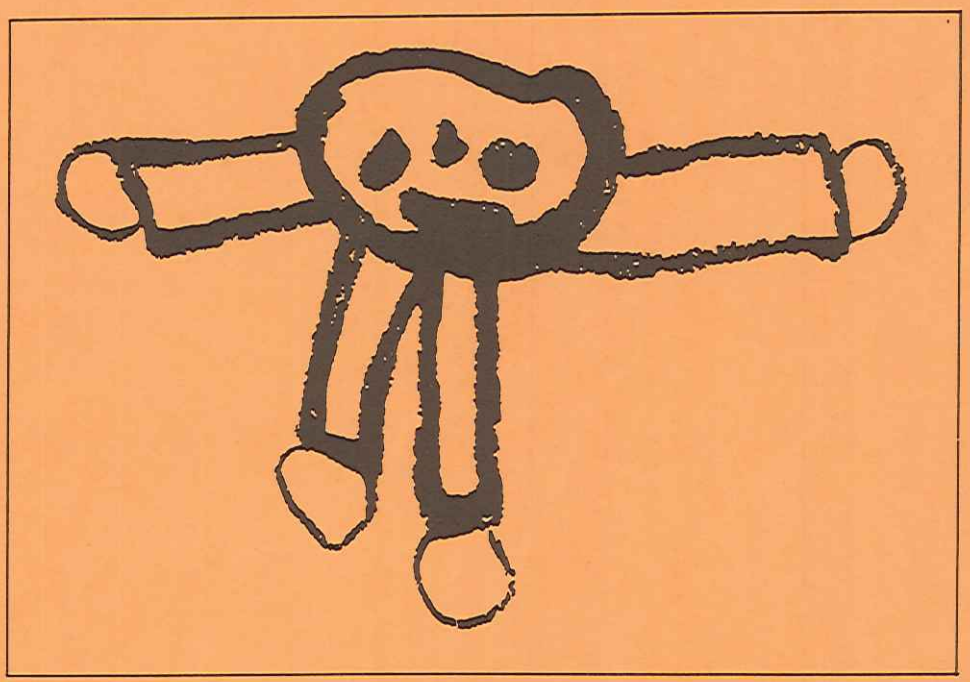
North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation



Anne Martin

THE WORDS IN MY PENCIL: CONSIDERING CHILDREN'S WRITING

In November 1972, educators from several parts of the United States met at the University of North Dakota to discuss some common concerns about the narrow accountability ethos that had begun to dominate schools and to share what many believed to be more sensible means of both documenting and assessing children's learning. Subsequent meetings, much sharing of evaluation information, and financial and moral support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund have all contributed to keeping together what is now called the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation.

A major goal of the Study Group, beyond support for individual participants and programs, is to provide materials for teachers, parents, school administrators and governmental decision-makers (within State Education Agencies and the U.S. Office of Education) that might encourage re-examination of a range of evaluation issues and perspectives about schools and schooling. Towards this end, the Study Group has initiated a continuing series of monographs. In addition to discussions of evaluation, the series includes material on children's thinking, children's language, teacher support systems, inservice training, the school's relationship to the larger community. The intent is that these papers be taken not as final statements but as working papers, written by people who are acting on, not just thinking about, these problems, whose implications need an active and considered response.

Vito Perrone, Dean
Center for Teaching & Learning,
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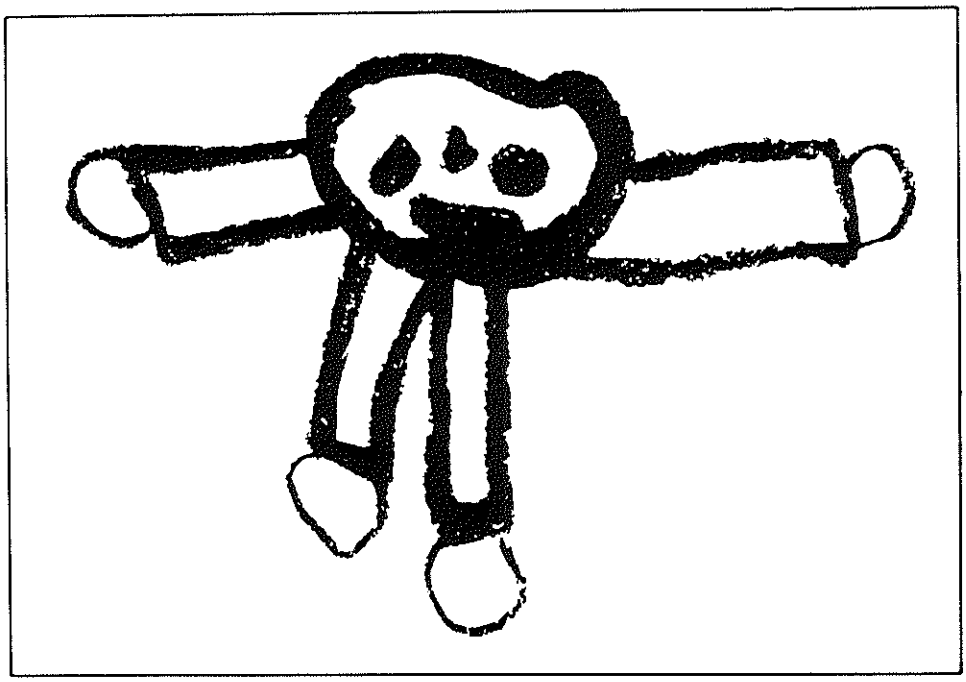
North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation



Anne Martin

THE WORDS IN MY PENCIL: CONSIDERING CHILDREN'S WRITING

University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, N.D. 58202
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Contents

I wish to thank all the people who extended my thinking and encouraged me to write about my work. In particular, I am grateful to Patricia Carini whose remarkable methods of child study gave me a productive framework, and to Nina Nyhart whose sensitive approach to teaching poetry influenced my work. For giving generously of their time to help me edit the manuscript, I would like to thank Philip Lopate, Brenda Engel, and my husband, Andy. My greatest debt is to the children whose writing I have quoted, and all the children who have taught me over the years.
A.M.

Introduction

Most children are ready to write before they ever set a word on paper, because they have urgent things they need to say. The difficult thing for them is to get hold of the words that accurately express their thoughts, and to keep the words long enough to capture them in written form. To teach writing, then, is to enable children to use language to release what is within. It is important for children to learn to write well not just for the sake of developing the skill, or even for the enjoyment derived, but because writing is a powerful means of expressing a person's deepest concerns, conflicts, ways of thinking, and whole approach to life. It is only when teachers become aware of writing in this larger view that they can begin to develop an honest, comprehensive writing program.

At present, there is a great deal of public concern that children are not learning enough in schools, and that they are especially deficient in reading and writing. The general response in the schools has been to *toughen up* and push a program of standardized drill. While I also view reading and writing as crucial subjects, I strongly believe that it is a drastic mistake to rely on a simplistic *back-to-basics* approach. To narrow writing down to a *skill subject* is not only unnecessary but damaging. It tends to reduce the children's output to lifeless copies of textbook models. Such a mechanistic approach can only lead to less competence and, in many cases, even a life-long aversion to writing. Good writing is the result of real engagement, an involvement that makes the writer willing to struggle to express himself. If writing is to be taught as an essential mode of expression instead of a checklist of fragmented skills, it requires a very different approach. The challenges to a teacher are considerable.

This monograph is an exploration of ways of eliciting writing from children. It is based on 20 years of experience as a classroom teacher and a long-standing interest in language, literature, and writing. While I have worked with children from nursery school through fourth grade, the monograph focuses on my last few years of teaching nine- and 10-year-olds. It examines the problems and conflicts that inevitably arise for any thoughtful teacher who is involved in day-to-day planning and decision-making in the classroom. It deals concretely with what children actually write and focuses

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specifically on the process of studying their writing. I am convinced that this approach to teaching writing--the constant search for better ways to release children's thoughts on paper and the study of the writing itself for what it can teach us about the children--is a more valid and more effective way to improve writing skills than the workbook kits and clever language arts schemes that are being packaged for schools all the time.

What I have written is not a *how-to* book. All teachers have to work out their own approaches from a variety of sources within and outside of themselves. But there are some insights I have reached through ordinary trial-and-error groping in the classroom which may be helpful to other teachers, or at least reassure them in their own attempts to work out a lively writing program. Some of my recommendations are so simple that they sound almost foolish:

1. If writing is a constant every-day activity, most children will lose their fear of the written word and write with increasing ease and pleasure.

2. If writing is taken seriously and consistently shared, children will be motivated to write clearly, and their technical skills will automatically improve from the impact of other people's responses.

3. If teachers don't impose preconceived standards of form and language but keep options open, children will produce an amazing variety of writing which keeps expanding in scope and sharpening in focus.

4. The identification of group themes in any given classroom of children is reasonably easy for an observant teacher, and these can be tapped as a rich source for writing material throughout the year.

One of the most difficult but I think essential tasks for a teacher is to learn to trust children to know--or find out--what they need to say and then let them say it without directing their expression. It is difficult because it may take a long time for a child to develop this ability, and teachers are under pressure to produce results within one school year. A teacher's self-image is bound to be more shaky when results are not immediate or clear. It takes a special patience, a long-term perspective, which is not encouraged in our school systems. Along with this perspective goes the willingness to accept work which may seem to be insignificant but which may be important in terms of a child's transitional reaching or experimenting with ideas and form. One of the most exciting things that came out of

this study for me was the confirmation that even work which seems muddled or trivial can be highly revealing when placed in the context of writing over a longer time span. The writing always makes sense on some level, if we know and understand enough.

This became clear to me only after I had focused on a child's work--any child--over a period of time. In examining a whole body of work of a child instead of just looking at individual pieces, I found that each child was working out over and over again some particular questions of his own, using style, vocabulary, form, and imagery in a unique way. I had expected to find some evidence of the development of style and themes in the work of the more advanced writers, but it was surprising to me to find such consistency and significance in the work of every child. Through the writing, there emerged for me a distinct and revealing picture of a particular child's view. Some of the insights gained from a careful study of a child's written work over a period of time might not be accessible any other way.

The teaching of writing takes us far beyond a school subject into the whole realm of experience. In allowing children to find their voices, in studying their work for what it reveals, teachers are opening themselves to learning so that they can teach.

1

The Children, the Classroom, and Getting Started

Our school population is in the middle economic range of a good suburban school system near Boston. While there is some variation in family income and increasingly more of our children come from housing developments, most of them still live in private houses rather than apartments, and their parents tend to be professional or business people. There is very little racial mixture--though we do get some foreign children for one- or two-year periods because of the proximity of hospitals offering research work to doctors from other countries--and our few black children tend to be bussed in from Boston through a voluntary plan. Both black children in my class, Greg and Brenda, came in from Boston every morning after a slow and often wild bus ride.

However, in spite of my children's comparatively privileged backgrounds, many of them had already suffered a great deal of personal upheaval and loss. Out of 21 children, 9 came from one-parent families, one family separated during the year, and one second marriage seemed to be in severe trouble. That means that over half of my children had experienced family separations or were in the midst of struggling to come to terms with difficult family relationships at home. This is only slightly more than the general statistics of broken homes in the school, a change over the last few years from relatively stable homes to much more movement and uncertainty.

The atmosphere every Monday morning reflected the children's anxiety. They had often spent part of their weekend with their other parent, perhaps been taken to many activities, or perhaps left in front of the TV set for most of the day. Many of the children came back to school tired, hyper-active, noisy, upset. As the week went on, the children relaxed more, got into school routines, quieted down. Fridays were usually good days in spite of the fatigue of the week. This rhythm of the days probably varied with different classes (though the Monday/Friday syndrome seemed to hold for the school) but it was something I had to take into account in planning. My particular problem with this class was how to give them enough leeway to express their feelings of confusion, anger, and sadness, as well as their exuberance and energetic enthusiasm, but at the same time supply the structure and limits that some of them were missing

at home. This was not easy, and I agonized over the balance all year.

While it was an unusual class in that none of the children were so far behind in reading and writing skills that they needed the help of a specialist, it was a usual one in having a large number of children who were getting some, at least minimal, social services through the school, mostly involving their parents also. As a matter of fact, I had been briefed by the guidance teacher beforehand, since it seemed I had a rather large number of bright, creative but quite difficult children, especially among the boys. During the year, three boys were tested by the school psychologist who recommended outside help for all of them. David's problems were recognized to be so serious that in spite of having been under psychiatric care for some years, he was taken out of the class for the last couple of months and was placed in a residential school the following year. Ruthie referred herself for help to our guidance teacher, Jamie continued to see the counsellor regularly as he had also done the previous year, Joe worked once a week with a social worker, Hannah had outside help, Michael went to the children's version of an "est" workshop (much to my surprise). One of the girls was involved in a custody suit that was scheduled and rescheduled for the whole year, and still not finally decided by June. While I know that the problems in my school don't compare with the overwhelming ones of inner city schools, all this is merely to say that life in the affluent suburbs is not that easy for many kids--or their teachers.

The one outstanding characteristic of this class was the children's absolute inability to work as a group or listen, and, by contrast, their amazing ability to produce fantastic work individually. Give them anything to *do* and they went at it with tremendous energy and purpose. Ask them to sit quietly for five minutes and they went to pieces. My inclinations fortunately are towards individual work materials instead of papers to fill out, lots of arts and crafts, partners and small groups in preference to class lessons. When I wanted group discussions, group singing, class projects, or listening times, I scheduled them for the first thing in the morning, which was designated as meeting time and was gradually expanded to include any group lessons I thought were important. (If I didn't schedule a discussion for meeting time, it was hardly worth it to try to do it later in the day. I could succeed by dint of a power struggle--putting the children in special assigned seats, continuing during recess or after school if I had to stop too many times during a lesson, removing a troublemaker into the hall for a while--but nothing much was gained by that, even though sometimes I insisted.)

Much of the time I simply listed the day's required work on the board, leaving the planning of their time to the children. They were extremely conscientious about doing all of it, some even worrying about whether they

should go to recess if they hadn't finished, though there were no penalties attached. Certain children sometimes needed reminders or checking, but the majority took responsibility for pursuing their own work. This left me free to work with individuals or small groups, although sometimes if there was a difficult assignment there were too many demands made on me during that time. The requirements could vary from assignments of math sheets or history book pages to crafts projects, puppet plays, nature study, or anything else. Any time beyond assignments was *free* for the children to use materials around the room. Once we worked our way into this kind of routine which took into account the children's drive to get going and my dislike of disciplinary measures, most days went pretty smoothly, with only occasional moments of high drama.

UNLIKE A REGULAR CLASSROOM

The physical set-up of the classroom probably made it easier for children to work independently in their own ways. My room itself was a particularly pleasant one, which I appreciated all the more because I had moved from an open area in our newly renovated building, where I felt extremely restricted, into a four-walled room where I felt comfortable. Moreover, it didn't look like a regular classroom. Having been designed originally as a teacher's room, it was odd-shaped, yellow-carpeted (not meant for muddy sneakers), and located in a far corner of the third floor where it was central to nothing in the school. In spite of the children's complaints about having to trudge up and down three flights all day long, it was worth it to have windows facing into trees--like a tree house, somebody once said--and convenient to have built-in bathrooms. There were four grown-up carrels to work at, and otherwise only an extremely motley assortment of chairs and tables which I dredged up from various parts of the school. The children kept their own things in cubbies in a free-standing metal cabinet, and their coats in lockers outside the room.

The three main divisions in the room were the art area, meeting area, and table area. Each of these areas, only partially defined by means of bookshelves or similar dividers, was used for multi-purposes. The art area contained a water table with a cover, a large table, and a storage counter and some shelves. It was used for painting, water experiments, printing, paper making, weaving and other crafts projects. Sometimes it was useful for a very small discussion group, or for a few friends to work together at writing a play, or as a place for someone to read alone.

The meeting area was empty rug space, suitable for board games, Lego, plays, puppet shows, or just to sprawl out full-length to read. Many times this space was underutilized, the children preferring to crowd into tiny

places where everybody else tripped over their work. Towards the end of the year, the children and I started to think of better ways of using the empty space by moving things back and forth into it (hard to do with the unwieldy furniture we had) or keeping building games and other materials closer at hand.

The table area was used for group lessons, a place to sit together for storytime (the children preferred sitting at tables to draw while listening, rather than just sitting on the rug), a cozy place for festive occasions, and, most commonly, an all-purpose work area for writing, drawing, science experiments, reading, bookbinding, board games, and anything else one might need a table for.

The room was medium-sized and would have been a great deal more efficient if some shelves had been built in and if the walls had been lined with bulletin board material. As it was, all storage space had to be brought in, even a supply closet and every bookshelf. (I always wonder about modern school architects who don't seem to know that under any system of education books are a necessity, as well as paper and other supplies, and that every classroom is going to need storage space so it might as well be planned for in advance. The old-fashioned schoolrooms in our town have wall-lengths of storage, and child-level counter space.) Pictures had to be taped on the wall and were forever falling off when the tape dried out, or else tacked in laboriously with the help of a hammer, which ruined the purple wallpaper but sometimes couldn't be avoided. With all its limitations, however, my room was a constant source of pleasure to me, and also to the children who almost unanimously preferred a regular room to the amorphous and badly planned open space in other parts of the building.

The main reason that the room had never been used much as a teacher's room, besides its inaccessibility, was that the only furniture that had been in it were the study carrels and a high built-in counter. These I thought would be useful for children as necessary private desk space, but what I had not foreseen was how wonderful the spaces underneath the carrels turned out to be for small semi-enclosures big enough for one or two children. Our lack of sufficient table space and seating was compensated for by the many underneath places on the floor, where most children preferred to work anyway. Partly through the accident of what there was available in the way of equipment, the room became particularly suitable to my style of teaching and our daily routine.

The general schedule for each day was roughly the same, varied mostly by the daily specialist's period--art, music, woodwork and homemaking once a week, gym twice--which came at various times either in the morning or afternoon. The children arrived at about eight, and class started at 8:15 with a whole group class meeting. The meeting could cover all sorts of ground, from spontaneous discussion to organization of projects or any

other class business. But it almost invariably included some explanation and/or decisions about the day's work, both the assigned tasks and optional activities. If there was a group lesson I wanted to have that day, or a writing assignment for the whole class, I usually proceeded to do that right after meeting. Mostly I found it more effective to have children sit in assigned seats for those group sessions, so we would move from the meeting area to the table area where children sat in groups of four or six.

If there was no whole group activity, the children would simply disperse to their work after meeting, sitting anywhere around the room, including their favorite places under counters or in corners of the room, using clipboards to write on. The acquisition of clipboards for the class was one of the most successful orders of materials I ever made, even if I did get tired of having to remind people to return the boards to their box from all over the room. There is something about a clipboard that exudes a wonderful air of freedom combined with responsible workmanship. I enjoy it myself when I walk around with one, and I know the children felt business-like also when they settled down with board, paper and pencil either near their friends or in a private place. I rarely insist that they work at assigned seats because children work so differently in terms of their physical position, proximity to others, their need for silence or for some discussion with friends to get them started. Finding one's own style of working is part of the whole process of learning. It often takes a great deal of experimentation, and sometimes also discussion and intervention from a teacher. Gradually, most children learn to know what conditions are conducive to good work--which doesn't mean they will necessarily always choose to seek those conditions, of course--so that the teacher doesn't have to spend much time imposing rules or discipline. I found that if I put the emphasis on tasks to be completed, taking into account the capacities of the children and allowing sufficient time, the children simply accepted the requirements and almost always completed their required work during the work period, often with time to spare for other activities.

These bare outlines of the program and description of the room can't really give the flavor of a class, which is made up mostly by the interaction of the people in it. Each class has its own particular character and molds the shape of the days, making different use of the room and its potential, requiring shifts in schedule and approach. When it all comes together and the rhythm is right, you can feel it, just as you can feel tension when something is wrong. It's not always easy to diagnose the problems, and even harder to rectify them even when you identify what's the matter. Other people in the classroom can help.

In mid-morning we usually had some outdoor recess time, and before lunch I read chapters of our current story book which I tried to choose with the interests and needs of the group in mind. After lunch and another, short, outdoor recess, the children immediately took their reading books and settled down for about 40 minutes of silent reading. They chose their own books, often with help from me or from the other children, and they talked to me about their books when they finished them. During this period I often read also (trying to catch up with the enormous range of books for this age group) or else I had individual conferences with children about their books. There were no reading groups and no other official reading periods during the day, though many

children chose to read on their own or went to the school library to take out books.

Our afternoon programs varied with different specialist times and according to ongoing class activities. Sometimes the children worked on specific projects, sometimes we had group activities like singing or theater games, sometimes we just had a continued work period. Every Friday afternoon was *play day*, when the children would put on a program of skits, acts, jokes, or any other kind of entertainment for the class. This was voluntary, and often some children spent much of their free time all week rehearsing plays and preparing to perform them.

