

2001

Celebrating Students as Authors in the Classroom Here and Now

Rose Reissman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Reissman, Rose (2001) "Celebrating Students as Authors in the Classroom Here and Now," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1323>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Celebrating Students as Authors in the Classroom Here and Now

Rose Reissman

As part of the Balanced-Literacy approach and the Readers-and-Writers approach for the nurturing of lifelong literate citizens, language arts classrooms grades K-8 celebrate authors. A visit to a language arts classroom will reveal a corner section, a bulletin board, or a display focused on one or more published authors writing for the appropriate grade. Considerable classroom time and independent student research, writing, and project time are devoted to in-depth study of specifically assigned or student-identified published writers. Such concentrated focus on writers whose works are recognized by literary critics, featured in published library collections, and sold in recognized bookstores does indeed contribute to love, familiarity with, and appreciation of the growing body and expanding canon of contemporary and classical literary artists.

But while rightfully concentrating on introducing students to a corps of celebrated authors, another wonderful resource for engaging and involving students in authentic appreciation of the process of writing and authoring is left untapped. This resource exists in almost, if not every, classroom: the student author. No matter what grade a language arts professional teaches, there are at least a few if not many students who identify themselves as storytellers, writers, illustrator/writers, dramatists, performance artists, and multimedia story presenters.

A kindergarten teacher may have two or three children who can get up and tell stories that enthrall their classmates and families. By second

grade various students take time in the writing center to develop numerous stories focused around single characters that they created themselves or featuring additional adventures and stories they developed for familiar literature characters.

As students progress through the upper elementary and middle school grades, many of them are hard at work on their own mysteries, science fiction works, poetry, and plays. Every teacher/educator is heartened by the presence of such student authors within the classroom and often provides time for them to share their work for a broader audience including the school community, parents, and other area groups (i.e., senior citizens, after-school community center peer groups, etc.).

But what would be truly wonderful would be to take time within the regular curriculum's author study to focus on a role model—the peer student author. With a concentrated focus and readily available to be interviewed, eager peer student authors can share their writing objectives, hopes, and dreams, and help to authenticate and validate author study. Best of all, this activity provides the aspiring and developing student writers with encouragement, support, and prestige as they begin to hone their talents. Interviewing student authors also concretizes the writer's life and the immediacy of writing for fellow students. Over the years I have taught and learned in classrooms with students K-16 of varied learning styles (including English Language Learners, special needs student, resource room students, gifted and talented students, and so-called mainstream students). As a habitual daily

writer myself, I have always taken time to read from my own writings to the students. I identify with delight the students in my classes who either know they are writers and take pride in it or have extensive writing ability and are writing “on the side.”

I have successfully integrated within my own language arts teaching K-8, activities, strategies, and products focused on student authors. It is my belief that by providing student authors with time, attention, and an audience to share their writing processes, interests, influences, products, goals, and anticipated new directions, that not only can the student authors within every classroom be encouraged to continue to develop as writers and readers, but also their peers can gain vital, direct, and concrete appreciation for the writing process. Furthermore, they can come to view authors and writing as a personal age-appropriate response to life and experience. Nurturing students as lifelong readers and writers includes the key insight that literary response to life’s events contributes to the core of significant reflections and reactions to daily experience. Hearing peers voice their reactions to life and seeing the inclusion of daily experience in their works truly authenticates and contextualizes this key intrinsic literacy principle.

But how does a teacher move toward actually including student authors as part of an ongoing Balanced-Literacy or Readers-and-Writers approach to literature? One of the easiest, readily infusible strategies for showcasing student authors is the interview. This is best done within the classroom by having the class, as a group, develop a series of interview questions for a student author. While the questions developed will vary according to the students who design them, among the basic questions that might be included are the following:

- When did you first begin writing on your own, independent of school assignments or letters that your parents made you do?
- Do you remember your very first story, poem, cartoon, or play? What was it about? What was the title?
- Did you share it with anybody? Whom? How did he or she react?

- Did your parents or other family members listen to or help you with it?
- When you write in school or at home, where do you write? Are you on the floor or at a desk?
- How do story ideas come to you?
- Do you listen to television, movies, family, or friends for ideas?
- Do you write about the things you see, hear, or read just as they really happened or do you change them?
- Who are some of your characters? What are some of your plot ideas?
- How do you improve your writing?
- Who are your favorite writers?
- In the future, how do you see yourself developing as a writer?
- What audience will you be writing for? Do you have a favorite genre?
- Will you be writing as your sole way of making a living? If not, what job will you have?
- Do you hope to create a memorable character, scene, or series? Describe it.
- Do you write every day?
- When do you write? If an idea comes to you, do you write about it right away?
- What writing tools or materials do you like to use?

Interviews with classroom writers, even if they are young children whose interviews the teacher audio- or videotapes, result in the class developing authors’ studies data and understanding authors’ processes. These are author study experiences as rich as students researching the responses to interview questions using published authors. Author study can be infinitely deeper and more honest if students actually sit face-to-face with a peer author to listen to his or her reflections. In addition to drawing on a body of adult community writers, how wonderful it would be to have classroom student writer close-ups for posting on the bulletin board or listening to at an author study center.

Here are the results of an author interview with thirteen-year-old Jonathan Solomon, whose comments were read and approved by his parents for publication:

Jonathan had been writing for over three years in Mead composition notebooks with ruled lines in his own handwriting. He stated that he was not particularly encouraged to develop himself as a student writer as part of his regular classroom studies but rather through the encouragement of his family, particularly his mother and others within his family circle. He began writing his stories and sharing them aloud with appreciative adult audiences.

