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## Review of *Hidden gems: Naming and teaching from the brilliance in every student's writing*.

Bomer, K. (2010). *Hidden gems: Naming and teaching from the brilliance in every student's writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, xi + 198 pp., ISBN 978-0-325-02965-8, \$22.50 (paperback).

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Grounded in the work of Lucy Calkins (1994) and the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, *Hidden Gems: Naming and Teaching from the Brilliance in Every Student's Writing* provides teachers of writing a guide for interacting with the diversity that is the daily reality within 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms. Honoring the process approach, Bomer encourages practitioners to engage with students' texts critically, building upon their composing strengths during writing instruction. She challenges readers to view their students' writing using a new frame of reference, in which their funds of knowledge, or resources which students gain from their family, community and cultural backgrounds (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2004), are valued and used as a starting point for learning and instruction.

Intended primarily for instructors who teach writing/language arts to students in grades 3-8, *Hidden Gems* would also be an excellent text for pre-service teachers participating in a literacy methods course. It provides readers specific strategies for interacting with students' writing, using language that is reflective of an additive perspective. It also presents rubrics, descriptive grids, templates, and protocols which offer instructors of writing multiple ways to assess and evaluate student compositions as they develop into final drafts. Furthermore, *Hidden Gems* highlights the importance of honoring student writing through varied forms of positive feedback and directions for growth, as well as informal and formal celebrations which are part of publication.

*Hidden Gems* is composed of 12 chapters, which are divided into two parts. Part I begins by offering practitioners a multitude of lenses for looking at students' writing by utilizing approaches that honor the unique, distinguishing facets of students' compositions. During these first chapters, in what emerges as a major theme within the text, Bomer encourages teachers to position themselves in their classrooms using this new additive perspective as they engage with students' writing. Particularly helpful is a reflection process in which she encourages instructors to contemplate their personal writing development, addressing the types of comments that were either helpful, or hurtful. In addition, these early chapters provide an opportunity for practitioners to engage in critical thinking activities regarding their views of what writing should look like, as well as sound like. The chapters also provide background for common approaches to reading and evaluating student writing which typically guide instruction, including district mandates and grading systems, standards and published frameworks, as well as large-scale published writing programs and rubrics. Bomer's discussion provides insight into why these approaches do not support the varying needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. She advocates instead for the use of authentic assessment, which involves continuous observation, as well as a dynamic view of what students are doing, understanding, and how they are engaging with writing as they learn. The key, she argues, is to converge aspects of assessment and evaluation so that they both more accurately represent students' growth, strength and writing-related funds of knowledge.

A second major theme emerges as Bomer challenges teachers to embrace a new form of language when engaging with their students' texts – a form of language that is reflective of the additive perspective which she introduced in prior chapters. This language reflects a more inclusive discourse, or way of talking about children's writing, that goes beyond the traditional conventions of writing. Instead, it takes into account the diversity of writers and writing styles that exist in our modern world. In this part of the text, she encourages teachers to become better readers of their students' writing, embracing the notion that "the true secret in learning how to write is to *read*" (p. 33), using both a writer's eye and a writer's ear, paying careful attention to the distinct language that emerges. Bomer continues with an in-depth analysis of the terms that

teachers have been taught to utilize as they evaluate the texts of their students. These include voice, organization, vocabulary or word choice, sentence structure, sentence fluency, and details. While acknowledging the importance of this language, she also provides recommendations as to how teachers can expand their meaning by utilizing a more critical method of engaging with students' writing. This involves what Bomer describes as "long language" (p. 55) and metaphors. This type of language is specific to the individual, the occasion, and the individual written piece. Furthermore, it reflects a more eloquent, in-depth, and descriptive account of what student writers are actually doing while composing. Classroom-based examples of teachers using 'long language' to support various aspects of students' writing development model its utility. For example, one teacher described her student's use of organization by comparing it to the thrill experienced on a roller coaster: "Reading your piece is like taking a roller-coaster ride, where you're climbing and climbing, anticipating that huge drop; I enjoyed the ride!" (p. 65). The key is for teachers to become familiar with the diversity of descriptive phrases and terminology that can be used to describe children's compositions and to utilize this language each and every time they engage with their students' writing.