OPENING UP

Having newly come to fourth grade after teaching first graders, I thought that the children would have gained confidence as writers in three years of primary school; not so. Many of them felt they weren't good at writing, and weren't used to doing it. Ruthie, who had been an outstanding poet in my second grade, said she was no good at poetry and didn't like to write it. Hannah, who had also enjoyed writing two years before, was at first very inhibited and got started only when I sat with her, talked, and wrote some of it for her by dictation. It was hard to know how much of the children's hesitation was due to lack of experience with frequent writing, and how much was due to the beginning of self-consciousness in relation to others, which seemed to be a marked feature of my fourth graders. At any rate, the attitudes differed from the spontaneity of most of the primary children I had taught before.

Reflecting about the children's uncertainty, I realized that it was not too surprising that they were confused. In their experience at school, the methods of teaching writing each year were as sharply different as the values and personalities of their teachers. And now, once more, the children were feeling out a new teacher, just as I was observing them. During those first days of the year, the groundwork for a writing program is laid out, whether by plan or implication. After that it evolves through the interaction of the children with each other and with the teacher. From the very beginning, my problem was two-fold and seemingly contradictory: How to ease the children's fears and allow them to write freely? How to get them to reach more deeply into their experience and achieve precision? The first concern requires a relaxed atmosphere, the second demands that the child invests effort, concentrated thought, self-discipline. Given the lack of confidence among the children, I felt my first job was to loosen up inhibitions and to approve of everything they wrote.

Writing was a daily requirement in my class, sometimes in diaries and sometimes by specific assignment

from me. This established writing as an important part of the day's work and at the same time implied that it was an ordinary activity that everybody could and would engage in successfully. At first the children were surprised that I asked for so much writing, but soon they took it as a matter of course and didn't object, except when my assignments were unclear or unappealing. By the end of the year, when I gave one child special permission to write during our sacrosanct reading time (where everyone in the class curls up somewhere and reads quietly for about 40 minutes), another child complained bitterly that it wasn't fair to let Emily write if the others couldn't. That doesn't mean, however, that all children did good or even concentrated writing every day; it is unrealistic to expect consistent high quality. But it is quite realistic to expect some effort and output regularly from all children.

No matter how meager the first attempts may be, there has to be acceptance of what the children are writing and, beyond that, an appreciation of what the work contains. Almost always, there are indications of potential strengths that can be recognized, encouraged, and broadened. Sometimes a whole group shows particular trends of style and interests: from the beginning, this class wrote more lively prose than the previous year's contemplative class. Their orientation towards action was demonstrated in a tendency towards adventure stories, lots of excitement, and snappy dialogue. Here are some of the first stories they wrote in September in response to an assignment to write an ocean story:

Once upon a time I went down to the beach and guess what I saw--a big tiger shark. It was coming straight at me and boy was I scared! My eyes was wide open and so was my mouth. And I had a friend with me, too, and my friend's name was Emily and I was baby sitting. And I had to make sure she didn't get hurt. Luckily I was the Bionic Woman so I took the shark by his tail and threw the shark on the shore and killed the shark. And Emily clapped for me and we went home and nobody said nothing to our mother and father. Brenda

Once me and Michael were swimming when a mermaid and a shark were dancing with an octopus. When a unicorn made love with a mermaid, me and Michael laughed our heads off. David

Hello my name is Greg. Once I had an adventure. It all started when I was in a boat. I sailed along the sea with my best friend Marty. "Hey Greg, a storm is coming." "Well do something. You see me steering the boat." BOOM! BAM! BOM! The thunder roared. "Dive, Marty, dive!" We dived into the water. We had tubes to float on. Here comes a shark. "Marty, stand very still. Here comes a helicopter. Swim for it!" Splish splash splish splash. We finally made it at last. What

a relief! "Hey, if we shoot the tubes they'll blow up the shark." BOOM "Yay! We did it. Now let's go home."
Greg

These early stories foreshadow not only a continued interest in the development of adventure themes, lively detail, dialogue and humor, but also something of the style and personality of each child. Brenda continued to be involved in working out her relationships with others, Greg fantasized hero situations for himself, David was obsessed with questions of sex and the body. At the beginning of the year, I didn't yet realize the strength of these personal thrusts, nor how clearly they would keep appearing in different forms. As the children's writing accumulated, I was amazed at how insistently the children's real concerns broke through in their writing, even in such unlikely places as the boring assignment of making up sentences for spelling words.

I always *like school.*
I almost *missed the ball.*
My mother does *want the operation.*
My mother doesn't *have to go until Monday.*
Where *is Steven?*
I have a friend.
I have a speech *problem.*
Because *why?*
Because people *don't like me.*
Today they're *leaving.*
That is their *car.*
Joe

Joe is a child who (along with a few others) went to a weekly speech class to correct a minor problem. On the day that he wrote these spelling sentences, he was much pre-occupied with his mother's imminent hospital stay which was worrying him a great deal, though he had been assured that it would not be a serious operation. In fact, he seemed to be struggling with two concerns in his writing, his worry about his mother and his (perhaps related) worry about his *speech problem.* Starting off with a positive sentence about school, and a slightly doubtful one about his sports ability which was very important to him, he went on to two sentences about his mother, the first of which states the necessary element of the operation and the second the relief that it is not for a few days yet. He then skips to a question about a child who is absent and assures himself that he has a friend. In the next sentences, it's not absolutely clear whether he means that his speech is disturbed because he doesn't feel liked or that people don't like him because he has speech problems. The last two sentences seem to be uneasy reminders again of his mother's anticipated departure. Joe, who was very close to his mother, was using the neutral words in the spelling list to express his worries. The word *speech* brought him to

thoughts of his own inadequacies, and the fact that many of the children didn't like him. Behind these sentences, Joe seemed to be expressing the undefined confusions and fears about his relationship with his parents and with other children.

In another spelling-word exercise, Richard wrote, "*Loneliness* can be fatal." Richard had come to the classroom after school on the second day of the year to show me his dog who was his only companion in the afternoons until his mother returned later from work. When I asked him whether that was lonely for him, he drew himself up tall and said, "Lonely? Why should I be lonely? I'm nine years old!" Richard, who hated to write spelling sentences and usually wrote the briefest ones he could, also handed me this sentence once for the word *jealous:* "When we lived in Northampton my mom invited my girlfriend to supper and she played Moonlight Sonata on the piano boy was I *jealous.*"

The associations that the children had with certain words were so strong that they burst through their exercises almost involuntarily. I wanted to help the children feel comfortable about releasing some of this material in a more conscious, voluntary fashion. By the middle grades there is so much emphasis on making sense, following logical sequence, using language in standardized form, that children are often afraid to follow their impulses into some playful or *weird* writing. Since this group already seemed to possess some skill in narrative writing, I concentrated at the beginning on assuring them of the freedom to write *crazy* things, stuff that might be pure fantasy or disconnected images. That is not to say that I didn't also encourage the skills of factual, sequential, *correct* language, but I didn't want the children to lose the desire or ability to experiment with looser forms of language expression, which my primary children had managed with such ease and pleasure.

Every year, early in September, I assigned acrostic poems (a word written vertically down the page to form the first letter of each line) on the theory that these are a good, non-threatening way to loosen up fourth graders who might be prejudiced against poetry as such. Each time, the children enjoyed it. But for this group, the half-hour lesson had a much more profound effect than I had intended. All year long, children continued experimenting with the form. If they couldn't think of anything else to write, they composed pages of acrostics in their diaries. They followed up themes, reworked the same words over and over again, made little books of a series of acrostic poems. I got tired of these exercises rather quickly, but they didn't.

The day before I was going to introduce acrostic poems, Andre, who has read a lot of European history, sat down at the typewriter and started to compose a long complicated acrostic poem about Marie Antoinette. He remembered the form from my class in second grade where, as he wrote, his "poems came into view." He hadn't

written too much poetry since then. Although he was a pretty able typist, the combination of his complex thoughts and the physical strain of writing proved too much for him, so I took most of the poem down by dictation:

Marie, little Antonchen,
Archduchess of Austria
Rides through Switzerland
In royal wealth. All her surroundings are biggest
Entering France.

A rich dauphin, future king of France, meets her
Near Paris. Being grand daughter-in-law of Louis XV
Turns out not being very homesick. Being queen
Of all France, does what she pleases, pays no attention
In all her fun to the poor staring people. Watch out,
little queen.
Now you are quite near to the French Revolution. You will
Eat your last comfortable meal and then you will lose your
Two children and your husband.
Torn between agony and despair you will never
Ever be a queen again.

The products of the other children's work with acrostics weren't quite as startling. But they, too, expressed the particular interests of the children. Pam, a sensitive nature lover, made a collection of animal acrostics, such as this one:

Turtles never carry
Umbrellas when the
Rain falls.
Turtles just use their shells mostly.
Lopsided in walking
Even in running
Such beautiful shells too.

Sara was in a group of tightly knit friends who liked each other a lot but had a hard time getting along. Somebody's feelings were always hurt, and there was constant bickering, making up, anger, tears, relief. Gradually these problems eased somewhat. But the daily demands of close friendship weighed especially heavily on Sara. She started to write an acrostic poem about one of her friends, and then wrote a series of them. This needed some collaboration from the friends themselves, so that nothing would be written that was unacceptable to the subject of the poems. It consequently led to some good discussions among the girls which may have helped them define their relationships with each other.

Bobby, a baseball fan, spent much time at the beginning of the year writing acrostic poems based on his name, each one a little different. When he finally realized that his thoughts could run across line endings, he

really took off, though he was sometimes hampered by spelling problems:

Calton Fisk is a good hiter
And a good cather. When he gets a
Lob over the plate he hits it
To Tiwan and some times
On the moon.
Now hes hiting the

Freway, and fenway is a Great place
In side thers so many fowl balls that you can
See stars and some times you get
Killed onley kiding.

Bobby's advice to first basemen is also in acrostic form:

First base is a very good position.
It's boring sometimes but you should be
Ready because if the ball comes and you miss it
Some kids will
Tease you

Because you missed it
And the runner on first will go to
Second and that's the
End of you.

Sometimes the need to find words with specific beginning letters jolts children out of clichés. Laurie had written several rather dull versions of some acrostics, and was not satisfied. She talked with me about her difficulty in livening up her poems. I asked her a few questions about swans, a word she had suggested, and she finally decided on this:

Swans swim
Way
Above their feet,
Nobody making a
Sound.

We were both pleased by her interesting way of indicating the height of the swan, suggested by the words *way above,* which fitted neatly into the structure of the poem.

As a kind of word game, acrostic poems offer children the security of a definite form, while at the same time they permit them the freedom of using unexpected words and phrases suggested by a letter of the alphabet. They also encourage inexperienced poets to run a line over into the next--a new idea for many children who tend to think of each line of a poem as a self-contained unit. It is not surprising that acrostic poems are so popular in the middle grades where games, rules, and

puzzles are such an important part of life. What did surprise me was how much the children in this class adapted the acrostic form to their own particular needs and interests. In order to provide more of these forms and techniques, I followed up with all kinds of poetic exercises.

At first the children seemed surprised at what I was asking them to do. When we had several exercises of *fire drill* poems, where they wrote down all of the associations they had with specific words, they kept saying incredulously, "You mean *anything* I think of?" "It doesn't have to be sentences?" and I kept assuring them that any words and phrases that came to them were all right. They themselves were intrigued with the strange results, and even more fascinated with the familiar loosening up exercise of automatic writing for seven minutes. A time limit always appealed to them because it sounded like a game. Afterwards I asked them to rearrange the words or eliminate and add material. Here are some poems about thunder, done early in the year by the quick association method:

Crack boom light flashing
in the dark. Trees fall.
Frightened and scared all
alone. Rain falls crash
black in the night. Hannah

crashing clouds
then raining hail drips on the roof like
a clock ticking
bees stinging flowers
catching the smell of red and blue flowers
flocks of white birds flying
across the sea. Sara

The main purpose of these exercises was not to turn out good products--though for every class assignment there is usually a bonus of a few good pieces of writing from the children who happen to catch fire that time--but to provide reassurance that seemingly random or *weird* thoughts can make their own kind of sense, or at least be fun to write. This would seem to be obvious, as it is to younger children, but nine- and 10-year-olds are drawn (and/or pushed?) towards a very factual approach to life, where fantasy has to be very carefully distinguished from reality. One of the most popular books in the class was the Guinness Book of World Records where fantastic things are actually true. Children at this age who want to indulge in fantasy are inclined usually to stick closely to the conventions of the fairy tale or science fiction. Poetry gives them an outlet for more unorthodox ways of expressing the strangeness they see in the world.

Once the loosening up exercises succeed in making children feel freer about writing, the effects carry over

to other kinds of assignments as well. Whenever I assigned a topic that dealt with some ordinary experience, I would add the option of substituting an imaginary account for the actual events. Pretty soon children would ask me before they began to write, *Does it have to be true?* When I said it didn't, some children would use the opportunity to write a satirical piece or a fantasy which was sometimes more *true* than the observable incident.

The whole question of literal truth is one that is very perplexing to children (as it is to adults). We had many discussions about fiction as compared to factual books, about psychological truth as compared to historical truth, and about the validity of an author's feelings and perceptions. Whereas in the primary years fantasy still merges easily with reality, by the middle grades deviations from factual truth may be greeted with scorn by children who term it *weird*. Yet children know, if only on a subconscious level, that their subjective feelings are as true--and certainly as powerful--as objective reality. The tacit acknowledgment by adults that this is so, and the explicit permission to explore the inner as well as outer world in writing may be a necessary condition for children to learn to write more deeply from within themselves.

One way to permit fantasy in ordinary writing is to assign children to write an account of what happened during a vacation--but to do it *before* the vacation begins. This gives the children leeway to express their wishes or anxieties:

Over the vacation we had a whole bunch of guests. I had to give up my room. We had a big turkey and we had mashed potatoes and gravy. We only got to stay up till 9:00. We made cookies and a candy house. We got rotten apples and rotten oranges and rotten bananas in our stockings. Under our tree all we got was coals and switches. That was one of the worst Christmases I ever had. Sara

One day on my Christmas vacation I got a phone call. It was a guy from "Be a Millionaire Show" and he wanted me to be on his show and it's not every day you get to be on T.V. Well I said yes and the next day I was off. The T.V. show was in California. I had never been to California before. I was excited. I got to the airport and got on the plane and soon we took off. I couldn't believe it.

Soon I feel asleep. A little while later I heard a man call "All off for California." I almost missed getting off. I soon arrived at the T.V. place. I stepped inside. A man greeted me. He showed me around. He took me into his office. He said that the T.V. show goes on in five minutes. We talked for five minutes and then it was time to go on.

The guy went out to announce the show and then he introduced me and some other people. When he called me out I sat at a table in a chair. He asked a lot of questions. I got two of them. If I got three I would get three million dollars. Finally he got to me. The question was, "Who was the first president of the United States?" and I said George Washington. I was right! I had won!

I screamed and yelled. I was so happy I could cry. Well that evening I went home very happy. And that whole week I bought everything in every store (if you want to exaggerate a little bit). And soon I was broke. I was sad but now that school has started I won't need all that money, so here I am, but I hope that there is another vacation soon. Hannah

These kinds of fantasy stories were accepted by other children as enjoyable fiction. Most of the authors became brave enough to read them aloud to the group, or have them published in the class magazine. The very ordinariness of the reception given to some wild writing, the normal class routine of handing in an assignment and reading it to the class (always with the option of keeping it private), gave respectability to private fantasy, and encouraged children to make use of opportunities to write about things that weren't absolutely conventional:

When I woke up I looked out the window. It was a big snow storm. I went outside and I saw a cat flying, a dog boxing, a car sitting on the toilet, purple snow, a grill swimming. So I went inside because I felt sick. I went to my mother's room. I heard the music on and I saw my mother dancing with a mattress. So I went back to sleep. Jessie

Jessie's world was an extremely unpredictable one, where he never knew what was coming next. It did make him *feel sick*, as reflected in his uncontrolled wildly fluctuating classroom behavior. But incongruity is a part of all our experience, as well as the desire to get away from it and just *go back to sleep*. Jessie was able to make use of an every-day subject, winter, to tell something personal as well as universal. The children were entranced by this, and asked him to read it over, which he did with a flourish.

When the children had some experience with various types of writing and felt pretty comfortable in the classroom, they started to find their own rhythms and style. They also found a particular form that appealed to them. Judy was much more of a poet than a prose writer and usually responded to assignments with poems; Jane wrote her stories in dialogue, Michael wrote humorous adventure stories or space fiction. Some children do better with long, detailed *novels* which they can work on for weeks, and others need to see a completed short piece every time. Cathy started off being quite inhibited

about her writing, handing in short, undeveloped stories. As she became more relaxed about it, her writing became increasingly freer. During this period we talked frequently about which of her pieces were especially interesting, and what made them so. A very bright, thoughtful child, Cathy really seemed to know what I meant when I said that she was managing to put more of her ideas on paper than she used to do. One day she started an adventure story and wrote for most of the morning. When I felt she might be getting tired, I suggested she could stop and continue the next day, but she said, "No, I want to keep writing so I can see what's going to happen!"

A Tunnel Underground

Man, help me go to the log next to the pond. My leg is hurt and I can't walk anymore but I am very thirsty. The man brought me over to the log. He carried me all the way over the rocks and twigs. Somehow I didn't like that man and I didn't think he liked me. He threw me to the ground and pushed me inside a hollow log, then he rolled it into the pond. I tried to wriggle out of the log but I was stuck. I carved out the log a little bit as fast as I could. Finally I was at the surface of the water taking big breaths! Then I swam to the edge of the pond and sat on a rock.

All of a sudden...POW! The rock went down, down, down, down. Down, down, down, down, down I went. There at the bottom of the hole was a little hole. I decided to crawl through the hole and find out what was at the end of it. The hole got big and wider. Finally I could stand and walk. Then the tunnel turned and the hole was as big as ever. At the end of the hole was a big door. I opened the door then I hid in the bathroom inside a dirty hamper. I had to hold my nose it smelled so bad. He must of worn those clothes over a month! I opened the hamper just a crack and a man walked in.

He looked very familiar. Then I remembered that I got pushed in the pond and I remembered that a man pushed me in and I figured it was the same man. It looked just the same! Same face, same eyes, same nose! I saw him look behind a little picture and he took out something. It was not *shiny at all but it was about five inches long...it was a pistol. I was so afraid he was going to shoot* me. *He loaded the gun and cocked it and was pointing it towards me! I hid under the smelly old shirts, pants and socks so he couldn't see me anymore. Then he just left the room.*

I heard the big door creak open, then slam shut. BOOM! I went out to the room where he sits. I remembered the rock that was left down in the hole and he might know that I was here! If he heard little noises in the bathroom he might think that I was still in there. I decided to hide in a basket. When I looked inside it was so full of shot guns and old magazines, well I couldn't hide in there. Then I saw a big bottle sort

of thing but it was full of...blood! I was running all over the place trying to find a good place to hide. I saw a door. I decided to open it.

It was a closet full of dead people that were either shot or stabbed, one or the other. I put some of the blood on me that was in the bottle. It smelled and I almost threw up. I hid in the closet and hid myself under the dead bodies and threw up all over the place! I raced out of the house, didn't even bother to shut the door, ran as fast as I could through the tunnel. I crawled the rest of the way and slithered up the hole from under ground and ran through the wood to my house.

Like Cathy, many of us write to find out what we think and feel, letting the process take over so that it almost bypasses conscious planning or formulation. It takes a certain amount of self trust to be able to give one's self up to the words which may appear, and to allow them to be transcribed on a blank piece of paper without censoring them first.

Beyond assignments that help free the inhibitions to writing and an accepting atmosphere in the classroom, children require lots of time to find themselves as writers. This includes flexible time spans within the school day which take into account the individual rhythms of children, but it may also mean time spans beyond one school year: the slow, uneven process of growth. Working with children only one year at a time, teachers tend to forget time as a dimension of learning and set goals and expectations which are unreasonable, perhaps even harmful to children. Schools exert so much pressure for immediate achievement that it is often hard to keep in mind the larger goals, to be patient with the almost imperceptible signs of growth and change. Children, who naturally don't have that perspective of their own development, may get easily discouraged with themselves. They need our reassurance that writing is a long-time process, that adults still struggle with it, that all products don't have to be equally good, that there can be pleasure and discovery in the doing. Somehow, I think that schools are more tolerant of *messing around* and unsuccessful experimentation in the visual arts than they are with writing which is supposed to be a *skill subject.* It takes a conscious effort on the part of a teacher to counteract that restrictive attitude.

At the fourth-grade level, where the children are only starting to separate themselves from the greater freedom of earlier childhood, it's not actually so hard to maintain a classroom where individual expression is evoked and respected. It does, however, involve some basic questions for the teacher about values, time allotment, expectations, curriculum. Encouraging children to express feelings honestly is also going to bring to the surface many conflicts which might otherwise be buried under workbook pages. Not only does it take an unusual amount of psychic and physical energy for a teacher to

deal with these strong feelings, but there may also be the guilt that the children are not always sitting in their seats learning academic skills which after all they must learn, whatever their problems may be.

