a boy who received his paper first:

"I'm done!"

"Aidan," says Hannah rushing over to the boy, "Let me see!" She reads aloud: *I have a dog named Barney. He chews tennis balls.*

Hannah smiles. "My dog likes to chew balls, too. What does Barney look like?"

"He's black," says Aidan.

"And big!" says a helpful student working nearby.

"Write that!" says Hannah handing the paper back to Aidan.

It's her best strategy for extending writing time. But it's not highly successful. Hannah teaches first grade, and six-year-olds love to be *the best, the brightest*, but most of all—*the fastest*. As soon as one child says, "I'm done!" others follow in quick succession. The noise level rises and students cluster around Hannah to show her their products, but they gently wander off as she questions them—a kind of "No, thank you" to her attempts to get them to add more.

She looks up with me with a face that is clear to read. It says, *See why I avoid this?*

* * *

I often refer to this writing model as "Spinning the Plates." The teacher runs around trying to meet the individual needs of all students—getting the plates spinning, if you will—and then at the first "I'm done!" all the plates come crashing down.

So what's the alternative? A workshop model. I hesitate to use the terminology "writer's workshop" because it is one of those labels that

has evolved to connote a wide range of often contradictory practices. In fact, Hannah may believe she is conducting a writer's workshop. But let's look at the difference between Hannah's writing time and Stacey's.

Stacey, who had lots of experience working with a writer's workshop model before moving to this district, quickly incorporates new ideas. She's used to having other practitioners in the classroom and eagerly welcomes another set of eyes (in the way we writers are always asking willing readers to provide feedback on our work). She begins her workshop with a mini-lesson on voice. She tells students she is going to write a story not once, but twice! She takes her marker and, on chart paper, writes a few sentences about her recent apple-picking excursion. Then she flips the chart paper and begins the story again, this time inserting words and details that reveal her unique feelings and perspective on the day. After reading both versions, she puts the marker down and asks, "Which of my stories has more voice?"

No doubt about it, the second story wins. Students are eager to point out places where Stacey's voice comes through in the second piece.

When the discussion ends, Stacey says, "Today, boys and girls, as you write, pay close attention to the quality details that show us who *you* are. Let your voice come through!" And then she asks, "Who knows what they're going to be working on?"

As students report briefly on their plans for this period, Stacey sends them off to the writing center. Each picks up his or her folder from the bin and selects a cup containing tools for writing and drawing. From there students settle around the room to reread yesterday's work, make additions or corrections, and write anew. Some students will begin new pieces, others will pick up where they left off the day before, and still others will use an editor's checklist to prepare their work for a writing conference. Many will choose to draw. For some, drawing is prewriting. For others, the drawing will be an integral part of their story.

A few students remain on the rug: two haven't formed a plan, one wishes to ask a question. Through brief questioning, Stacey guides the uncertain ones toward topics of their choice without resorting to "Why don't you tell me about _____" and confirms for the third student that yes, she is ready for a prepublication conference. The student nods and heads to the whiteboard to write her name under the heading "Editing Conference." She then gets her folder and begins working on