Jonathan was delighted to provide a list of his growing body of "authored-in-the-notebook" titles. Among these were "The Silliest Birthday Cake Ever" (1999), "The Astonishing Violin" (summer 2000), "Riding on a Shooting Star" (fall 2000), and "Where is the Carousel" (winter 2001). Of these works, two of them were winners in the NYC Teachers of English Annual Writing Contest. Jonathan had the pleasurable experience of reading them aloud to audiences of peer writers and getting feedback on them from adult writers, including folklorist Dr. Steve Zeitlin and children's author Cari Best.

Jonathan talked about the influences (his own choice of word) on his writing. Among these were television, Madeline L'Engle, E. B. White, Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume, and J. K. Rowlings. Beyond just answering the question, Jonathan went on of his own accord to explain the quality of the various writers he had listed among his influences and to detail in a very mature, literacy-critic fashion their specific stylistic qualities.

Madeline L'Engle he enjoyed because of the way she was able to use kids as the leading characters for her fantasies and because of the relationships among the children she uses. Jonathan loves to write about characters traveling back and forth through time, so Madeline L'Engle's works are wonderful models for the fantasies he writes.

E. B. White was a favorite author for Jonathan, who had also seen film versions of White's books, because he enjoyed the fact that the animals were

portrayed as persons with feelings of their own and human voices to state them. Indeed, Jonathan even felt E. B. White merited an exhibit at the Children's Museum he visits frequently in Manhattan (CMOM) because he felt that like Sendak, Schultz, and Milne, E. B. White had a range of work that could be easily exhibited.

Jonathan still fondly remembered Beverly Cleary, who had been an early favorite of his as a pre-teen reader, because of the wonderful characters Ramona and Beezus. He hoped to create such vivid characters in his own works. Judy Blume—with her family-centered, funny, and yet very real stories about kids—was another author who stood out in Jonathan's judgment as a good model for him. He found her works to be "very funny and very entertaining."

Jonathan noted that the best training for a writer was to read more and more.

Jonathan noted that the best training for a writer was to read more and more. Later it was learned that his mother had suggested that idea. He also recognized that so-called children's writers like Dr. Seuss could contribute to his writings as a children's author and also as an author for adults. He stated that he particularly enjoyed Dr. Seuss's quality of sheer fun and remembered with love and respect Green Eggs and Ham. He also mentioned as part of his writer's influence, reading books with both his father and mother and storytelling with them together as a family team

Jonathan was well aware of the fact that a writer needs to have a day job. At thirteen, he was focused on the ways in which he could use his love of reading and writing to make a living and contribute to the community. While he had originally wanted to be a movie director because he felt that field would allow him to use his creativity and storytelling, he was focused at the time of the interview on several areas in the community service sector and performing arts. With the encouragement of his parents he had learned to read with expression and to perform as an actor. He said he hoped in some way to use these abilities and to perform perhaps in his own works. But he was aware

of the fact that actors often can't find a day job or earn a living, so he was also interested in becoming a children's librarian. This career aspiration grew out of frequent visits to the public library and participation in library contests, workshops, and events. He said he loved the idea of introducing children and adults to the library's rich storytelling possibilities.

Jonathan also expressed an interest in becoming a critic of children's entertainment, books, and movies. When he was interviewed, I told him that such a job could be called a pop culture critic. He was excited at the fact that as such, he could write his own copy and share it via radio, television, or print. Thanks to his parents, grandmother, and adult friends, Jonathan had been exposed to many opportunities available through NYC cultural facilities where he had already played actor, anchor, and print author. For him, the concept of reading his own copy through various broadcast and print media was a concrete one for which he had had some initial exploratory experience. Jonathan said he was proud to be an author and even requested that his birthday celebration include some mention of him as a children's book author, a new title and aspiration he voiced with pride and reverence. He said he was working on a series of stories focused on a character, Louis. Because of this, he was interested in J. K. Rowling's character, Harry Potter, and the recurring characters in the works of L'Engle. Furthermore, he said he was also at work on a story called "The Short and Narrow Bear Walk Tree."

So Jonathan conceptualizes writing as a seamless part of his family and social life. Again he is truly lucky that this feeling of valuing writing as an art form and part of the family fabric is nurtured in his family circle by a mother who is expert in word usage and has a love of vocabulary, a father who is a writer/illustrator, and a brother who composes his own poems, stories, and song lyrics. Furthermore, Jonathan's grandmother is, among other things, a reading specialist.

Still young, Jonathan Solomon and other student writers do not yet have the canon or established literary expertise of Beverly Cleary, Madeline L'Engle, and others. But allowing students to use

author study techniques, strategies, and projects to focus on peer authors makes the very process of authoring a live, immediate, and attractive one. Providing time and voice to the Jonathans within every language arts teacher's classroom will not only offer incentive to these young writers to join the ranks of the established writers already used in author study, but also prompt students to study these established authors that peer authors list as influences. Contextualizing author study to include young writers can only serve to broaden the developing multigenerational circle of readers and writers. Let the celebration of peer author study begin.

About the Author

Dr. Rose Reissman is presently President of the New York City Association of Teachers of English, consultant to the New York City Board of Education-Office of Technology, teacher-trainer at community school district 10 and 20, and educational consultant to the Museum of the city of New York.