Some of this uncomfortable split between encouraging children to be themselves and wanting at the same time to be teaching some very specific content must be inevitable for any thoughtful teacher. Probably this balance has to be worked out over and over again, with each child, with each class. I'm not talking here about a choice between concern for a child's emotional life and his/her academic achievement. On the contrary, I think the mastery of academic skills is essential to children's views of themselves and their ability to function in the world. There is no dichotomy between intellectual and emotional growth. What I do mean is that if a teacher is committed to allowing children to express themselves directly, it can't be limited to some *creative writing* lessons or other designated outlets. If you want the classroom to continue to work with the whole child, strong feelings will emerge at inconvenient times, immediate outbursts will have to be dealt with, some lessons will be interrupted or have to be postponed, classroom conventions will be questioned and sometimes challenged.

2

What Do Children Write?

My pencil contains
quite a few things
like for instance Super Heroes
blasting each other
with never ending gossip
Captain America against Batrock
like a shooting star
anything that isn't ugly
fireworks and almost anything of this sort
light shining in the sky bomb blasting in the air
(try not to mind the copy of the Star Spangled Banner)
people running everywhere
words that never seem to stay in too long
because I use big words
not every day ones like everybody else
but not like me and my pencil
I can't be sure because my pencil is new (not old)
and I can't control them. Jonas

In any group of children, there will soon emerge a great number of themes, styles, and forms. I have chosen some examples to illustrate this, focusing on the pieces as signposts to particular modes of thought. I consider all of these examples *good* writing, not in the sense that they are objectively skillful or effective (though many of them may be) but because they accurately catch something of the writer's viewpoint. Some of these pieces were written by assignment and some spontaneously, but in each case the child became involved enough in the writing to produce something of meaning to himself. What that meaning may be is, of course, hard to determine.

These pieces of writing were chosen because I responded to them, whether I could understand them or not. I have purposely avoided arranging them by subject or form. This may seem haphazard, but in order to communicate the richness of emerging writing, I want to present it in the random fashion in which it occurs in the classroom, often unanticipated and surprising.

Jane's stories had a way of turning into dialogue, no matter what the subject was. Extremely sensitive to nuances between people, Jane picked up bits of conversations from life and books, and transmuted them into reams

of imaginary dialogue. Here is one of her shorter ones:

Mom, will you please make happiness for me?

Why, darling?

Well you see, my sisters are brats, my brothers are weirdos.

Really!

Yeah, really!

Well, I'll tell you something. They are a little bigger than you and they're growing up now. They're going to get different.

I'm not talking about that, Mom, I'm talking about happiness.

Tell me one reason I have to make happiness for you.

Well there is more to this than you think.

Oh, really. Tell me about it.

Well this week Yoyo died--my pet dog. I've been just miserable. I lost 20 cents making a bet. I got a bad report card. And I wish this kid in my class was never born.

That sounds like you have some problems there.

You bet. Make it better. You always fixes things.

O.K. I will. You say you're not happy. Well I'll tell you a short secret. Nobody, nobody in the whole wide world can make you happy. You have to do it yourself. See if someone went around making you happy, someone else would have to make that person happy and it's not very easy to make someone happy.

I don't understand.

You will later on in the year.

Can't someone make you happy once?

Yeah sure, but not all your life.

After a blizzard in Boston, I asked the children to write personal accounts of the experience. Tam wrote less than anyone else in the class and apologized to me when he handed it in, but I thought it was a lot livelier than some of the longer, smoother papers I received:

It was a cold day and I went outside and played with my war men. I played for a long time. I was about to go to the park when it started to snow. I said, "Humph. It has snowed before." But it just kept on snowing. So I said, "The heck with it, I am going home." So I went home.

"Dinner is ready," said Mom. It was still snowing. It was steak. You mustn't forget that I love steak. It

was still snowing. I ate my steak and drank my milk and got my allowance $1.50 for it was Saturday. It was still snowing. So I took a shower for 15 minutes. When I got out it was time for bed. I dried off and went to bed. It was still snowing.

When I woke up I was half asleep. I looked out of the window. MY GOD!!!!! Everything was covered with snow. I jumped into my clothes and ran outside and played in the snow.

What I liked about this story was Tam's faithful rendition of the routines of his daily life, interspersed with the low-key observation that it was *still snowing*, until he realized at the end that it was not just another winter day but an unusual event.

Jonas' account of the snowstorm was much more detailed, full of self-consciously dramatic remarks to the reader, like, *I'll bet a lot of you are going to ask, 'What did things look like after the storm?'* or *Anyway there are a heck of a lot more things to say (two pages to be sure).* So I was a little surprised to find this bit of self-revelation embedded in the verbiage:

Now playing was a bit hard for most people, but not me. If I had nothing to do, I'd chatter my teeth or twiddle my thumbs, and find it quite exciting. Luckily I had more things than that to do. (Have you ever tried twiddling your thumbs for two weeks?) Well I mostly played by myself. I can do that better than anyone else I know. (If you don't believe me, try playing by yourself 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.) And I also had my snow fort don't forget.

Later on, in the spring, Jonas took up this theme again:

I like playing by myself a lot. I'm not a kid that can get bored easy. I usually pretend I am a super-hero of some sort, sometimes two or three, who knows? But that is just one of the reasons. I also have weaknesses like I don't like having people see what I was playing and there are a lot of people around. But I also can play very well but I don't like scripts or anything like that (big problem).

For Jonas who liked nothing better than to sit alone reading, drawing, or writing pages of adventure stories, this beginning awareness of himself as separate from others, written out more for himself than for me, may have been the first indication of a reconsideration of his relationship to other people. By the very end of the year, he was tentatively beginning to use his dramatic ability in skits with other children (without scripts, naturally!) and magic performances for the class.

In a school where children tend to be excitable and highly active, it was something of a relief to have a child like Martha--practical, cooperative, friendly, absolutely reliable, almost stolid. Mathematics and other abstract concepts were hard for her, but she worked doggedly and conscientiously to try to accomplish the work. Her writing was usually undistinguished, a string of declarative sentences with little spark to them. But one day, when the assignment called for writing about how it felt to *make* things (we had been spending a lot of time on crafts), this is what Martha wrote:

I like weaving. It is fun.
Weaving is thinking of people and places.
When I think of places like ice cream factories
When I think of people I think of my whole family and relatives.

Reading this, I had the feeling that there was a picture in Martha's mind which had not been developed into words. All the links and details were missing in her poem, but they probably existed in her thoughts. I sat down at the typewriter with Martha and started asking her questions about what she was seeing and hearing while she wrote, and as she talked I typed what she said, always checking with her to make additions or corrections. Here is what came out:

Weaving is thinking of people and places.
People pouring ice cream mixes into machines
all the machines running
it squeaks like it needs oil
and it's so loud it almost broke my eardrums.
There's a whole lot of people watching
talking about how exciting it is.
When the factory closes
people walk away and still talk about it.

At first glance this poem may look as though it has nothing to do with the subject of weaving, and that Martha was just obediently answering my questions. But I don't think that's so. The beauty of a satisfying, repetitive task like weaving is that it frees your mind to wander. In this case, the vision released was of people working together to make something (a product as wonderful as ice cream!) in an atmosphere of pleasant noise and excitement. Not all of the people are working. Some are participating by watching, sharing their enthusiasm by talking together. And at the end, *people walk away and still talk about it.* The atmosphere of the ice cream factory remains with the people when the place is physically closed.

What Martha seems to be talking about here is the exhilaration of creating something, an excitement that is shared by people everywhere, and that connects Martha and her weaving to all the creators in the world. For

Martha, factories aren't symbols of oppression and boredom; she thinks of them rather as symbols of a creative energy which permeates people and reverberates into all aspects of their lives. I might easily have missed these thoughts if I hadn't happened to catch Martha at a time when I could sit down with her and give her a chance to find the words. I suspect we miss many of these kinds of ideas from children, if only because of the pressures of time and demands in a busy classroom. When we do manage to catch a few of the elusive poems that haven't quite jelled yet, it is an enriching process for the teacher as much as for the child.

THE PLEASURES OF FORM

Children's thoughts may evoke visual representations along with words. Looking at examples of concrete poetry is always fun, and making up their own seems to be a good deal easier for children than for me. It combines the appeal of doodling and playing a word game. Prasad, who started off the year with extremely literal, imitative adventure stories, discovered the pleasure of inventing poetry forms, replete with arrows and pathways (see illustration). He might have taken off from our exercises in concrete poetry, but he ended up with something of his own; not exactly intelligible to other people but a source of pride and satisfaction for him.

Schools and classrooms tend to be fertile subjects for spontaneous writing at almost any time, whether in a spirit of exasperation, such as Rod's opening to a diatribe, *The other class is like a car it drives you up the wall,* or Shari's grudging admission:

Classrooms in school
have very high ceilings,
and the desks are all scribbled on
with swears and math problems.
They have rugs of different sorts
and some of the teachers are mean
and have pointy glasses.
But even though of all these faults
I'm bored if I don't go to my classroom.

Opinions on school matters--standardized testing, rules, threats made by other children--often run high during discussion and make for forceful written statements:

I hate tests they are stupid they only tell the teacher what we get wrong. And then the teacher never tells us how we did. The beginning of the test is fun. But sometimes they ask you these weird questions like are you a boy or a girl (male or female). Whenever I come home and tell my mother I took the test she gives me the third degree. And whenever I say I hate them

Sneakers are just waiting for their owners to come and pick them up and put them on and take them home.

by Pam

by Prasad

A pitcher is good to have around the house because you can have all your favorite drinks and keep them cold and cool and thats why it's good to have

Juice Juice Juice Juice

handle handle handle handle

by Joe

by Michael

she always says go in your room and think about it for a while. Ruthie

Writing an *essay* is usually a new idea to children, and one that has to be introduced by a teacher. It doesn't naturally occur to children that their opinions can be put into writing with supporting evidence and examples. If some leading questions are generated by the whole class first and written on the board, it helps children organize their thoughts. That doesn't mean that strong opinions aren't frequently written spontaneously, such as Darryl's announcement, *I double triple fourple hate my parents all the time.* It's just that these self-evident statements are rarely developed further without a framework of questions to outline the topic.

On the other hand, lyrical writing about nature seems to be a form of writing that needs very little stimulus. This poem was written in the classroom long after the summer:

If you wake early
you can see
the silvery
dew drops.
The sun shines brightly
through the green
trees. The lake
reflects the morning sun.
Michael

Moving away from direct nature observation into a description related to her particular fantasy life, Sylvia used the device of a repeated line to build up a multi-layered scene:

In the heart of the forest
the deer romp.
In the heart of the forest
the foxes hold a meeting.
In the heart of the forest
the bears are picking blueberries.
In the heart of the forest
the flowers are blooming.
In the heart of the forest
the sun breaks through the trees.

Kermit used repetition for a different purpose, to underline contrasts:

While we sleep
the moon shines down.
While we sleep
the sea and the rocks fight.
While we sleep
the sun rests too.

While we sleep
the sky goes wild.
While we sleep
we wake up.

The implications of Kermit's poem obviously go beyond a description of nature. The last two lines are ambiguous. The literal interpretation could be that a sleeping state changes into a waking one. But it could also mean that a sleeping state can paradoxically be a way of waking up to consciousness, that when we let go of our ordinary controls we are in closer touch with some of our strongest impulses, that we can gain insight into ourselves through sleep. Looking at the rest of the poem, which contrasts the shining moon with the fighting rocks and sea, and the resting sun with a wild sky, the ambiguity of the ending would seem to be an integral part of the whole poem. While we sleep, the warring elements within us become alive and remain active.

These are complicated thoughts, and a natural reaction would be to say that a nine-year-old boy who knows nothing about dream theory or psychology couldn't possibly have meant any of this. And on a conscious level, Kermit probably wouldn't have explained his poem in these terms. But the thoughts are in the poem, not in the reader's imagination, and to deny that children can have deeply perceptive insights seems to me either arrogance or self-protective denial. Everything a child writes doesn't have to be profound (how often do adults write profoundly?), but when there are depths and moving reverberations in children's writing, it is neither an accident nor a projection on the part of the reader. Children have not yet taken on all the defenses that adults have against disturbing thoughts, and their use of language is both more limited and more flexible so that their messages come across with stark power.

When Santha discovered the short poetry form, she wrote a series of poems which she brought in to school to show me. It was one of the few things she did about which she displayed some tentative satisfaction. I found them disturbingly powerful:

In a river
all water
but no land.

All cold
all snow
all winter
but no summer.

A bird
might say
no mother
no father
no nothing.

In a bag
all filled up. No
more room for
me.

A good girl
never fight
never kick someone
never break anything.

Earlier in the year, Santha wrote of this memory:

Last year I had my birthday
party in school. It was raining
that day, we had indoor recess.
It was so dark and it was raining so hard.

It is painful for me to read these poems and to surmise the feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and hurt out of which they were written. But the expression was evidently a relief for Santha. In the same way, Steven was very pleased with this carefully constructed story about a father from whom he had heard nothing for many years:

You know what? I saw Santa. But it was my father. But he gave me a electric train, but it didn't work. But we fixed it. But it kept falling off the track. So we got a new one. That worked. But one wrong thing about it, it didn't come with tracks. So we bought another one. That one had tracks but it didn't have the trains. We ran out of money. So my father got me a little matchbox car.

But this couldn't happen because my father is in Michigan.

In amazingly succinct form, Steven has depicted the eternal hope that his father would come through, the disillusionment that inevitably followed, the only half-ironic acceptance of the smallest crumb of affection (the matchbox car). Then in a postscript not meant to be part of the story, there is the anxious explanation that none of it could really happen. In this short piece, Steven has run through a gamut of feelings. It is a low-key statement of his own hurt, put into objectified terms. This is not an easy thing to do. It's no wonder that in another of his stories, where Steven himself was the hero hunting a killer shark, he ended the successful adventure with, *Steven quickly pulled the spear gun and shot him right in the heart. Steven got in the boat and went home scared.* Those are pretty formidable challenges for a timid, helpless little boy.

Santha and Steven were writing fairly directly about themselves. Other children prefer to write about miseries in disguised form, such as Denise who invented a character called *the miserable man,* about whom she wrote

several adventure stories. Some years behind in reading and writing achievement, Denise had a wry sense of humor, a shrewdly original way of looking at things and commenting on them. When she got something scrawled on paper, it tended to be a little odd, like this:

Outside I felt like a snowman
and I had beef stew
and my mommy had a baby
and that baby was born
with a cold.

Once she hit on the idea for her special character, she worked long and hard in producing what was for her a major effort:

The Miserable Man...

was so miserable he got a pie in his face and when he got home he took his clothes off and he brought new pyjamas. He put on his new pyjamas and they cost a hundred dollars. And when he put them on they had holes in them. And when he got in the bed it fell down on him.

The next morning he went fishing and he fell in the water and a fish was in his pocket and he said, "Not bad! Underwater fishing!" And the fish came up and squirted him in the face.

And so he went shopping and bought a whole lot of groceries and he bought a box of doughnuts and it cost two hundred dollars. And when he got home he opened the bags of groceries and it was nothing in it, only fake doughnuts.

Having thoroughly defeated her miserable man at every turn, Denise was so delighted with this story that she wrote a sequel with a happier ending:

The miserable man was so miserable he got a pie in his face and when he got home he fixed his dinner. And a lady was at the door and he said, "Oh boy! Now's my chance for a lady. I love you." "O.K., I love you too. Let's be friends." "O.K. Before we be friends, I got to tell you something." "And I got to tell you something too." "O.K., tell me." "O.K., I'm the miserable lady." "And I'm the miserable man." "Yeah, we could live together and everything we could share and I could fix dinner." "O.K. and I could get a job if I could find one."

And one night they had a fight and this is what they did. He got a left hook and a right hook and then they did the Bugaloo and then they made up and they did not get married. "Why?" "Because I don't want to marry you but I like you." "And I like you too. I just don't want to get married." And they lived happily ever after.

Or at least the surprise ending appears to be happy, depending on one's attitude toward marriage or staying single. At any rate, the miserable man overcomes his passive victim role enough to establish a friendship and furthermore to assert his independence. That is a victory of sorts, and perhaps proves that misery doesn't always love company after all.

The unexpected may also turn up in stories which subtly cast doubt on some established formulas of morality. Here are two stories which abandon the usual good-guy bad-guy pattern. Ezra's story casually disposes of a bunch of friends with only slight regret, rejoicing in the wealth amassed by suing their parents. Cathy's story upholds the value of junk food. It would seem that irony isn't all that rare in bright children:

Boys Don't Live Long

I picked up seven friends: Ralf and Pete and John and Scot and Andy and Ben, and last but least Danny. We went to the rocks and Andy broke his leg, and an ambulance came and brought him home. And when we went through the wood, Ralf got lost. And when we were looking at the deer, a bear jumped on little Peter and he got eaten.

When we were walking down the street, a hailstorm started and a big hail stone came down on Scot's head and he got killed. While we were walking along the side of the river, John fell in and drowned. And when we went to Ben's house, a robber came and stabbed Ben. And when we went to my house, Danny didn't see the trap door and he fell in and broke his leg.

And the next day Ralf's parents came over, and so did Pete's and John's and Scot's and Ben's and Andy's. They tried to sue me, but since I didn't do anything to them I sued them back. And I lived happily but missing six friends and a friend with a broken leg, but I had a lot of money. Ezra

My Father!

My father was a health food nut, always saying, "Why are you eating cookies and candy five minutes before supper?" And he always would eat nuts and raisins for a snack. He never ate a pizza in his life and I never got to eat a pizza in my life when he was around. After he died, mother and I always ate junk food because who wants to die at the age of 25? Cathy

Some stories seem to be bare outlines for something a child wants to say but has not yet gotten hold of. Tara was a prolific writer, and much of her material came from her experience of being a child in a divorced family. Over and over again, her writing dealt with her family relationships, but she seemed to be trying to say

something that wasn't explicit in her stories. In the following story which was not about herself, Tara finally was able to say what she needed to, and the details are left undeveloped because the plot didn't really matter to her. In the title, and twice more in the text, Tara tells us that *sadness hurts*. That is a hard realization for an extremely active, noisy, outgoing child, and a painful admission to make in writing. The story is merely the illustration for the message:

The Sadness Hurts

Once upon a time there was a little boy. He was so rich that he could yell, "Maid!" just for scratching his fingers. His father was an oil tycoon. Well anyway, one day his father lost his stocks. Oil went down and his father played poker, a betting game. He lost all money and property. The boy's name was Eric.

So Eric's father and mother went to look for jobs. Eric went to a detention home. He had many lonely years without his parents. And during those years he found out sadness hurts. Well his mom and pop came home. He got back his oil stocks and everybody was happy and Eric found out sadness hurts.

When we talk to children about stories needing to have a beginning, middle, and ending, with much detail fleshing out the plot, we are probably helping some children organize their ideas, but we are also eliminating other kinds of *stories* that are equally valid in their own terms. Tara's story leaves out all character development and plot details because she had a different reason for writing it. That doesn't mean that Tara was not able to write a more carefully constructed story or that she should never be asked to work out a piece of writing she has outlined. But for that particular piece, it would have been both useless and insensitive to ask Tara to fill in the details and write a longer story.

THE PICTURES IN OUR MINDS

Children's definitions of a *story* fortunately are a lot broader than an adult's, and include almost anything that is not specifically factual or intended as a poem. When a child's idea of what constitutes a story is too rigid, a whole range of writing possibilities may be closed to that child. Holly consistently wrote imitative, long, dull stories, filled with conventional phrases and elements she had picked up from her reading. Well-written though they were, Holly's stories always seemed curiously empty and shallow. Holly and I didn't have much of a meeting of minds, and she was producing good work by any standards of what could be expected of a bright girl of her age. One day we had a class exercise of automatic writing, and at the end of the session Holly handed me

this fantasy of a party at the house of her Japanese friend:

Bozo will be at Kyoko's party. She will wear a pink dress. She will give Japanese shrimp. We will throw bean bags. Her mother will play the flute. There will be soft stories going from ear to ear. There will be a different language that nobody will hear. There will be mats and flowers all over the house.

She will have rice balls and shrimp for her cake. Pink lions will be in her parents' bedroom. Her mother will wear a white and pink veil. She will have thirteen turtles in her kitchen and she will have paper flowered things hanging from the ceiling. We will have seven Japanese blood brothers. Kyoko will wear a silk gown made of pink and white. Kyoko will marry Bozo.

This fragmentary description seemed to me to have everything Holly's stories usually lacked--a strong sense of atmosphere, vivid and imaginative detail, a willingness to entertain some weird notions which give the story its originality. There is a mysterious depth that comes from ideas like that of *a different language that nobody will hear* and the *seven Japanese blood brothers*. Holly probably never understood why I liked this story so much and put it in the class magazine (though I tried to explain why). I doubt that she will continue to try out more writing like this, but it stands as a reminder that the pictures in our minds have to emerge in their own form and time, not necessarily within accepted definitions. If I had asked Holly specifically to *write a description of a scene*, she probably wouldn't have come up with this. Content makes its own form.

