

Some Thoughts About Children and Their Writing

Beatrice J. Hurley

"She cannot talk,
She cannot walk.
She cannot eat,
She cannot think.
My favorite doll,
I take her everywhere I go.
She's mine!"

Miss Jones found this piece of writing in the agreed-upon "private putting place" (under the left-hand corner of her green desk blotter). Miss Jones always looked there sometime during each day. Often she found nothing. But then again, sometimes she did. And whenever there was a piece of a child's heart and mind spread out on paper, she gave it loving care. Always, she would read it silently to herself first. Sometimes, however, a note in parentheses said, "Miss Jones, please read my story to the class." And then she did with all the dramatic power it merited.

Such moments during the busy day in Room 103 were special. When Miss Jones announced she had found an idea under her blotter the children knew what to do. They tuned-in for a listening time. They became quiet with expectation. She read; they enjoyed. Sometimes she made appreciative and reassuring comments, like, "I'm so glad Mary described her doll before she told us what she was writing about. That's an interesting way to write sometimes." Or, a child might remark that the story reminded her of a poem she once read in a book about a doll that got lost. Another child might request that the composition be read again; and Miss Jones would oblige. After these moments together, the children usually went back to their other classroom activities, the better for having been

diverted for a few moments.

Other teachers wondered about Miss Jones' room. It was a happy, busy classroom. Children in there seemed to learn arithmetic and spelling and yet there was time for other things. How did she get her children to *like* to write? How come the pieces the children read in a story-hour assembly seemed so refreshingly honest and childlike? Was she always given the brightest second graders?

There was something special about what happened in Room 103. Let's examine the elements that freed children to write honestly and willingly. Let's find the methods she used. But let's enlarge our view to include all teachers in all classrooms with their children. Let's examine some of the conditions necessary for good writing.

Undeniably, a teacher must be knowledgeable about children. She must first know what makes children tick. She must know that a tight, regimented classroom atmosphere, dominated by worship of rituals and bounded by conformity, seldom contributes to an enlargement of spirit. She must realize that in each child there is latent potential waiting to be developed. She must work so that this latency does not remain dormant. She must believe in a child's power to grow, to perceive, to imagine, to produce childlike things. She must cherish what comes, no matter to what low estate it sinks, as long as it is an honest attempt by a child to put his idea on paper. Here's a piece of low estate writing, when viewed by an untrained eye. Imagine, if you will, John turning in a book containing three pieces of yellow 9" x 12" drawing paper, two brads, a blue crayon and these words:

"A couple of piles of dirt
And a couple of cans of oil."

Pretty ordinary—in fact, pretty dull! What should a teacher do? One who wants to hold her tongue so that a still latent talent, not yet visible, will treat this effort kindly. She can't praise the product; but she can, if she is a knowledgeable teacher, note that the two piles of dirt and the two cans of oil do fit the story. She can remark how neatly the holes were punched, and how carefully the cover fits the inside page. She can commend him for the colors he chose for his book.

What's the result? No damning of John's crude story. No saying, "I wish you had . . ." She knows enough about children to accept what comes and to hold out for more and better ideas on paper.

But the art of good teaching is more than waiting. It is investing children's days with activities and experiences through which they can stretch and grow. A primary grade teacher may do this. Knowing that children can think big thoughts she may say, "Let's think of quiet things today." Then, acting as scribe, she will write what comes. Here are examples of what came. They represent a composite of ideas from several classrooms:

"I'm thinking of things as
'quiet as our classroom when no one is in it;
'quiet as my shoes standing in a closet;
'quiet as a feather dropping from heaven;
'quiet as a mountain reaching for the sky;
'quiet as a spider spinning its web;
'quiet as ice cream melting;
'quiet as an earthworm digging a tunnel;
'quiet as a cloud moving across the sky;
'quiet as people standing at a funeral."

A first grade teacher used childrens' composite stories as a take-off point for learning to read. Here is a sample of one such story composed early in the school year:

Winnie The Pooh

Christopher Robin's father wrote stories
about Winnie the Pooh.
Today we are going to start reading about
Pooh.
Winnie the Pooh is fat because he loves to
eat honey.
He is a cute, silly, stuffed bear.
Winnie the Pooh has lots of funny, nice,
stuffed animal friends.
Christopher Robin is also Winnie's friend.

Through the giving of opportunities for children to say their ideas, and listen as the teacher reads them back, power to think and express beautiful thoughts grows.

Here's a fifth grade group composition:

"Oh, winds of March,
Battering, battering
Against my window;
Pounding, pounding
The ships at sea;
Pushing, pushing
Against my umbrella;
Ramming, ripping,
Roaring at me.
I shiver as it howls around me,
Like an angry wolf
That's lost its prey."

It's quite obvious that a teacher who gets such powerful group pieces must have made an investment in her children's development. Can you see that there must have been ample time spent on alliteration used by writers of stature? Perhaps, lots of reading together of such snatches of pieces as: "One misty, moisty morning . . ." or "Six shrieking, spooky skeletons scooted screeching through the night . . ." or "a soft, slumbering summer breeze . . .?"

Many teachers find that group writing at any age level helps children to feel the dignity of their thoughts, and when these thoughts are set next to next (individual thoughts joined together), the result can be an effective piece of writing.