Part II of *Hidden Gems* offers practitioners suggestions and hands-on activities for reading and responding to student compositions, integrating analyses based upon the works of exemplary 'artist' authors, including classic writers like William Shakespeare or more contemporary writers like Ian McEwan, who wrote the novel *Atonement*. Aware of current challenges which teachers face as a result of standards-based reform and the high-stakes testing movement in the US, which result in tight curricular control, Bomer is very careful to frame these ideas within a context which is meaningful and realistic for today's teachers. Bomer asks that instructors explore students' writing in a way that is reflective of their unique voices, styles, and passions in order to find their 'hidden gems' (p. 90). Instead of viewing the language used in students' texts as incorrect, she encourages teachers to search for hidden jewels in students' writing by asking: "What do I see in this piece of writing?" (p. 99). As teachers engage with student compositions, she suggests that they expand on key aspects of the writing workshop (i.e., research, decide, teach; Calkins, 1994) to include an additional characteristic which she describes as "Name" (p. 9). In what emerges as a final major theme in the text, naming is a way for the teacher to highlight several things that the student does well during the writing conference so that s/he might build upon it and do it again in subsequent compositions. Using the long language Bomer describes in prior chapters, naming is not empty praise, but in fact "the key to teaching students something they may not have consciously realized they are doing" (p. 9). In addition to naming, Bomer challenges teachers to offer several suggestions for growth as they read their students' texts which might propel their writing forward as they work towards publication and celebration of their written pieces. A particularly advantageous aspect of this discussion is Bomer's inclusion of student writing samples as a part of the text. Using these samples, she describes students' work, using naming techniques and opportunities for further instruction. Furthermore, she provides guidelines, protocols, rubrics and templates for examining student writing, and examples of how these tools might be utilized.

Bomer is careful to provide readers with specific strategies for interacting with the writing of students who enter the classroom with multilingual and multidialectal experiences. While teachers should continue to introduce students to the conventions of standard English, Bomer contends that they must also value students' home languages and dialects and invite their use in the classroom. She adds that while students are learning standard English as a second language or dialect, it is important to view the language patterns that emerge in writing during this time

not as errors, but rather students' abilities to experiment with words in two varied and sometimes overlapping codes.

There is substantial merit to be found in *Hidden Gems*. Not only does Bomer promote a new perspective of how to view children's compositions, but she also provides a variety of hands-on strategies that teachers can begin to integrate immediately in order to put this perspective into action. She encourages teachers to thoughtfully engage with their students' texts, providing specific and positive feedback as well as supporting growth through targeted instruction. As a result, students are provided the opportunity to write, revise, and polish their drafts towards publication. For many educators, the additive perspective from which to view student development might not be a new concept. But Bomer's thoughtful samples and strategies for utilizing this perspective to engage with students' texts are nonetheless noteworthy. As such, they should not be dismissed as passé. Rather they offer *another* reminder which urges teachers to reengage with their students' writing in a unique, critical way that is representative of the diversity of learners in today's classrooms.

Bomer's text is timely, as researchers and practitioners alike continue to debate the question of what makes writing good (Nauman, Stirling, & Borthwick, 2011), as well as why good writing is so important (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Her insights into these issues are commendable, especially in an era where the disconnect between the diversity of schoolchildren in our nations' classrooms and the uniform, homogenous, structured practices which reflect classroom instruction and standardized measures of achievement, continue to be of great concern (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). *Hidden Gems* underscores the value of students' unique stylistic resources represented in their writing, and how these resources should be acknowledged during writing instruction. More importantly, however, the text reminds teachers to view these resources as 'diamonds in the rough,' and to build upon these characteristics in an effort to develop creative, confident, and prolific young writers.

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