That is not to say that exercises in specific forms can't yield interesting results. Sometimes they do, and even if they don't they supply children with knowledge of a form they can use another time when they want it. (Undoubtedly, Holly must have had some past experiences with description which allowed her to use the style when she imagined her party scene.) The following two poems were written in response to an exercise that called for writing a description of a family member. Sylvia's poem expresses something she often talked about--her mother's busyness in the house which made it hard for Sylvia to approach her and receive the attention she wanted. Cliff, who worried a great deal (needlessly) about his own intelligence and chances of getting into college, saw in his brother a wishful projection of himself:

Mother
she is
running
here and
running
there she
is fixing

a frame
here and
cleaning
glass
there.
And now
she is
off for
Denmark.
Sylvia

My brother
he is very intelligent.
He has a very good report card.
He has a great chance of
getting into college.
He has six fillings.
He plays games with me.
He has an eight second time on
the fifty yard dash.
He screams a lot at the dentist.
He's sort of a pest
but he's a great brother.
Cliff

Most of the other children didn't respond to this exercise with as much involvement. But perhaps exercises of this sort did open up possibilities for Shari when, several months after the death of a beloved grandmother, she wrote this:

A big garden with flowers
and a strong fragrance
out on the hills
where no one lives
except an old old lady
who expects to die
very very soon.

Similarly, an assignment asking the children to write the story of a friendship brought only a few interesting results. But a long time afterwards Pauline, whose stories were usually a few disconnected sentences, decided to write a story about a friend which began like this:

One time long ago I met a girl named Nancy. We became friends and she started sleeping over my house. I began sleeping over her house. In second grade we were in the same class and we started fighting now and then.

One time we had a big fight and we weren't talking to each other for a week and the fight was about her saying I was bothering her and I said she was bothering me. For a week she was hitting me and she was pulling off my Levi's tags. Then I got really mad and I started to

pull off her tags. Then she got mad. We weren't talking to each other for a week.

The story continued through all the grades for five pages, and ended up with Pauline's move away from her friend to a new school where she was not very happy in her first year. This story was very important to Pauline, the only long piece of writing she did spontaneously and then bound carefully in hard covers. Yet at the time of the original assignment, none of this material emerged in Pauline's composition.

If there is a lively, shared, constant writing program, most children will come upon their own meaning in their own style over an extended period of time. Probably the best support we can give children in finding their way of writing is the faith that they can do it and continuing interest in what they write. Beyond that, only the children themselves know what they must say and how they must say it.

3

Andre

I have blond hair, blue eyes, good humour, glasses, and an ambitious personality. One of my favorite hobbies is writing Italic. I will be ten in September, and at the moment am about 5'2". The subject I am best at is spelling. I like to wear blue. I am crazy *about watching Red Sox baseball games. But no hot dogs, please. I detest them.*

Even in my humorous capacity, I have to admit I'm a bit of a pessimist, but I like to speak French and play bridge. I play piano, violin, clarinet, bass clarinet, recorder and fife. I like to be melodious. My first instrument (piano) I started when I was 4. I'm going to camp this summer and I learned knots. I love them. My favorite board game is chess. The worst is Dealer's choice. My best friend is Prasad. I fairly like to play sports.

I can hardly wait until school's over! I hope the reader has a good vacation as I do.

P.S. Dear Reader, I forgot to tell you. I am a sweet-tooth, my favorite trip to a foreign land was last summer; to England for three weeks, and to France for one week. You should taste French peaches! They're wonderful on a hot day. I was born in New York (my family's real home was in New Jersey). I was ten months when I moved to Ohio, where my brother was born, and 6 when we got to Boston.

Once more, Bon Voyage after June!

Andre described his own writing quite accurately as *surprisingly inventive.* Having known him in second grade, I was curious to find out how he was doing and very much looking forward to more of his writing when he entered my class two years later.* On the first day of fourth grade, he sat at the typewriter and composed this:

Some poems are happy
Some poems sad,
Some poems evil,
Some poems bad.

Some poems are floppy,
Some poems soppy,

*In the next chapter I will examine some of Andre's work in second grade in order to trace the lines of his development as a writer.

Some poems toppy,
And some poems mad.

He handed it to me proudly, and I don't think I quite managed to hide my dismay at this banal verse. As we talked about it, he conveyed to me that the purpose of the poem was a kind of invocation, his dedication to continuing in the craft of writing poetry where he had left off when we last worked together in second grade. A few days later, he wrote his acrostic poem about Marie Antoinette (see page 13), and I was reassured that he had not lost his remarkable gift for language.

Andre is the middle child of highly intellectual professional parents who have read to him and talked a great deal with him all his life. All three boys in his family learned to read at three years old, and Andre reads extensively, at a high school level. One of the books he most enjoyed in fourth grade was *The Count of Monte Cristo* which inspired this acrostic poem:

The majestic smile
As he gently strides through his surroundings
Calm in every word he utters,
The very model of a wise man.

For everyone knows
Of Monte Cristo, who is wise and
Rich and sensible.

Another person never matched him.

Mortality for Monte Cristo is
Astonishing. He has the figure of immortality.
No one is like Monte Cristo.

Andre's reading tastes run to historical fiction, some ancient and European history, and elaborate fantasy such as Tolkien. His third grade teacher likes to quote him in an enthusiastic testimonial for *noble stories* (preferably with a British, French, or ancient world setting). He is very definite about what he likes, and wrote in his plans for fourth grade on the first day, "Please don't give me any modern stuff. I can't stand it." And again:

Blue is silken, Red is calico
Blue is sadness, red is anger,
Blue is sleep, red is awake,
Blue is romance, red is modern,
I hate modern, I love romance.

Living so much in the world of the mind, Andre has missed out on many simple experiences which other children have absorbed naturally. When we did water experiments, he hadn't the faintest idea of how to fill a tube with water, and he needed help in the elementary things

that two-year-olds do easily in water play. Science experiments in general were foreign to him, and at first unappealing. Later on in the year, he gradually became more interested, especially when we were making crude musical instruments. In the same way, Andre showed surprisingly little interest in social studies, and with all his reading background he had practically no research skills. Again, it took a great deal of individual work with him to waken some interest in the real and present world, such as our study of black experience in America, which finally did get some response from him, especially through the poems of Langston Hughes.

What was even more alarming to me was his inability to listen to other people or to take in things that were being presented. He was the only one in the group who did not pay attention when we had a visitor who read the work of black poets to us. On another occasion, he was unable to focus on an excellent children's arts and crafts exhibit which fascinated the rest of my class, and spent his time there acting silly and noisy. This seemingly arrogant rejection of stimulation from contact with other people would infuriate me. I had to keep reminding myself that Andre might have felt threatened by this infringement of the *modern* world (which in his color poem was associated with anger and drabness), and that perhaps he was defending himself in fear rather than being a snob. The derivative quality of Andre's experiences, his reliance on words and concepts which he had read rather than felt, is evident in his high-flown style and in his sometimes confused metaphors, as in these two typical poems:

The day dawns:
It has a fierce pride.
An Admiral of light,
But no horse does it ride.
It keeps the sky alight
and leads his light of men
But when it's ruddy it retires
As a fox into its den.

The Gods look down sorrowfully at these
mortal men who must die.
They are born, growing up with a Loom of Life
which withers away as they grow older, until
there is only one thread left to the loom.

The Scythe of Death is called to cut this thread
and leave a mortal to close his eyes in eternal sleep

Sometimes this inflated language worked well in a poem, especially when there was some real feeling behind it:

Did not the falling eye arrive in victory as it scanned
these ruins of Troy?
Did not the Roman ranks scatter Versingetorix'
men and kill them in circuses?
Did not the Huns reach the land promised them?
Did not King Alfred win the war against the Danes?
Did not Richard III smother Edward V along with his
brother in the Bloody Tower?
Was it not "When I am dead you will find Calais written
on my heart" from Queen Mary before she died?
Did not Queen Marie Antoinette live once
in the Conciergerie and then on the gallows?
Did not the colonies fight for independence?
Did not Blacks gain freedom in America?
Did not Hitler exist?

And was not all this in thirst for
CONQUEST?

Yet he still let language run away from him to the detriment of his meaning. When I talked to him about the inconsistency of some of his examples, e.g. that the fight for independence or the black man's desire for freedom were not examples of a thirst for conquest, he could see what I meant but had no way or wish to change his poem. He once pointed out to me that children don't revise, and he never changed any of his poems after a quick first draft, though he said that sometimes he thought about the poems before he wrote them. As far as I know, he made a second draft of a poem only once during the year:

THE RABBIT -- Version 2

The rabbit hides in a bush unknown to man.
And then, with a toss of his silky, white head
Runs off to play somewhere else.

Later I found the first draft in the wastebasket and rescued it:

THE RABBIT -- Version 1

The rabbit hides in a bush unknown to man.
And then, with a toss of his head,
Swiftly dashes away
Shaking

When I told Andre I liked the original draft better, he was surprised and said he liked the second version because it's "calmer." The last line in the earlier draft was apparently not intended--he had planned to continue the phrase but discarded the poem before finishing the line.

Another way that Andre exerted control over his poems was to use rhyme. This had been a running argument

between us since second grade. I felt he should also experiment with unrhymed forms, since in spite of his skill and large vocabulary the necessity for rhyme often led him into forced constructions and changed meanings. During the year, he gradually became more open to freer forms, and was amazed and curious about possibilities of assonance and alliteration which he had not consciously known about before. But he still liked the security of rhyme, and couldn't yet make clear distinctions between cliché (such as the last two lines of this poem) and effective juxtaposition (as in the second and fourth lines):

A falcon's Soft Wings beat the air;
Its eyes survey the land.
Its ears sense all the sound about it
With suspicious reprimand.
Why does it accuse us so?
Why the all-sharp eyes?
We know not the answer at all;
Not the wisest of the wise.

Another poem about a bird, this time unrhymed, has a nice flow to it, since he doesn't stop at the end of each line as he tends to do in a rhyming poem:

The eagle soars
Great and gracefully
Crowning the sky
With its peaceful glide.
Its expert eyes piercing
The hazy clouds
It lets out a thin cry
Lost among the mountains.

Andre took his poetry seriously. During a class discussion he once defined poetry as *your feelings and opinions--poems are dreams.* He often asked permission to write a poem that was forming in his head at odd times during the day. Needless to say, I always granted him permission, not only to encourage him to write but because I thought that poetry was a necessary outlet for Andre's feelings. He was aware of this, too, as evidenced by the following poems. The first one, which is stilted almost to the point of parody, nevertheless expresses Andre's compulsive need to write:

Deep inside a Poet quakes
His sense subsides, his consciousness aches,
to pen and ink he thankfully creeps
and peace at last over him seeps.
Oh! Beauty rare of poetry fair;
Of strong faith and of color;
Of endless lines of any kinds,
Lines getting fuller and fuller.

The following acrostic captures some of the wonder of the writing process for Andre, at the same time that it shows up the fakery of the acrostic form itself:

The poem that wasn't a poem stood wrapped in ink
Hitting p-o-e-m.
Even mystery itself turned down the offer of explaining

Poetic lines of beauty and what formed them.
Oh, when the larks of old sang "p-o-e-m,"
Ever-rising sadness sounded in them;
Mentioning P-O-E-M T-H-A-T I-S-N-T A P-O-E-M.

The following poem was written as a note to me on a day when everything was going wrong for Andre:

In memory of Tuesday the 24 of May 1977

I have a poem in my head
And no matter how hard I try
I can't clear it out at all.
You feel as though you could die
For there's a fog in your brain
(Of course no one can rest in a mist!)
It'll be a hard, hard day
Signed: The Pessimist

Although it was written half humorously, the poem does convey his frustration and anger. The idea of a mist obscuring his emotions, the split between his thinking self and his feelings, the difficulty of getting in touch with himself--these are much more explicitly stated in this poem:

When we look up
Andre and I see our
self as misty clouds that have
disappeared. When they disappea
r we can finally see them, hangin
g there
In midair. When we look up
they look down. When we look up
everything lights up and we
understand our feelings
WHEN WE LOOK UP
WE SEE OUR FEELINGS.

Andre was one of the few children in the class who thought carefully about line endings in his poems, and the only child who was very particular about his punctuation, telling me commas and periods and capitals even when dictating. His poetic fancies sometimes arose at unexpected times and in amusing ways. On one occasion I became furious with the class for their impossibly noisy behavior, and on the spur of the moment handed out writing paper and told them I wanted an individual

statement from each child as to what I could reasonably expect from them in the way of their behavior in a group situation. I didn't think that was a particularly clever device for discipline (though it did result in an atmosphere of quiet self-searching for about 15 minutes). It's just one of those things that teachers sometimes find themselves doing when they are exasperated at the end of a long day. But it turned out to be worth it just for the response I got from Andre:

I am a full-fledged pessimist.

When there is something very exciting or something very good that has happened to this said pessimist, he will get very excited, like a bird scared off by a gun. When all is calm, the bird will nestle down in his nest and do anything. In short, what you can expect of me is what you've seen of me.

In spite of my amusement at this, I did speak to him sometime later about people's ability to change and grow at all ages. His rigidity made it very hard for him to adjust to new situations, and he easily lost control and became annoyingly silly and inattentive. He rarely listened to directions or explanations, and consequently panicked if he didn't understand something right away, refusing to wait and find out by patient listening. While Andre was aware of these tendencies, he was not willing to admit that he could do something about changing himself, and therefore preferred to give elaborate and beautiful explanations of why he could not possibly act differently. He didn't really want to.

It never occurred to Andre that there was a good reason why I wouldn't let him interrupt me in the middle of conversations with other people or with the whole class, though by my insistence he did learn to wait impatiently sometimes. He really was not aware of other people's needs if he had anything on his own mind. That got him into occasional difficulties with people, adults and children, sometimes seriously enough to land him in the principal's office for arbitration. At those times, Andre would get angry, tearful, abusive, but never aware of his own part in the conflict, even when it was pointed out to him. He was very vociferous about children's rights, but oblivious to other people's reactions. When he would rudely and constantly interrupt during class time, I sometimes sent him out of the group. Here is his account of one such occasion when he became noisy and insolent during a group lesson:

It was all one Autumn day I got overexcited. It was when Ms. Martin was talking about Martin Luther King Jr. and she made me put my head down. I couldn't even hear! I think I admire Jesse for the way he can be funny, and I try to copy him.

Given Andre's lack of empathy with others, and his scant attention to anything outside of himself that was not in print, it was no surprise that he rarely did a good job on assignments (though we did work on that all year, and he showed some marked improvement by the end). He worked from inspiration only, and did barely passable work when he wasn't in the mood. I quickly learned there was nothing much I could do to encourage Andre to do better so I accepted what he wrote without much comment, except a question now and then. Andre, however, was extremely sensitive to my reactions, and could usually tell how I felt no matter how non-committal I might try to appear. (In matters relating to attitudes toward him, he *did* notice other people.) If I singled out a line that appealed to me, he would say with great satisfaction, "I *knew* you would like that!" Conversely, he would over-react to any question that might possibly imply the slightest shade of puzzlement or criticism. For that reason, I tried to be extremely careful of what I said to him, leaving out all value judgments and concentrating instead on the craft of writing or the philosophical implications of the content. I didn't want him to adjust his writing to my interests or standards. He noticed that, and once engaged me in a long conversation about why I answer children uncritically, suggesting that it must be because "you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. You don't want to discourage them." We then discussed the impossibility of value comparisons about works of art--each work is too different, unique in purpose and execution.

Coming from a family where everything was evaluated and where intellectual achievement was the highest priority, Andre seemed to find it a relief that work could be experimental and didn't always have to be good. This poem about music is free and spirited, in spite of its archaic poetic diction:

The merrybirds make a circle around the blooming flowers;
Hooray for harmony!
Ere the end of melody cometh, let us rejoice!
Many forests come alive, and the trees form a majestic arch
in the air.

For Andre who truly loves music, this was the only way he could let go and express his delight. In the same way, he started to work out his ideas about *the dimensions* (length, width, depth, time, space, sound), which he had been turning about in his head, by trying them out metaphorically in a poem that has a teasing riddle quality to it:

The first is a teenager
Full of woe
Alas! It can make but lines.

The second is a lady
Full of pride

It thought that it was enough.

the Third is a gentleman
So modest.
it makes our world.
The Fourth is good
were it real, solid,

Man would find the beginning of time.

the Fifth is evil, were it solid
population would die off

the sixth is the same as the fifth.

I was intrigued with this, but curious to have some notes of explanation which Andre was happy to give me verbally. He said that the first dimension, length, was like a teenager because it had far to go in life. The second, width, makes flat things just as she likes. The third, depth, is molecules that make everything three dimensional. As for time, space, and sound, they are *impossible to be solid.* Clearly there is much more in his mind than got into this mysterious poem, and perhaps he will write more poems on this subject some day.

Actually, Andre was less interested in writing poetry that year than he was in his novel in progress, a long elaborate romance set in Roman times. He worked on it from September through June, barely finishing his trilogy at the end of the year. The first volume has more consistency and comprehensible plot than the second and third which became rather haphazard. However, he persisted in his project and was extremely excited when I helped him bind the three little notebooks into a real book. He was very proud of the professional-looking product which he carried around with him for quite a while before he took it home. Since he had written in pencil on two sides of the paper, his book couldn't be photocopied. I managed to copy his first volume, and it came out to six and a half single-spaced typewritten pages.

Probably one reason that he stuck to his novel so adamantly was that it served as a substitute for writing in his diary. Andre found it more difficult to write about his own life than most of the other children did, and the project of a long novel helped him evade the necessity to make personal entries into his journal. It was a means for substituting *romance* for *modern.* But whatever his motivation, and in spite of the uneven quality of the writing, it seemed to me quite amazing that such a young child could conceive and carry through a writing project of this much complexity and length. And in his own oblique way, Andre may have been writing some

things about himself after all. In his second volume, he introduced a small child who turns out to be a genius but tends to be unkind and rude. Andre said it was the saddest of the three books. I had the feeling that he needs scope to write copiously in symbolic form because he is not ready to deal with reality in a more straightforward fashion, and perhaps will never do so.

However, I also wanted to encourage Andre to observe more carefully the world around him, and to focus on actual things rather than only mental images. A class photography project, where each child took a roll of film and discussed it afterwards, seemed one good way to help Andre look around him with greater interest and concentration. All the children were very excited about their own pictures and the use of the camera for which they prepared thoughtfully under the guidance of an excellent student-teacher. Andre took a little time to get seriously involved with picture-taking, but once he did, he experimented with technique and effects. This is how he wrote about one picture he thought came out badly and one that was successful:

Bad. *I have a picture of Jamie near the river and it might have come out well had I not had a finger on the lens of the camera.*

Good. *I have a picture of the river that would have everyone tricked. Its reflection make it look as though it were of the sky.*

Not only is it important to connect Andre more with the physical world, but he also needs help in connecting in a more immediate way with history, so that it doesn't serve only as a golden fantasy with which he can counteract the present. Our extensive Black History study did seem to reach him at certain points. During a discussion of ghetto life, Andre disappeared under the tables as usual, but when I asked why a ghetto child might want to go up on a tenement roof, he answered, "to cry." In response to an assignment to write a story from the viewpoint of a slave, he wrote a fragment which shows considerable empathy along with literary style:

"15 dollars!" "25!" George shivered as he saw his mother drawn away from his diminishing family. Then someone dragged him up to the platform. He was a strong boy of twelve, and immediately there were cries from all over the crowd. "$50!" "75!" "200!" There were cries of astonishment as the gentleman who had said this ("200!") walked up to the platform. He had a silver-headed cane and a top hat. "Going...going...gone!" said the auctioneer. George wondered how they thought they could sell him as though he were a dog!

He was tied up, and two of the man's servants grabbed him roughly by the arms and pushed him into a carriage.

The rich man came into the carriage. Then the carriage shot forward with a jolt.

Tears came into George's eyes as he watched his father, two remaining brothers and sister get smaller and smaller. What would everything be like? Would he be set to hard labor the rest of his life? Would he ever be free again? And what would he do once he was free? It would have to be a miracle that saved him from slavery, he thought in despair.

A child as gifted and motivated as Andre is rare in any classroom. He didn't need help in getting started writing or in mastering mechanics and style. But he did have very special needs of his own in connection with his writing. He needed exposure to different writing forms and techniques, excouragement to trust his own senses and experience, freedom to experiment with many kinds of writing without being evaluated, extra time during the day to pursue his writing ideas. Most of all, I think he needed genuine involvement with a teacher interested in his writing but not overly dazzled by it. He once commented with grateful surprise that I really considered his ideas seriously and discussed them with him, and he obviously enjoyed our exchanges about his written work.

Thinking about Andre and trying to help him with his writing always eventually led me back to examining myself and my own attitudes. This is of course a truism about all teaching, that the teacher learns more from the children than they do from her, but in this case it was especially evident. There are some children who are so unusual that they push us into greater consciousness, sometimes in spite of ourselves.

4

Developing as Writers: Andre and Ruthie

In examining Andre's distinctive writing in the fourth grade, the natural question that arises is how he got to write that way, what led up to his present style and content. To answer that question to any real extent, discounting of course for all the mysterious, unknowable factors in anyone's development, we would have to have extensive documentation of his previous years at school and before school. Unfortunately, there is no such record available. The material I do have is some extremely sparse notes from his second grade year (I was not doing extensive write-ups at that time) and an incomplete but reasonably representative body of his writing.