But, one might ask, when does an individual ever learn to write an entire composition by himself? And that's a legitimate inquiry. Some children can do this at an early age; others take a longer time. The quality varies. Skill in using the mechanics of writing varies. Just as the ancestor of the tomato you may have had last night in your salad was once a fruit unfit for human consumption, so, too, early attempts at writing often bear feeble resemblance to subsequent achievements. Good things are worth waiting for. Here's an example:

A fifth grade boy would write only when not to do so would embarrass him in front of his classmates. He'd do the thank-you notes, the social studies reports, the other expected practical writing jobs. When it came to voluntary, personal writing that was another thing entirely. Encouraging him, prodding him, worrying about him were of no avail. Toward the end of the year a class magazine of children's personal writing was contemplated. Children

were invited to choose a selection from their writing folders (each child's work was filed throughout the year) or to write an entirely new composition. Most of the children had many selections from which to choose. Not Jon! His folder was nil. What a box to be in! How to get out of this fix! Backed to the wall, he produced the following piece in about twenty minutes.

OLE BILL JONES

"Ole Bill Jones was as bloody a pirate as any other pirate that ever sailed the spanish main.

He'd sunk as many ships as he had fingers on his hands. With a patch over one eye and a crutch under one arm he gave his thundering orders. And many men did walk the plank for him.

One time he came upon a richly laden vessel. He fought for six hours and finally captured it. He showed no mercy for any of the men except the captain and he kept him to guide the new ship.

There are many other adventures but I'm going to tell you how Ole Bill met his finish.

This time he was sailing past Brazil, and he came upon a Spanish treasure ship and he fought. But this time it was he that was captured. They clapped him in irons at once.

They turned him over to the authorities and that was the end of Ole Bill Jones."

An astounding bit of writing coming from a boy who had had almost no practice in personal writing.

A question often asked by teachers relates to the matter of the writing of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Surely, in reply, we would note that latent power to use language is often more submerged in these children. Each adult human being coats himself with protective layers of whatever is required to assure privacy within. Children do this too. It may take weeks, months, even years to peel off these successive layers and get to the core of a child's self. Many children can't trust adults enough to dare to bare their innermost thoughts. Sometimes a teacher comes into a child's life at the right moment and can earn enough trust so that writing such as the following results.

SURVIVAL

What will I do if I'm left all alone on St. John? I will put out a big fish pot and catch it full of fish. That will last me one week.

The next week I will make a canoe out of ply board and sail it to Coral Bay to get a cow and kill it

and roast it over a big fire. I will catch a pig named Miss J. I will have to save bananas and fish heads to feed her.

For clothes I will have to wear a panty alone, because my dresses will get torn and it will be hot anyhow.

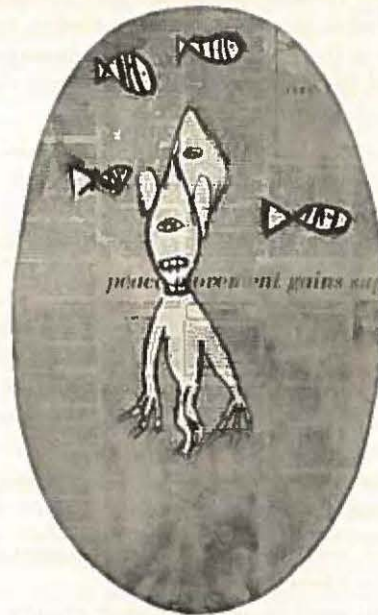
I will bake coconut bread and boil bush tea for my supper.

I will have to sleep in my father's pantaloon and tie it up with a string.

There will be no one here to play with but Ilva, but sometimes I will go to Lovango to play with June and Margaret.

Sometimes I will have to ride my jackass in the woods.*

*Jadan, Doris. Donkey Wings and Other Things. Virgin Island Press, Inc., St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.



He's got one eye and a big long beak and a spiney back and big fat feet.

Clinton Vitousek

5th grade

What more honest a piece of writing can one wish for? The locale of this story is St. John, Virgin Islands. The girl is representative of the children from a primitive milieu. Each sentence in the story reveals a chunk of her life. And, who among us has not at some time in our lives wished "to ride a jackass into the woods"?

Children are children whatever their background. Being children, they have time on their side—time to grow, time to develop, time to be helped in that growing and developing. The essence of the pupil-teacher relationship should be one of helpfulness. Where this helping relationship is exploited, writing can become a mirror through which one's innermost self is portrayed.

Many times writing may come from stimulation outside the classroom. A third grade class was inspired by their art teacher to produce imaginary animals. They painted their pictures on the want-ad pages of the daily paper. Fantastically ingenious creatures resulted. Upon seeing the pictures in the art studio, the fifth and sixth graders in the school decided to help the project along by composing appropriate rhymes about the creatures. Not poetry, just rhymes. Here are some samples:

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"He's got one eye
And a big long beak
And a spiney back
And big fat feet."

"Long Zonger, where did you get your neck?
It's so long, so long, so long,
It's as long as a Heckety Heck's neck.
Long Zonger, where did you get your neck?"

In summary, what can be said of children and their writing? We could say that:

1. Children need to feel that their thoughts have dignity and are worthy of recording.
2. Children need to feel that their readers will receive their deeply personal, recorded thoughts with respect and enjoyment.
3. Children can learn, ultimately, to be efficient scribes of their own ideas, but such skill requires time and healthy, sensitive nurturing.

Writing is a deeply personal experience. The creative muse retreats easily. Anything that brings about these retreats causes the writer to mistrust his own ability to write, and may cause him to write less, and to write less honestly.



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