In this chapter, I would like to take that second grade writing and trace briefly some of the trends that continued into Andre's fourth grade work. Similarly, I want to follow some of Ruthie's writing in second grade and then again in fourth. I am painfully aware of the inadequacy of my own records, but perhaps there is enough to indicate how much value there would be in studying children and their work over a period of years.* The long-term continuity of a child's concerns, subjects, language, and style is so striking that it is evident even in a sketchy account. And yet it is something that is easily missed when teachers have no access to a child's previous work, no real record of past years, and no ongoing study of work in progress.

When Andre entered my second grade class, I knew very little about him except that he had been a fluent reader when he began first grade, that he often stayed close to his first grade teacher and kept putting his hands on her (which made her feel uncomfortable), and that he had written one poem which brought him much admiration when it was displayed in the school lobby:

Day is day, night is night,
Sometimes you're at the end of your flight.
Day is sun, night is moon,
Think of the butterfly in its cocoon.

I thought this poem was interesting, more for its potential than the actual result, and I looked forward to working with Andre in my class. Andre's reputation of being *different* from other children was reflected in his mother's anxiety that he had no friends and that he

*This has actually been done in the fascinating and carefully detailed records of children at The Prospect School, North Bennington, Vermont. In this monograph series, see *The Art of Seeing and the Visibility of the Person* (1980) by Patricia Carini.

would be isolated. During the first week of school, Andre told me that he would get a reward from his parents if he remembered the first and last names of five children in his class. He too seemed tense about his social relationships. I spoke to the mother and suggested that the family stop all coercive measures, that if the pressures were taken off Andre, he would probably be able to relax and make more social contacts on his own (which eventually did happen). She was relieved and agreed to drop the subject at home. I talked to Andre and said I understood that he was complaining about being teased but that actually I had not noticed much teasing going on. At that moment, a classmate walked by and poked Andre, giving him a boisterous greeting.

Andre: See, that's what I mean.

Teacher: But that was just being friendly, not teasing.

Andre: I don't know the difference.

Andre, who evidently felt more at ease with adults, often sought me out to engage me in conversation. One continuing topic was the question of whether poetry needed to have rhyme. He insisted that it did, and he pointed out to me that his children's anthologies contained only rhymed verse. I agreed that unfortunately some adults felt that children could take only light verse, but that serious poetry could be either rhymed or unrhymed, and I showed him examples of both. It was evident that we both enjoyed our literary discussions about imagery, language, and writing, that we both felt stimulated in our thinking. Andre's rhymed poems at their best were beginning to have much more power and control than his earlier efforts. This poem, written in the fall in second grade has some of the same qualities as his fourth grade poem about a falcon (page 40):

I feel like a volcano
Lashing fire against the rock,
Blowing up and shooting down
The birds that come in a flock,
Pushing up the flames
That come in awful rays,
Blowing up the mountains
That show up the evening days.

There is the same connecting of human feeling with natural phenomena, although in the earlier poem it is simple identification whereas in the later one it is a much more subtle self-questioning, *Why does it accuse us so?* Both poems have concise and vivid description: *lashing fire against the rock* sets the picture of a volcano, just as our immediate view of the falcon is set when its *soft wings beat the air* and its ears *sense all the sound about it.* Already in the much earlier poem,

Andre was putting in adjectives that catch attention: *awful rays* and *evening days,* as later he used the arresting words, *suspicious reprimand.* Both poems have a kind of driving intensity. The rhythms are generally regular, but varied enough in the accented words and number of syllables to avoid a sing-song quality.

In both these poems, the rhymes work to strengthen meaning rather than to distract from it, which suggests that when the material of the poem is deeply felt, Andre can use his unusual language ability to serve his intentions, whereas in less urgent writing he may let the rhyming words dictate the content.

CONTINUITIES

Andre's experiments with old-fashioned diction, which later permeated his fourth grade trilogy (and continued in much of his fifth grade prose), started with some of his writing in second grade, such as this:

Once in the middle of winter
I was doth dreaming
A snow fairy came along
And said, "What is thou doing here?
Come along to the castle
And have your feet warm."
So I came along and was presented before the king.
Then, I blinked and woke.

The playful element in Andre's rhyming poems often saved them from banality. Here is a second grade prevacation verse:

Sea shells are things
Small or wide
Sometimes there are
Clams inside.
Their soft scales
In connection
Are beseeching me
To start a collection.

Somewhere between the rhymed poems that are powerful because they are deeply felt, and the ones that are either a banal response to an assignment or, at best, a playful one, are poems in which Andre sets a strong mood which is only somewhat weakened by forced rhymes or creaky literary devices. In looking at these two examples, the first from second grade and the other from fourth, it is interesting to note that while the mood is similar, the technique is much more advanced in the later poem:

The clouds wanted to know
How wintery it was going to be.
The cow and the sheep and the turtle
Also wanted to see!
The fleeced white snow
Came down upon the ground,
But the animals were happy
When spring came around!
But the animals had no need to be happy
For next winter was to come around
And then they'd be sad as sad
I think I'm sure to be bound!
Then winter came around
As fleecy as before
And they were so sad
That they cried some more.

I wish I could run
away to a beautiful land where
Everything is
colored
There are sheep
in a full herd
They give you milk
And wool like silk,
And you live in a palace
pillared.
The bells are always
ringing
The birds are always
singing
The wars stop short
"personne est mort."
And no school bell is
ringing.

Where the earlier poem has some filler lines ("I think I'm sure to be bound") and some needlessly repetitive words and phrases, the later poem is much more economical. The first poem relies on exact rhyme--*be* with *see, ground, round, bound, before, more*--and yet it already experiments with rhyme in unexpected places (the last word of the first line rhyming with that of the fifth), repetition of end words instead of rhymes, the inexact rhyme of *happy* with *see* and *be*. By the second poem, Andre is using near-rhyme--*colored* with *herd* and *pillared*--a witty use of a bi-lingual rhyme, and an unexpected last line which brings the romantic fantasy back to the playful wishes of a little boy. In both poems, Andre catches something of the flavor of pastoral settings.

Towards Christmas time, Andre became increasingly restless in the classroom, interrupting with noises and other silly behavior, doing very little work. Finally

he wrote the following piece which gave vent to his feelings:

There's only five more days until Xmas!
I'm so excited!
There's nothing I like better than Christmas!
It has no much presents! And it's so lovely!
You never know what's in the presents.
The only thing that's bad about Christmas
Is that the week before is so slow.
You feel as though it's never going to come
And you feel like you're going to give up.
You can just hardly wait!

This was a kind of precursor to his note to me two years later which explained, "When there is something very exciting or something very good that has happened to this said pessimist, he will get very excited, like a bird scared off by a gun." I soon learned to recognize these periods of silliness and restlessness as signals that Andre was anticipating some exciting social event or feeling fearful about an impending situation. Making the feelings explicit sometimes helped to calm Andre.

As early as second grade, Andre was asserting the importance that writing poetry had for him. His letter to me at the end of the year started off, "School is almost out. I've written two diaries and a half. I've liked typing the poems I have thought of." And the letter ended with, "When I get to 3rd grade, I'm going to write better poems. I'm going to try new things." Obviously he had not forgotten this promise two years later in fourth grade when he again dedicated himself to writing poetry on the first day of school. Sometime during that year he wrote:

Poetry is like the waves
Of death to the Drowned

In this brief comparison of Andre's work in second grade and fourth grade, we see a child who is seriously involved with writing, interested in working at the craft and thinking and talking about it. From the beginning, he was experimenting with vocabulary, rhythm, precision of description, and form. His prodigious reading allowed him to make use of old-fashioned diction and literary devices, and he was trying to work out ways of adapting these, and the convention of rhyme, to his subject matter. Using themes from nature and from mythology, history and fairy tales, Andre was writing about power, beauty, mystery, fear, joy, wonder, anger, etc.--in short, the subjects that any serious writer would explore. He was also trying to get a handle on his own world and his own feelings, sometimes humorously and sometimes symbolically. As he continued to write, his language was becoming more precise, his forms more related to his subjects, his command over language more secure. But the subjects

did not really change too much, and many of the elements of his style and diction in fourth grade were already beginning to emerge two years earlier.

Andre is, of course, an unusually gifted writer, and therefore it might seem that his development in writing would be a special case and not typical of children in general. However, that is not really so. While it is easier to pick out the trends and themes in a child who writes as expressively and copiously as Andre, any child would show lines of connection within his work produced over a period of time. In looking at Ruthie's writing, we are studying a child who did not consider herself a writer, did little writing aside from assignments, and in fourth grade often complained that she wasn't good at it. In spite of that, and even in a superficial presentation of a limited amount of work, we can see thematic material re-worked many times, the elements of style and mood carried through from second grade to fourth.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WRITER

Ruthie entered my second grade from an independent school, where she had not been too happy, and immediately took to the freer atmosphere of our school. Although obviously a bright, creative child, Ruthie was easily discouraged or frustrated, which resulted in many outbursts of anger. I soon learned that her parents were in the process of separating, and that her older brother was having severe difficulties in coping with the home and school situation. The second week of school, Ruthie sat down at the typewriter and wrote this:

mie bruthr is dum. he hatse me. he htincs i am dum to. he is dum mentl and retartetd. i hate him. he is mentl and retartetd.

Two days later she continued:

yesterday i brange a storee home and i wanted to show my mom but i wood get in trubl bekus it is abwt my bruthr. mi bruthr likse me sumtims and i like him sumtims too. my mom dus not like it and shee is mad wen it gets to be stoopid.

From these first pieces of writing, Ruthie continued to work out her perceptions of family relationships. But she was also interested in many things--math, dancing, singing, handicrafts, and nature. When she was happy, she was enthusiastic, outgoing, energetic and affectionate. Her writing was also a way to express her love of the outdoors:

A rain shower looks
like it is not raining

because the sun is out
but everybody has raincoats.

When the warm weather comes
I can't wait to go swimming
And I can't wait
to tip my brother over
in the water, and spit water
on my father and my mom.
And I can't wait to do
what I want to do
And I can't wait to go
swimming all I want to do.
And I catch frogs all the time.

Ruthie's spontaneous feelings fairly burst out in her writing. She always wrote very fast and seemingly without premeditation. If it didn't come immediately and easily, which it usually did, Ruthie refused to work at writing assignments. It was almost as though her half-conscious feelings were bypassing her logical mind and imprinting themselves on paper in unedited raw form. While most of the other second graders were imposing very conscious order on their writing and struggling with mechanics, Ruthie was letting her writing flow out in short, intense bursts, untroubled by punctuation or spelling problems. Most of her writing was so compressed that it felt like poetry to me, and I always copied it in shorter lines even if it started out as a story. Here are a series of Ruthie's poems, written through the course of the year:

I had a catfish and it died and I was sad.
And when it was dead, my mom did not tell me.
And when my brother told me
I was sadder than I ever was.
And I was mad at my mom,
but I still liked my mom.

Once there was a girl
who went to sleep
and yawned and yawned and yawned
And I was mad because
she was making so much noise.

Once in the middle of winter
a girl went out to fetch some wood.
And when she came home
her mom yelled at her
because she was late
and she ran to her room
and cried.

I was born in a log cabin
and so was my brother
and he had yellow dots
and black wings.
And my brother did not like me
and my mom liked me better
than my brother.
I am yellow with black wings
and I am sick of telling him
to stop shouting
*And I just fly away.**

*This was written in response to an assignment to write about butterflies.

My hair is short
My hair is long
but I never was going to cut my hair
until my mom said I had to cut my hair
but I never liked to cut my hair
but my mother forced me to.

In all these poems, there is the tension of people in conflict with each other, the potential explosiveness of strong feelings, the complicated reactions of a small girl trying to come to terms with confusing relationships. When Ruthie wrote longer prose, she seemed to lose her strong focus; her stories were rambling, disconnected, and sometimes dull. Yet, even then, some of Ruthie's themes were always present.*

When Ruthie entered fourth grade, she was very much the same as she had been two years before--impulsive, easily upset, full of ideas, affectionate and sulky by turns. She said she no longer liked writing poems, and her third-grade teacher said Ruthie's writing was imitative and undistinguished. As the year went on, Ruthie relaxed more in her work, set herself to learn spelling which was a source of frustration to her by then, and did a great deal of reading which had not been easy for her two years earlier. Her final evaluation of herself included this sentence: "At the beginning she thought she couldn't do poems but now she is fairly well." Again, her interest in nature was used in her poems as a way of reflecting her own moods:

*I'm just beginning to realize that writing which seems commonplace and disjointed may hold more meaning than would first appear. It is true that sometimes classroom writing is superficial because the children have not put effort into it, and teachers can encourage better, more careful writing. But there is also the danger that teachers may ask children to change stories that are illogical or to add endings when the story is unfinished, and in this way destroy a child's meaning which is implicit in the lack of sequence or the open ending. Ruthie's longer stories were probably a groping for something not yet formed in her mind, a transition exercise which would eventually lead to some more of her crystallized insights.

November is snowy
snowy as a white ball.
It is my birthday.
The snow crowds all over the trees,
the houses are white.
I think it's going to be a long winter.

The sky is black
with rain coming down
from the black sky.

The struggle of trying to get in touch with yourself, alternately succeeding and

then losing it again, a lifetime of striving to find your own voice--this is the complex subject of a remarkable poem Ruthie wrote towards the middle of her second grade year:

There once was a girl
That wanted to be a poemist
But she couldn't think of a poem
But then she said to herself
I will make one up myself
And she did.
But then the girl forgot it
And then she remembered it
And then she forgot it
And it kept on going forever
And that was the end of the girl
And the girl kept on forgetting
For all of her life.

Trees are swaying
and dust blowing,
lightning is coming
my way.

A shadow in the light
a flower standing bright
Eve is standing next to a house.
The flower bends
and Eve bends too.

These poems seem an extension of her second grade observations of raindrops and her appreciation of being in the country. Whereas the earlier poems stopped with description and with the association of actual events with the natural setting, these poems make a direct connection between observed nature and her own feelings. In the first two, she ends with a generalization which seems related to her anticipation of difficulties ahead--*I think it's going to be a long winter* and *lightning is coming my way*. The third poem, a description of a photograph she had taken, contains a loving observation of a student teacher she cared about, comparing her to the bright gracefulness of flowers. This was particularly apt because it caught the special quality of Eve's quiet and deliberate blending with the natural world.

Ruthie was still preoccupied with trying to work out her relationship to her big brother who was by all accounts an extremely difficult person to get along with, in spite of his intelligence and creative abilities. Here is an acrostic poem that Ruthie wrote in her diary and later submitted to the class magazine:

Brothers hit you. You try to
Run away but your brother
Outwits you if you
Try to stop
Him.
Everything in my mind
Runs around the ground.

When Ruthie made the illustrations for the following story, she cautiously added the word "FICTION" for her readers:

I could never forget when my brother came home and asked where my mother is. I said, "Mom went to the store." He said, "Well next time when she wants to go to the store tell her that I'm coming home." "Well why don't you stop being so grumpy and tell mom yourself?" So I walked into my room and sat down on my bed and started to read. My brother went into his room and turned on the tape recorder and said, "Testing 1234" (repeat) and then he played it back. He pushed the

button again and said, "Ruthie is stupid." Then he went out into the living room.

I went into his room and played over his voice and said, "Derek is stupid." I turned it off and went into my room. The next day he turned it on and got really mad and kicked me. When my mother got home she got really mad at my brother.

PERPLEXING THEMES

Ruthie was part of a small group of girls who played together but got into frequent conflicts. I was sometimes pulled in as sounding board and mediator when things got too much for the girls to handle on their own. Alone in conversation with me, Ruthie showed much perception and quickly jumped to her real worries which had to do with family problems at home. Her mother had also expressed concern about Ruthie's quick anger and fresh answers. At the end of January when I was talking to the girls after another round of upsets, Ruthie suddenly spoke up and said emphatically that she had been having problems with other children for the past three years, that there was no point in discussing it with her mother because it only ended up with Ruthie being blamed, and that she felt she needed help from the guidance teacher. I was naturally impressed by Ruthie's clear self-knowledge and decision to seek psychological help--the only self-referral by a nine-year-old that I ever experienced--and I made arrangements for her to have appointments with the guidance teacher. Ruthie was relieved but needed to be assured about the privacy of these sessions. During this period, she often had trouble writing. Her confusions might have been interfering with her ability to express herself. At the time, this story seemed to me like a meaningless response to an assignment:

The weatherman predicted snow but I was surprised when the snow turned pink. I ran upstairs. I ran up up up up and up. Finally I found my mother. My mother asked what was the matter. I told her the snow is turning pink. She said, "Let me see." "But mom, there is no window up here." "Well let's go downstairs." "O.K." Down down down down down and down they went. The window was boarded up. "Oh no, let's go up to the 5th floor again and we will get our ski pants on." "O.K., Mom." Up up up up and up they went and down down down down and down they went. They opened up the door and the snow stopped. Up up up up up and up they went and got off their ski pants and down down down down and down they went and sat down to watch T.V.

Some time later, Ruthie wrote this story which is more tightly constructed, and I began to see some connections:

There's this weird kid who whenever I say something she starts to laugh. I think she's weird. Her name is Kim. I say freckle, she laughs. I say purple, she laughs. When my brother saw her and he said Esther she started to laugh. All of a sudden the door flung open and my mother came in and said, "Hi Ruthie, hi Kim." And Kim started to laugh. My brother said to my mother, "She laughs at everything." My mother didn't believe my brother so she said pickle and Kim started to laugh. Later on, my mother said Kim has to go home, her mother just called. So I said goodbye and Kim laughed.

Both stories deal with an unexpected phenomenon, pink snow in the first one and, in the second story, a girl whose only response is to laugh. In both instances, someone tries to convince the mother who is skeptical. In the first story, the plot revolves around the attempt to prove to the mother that the snow is pink. The narrator and her mother make the long trek up and down five flights of stairs three times (not counting the time the narrator went down by herself and made the discovery) only to find that the snow stopped so they might as well stay in and watch TV. In the second story, it is the brother who tries to convince the mother, and he succeeds in proving his point. The first story emphasizes the long, arduous process of trying to get across to someone who is perfectly cooperative and friendly but insists on proof. In the second story, the emphasis is on the absurd phenomenon itself, an inappropriate response to other people.

It seems to me quite plausible that a child who consciously is trying to work out her problems with other people, would be turning over a lot of her thoughts on a less conscious level in her writing, even during a period when writing has become a chore instead of a pleasure. While neither of these stories has the compressed focus of her earlier poems, they do deal with the difficulties of close inter-personal communication. This may be the beginning realization that there are important perceptions which can't be shared with others, that sometimes we have to settle for a side-by-side companionable activity, that people's reactions can be amazingly unresponsive. For a child like Ruthie whose quick reactions tended to be those of anger or hurt, it must have been especially intriguing to imagine someone whose only response was laughter, a kind of imperviousness to the pain of life.

At the end of the year, Ruthie wrote a long mystery story in several chapters. Much of it dealt with the minutiae of getting in and out of taxis and renting disguises. Whatever plot there was became lost in endless rambling details. Writing in the familiar genre of mystery-horror stories, Ruthie was experimenting with the usual ingredients like murder attempts, car chases, unexplained appearance and disappearance of characters, etc. Within these conventions though, Ruthie's story

touched on some of her previous themes. This is the beginning of her novel, entitled *Scary Days:*

Once upon a time I was about to go to sleep. And I saw my mother in thin air. I tried to touch her but I couldn't. Then I thought and remembered that she died two years ago. I was scared. I decided that maybe I should go to a psychiatrist. So I walked out the door and called for a taxi. The taxi cab pulled over and saw my face. And I was about to say something and he drove off. I found out someone is trying to kill me. I just noticed that was the man that killed my mother. I thought about it for a while and then thought he killed my grandfather. I went back in the house and called my grandmother. I asked her if her husband was killed by this same person. I told the description and she said, "Yes, that's the same person. He should be in jail." I said, "Calm down. I will get him. He can't get away from me."

The image of the mother *in thin air* who is really not alive anymore, and the simple sentence, *I tried to touch her but I couldn't*, express a longing for closeness that can't be reached. For a while, the mother seems really there, and the scary feeling of uncertainty about whether the mother is alive or not, sends the narrator to seek help from a psychiatrist (someone who is trained to straighten out troubling confusions). In the meantime, the narrator establishes firmly that there is a killer who was responsible for the death of his/her mother and grandfather, and who is now after him/her. (The sex of the narrator is not made clear, though the taximan addresses him/her as *buddy* once. Then again, the narrator gets away by biting a would-be kidnapper, which does not sound like a macho hero. The character remains ambiguous throughout the story.) Once the killer has been identified, there is the firm and *calm* intention to control the situation and *get him.*

In this story opening, the narrator is revealed as terribly vulnerable and at the same time strongly motivated to take effective action. The contrast is all the more poignant because Ruthie has previously written about the difficulties of communication, the powerful feelings within family relationships, the pain of conflict. From very specific descriptions of family problems with her mother and brother, Ruthie has moved to the depiction of a universal need--the deep emotional ties to our parents which follow us throughout our lives, and which might not even be severed by death. Indeed, her story concludes this way:

The next day was short. I got out of jail and called the psychiatrist. I made plans to see him that day. Well I got out and started for the psychiatrist. I got there when it was my turn well the nurse called me in. And the doctor said, "Come in, come in." So I came in. He looked really spooky that I got scared and decided

to go to another psychiatrist. I started to go out of the room and he grabbed me. "I'm going to kill you." "No, don't. I'll do anything." "I'm planning to kill your whole family." He took a knife and ~~killed~~ stuck it in me with blood running through his fingers. The End

Actually, it is not clear whether the narrator is killed or not. The word *killed* that Ruthie first wrote is crossed out in the manuscript and the other words are added instead. Perhaps Ruthie wanted to leave it open. It could be a kind of reprieve, the hope that it might be possible to come to terms with oneself through pain, that death is not the only and inevitable solution. It is interesting that the psychiatrist is the instrument of suffering and death. He holds the truth about family relationships and thus has the power to control the lives of the family members.

When I first read Ruthie's mystery novel, I was struck by the beginning but thought that the rest was too confused and rambling. But Ruthie valued the story enough to bind it carefully in order to give it to her mother as a present. When a child herself feels that a piece of writing is important, that is probably a tip-off to the teacher to look at it more carefully. It is not until I thought about the story in relation to her other writing that I began to see the significant elements within the material.

PERSPECTIVE OF TIME

Ruthie's pattern of writing from second into fourth grade seemed to be alternate periods of clarity and obscurely rambling searches. Her themes were more narrowly defined than Andre's. Where Andre, as a precociously dedicated writer, was exploring a wide range of subject matter and technique, Ruthie was concentrating on feelings within close relationships, and the reflections of our moods in the natural environment. By fourth grade, Ruthie was more consciously involved in trying to cope with a complicated family life, and her writing was not as expressive as it had been two years earlier. But she was working at the same themes, in similar terms, taking them further according to her level of maturity. It might be reasonable to expect that if Ruthie continues to do a lot of writing, she will gradually be able to eliminate some of the necessary gropings and emerge with a sharp focus that can illuminate her insight.

Only this is not a reasonable expectation. Andre's writing is so spectacular that it is bound to be noticed and encouraged. Ruthie's writing often seems haphazard and as such is likely to be much corrected and revised by well-meaning teachers who have not, after all, seen any of her earlier poems. Andre's conviction that he is a writer will probably triumph over the periods when

his writing is not taken seriously, and he is likely to revive and develop his writing talent by the time he gets into adolescence. Ruthie, like most children, does not consider herself a writer, and moreover she is easily frustrated and discouraged. She might not do any more writing beyond the barest requirements.

When we see children only in fragmentary periods of one school year, when we see our task in relation to their writing to teach the *skills* appropriate to their grade level, we run the almost inevitable risk of losing the thread of a child's development as an expressive person. And that is not necessarily because there is "bad" teaching or because schools are restrictive. A sensitive teacher in a rich classroom environment, who has no access to a child's previous body of work nor any contact with the child in subsequent years, has no way of interpreting a child's present stage of thinking in the light of his whole development over a long period of time. If this perspective is missing, it is unlikely that the teacher will be able to support a child's strengths in the particular directions that are most appropriate and expanding for him.

The loss is not only the children's. In narrowing our perspective to exclude the long rhythms of development in time, we are depriving ourselves of witnessing a small part of the mystery of human growth, of partaking more actively in the shared process of human history.

5

Past, Present, and Future

In spontaneous conversation or in response to a film, book, or TV show, children are full of stories of incidents that happened to them in the far or recent past. Usually these stories are lively, dramatic, sometimes funny, and both the storyteller and audience enjoy the shared memory. When it comes to writing, children rarely realize that these memories make good material. When they can't think of anything to write, they often struggle at laborious imitations of storybooks rather than draw on their own lives. If assignments are given which deal with memories, and especially if these assignments are connected with classroom experiences and illustrated with examples from the writing of children and adults, some material from the past is usually released and recorded. For some children, capturing parts of their past lives may be an important way of putting their present lives into perspective. Reliving experience is often an especially absorbing writing task.

There are some common categories of memories which almost always spark children off, and which tend to recur during the year long after they have been assigned, or sometimes without assignment. When these subjects come up naturally during class time, children can be encouraged to write about them, and to read them aloud to each other. This generates more stories, and also the confidence that other children like to share real experiences.*

Taken out of context of a child's life, many of these memories may sound trivial or pedestrian. But it is these fragmentary incidents that build up the texture of our days and years. These stories may not be as striking to read as some of the poetry or fantasy writing, but they hold much of what is vital to a child.

Stories about Injury

One endless topic for discussion or writing is past injury or illness and its aftermath.

When I was four I went to nursery school. One day I was running up the stairs while my Mom at the end of the stairs was talking to a teacher. Meanwhile I'm running up the stairs and I start to slip and I tumbled down

*Examples of writing in this chapter are taken from my three fourth grade classes.

the stairs. (Of course I cried.) Then my Mom got me. I was Okay. Then I was alright the rest of the day.

Emily

When I was seven I was going to a park. It was a hot day in July and I was barefoot. When I got there some people were lighting firecrackers off in glass bottles. I was being careful not to step on any glass. I was walking on grass and cement.

All of a sudden I walked behind a bench and just then the ice cream man came. I was so hot I quickly ran toward the ice cream man. As I was running I stepped on a piece of glass. I cut my foot so bad.

My mother quickly rushed me to Children's Hospital. Then I got my foot bandaged. That's the story. Michael

On Christmas day, me and John were playing around. And I said I was hungry so I made a sandwich. I was running around with it, and me and John smashed into each other. Nothing happened to him and I did not know if something happened to me. Just then, my mother came down and said, "What were you doing with the magic markers?" But it was really blood. It looked like red magic marker. Then we found out that I needed stitches so my mother took me to the hospital. The doctor gave me eight shots of novocain and then gave me stitches and they didn't hurt a bit. When we got home I played with John a long time. Tim

A common element in stories of accidents and illness seems to be the relief at the end when the child has been comforted and cared for by parents and doctors. It is reassuring to remember that after the shock, fear, hurt and blood, everything was all right again and the wounds healed. Some stories of injury deal directly with the courage of bearing the hurt, or trying to fight back:

I was going down the field and I was in the center and was going to kick the soccer ball and I lifted my leg up and (I was wearing cleats) I hit my thumb. The finger nail lifted up. I put it back down and played the last half. But it hurt. Billy

Sometimes the stories deal with (real or fantasized) injuries inflicted on someone else:

One day I was walking down the street. I tripped, fell right near my friend Tommy. He laughed. I said, "Shut up you weird thing, you." Then he called me a fag. I was so mad that I punched him right in the face. He was crying the hardest he ever did. He ran up his home. Later he came out. He had a fat lip. Then I felt sorry for him. And I shook his hand. Jay

Or injuries *not* inflicted, as in this interesting variation:

Once my sister and I were biking in the driveway. My sister said something which I did not hear. So I asked her, "Karen, what did you say?" Instead of answering she said, "You heard me I know because you have a grin!" I did not know why but I did have a grin. I was angry because she would not tell me and she thought I was trying to make her mad. My sister is three years younger than me so I could have killed her. But I just didn't. I don't know why I just didn't. For the rest of the day we had fun. I'm glad I didn't react. Jonas

Family Stories

As might be expected, many of the children's memories are of family incidents. However casually they may be recounted, there is usually a strong emotional tone underneath the surface events. This story of Judy's revived in me the first sense of real independence that I had around the same age when, with some friends, I made my own way around unfamiliar country, and came out all right:

Once me and my cousins had a picnic with my aunt. And me and two of my cousins and their friends went ahead. There was a fork in the road. We took the one that we thought was right. We ran down the hill very fast. Then we had to walk a very long time. We crossed several swamps before we knew we had the wrong way. Then we came to a road and there was a restaurant. We went in and asked if we could use the phone. We called my mother and my mother came to pick us up, and we all went home. My mother told me it was a 4-mile walk we took.

In spite of the fact that the children had to call home and be picked up by mother, the emphasis is on the initiative taken, the long walk accomplished, the resourcefulness of taking care of themselves.

Some events are remembered because of the deep feelings of sadness, anger, injustice, or happiness that accompanied them. These feelings are, of course, very much part of everyday family life, but some incidents focus them more sharply, as in these examples:

When I was five and lived in Somerville, I had a very nice next door neighbor whose name was Mr. Desmond. He and his wife Mrs. Desmond gave me whatever I wanted, almost. They seemed to spoil me. My parents were very close with the Desmonds. On holidays we would go over to their house or they would come over to our house.

Well when I was going to be six we were thinking of moving. And in a while we found the right house. We were to move in, in a couple of weeks. We were all very sad to have to leave the street. We would all miss the Desmonds. In a few weeks we started to move in. After we were settled we got a box of cookies and a note saying that Mr. Desmond was sick in the hospital.

Then in a few weeks we heard that Mr. Desmond was dead. We were so sad that we cried. Hannah

One day some paint or something got on our living room rug. My parents and my brothers and sister blamed it on me. I got really mad because I didn't do it. I screamed and yelled but they still didn't believe me. My sister started to believe me a little bit but deep down she still thought I did it. The next day my grandfather came over and he told us that he spilled it. That was a relief. Ezra

When I was in second grade we were drawing pictures of our family. The telephone rang and the teacher got it. She said it was for me. I said hello and no one answered. And so they sent me to the office to pick up the phone there. I picked up the phone and it was my mother. She told me to come home. So I rushed home because my mom told me she was going to have a baby.

When I got home my uncle wouldn't let me go upstairs to see my mom. When it was time for my mom to have the baby I went upstairs.

My uncle had a movie camera but my mom said not to use it. My dad was telling my uncle to use it but my uncle was too nervous. Matt got scared so he ran out of the room. Me and my aunt chased after Matt. By the time we got back in the room, the baby was born.

Then we had a party Jill

Toys and Games

Connected with family incidents are the activities and belongings that are special. Bicycles are often especially important to children, and appear frequently in their stories or memories. Learning to ride a two-wheeler is a kind of milestone in childhood, a test of persistence and skill that is not forgotten years later when the bike has become a familiar companion:

I got my first bike from my mom's friend. Her son had a red bike that was too small for him. I brought home the bike and started to ride. I fell down about five times. My mom helped me to ride the bike the next day. Then my father helped me the next day. After about two months I was riding my bike. I was really proud of myself. The next day I was riding my bike and I almost fell off the seat. I got scared so I put my bike in the garage and went in the house and played with my toys.

Ruthie

Sometimes special toys are connected also with birthdays or other family celebrations:

I could remember when I played basketball the first time too. It was when my father put up a new hoop in

our backyard on the garage. My cousins came in my yard, they let me play too.

The next day was my sister's birthday and everybody on my street came in our backyard. Some played basketball. Some of my friends played with me. I was riding my big wheel.

Also every day we would go in the backyard and play basketball. Greg

When I was six I could remember when my mother took a picture of me with my eyes wide open. I looked funny. My landlord's child was standing by my chair. He laughed at me because I made a funny face. I had a chocolate cake and when my mother lit the candles I blew them out with a hard blow.

On that day my daddy bought me a watergun. I filled it up with water and took my friends outside and squirted them with my water gun. They laughed and laughed. Then I went inside and filled the gun up with water and let someone else squirt us. It was so fun. Then we went in and had hot dogs and hamburgers and cheeseburgers.

My father bought me two Barbie dolls. I said, "Wow!" and I tored the boxes apart and took my dolls out. Then I played with my friends. Of course they were girls. We went outside and played on the steps. We played house. That was fun. When they had to go home I helped my mother with the clean up. That day was a happy day. Brenda

Early School Memories

The first few years of school, particularly kindergarten and first grade, usually make a deep impression. Here are some reminiscences of those school years:

When I was in kindergarten, about the first week in school, it was eleven o'clock, time to go home. And a kid threw up in the hall and everybody hid in the bookcases and blocked their noses. Then the nurse came down and he had a big temperature but I can't remember it.

Then we had to go to our buses. I had Bus D so I sat with these two kids and they didn't let me out. So I had to cross Aspinwall Ave. and my mother didn't let me cross that street. So I went home and my mother didn't slap me and I thought she would because she said if I ever crossed that street she would slap me. Bobby

When I was five I was in kindergarten and there was one thing I could never forget and that was my first birthday. My mother came in with chocolate cake and drinks.

I felt so embarrassed because they were singing songs and everybody was staring at me but it made me feel good and happy with all my friends surrounding me.

I remember when I couldn't blow out the candles and everybody started to laugh at me and I felt real bad.

I got so many presents and lots of money. Jesse

When I first went to first grade the kid next to me was crying because his mother had to leave. Then I started talking to him. Then he stopped. The first day was good but the second day I had a huge stomach ache. Then the teacher said you're probably just hungry, and sure enough after lunch I was all right. Henry

At the age of five (and I mean five) I started writing. It was very fun. I loved it but no-one could figure out how I had learned. They wanted to know how I had learned to write so they could use it to help my sister learn. But they never found out.

The same thing happened when I learned to read, but they never found that out either. Jonas

In first grade I had Miss S. but I only got to see her when she gave out work because the girls were on top of her scratching her back and massaging her neck. The best part of first grade was a play we did. It was Captain Hook. I got to play third mate but all I got to do was say two words and fall down. Colin

At one parent-teacher night when I asked parents to write a brief memory of their early grades, the material that appeared was almost exactly like the children's memories, full of quirky teachers, incidents of illness or mischief, friends and enemies in the classroom. The parents enjoyed reading these aloud just as much as the children did. It was obvious that the jotting down of these memories brought back a whole atmosphere. Equally when children interview their parents about their early school years, the stories can be shared, first orally and then sometimes in written form as a family record. These informal family histories give children and parents an opportunity to work together, and the writing that ensues is likely to be valued by the family and the child.

This is an excerpt from Martha's interview:

My mother was born in Boston. They lived in Dorchester and she got along with her brother pretty good. She also learned how to ride a bike at eight and never drove a car. One day my father was teaching her how to drive. And she was coming down the hill. My father told her to step on the brakes but she stepped on the gas instead and she almost crashed into the wall. So she said she is never going to drive a car again in her whole life.

Parents' memories may enter their children's lives spontaneously, too:

My mother once sat down
to tell me a story.
When she was young
she told me

her mother was a perfectionist.
If she told lies
she would wash
her mouth out with soap.
But once she told a lie
and got her mouth
washed out with soap.
Oh it was terrible.
Laurie

Memories of Places

Just the names of countries, cities, streets, towns, help us recall not only a physical setting but the atmosphere of a particular time in our lives. Children almost always respond easily when asked to think of place names that have meant a lot to them, and then to write about that place:

In Switzerland
I played in the field
and when the winter came
the snow would be higher than me.
Foxes would run down from the mountains
and I would run in the house
and have hot chocolate.
Lenny

I think about riding my brand new bike in Alabama down the long rocky path. As I ride down the path I see patches and patches of weeds and poison ivy on one side. The other side I see a fence where there is a pasture with cows and horses. The fence is covered up with shade trees that cast a cold shadow on the path.

As I come to the end of the path I see one calm smooth road. It leads me to my aunt's house. I turn back. I come to our big brick house where my grandparents live. And my puppy comes to greet me with a happy bark. There I go inside and smell the delicious smell of cabbage, chicken, corn on the cob, cornbread, okra, cooked potatoes topped with gravy, lima beans, pumpkin pie, custard pie, all trying to be made, and also my favorite, a three layer cake and even more.

Later on we sit down to a beautiful feast as the sun goes down. We sit by candle light, eating and talking. We end the day by saying, "Goodnight. That was a nice dinner." The guests are gone now. I lay back to think about the feast. Jane

A landscape may be closely tied to events that appear almost like a dream afterwards:

One day we went to the beach and everybody went to the sea and on the sea there was a tree and the sea was angry and everybody went all the way to the end of the

sea. But my sister and brothers and friends got the tree and I went to help and then everybody went to water ski and my uncle fell to the sea. And then we went to the statue of Mary and my uncle went to a tree on the sea and he went like Tarzan and that was funny. Pablo

For a city child, the wonders of summers in the country may remain vivid for the rest of the year:

One day in camp on my last over nighter when we were hiking the rest of the way up the hill that we were on, we came across the most wonderful thing in the world-- the biggest raspberry patch I'd ever seen. Luckily it was on top of the hill so we stayed there about three or four hours. And half of that time, we were picking raspberries, and we just about picked that raspberry patch bare! And when we left, we were terribly unhappy. the very raspberry end

Dede

Memory Flashes

Once in a while, a child will write a memory that seems like a snapshot. These may be very short pieces or a couple of sentences of a longer piece, but they give the impression of a particular moment in time, held permanently because it had a special meaning:

One day when I was playing outside, I ate a leaf. It tasted really weird. At first I thought I might die but I didn't. I never told my dad because I thought he might punish me. Henry

When I had first come to Boston, we received news that my mother's father had died. I still remember a faint vision of myself looking up at my mother washing the lunch dishes and her telling me about it. Andre

I haven't found many of these kinds of memories among the children's writing. They seem rare and like a gift when they appear. If there is a way to help evoke them, I have not discovered it yet.

Everyday Chronicles

By far the most commonly recorded memories in the classroom are the ongoing journal entries of daily events. These may be just a few sentences written reluctantly to fulfill a writing requirement, several pages of a play-by-play account of a sports event, a family incident, or a description of an outing or holiday. At first glance, these entries are often superficial and dull reading. However, when children write regularly in their journals, they are recording much more than just outward events.

The entries build on each other, there is a thread of connection running through, and a child's concerns often become apparent both by what is written and what is left unsaid.

With younger children, the urge to show an adult what they have written is usually greater than the need for privacy. By fourth grade, children are much more aware of their separateness from adults, and they really appreciate the option to keep their diary entries private. Consequently, I can't quote from any child's journal at length. The everyday-type memories that I am using here are ones that children wanted to share, and that show a range of style and subject matter.

David arrived at school one day very animated about his morning adventure. He had recently moved to a new building and he had told me a great deal about his brand new apartment for which his family had waited a long time. For once, he was very eager to write, and his handwriting was much clearer than usual.

This Morning (True)

This morning I woke up, got dressed, washed, brushed my teeth, ate and left. I went down in the elevator. I got out of the elevator, and at the end of the elevator there's a electric door and all I have to do is step on a black square and it opens. But today it did not. I walked right into it. I pushed and I pulled but it would not budge. I found out it was locked. I thought I would be late for my ride but as I got there they were just pulling out of the lot so I got to school on time.

I asked him how he had gotten out, and he said he had finally found the janitor who had used a key. Since David usually tried to evade writing assignments, I was impressed with this effort and told him so. It was not until the next day that I learned that the night before he wrote this had been an especially difficult one for David, and the final straw which led to the strong recommendation by a psychiatrist that David receive special schooling the following year (as in fact he did). That made me look back over the story to examine it more closely.

The first thing that struck me was the word "true" in parenthesis next to the title. The whole story has that feeling of holding on to reality, the comfort of everyday routine, as exemplified by the first sentence which details David's morning activities. This is continued with the description of getting in and out of the elevator, and the expected process for opening the door. Then the short dramatic sentence, *But today it did not.* Suddenly the ordinary workings of routine machinery were interrupted, and no amount of pushing or pulling would fix it. Yet there is no sense of panic, but an almost humorous acceptance of human failing in relation to machines--*I walked right into it.* Not only did David

act resourcefully to get himself out of a frustrating situation, but he managed so successfully that he wasn't even late for his ride and was thus able to get to school on time.

David's eagerness to tell the story, his unaccustomed concentration on the mechanics of writing, and his clear account of the situation all indicate that the story meant something to him beyond the mere surface details. It seemed to me that whatever had happened to David the night before, this story was an important statement of his own strengths. He was asserting his contact with reality, his knowledge that there are unexpected frustrations in wait for us, his pride that his own intelligence and humor could cope with difficulties. David was very satisfied with this story and especially wanted to take it home. I think that putting it in writing made it a stronger statement than the oral telling, and also made it available to David to read again, to help him regain his confidence in himself. It also made it available to show to the people who were closest to him and most concerned about his wellbeing.

Quiet and responsible, Ellen was new in our school when she entered my class. She did a lot of observing before she joined fully into activities, though she was always cooperative in her behavior and conscientious in her work. She came from a large family where she was expected to do her share, and many of her stories dealt with family themes, like this one:

Yesterday I moved to my grandmother's house. I told my mother that I wanted to go to school but she told me that I had to stay and help move. Then I started to carry some boxes over my grandmother, and clothes. My father said that we would be done by the time the kids came home but we didn't. We finished late. When they took the refrigerator I thought they were going to fall down the stairs because they had to go down two flights but they didn't. I am glad they didn't. When we did finish we were all tired.

Ellen's practical, sensible attitudes come out immediately in the account. She would have preferred to go to school but she was told to help, so she worked steadily all day carrying boxes. She takes note of the fact that her father misjudged the job, but not with anger. Though much of the work was drudgery, it had its moments of interest, such as the moving of the refrigerator, and Ellen had enough involvement in the moving to worry about possible accidents and to feel relieved when all went well. The last sentence speaks of the kind of physical exhaustion that proclaims a hard job well done. Though she writes in an understated style, Ellen manages to make us see the situation through her eyes by recounting actual conversations, actions, and her own reactions to the events.

Where Ellen comes across as the quiet, observant person she is, Gretchen writes with vivaciousness:

Last Saturday I rode a horse named Twinkles. I went around and around in the rink. When I wasn't looking, my teacher whipped him and I started trotting. Boy was I scared! I thought I kicked him. I went up and down, up and down. Boy was I tired!

Twinkles was one starved horse. There was a corner in the rink and every time I wanted to turn left, Twinkles went straight. Finally I had to get off. My bones were aching! I'm glad I had a hot bath.

All those exclamation marks and short sentences carry the good-humored drama of the situation. Gretchen was enthusiastic about horses and also quite timid. Both attitudes are stressed in this story, and Gretchen's unassuming charm emerges as well.

Unexpectedly, a daily event can emerge in the form of a poem. It took Santha most of the year to stop insisting that she was ugly and stupid. (Actually she was a strikingly beautiful and intelligent child.) By springtime she discovered that she liked writing short poems, and she brought to school a bunch she had written at home (see page 28) from which I made a selection to publish in the class magazine. Maybe that's why some of her journal entries also started to come out in poetry:

When I waked up this morning
my room is all messed up.
I asked my mother if she
messed up the room she said no.
I asked my father if he messed
up my room he said no.

I asked my brother if he messed
up the room he said yes.

I know it was him.
Who else? A ghost?

In a few economical strokes, Santha tells us quite a bit about the inevitable exasperation of having siblings. But it is all told as one incident in which the dramatic climax comes only after the matter-of-fact conversation with each member of the family. The parallel structure works well to build up suspense, until at the end we realize that she knew all along what had happened, and that the whole point of the poem is to create a tone of ironic resignation.

Almost any such writing about daily occurrences can tell us a lot about the quality of a child's life, the attitudes, rhythms, relationships, feelings, wishes, that lie beneath the surface of casual events. However random the child's choice of subject matter may seem, there has been a choice made, after all. If we examine a continuous

sampling of the child's writing, along with our classroom observations, it becomes increasingly evident that the choices are not as random as they seem, but that they are part of a larger statement the child is making about himself and his world.

Future

Where ordinary journal-type writing pulls together some of the significance of present-day events for the children, speculations about the future may indicate children's expectations for themselves, and something about their conception of the world they inhabit. It is also a kind of writing most children enjoy because they can indulge in romantic fantasies or voice their confusions without being ridiculed by others. Not too surprisingly, many of their visions of adult life come directly through TV. It is hard to know just how seriously children believe these visions, and how much they are just playfully trying their hands at imitation. In this story of Rod's, quoted in its entirety, I detect a complex mixture of skepticism, admiration, apprehension, and envy for the TV world of Starsky and Hutch:

When I was in my second year of high school I dropped out of school. I bought the same car as Starsky and Hutch, a red sports car with a white stripe. Five weeks after I quit school I was lost on a highway. I was going to Indianapolis to see Colin. A sign said 50 mph. I did 90.

A police car came out of nowhere. We were going over a bridge. I hit his car. He hit mine. I hit his car. He went over the side into the water. Right then I ran out of gas. I looked back. Five miles away I saw a police car. I started to push my car at the police car! He went over the side into the water. I got in my car and I glided down the hill. I pulled into a gas station. A man filled my tank. I left.

When I was past the bridge I went 115 mph. A police car chased me. I was mad because the bridge was not finished. I churned around. I headed at the police car. I drove past the police car. The police car churned around. I was going 116 mph. My motor was hot. I read a sign said three miles to Indianapolis. The police was catching up. I was scared. All at once my motor overheated. I jumped out over a rock. Just as I hit the ground my car exploded.

I got up and started to run. In thirty minutes I was in Indianapolis. I met a girl named Sue. We went out a couple of times. Then we got married. We had five kids: Ezra was ten, Shari was eight, Sam was six, Henry was five and Jeanette was three. I'm thirty. Sue is thirty. I am in jail. I took my belt off and picked the lock. When I got out Ezra told me Sue was with another man. I took the kids and left.

I was going to Washington. Jeanette was always crying, Henry kept hitting Sam, Ezra and Shari were good. Then out of nowhere a police car came out and bumped my car. He pulled out a gun and I hit his car. He shot himself in the face. The next day we were in Washington. I met a lady. We dated a couple of times. Then we got married. I became a policeman so they wouldn't catch me.

In a laconic style that is almost reminiscent of Hemingway, Rod has admirably caught the quick action and violence of TV police dramas, where most of the plot is tied up with car chases. Marriages occur casually after a couple of dates, and break up just as suddenly even after 10 years and five children. Yet there is a feeling of responsibility for the children, and some detached observations of their behavior. While Rod as the hero gets out of every tight situation, he finally decides to join the side of the law for safety's sake. Presumably he will continue to have very similar adventures, this time legitimized by his job.

Undoubtedly, there is an element of satire in Rod's story, and he did not intend it to be a serious picture of life. Yet the thrill of the action is made pretty attractive, as is the sense of power conferred by cars and guns. Here is a shorter story by Rod, again using himself as the hero and naming his classmates as characters:

"Hi Chief, what's up?" "You mean what's down. Ezra, you're going down under the sea to catch Rod." When Ezra got in the castle, Rod met Ezra. They were walking down the hall. Sam jumped on Ezra. He put Ezra in a box with five girls. They started to strip. One touched his pants. He pulled out a gun and killed them.

Rod heard the police boats. Ezra got out. Henry held Ezra. Ezra stabbed Henry. Henry threw his sword and hit Ezra in the arm. Ezra caught Sam and killed him. Ezra and Rod were lost. Ezra found Rod. Rod said, "If I push this button this castle will blow up." Rod pushed the button. Ezra ran up 27 steps. The base blew up. Five boats blew up. Rod and Ezra died. All that was left was Sam's head on the beach.

Again there is the staccato action and deadpan violence. But in this story Rod does not triumph. He dies at the end along with all the rest of the characters. Aside from the gruesome touch of Sam's head on the beach (which can be accounted for by the fact that Sam was generally feared and disliked by the class, and Rod was always killing him off in his stories), the deaths are undramatic and bleak. There is none of the zest of the game of outwitting the other guys, nor any indication of the hero's feelings, as there was in the other story. Sex is tied up with violence. Either symbolically or actually, the sex act means punishment and death. The plot is unclear, but Rod dies by his own will. He knew

the button would blow up the castle and he proceeded to push it anyway.

However closely Rod's stories imitate TV and capitalize on pop culture, Rod is using the material for his own purposes. I think he is asking some real questions about values in a society where cops and robbers are not clearly distinguishable, where relationships between men and women may be shallow and exploitative, where violence and power win out, where children are easily deserted by their parents. Having listened in amazement to conversations among the children in which they were knowledgeable about drugs, prostitution, homosexuals, oral sex, and other things I never heard of at the age of nine, I would say that Rod's stories represent a general uneasiness about the adult world as conveyed to children by the media. Flooded by information that they theoretically understand but can't absorb emotionally, the children are confused, frightened, and sometimes angered by what they see and hear about adult life.

These feelings, often reflected in the children's restless, erratic classroom behavior, are evident in the mixture of sophistication and naiveté in their writing about contacts between men and women, and courtship patterns. Drinking and bars appear frequently as the setting for intimate conversations or pickups, and cars and motorcycles are part of the scene as well. Here is a partial script for a play made up by several children:

Last Night at the Bar

Scene 1

Opening: Jill and Cathy walk down the street. Emily comes up on a motorcycle.

Emily: Hey you guys, wan'a lift? I'm on my way to the bar.

Jill: Sure.

Sound effects -- Chris

Scene 2 At Bar Door

Bump into boys.

Jesse: You want a drink, girls?

Jill: Dynamite.

Michael: What cha want?

Cathy: We'll all have beer.

Bobby: Hey girls, go do a dance for us.

Cathy: O.K.

Michael: How about another beer?

Chris: All right!

We all get drunk.

Michael: Why don't I interview you girls?

Emily: O.K.

Michael interviews us when we are drunk.

We go home but the motorcycle stopped but we got it started and went home. The End

With all the trappings of what is supposed to indicate a fast lifestyle, the children had a hard time deciding what should actually happen at the bar, aside from dancing. If I remember correctly, at the performance of this skit the interview was mostly a series of giggles, overshadowed by exaggerated drinking and staggering.

The first meeting between a young man and woman is frequently depicted as a dinner date, and a series of dates tends to lead rapidly to romance and marriage:

I had to go back to school. I taught English in high school. As I was correcting some tests after class, a man came in. "Hi," I said. It was the boys' chorus teacher, Bill Cooper.

"Have a minute for lunch?"

"I have a minute but no money," I said.

He must have known I was trying to stall.

"I don't either, but I have plastic."

He pulled out his wallet and took out a Master Charge Card.

"C'mon," he said.

So I went. We had always been friends but he was acting strangely and I was curious. I wanted to eat at Cafe Minot but I had to get back so I chose McDonald's. Jeanette

I looked around the corner and there she was--a blond haired girl on a skate board. I went over to her. I asked her, "Do you know how to drive a car?" She said, "Yes. See that Black Corvette over there? That's mine." "WOW!" I said. She said, "How would you like to take a ride in it?" "Sure," I said. She took me around the block. She said, "How did you like it?" "I loved it," I said. "How would you like to go out for coffee at Jill's Cafe?" I said. "Sure," she said. A few weeks later we got married. Steven

One night at a cozy little restaurant he proposed to me!!! I told him I had to think about it and that it was a big opportunity.

The next day he asked me but I wasn't ready. The day after that he asked me at his apartment and I said YES!!!! Shari

The guy who I work withs sister came to see him one day but he wasn't there. I told her he'll be right back.

We got to meet by me making her a pizza. She was pretty and I was handsome. A month went by and we knew each other really good. I asked her if she wanted to help in the shop. She said yes. Believe it or not we got married, me and the guy who I worked withs sister Ann got married. Jay

The contrast between romantic fantasy life and the reality of being nine years old is brought out sharply in these two excerpts from Jane's writing, the first a projection of her future and the second an episode from her fourth-grade year:

I don't have any children nor a husband. But I do have a boyfriend. We had met on an airplane. I was flying to New York. He was in the seat next to me. He was flying to New York too. We were both clothes designers. He had just been looking over some sketches. His sketches were pretty interesting so I started to stare at them. He noticed I was staring so he said, "Would you like to look at them?" "Sure," I said.

So I started to do so. They were fabulous so I said, "I'm a clothes designer myself." He asked me if he could see them and I said O.K. Soon we were in New York having dinner together, talking and laughing. Then soon we became friends.

I remember in fourth grade when I had gone to Holly's birthday party, we had gone to see the movie, "The Goodbye Girl." There was this young couple in front of me. They were hunched over each other for a very long time (I was the only person who noticed this) and I thought they were kissing. I watched to see if they were moving their heads. I learned this on TV. Yes they were, so I signalled Shari to see what they were doing. She looked over and giggled and said yes! We told everybody else. We started to laugh. Now you see I have grown from little to big. It shows how a person can be a baby and grown-up all in one!

Jane is unusually aware of herself and of relationships between people. Her honesty in accepting herself as a mixture of *baby and grown-up* constantly exposed her to the scorn of the other girls who insisted on maintaining their pseudo-sophistication at all costs. And the costs in this group turned out to be high in terms of emotional stress and destructive interaction. Perhaps to counteract the overstimulation produced by TV and movies, many children seemed to hold on tight to the old traditions of big weddings and exciting honeymoons which I thought were no longer important to young people:

The wedding was good. My wife was wearing a white silk dress. I was wearing a four piece tux. And we had a big cake. We had a lot of presents. We got a toaster,

television set (colored) and lots of other things. We probably will live happily ever after. Billy

I said, "Carl I decided to become your wife." After he kissed me he said we should start planning for the wedding because it was almost summer and we wanted it to be in July. Then we both called our parents. They were both very happy. Finally we sent out invitations. My mother and sister helped me get my bridal dress.

Finally it was the wedding day. The wedding was held in Willow Gardens. It was a beautiful wedding. My whole family came. There were flowers all over the Gardens and people crying. My sister's daughter (Suzanne) was my flower girl and my brother's son was there. Shari was my Maid of Honor. Carl's brother Chris was his best man. After the wedding we went in Carl's Corvette to the airport to catch our plane to Greece. That was where we had our honeymoon. We spent a wonderful time in Greece. We swam and we played tennis. Holly

In describing their future jobs, many of the children envisioned glamorous occupations, along stereotyped sexual divisions, the boys becoming sports heroes and the girls models, singers, and fashion designers:

My future started out being a fashion model flying all around the world--New London, Paris, Hong Kong and every place else. It was so fun I would wake up at 6:00 and come home at 9:00. I lived in San Diego, California in a very expensive house. It was all modern. I was also a famous clothes designer. I made clothes for all different kinds of people. My clothes are selling well nowadays. Jane

When I came out of college I began to play a lot of baseball. I could play any position, but I could play left field best. I got picked up from the Red Sox farm team from the Brookline team.

I got a job as a fireman. Every about two days there would be a fire. I was very busy being a baseball player and a fireman. ...As for baseball, I got better and better and when I was 26 I got into the Majors. My batting average was 293. At the end of the year I hit 27 homeruns and 96 RBIs. I was the rookie of the year. Jake

Next thing I knew I was singing in the Sparkle Night Club. Then one night a man came up to me after my performance.

"Today I had an audition to see who could sing the theme song to a new musical backstage. Nobody made it. You're perfect!" Jeanette

Most of the other children saw work not as a vocation but as a means for making money. The few children who wrote of jobs as being pleasurable in terms of

personal fulfillment, chose professions in the arts, or in service occupations like teaching and medicine (or both!):

I graduated ten years ago. I went to college and when I got out I couldn't decide whether to be an artist or a dentist. I knew I couldn't draw pictures on people's teeth! And drawing pictures of teeth only wouldn't get me too much money. So I decided to be both!

I could be a dentist and still draw! So I went to dentistry school for four years and while I was in school I was an assistant dentist and I loved doing it.

Finally I got my own office. It had two yellow chairs and wall paper that had yellow giraffes all over it. Pam

There were a few startling variations in these rather predictable conceptions of work life. Steven's projection of his future did not include either a glamorous or lucrative job, nor a chosen profession. He stated very clearly that he would never find work at all:

After college I had to find a job. I looked in the paper. It said POLICEMAN NEEDED. I quickly threw down the paper and ran all the way. But then I stopped. I thought, I don't know how to drive a car. "Oh boy!" I said. Now I need someone to teach me how to drive a car.

... I was 73. I still couldn't find a job. By the time I found a job I was too old. I found a job working for a gas station. But they said I was too old. I was only 75!

All year I had been battling Steven's self-defeating attitudes. A gentle, perceptive, disorganized little boy, Steven was convinced he couldn't do anything, and proceeded to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. He turned off his attention, lost papers, produced very little work, insisted things were too hard for him. Every small success was a milestone, but in the end there was not enough time and energy to give him what he needed to make a substantial change in his feelings about himself. Steven's distress signals, as well as his strengths, came through in his writing all year. (He said he liked to write, even if it did take him hours to get started on a story.) His pessimistic view of his future might not be very far off the mark. I too had nightmare visions of his withdrawing from achievement further each year, as the demands on him increased and his confidence waned. Working within the inevitable constraints in a school system, there are some situations where I seem to be waging a losing battle, seeing a child's potential slowly seep away under pressures which I can't remove.

In our adult system of practical knowledge, we assign places of relative value to familiar social arrangements. So it comes as a shock to have these

turned topsy-turvy through a child's eyes. When Brenda wrote about choosing teaching as a profession, she cited her love for children as a motivating factor, and in fact she had amply demonstrated her motherly concern for younger or troubled schoolmates. However, her idea of a promotion from teaching was a delightful surprise to me:

After a couple of years teaching, they made me the secretary. When I told Scott he said, "No wonder they assigned you secretary, you were the top teacher."

Of course, it is only natural that the job of school secretary would appear to be the most important one in the school. She is the one in the hub of the excitement in the office, having direct access to the principal. Besides dispensing papers, information, bandaids, sympathy, discipline, supplies, she handles telephone calls and makes contact with everyone in the school, including all visitors. I have always felt unbounded admiration for the stamina of a school secretary who could handle all these myriad jobs and still remain calm and friendly, so I was quite prepared to agree with Brenda that it takes very special qualifications to accede to this job. (Needless to say, our school secretary loved Brenda's story when I showed it to her.)

Writing about memories, present experience, and hopes for the future is a way of integrating ourselves. It is also an acknowledgement that our experiences matter to us and to other people, that good writing can be grounded in literal reality as well as in symbolic truth (and indeed the two are closely allied and not separate at all). If we make children's lives available to them in their writing, there will be less need for teachers to keep thinking up gimmicks for writing lessons, and less panic from children who can't think of anything to write.

6

How Do You Teach Writing?

Whenever I start talking enthusiastically about children's writing, sooner or later someone asks me how I go about teaching children to write. Then I become confused and a little embarrassed because I don't think I'm really teaching them to write at all. Having watched young children, listened to them speak, recorded some of their stories, I have always been intrigued by children's gift for language. Later, when I taught first graders, I participated in the pride that comes with those first laboriously printed stories. The urge to combine our delight in words with the strong need to record thoughts and preserve memories--that seems to me an intrinsic part of all human experience. In a sense, children come to us already knowing how to write. What we, as teachers, need to do is to release that ability, give it scope, focus attention on it, share with the children the pleasure and pain of writing.

After many years of teaching, I would say categorically that there isn't a child who *can't* write. Some children can't perform the physical act of writing, some are too blocked to write, some have learned to fear and hate the written word. But every child has something to say and needs the encouragement to say it. Writing is not an isolated skill to be taught by workbook exercises. It is an integral part of a person's life, and therefore everything that happens to the child in or out of the classroom is in some way connected with what can--or can not--be written by him. *Teaching writing* probably consists of helping a child make the connection between what he has to say and the process of putting it down in symbols on a piece of paper.

That isn't how many of my fourth graders saw writing. For them it seemed one of the many senseless school requirements which they wanted to get over with as fast as possible. They were often worried about their spelling and handwriting, reluctant to take time to think about what they were writing, either overcritical of their own efforts or overly defensive of whatever hastily scrawled words they managed to produce. Once they accepted the fact that there was going to be a great deal of writing going on in the class every day, the children started to improve in their work just from the constant practice and the sheer volume of what they produced. Like any other skill such as woodwork, baseball, or

anything else that children are willing to spend time on, writing becomes easier and more controllable when it is practiced frequently.

A writer is someone who writes. That often surprises children who think that only adults are writers, that people have to go through college before they can be considered competent in writing. When Dirk came into my class from another school, he said he couldn't write and he didn't want to. I insisted that he should try anyway, and he angrily came up with some smudgy, misspelled one-sentence papers which didn't in the least reflect his verbal ability. When I talked to him about what he had written, he would start to tell me the thoughts behind the words, and I would write them for him on his paper. Sometimes I typed his stories or poems and gave them to him to decorate, and once, when he came in very excited about an outing, I took down by dictation a two-page typed story. Dirk still objected to writing, but gradually there were some occasions when he wanted to write stories, such as this one:

I was on the beach of Cape Cod when a monster came out of the water! I ran for my life but it was too late. The monster had me. But he said, "What are you running from?" I said, "YOU!" Then the monster said, "Do not be scared. I could not hurt a fly." Then he said, "Will you take me home?" I said, "Well maybe." Then I said, "I can not take you. You are too big." Then he melted and I ran home.

By the end of the year, Dirk still wasn't a fluent writer, but he produced a novel in several chapters about Superman, and he rarely protested writing assignments anymore. He really had not thought he could do it, and it was a surprise to him to find that he could write, that he even enjoyed it sometimes, and that his spelling and handwriting were getting better.

Taking dictation from children sometimes, even children who have mastered writing skills, is a good way to make that connection between thinking, speaking, and writing. Some ideas come too fast for children to write, or are too complicated or tentative, and it is worth it for the teacher to take time to write it down for the child when it seems important to do so. Aside from the benefits that occasional dictation may bring to a child's confidence in his language ability, it is also a pleasurable activity for a teacher, a way to collaborate with a child in a friendly rather than didactic fashion. There generally isn't any danger that children will become *lazy* and demand help all the time. I'm convinced that children desperately want to become independent, but that they will develop the confidence to strike out for themselves only if they are given support at crucial times. If that help is not given, children may become too discouraged or angry to forge ahead.

BEING PATIENT AND INTERESTED

Sometimes in our concern to teach children the mechanics of writing, I think we forget that these take a very long time to master, that children who have just barely learned to write still need a great deal of encouragement to keep working at it. There is nothing so irritating to a child who is involved in writing a story and wants a word spelled as the standard suggestion, *Look it up in the dictionary.* By the time the child walks to the shelf, searches for the word in the dictionary, drags it to his table to copy out the word, the whole thought and the excitement of it may be lost, and, more often than not, the word is miscopied anyway. It makes more sense just to give the child the word on a piece of paper or a special spelling word booklet and not impede the flow of writing. On other occasions, the same child might be delighted to spend a long time with a dictionary. I'll never forget the amazement in Bert's face when he started looking up *bad* words, one after another, and found they were really in there. He kept coming to me to report on what he had read, scandalized and thrilled at the same time. I figured that when people have a need for the dictionary, they learn to use it. A game of scrabble, an assignment to produce a hard spelling test, an argument about a word, will send children to the dictionary voluntarily.

An indirect way of showing children that they are potentially writers is to read aloud what other children have written, not only from the child's class but from other classes, other schools, other countries, other times in history. There is something compelling about writing done by other children and I am often touched by the sympathetic attention that children give to each other's work. The interest and approval are so genuine, the questions that arise so relevant to the material, that a young author can't help but take his own work more seriously as a result of the reaction of other children. As a starter to a writing assignment, especially in poetry, I often look for other children's poems or stories to read aloud or put up on a chart for the class to read. I remember once reading two examples for a type of poem I wanted the class to try, one by a well-known adult poet and one by a former student. The class decidedly rejected the adult poem as dumb and incomprehensible but immediately took to the child's poem saying now they knew what I meant, and why hadn't I said so in the first place. Generally, however, carefully selected examples of adult work are also an essential and effective way of opening up paths that lead to writing.*

Published children's work is often a surprise to my students, and may inspire a wish to have their work disseminated. As the next best thing to being printed in a real book, my class puts out a literary magazine, which includes some of their most representative work that I type up on stencils and they illustrate. Often

*For an excellent anthology of poems to stimulate children's writing, see Kinereth Gensler and Nina Nyhart, *The Poetry Connection* New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1978.

the magazine is read at home by sisters, brothers, parents, grandparents, friends, and it engenders lively discussion of content by the children at school. After the first issue comes out, there is a noticeable lift in children's motivation to write more and better. Needless to say, every child has several pieces in each magazine and nobody is overrepresented. But quality is important and not just anything gets published. There has to be some investment by the child in his writing, some real involvement beyond the mere fulfilling of a requirement, something of the child himself. While the authors and I don't always agree on which work we like best, I always include the pieces to which the children are particularly attached. If a child really wants something published, there must be a good reason.

The other side of the pride that comes with being recognized as an author is the self-respect that comes with the right to keep work private. If a child doesn't want to read his stories to the class and doesn't want anyone else to read them, that wish needs to be honored. Other children often start to cajole, saying, "Come on, read it, we want to hear it," and if the author needs to gain courage, that may be all he needs to dare to share his writing, maybe at first just with one friend or a small group, or the teacher. It may be embarrassing at first to read to the class. I remember when I once read something I had written to the children, Chris commented, "That was good but too fast." Children also rush and swallow their words until they build up more trust in themselves and each other. But even when children feel confident about sharing their work, they may still want to keep certain things to themselves. I realized how important that option is when I attended a poetry workshop a few years ago. While I became increasingly braver about reading my work to others, the assignments sometimes evoked such personal writing (often to my own surprise) that I needed to think about it and maybe revise it before I could consider sharing it. That may happen to children too--a release of personal material which is important to the child just then, but too private to share.

The right to privacy in a classroom is not always easy to uphold. One effective way is to use journals for writing that is not meant for the teacher or anyone else except the writer himself. It seems to me important to have at least one kind of writing within the school context that is free of any adult contact if the child wants to keep it so. When I present journals to the children, I talk with them about the kinds of writing that can be done--observations, accounts of events in our lives, poems, stories, opinions, feelings--just about anything someone might want to write. The journals serve as a sort of writer's notebook, and I make it clear that I will not read them unless the children want to show me what they have written. I absolutely keep that promise, during or after school. Many children show me most

of what they write, most children show me at least certain pages they want me to read, and a few don't show me any at all. I never write comments in a journal because I want to assure the children that it's okay to write without the expectation of adult involvement. I know that many teachers use journals as a way to communicate with the child, to write comments back and forth, and there is certainly a place for written communication between the children and the teacher. But I prefer writing notes and keeping the journal purely the children's work.

When work is handed in to me, I frequently write comments or questions in the margin of factual research papers, but I am careful never to write anything at all on personal writing, nor to make any correctional marks on the paper. That often needs some explaining to parents at the beginning of the year, so that they won't think that I ignore spelling instruction or that I'm not reading the children's work. Tara, a very good fourth-grade writer, once told me of the dismay she felt when teachers wrote on her papers in ink. She felt it spoiled the way her work looked. Pencil was all right, she said, because she could erase it. Probably many children feel the same sense of violation when their papers are written on by someone else. (On the other hand, a few children are very insistent about wanting a grade or checkmark on their papers, and when I refuse to do that, they sometimes write in their own.)

TECHNICAL QUESTIONS

That doesn't mean that I don't correct errors, but that I prefer to do it together with the child. If the content is valued first, it makes sense to most children to have their papers as readable as possible, and they enjoy private proof-reading conferences with the teacher. I have not found that it discourages children or spoils their motivation to correct some (not all) errors with them when they have finished writing. After they have had many such conferences in which we go over spelling and punctuation, they gradually are able to help each other proof-read, and finally to start to proof-read their own papers before they give them to me. By the end of the year, most children can spot--and correct--some of their own errors, putting in periods and capitals, inserting words that are omitted, sometimes even correcting sentence structure that is incorrect or awkward. I was amazed at how good some children were at helping classmates edit their writing--sometimes with much more care and patience than I could muster during a busy school day. Of course I don't go over all papers carefully. Many I simply read and don't correct or discuss with the children, but I frequently note some of the errors to work on with the child in another context.

Another thorny question is whether to have children copy or revise rough drafts. For a few special projects--

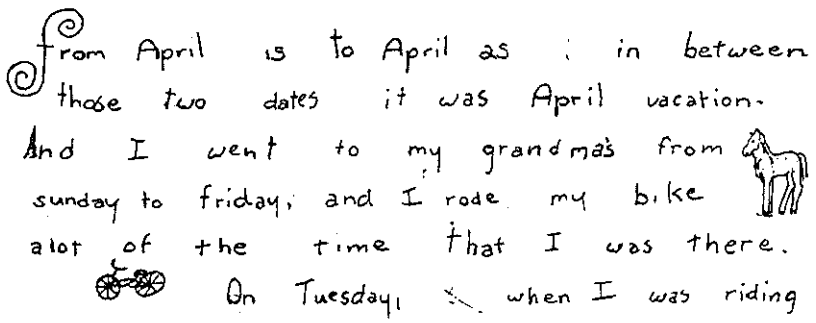
making books or displays--I had everyone write rough drafts and then do revised, corrected final drafts. But otherwise I rarely ask children to copy what they have written. There is nothing so dreary as having to recopy a long story just to correct some errors or improve neatness, and indeed, the prospect of having to do so tends to discourage children from attempting to write longer stories. Again, if writing is taken seriously by the other children and the teacher, most children really want to learn to make papers neater, more correct, more legible, and are very pleased when other people notice a change for the better. They generally don't need to be forced to try harder. If rewriting is not usually required, children probably won't mind working hard at neat copies for special reasons, and they may even insist on rewriting their papers when they are not required to do so.

However, there are always some children who have such a hard time physically forming their letters that it is torture for them to write. Colin's papers were unbelievably messy--smudgy, crossed-out chicken tracks, corners chewed off, letters all sizes under and over the lines, illegible words--and they had little discernible content. Yet Colin was a sensitive, intelligent, extremely verbal child who was skilled at using his hands in woodwork and scientific experiments. I was amazed at the discrepancy between his real ability and his absolutely terrible writing skills, his refusal to involve himself in writing although he loved reading and had many good contributions to make in discussion. We made an agreement early in the year that I would more or less ignore technical skills if he would make a real attempt to get more of his thoughts down on his papers. He resisted still. Sometime during the year, Colin decided he liked writing poetry (fewer words to put down?) and at the end he became so engrossed in a poem that he insisted on missing recess to finish writing it.

His handwriting, however, improved only slightly, and I finally suggested to him and his mother at a conference that he should learn to use a typewriter early in his life. The following week, Colin gleefully brought in a typed second draft of his autobiography which he proudly claimed had taken him many hours to do because he was just learning how to type. His mother, who had been struggling with him and his writing for several years, was relieved at my suggestion. Colin felt so frustrated in his writing that it was important to find some forms and ways in which he could feel better about it. Most children can do passably well in manuscript or cursive script, but there is also room for typing, printing, calligraphy, and other ways of producing writing that may sometimes turn out to be an art form in itself.

Art and writing may be very closely allied for some children. Pam intertwined all her stories with delicate drawings in the margins and within the text. She also

started to decorate the first letter of her stories, as in old-fashioned books. The mood of her stories and drawings were closely connected to produce the effect she wanted.



Tam was even more dependent on drawing as a way to enter writing. An artist, whose parents were also painters, Tam spent most of his time drawing, one of the few activities in which he could lose himself concentratedly and in which he had confidence. Most of Tam's writing was connected with pictures he drew first or pictures he planned to make for his stories. His writing, in spite of the absolutely atrocious spelling and mechanics, was often more vivid than that of more skilled writers, because imagery was such an important part of his world.

The connection between visual images and words is not always obvious to children, though it comes intuitively to some who may have read a lot or have a special affinity to language. It is sometimes useful to have examples of *word pictures*--poetry, passages from books, young children's conversations--and discuss why and how these form pictures in your head. A good exercise is to read some examples and then allot a short time--5 to 10 minutes--to go outdoors silently, really look at something, and then immediately write a short poem about it.

For some children, this exercise opens up the possibilities of writing with more immediacy of observation, using their senses more consciously. After one such session, Ellen came to me with a dull piece of writing which had nothing to do with what she had just observed with interest. I asked her why she hadn't written about what she had looked at, and she said with surprise in her voice, "You mean you want me to write what I *saw*?" I said I did, and she came back with a much fresher piece of writing. It is a point that may need to be made throughout the year in many different ways, that images can sometimes be captured by words, and that each person's individual vision is worth recording. For children who don't draw easily or who become frustrated with their inability to capture images visually on paper, the revelation that they can keep pictures through words may become really important.

Aside from the children who aren't aware of the possibilities of translating images into words, there are

some who have already formed a glib, imitative style and who tend to substitute clichés for their own observations. I once sat for 15 minutes with Holly who had written a very superficial description of a place she really cared about, and asked her to close her eyes, see it in her head, and then tell me what it looked like. Slowly, painfully, we arrived at a more vivid picture which I took down as she told it to me:

Out of my kitchen window in Vermont I see a bush with lots of scattered flowers, purple blue. When you go up close they're little flowers round at the top and fatter at the bottom. They smell like perfume. In the wind some of the petals come off and lie under the bush and it looks like a wedding.

At the end of our session, Holly looked exhausted and said with emphasis, "That's hard!" I agreed that it's hard work to be a writer.

EXERCISES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Being a sometime writer myself has probably made it easier for me to identify with the children's problems in writing and to share in the process. The children knew that I do a lot of writing on my own, including a personal journal and notes on the classroom, and that I'm not asking them to work at something that I don't do myself. However, I don't think that teachers have to be involved writers in order to help children learn to write. I am terribly inhibited about all art work, but I have my children do it all the time. Recently I expressed my own feelings of inadequacy about drawing to my class. At first they were surprised (that anyone should have trouble with drawing? That a teacher can't draw?) and then very encouraging to me when I hesitantly made my own attempts to join them in drawing from nature, although they were generally a hyper-critical group. In the same way, a teacher can join in writing exercises with children in class, and gain confidence and skill along with the children. It is amazing what a different view of a writing assignment a teacher can get after struggling with it herself. I never cease to be impressed when the majority of nine-year-olds in my class can be told a writing assignment, connect with it in some way, and then sit down in the middle of the classroom and produce adequate--sometimes outstanding--work, whereas I have a hard time trying to write with other people around me, away from my typewriter, at a given time. Any teachers who make a serious attempt to fulfill writing assignments along with the class are bound to develop a lasting sympathy for students who can't settle down to write, who don't want to write on that topic, who would rather do it later in the day, who need to withdraw into the hall, etc.

What should I write? or *I don't have anything to write about* are the kinds of questions and complaints that come up frequently, especially at the beginning of the school year. Though my aim is to make children independent in their writing, I realize from my own experience how hard it is to know what you want to say, or to get started even when you have an idea of what to write. Teacher assignments are often a kind of bridge to self-motivated writing, a way to give children the security to venture out in different directions. If a writing assignment is to perform this function, it probably needs to be closely tied to the current interests of the children. While there are a few almost sure-fire topics or exercises, most assignments have to come directly out of observations of the children, classroom events, enthusiasms, unexpected situations.

So when we have caterpillars in the class we write about them, and when we have heated arguments about playground rules we write about that, and if we are studying explorers we write a journal of a trip. Science experiments get written up, social studies films reviewed, notes written to each other. Writing may be a way into a subject as well as a way to hold it. Before we made a visit to a museum to study bridges, I asked the children to think of a bridge and write down any associations or pictures that came into their minds. Here are some examples of what they put together out of their five-minute reflections:

Over a waterfall
way beyond the moon
stands a big bridge
with water
beating against the rocks
singing a lullabye
for doves. Judy

Full of holes dark
falling apart small
over a river
flowing strong
scary wooden
take care when you walk through.
Dede

The people
are in cars
on the bridge
with sea
gulls flying
in the sky
and the sound
of traffic
on the steel
bridge and
the boats
going
under
the
trucks. Tim

They also made ink prints of bridges and models out of toothpicks and cardboard. By the time we went to the museum, the children had established a wide framework for their study.

Alongside the assignments that come right out of our classroom lives or the interests of the children, I give some designed to introduce children to different forms, stimulate story or poetry writing, elicit thought. I usually introduce the assignment briefly to the whole class, often reading some examples, and get a response from members of the class before they start to write.

Sometimes I supply a choice of opening lines, or a list of ingredients to include in a story, or a story idea. The trick is to have just enough introduction to make the children feel at ease with the assignment, but not so much that they feel they have already covered it orally and therefore have no more impetus to work at writing it. It is not always easy to judge this fine balance, and sometimes writing assignments fall flat completely. At other times, the class seems to get fired up and eager to write, some children wanting to continue their stories for several days. I try to approach writing assignments with an experimental attitude, so that when they turn out to be duds I can shrug it off and take a different approach next time. It could be that the time isn't right, or the atmosphere, or else an assignment that was great with one class can fail completely with a different group. There is no sure formula, but I have learned a lot about my children from thinking afterwards about why certain assignments didn't go over, so there can be some gain even from unsuccessful ventures. And, of course, any writing assignment is primarily an exercise and doesn't need to yield excellent products. Somewhere along the line, each child is bound to hit some assignment to which he can really respond.

If a child has particularly negative feelings about an assignment, I don't insist on it, as long as he substitutes some other kind of writing. When the whole class embarked on a long-term writing project of autobiographies which was to last for several months, Dirk became absolutely panicked and flatly refused to do it. I talked with him a little and got the impression that an exploration of his family background and early years was so painful to him that he could not even think about it, much less write it. We agreed that he should write a comparable history of an imaginary character instead.

The other children were a little surprised that Dirk was doing a completely different project, but they accepted it, probably because they were used to variations on assignments. All during the year, children would get going on work of different lengths, so that if someone was working on a long story, she might continue it for a week instead of doing a class assignment. And people who were absent might be working on quite different writing than the others. The more flexible the writing assignments become, the more it is likely that children will start to have writing ideas of their own instead of using the teacher's. There are times when I want everyone to try a new form or subject, but generally I am rather pleased when children say that they don't like my suggestions and would prefer to write something else. When I make a worksheet of a writing assignment, I usually state specifically that there is the option of choosing a quite different subject to write about.

Children also found purposes of their own for writing. One class had a rash of secret notes carried on defiantly during the silent reading period. They were

testing me, trying to get away with this surreptitious misbehavior, and I played my part by sternly forbidding it and confiscating notes when I caught them. ("Henry, spy on Ezra and Billy. Write back, Sam.") Basically we all got what we wanted. They had the pleasure of ganging up to put something over on the teacher, and I had the pleasure of indirectly encouraging them to use writing for enjoyment. Other spontaneous uses of writing were less disruptive. Children wrote skits they wanted to perform for the class, some wrote cartoon stories, some wrote reminders for themselves to bring things to school. Jonas used much of his free time to write endless chapters of the adventures of his super heroes, Tam wrote texts for his pictures, Richard made posters and signs to hang up in the classroom.

THE POWER OF WORDS

The note-writing epidemic was relatively innocuous (except when it started to give orders to "gang up" on particular children), but it does raise the issue of writing as a source of power. When we encourage and sharpen children's writing ability, we are giving them a powerful tool to use. Written words can carry weight far beyond spoken words, and their impact may be quite different. Children discover this very early when they begin to write swear words on desks and walls (the word *fuck* is sometimes the first word a very young child can write and read, aside from his name), and of course adults carry this much further with graffiti which may range from ordinary vulgarity to highly sophisticated jokes or impassioned political slogans. Children can also become adept at exploiting the power of the pen to hurt others or fend them off. When another class was going to visit our room for a short period, Richard covered his cubby with taped-on paper and put a large KEEP OUT sign on it. Before I knew it, every child in the class was feverishly doing the same. It was not until the next day that I could get through to the children enough to at least discuss why they had felt this was necessary. Stories frequently contain insulting references to other children (which I won't let the authors read aloud in class, on the principle that you can write what you want but you may not hurt people deliberately). The constantly shifting alignment and realignment of friendships may include letter writing that can result in tears and recriminations. I found these notes on the floor:

"Dear Tara, why are you mad at me?"

"Dear Sylvia, Yours is not to reason 'why' yours is but to do or die!! P.S. Don't write back!!!!"

"Dear Dede, I'm feeling that you have been playing with Tara more than me. Well that is all I have to say."

I think that writers, especially new writers, are not always aware of how powerful written communication can be. It is certainly something that still surprises me in my own life, and I've had a great many more years of experience than my students. One way to make children conscious of the effect of the written word is to read to them regularly every day. If the books are carefully chosen, children can't help but be impressed by the power of books to evoke laughter, tears, anger, excitement, sadness, fear, joy--the whole range of strong human emotion produced by some symbols on a printed page. The compulsive readers have probably already discovered this for themselves, but even for them there is a difference in sharing a book's atmosphere with a whole group rather than reacting to it alone. While there is not necessarily a correlation between good reading and good writing, I would think it essential to classroom writing to have a lively reading program also, where teachers read in the presence of children as well as to the class, and everybody gets excited about books. Just in case a teacher has doubts about the power of language, these are absolutely dispelled when even the wildest group of children listens with spellbound tension to a story that is being read aloud or told.

It is no wonder that all children are entranced by good books, whether they are habitual readers or not. Children's literature contains the same themes that adult literature does: birth, death, love, hate, relationship, separation, loss, and many more basic human concerns. There is nothing *simple* about good children's books, even picture books which have only one line of print per page. When children listen attentively to these books, or read them for themselves, they absorb indelible impressions which remain part of their lives. It is amazing, and moving, to participate in a discussion among adults of their childhood reading, as I did recently, and realize how vividly those early books stayed with their readers, and how closely they were tied up with the whole texture of childhood experience.

Choosing the right books at the right time not only for reading aloud to the whole class but for individual children, can be a challenging task for a teacher. It takes a lot of hours of reading (and if it is hard to keep up with picture books at the primary level, it is quite impossible to cover thoroughly all the books available by the middle grades--informed choice is a necessity) and many more hours in libraries searching for just the book you want for a certain child. You will probably know when you've hit it, as Dirk settles down without a peep to an hour of reading and then wants to continue and finish the book, or Dede comes to you exclaiming, "This is the best book! Do you know any more like that?" It's not just a matter of a book which would be appealing to a child, or which matches a child's present reading level. The books which become very important to a child are the ones that touch his own deepest concerns, expand

his awareness, and open new paths of thought. These books connect him with other people who have had similar experiences and recorded them, so that the child's own writing is also put into the perspective of human consciousness and memory.

We have now come full circle to where this chapter began: the idea of children's writing as a basic and integral part of all human experience. Just as children become involved in their favorite books (sometimes reading them over and over again) because something in the style and content speaks especially to them, so in their writing children work out the themes and modes that are especially their own. I am always uncomfortable in curriculum meetings where writing is discussed as a *basic skill* in terms of *minimal competencies*. If we tie our expectations to such limited goals, we may tend to cut off the boundless abilities of children to make use of available media to shape their images and communicate their perspectives. Instead, I would like to see the emphasis in schools on the encouragement of children's maximum abilities to express their own visions of the world. It is only within the framework of this larger goal that we can work with children on mastering the craft of writing.

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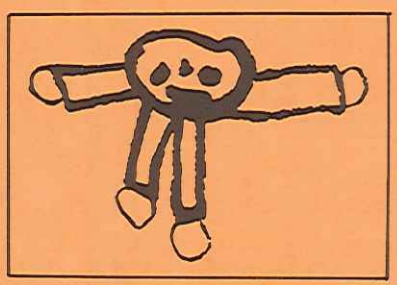

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