Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 14
Issue 2 *Moving Toward Best Practice*

Article 5

1998

The Best We Can

Toby Kahn Curry

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

Recommended Citation

Kahn Curry, Toby (1998) "The Best We Can," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1410>

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.

The Best We Can

Toby Kahn Curry

He brings me his stories and he asks me for a grade. I always give him a good mark because I don't want to discourage him. He told me once, "If I could not write, I would go crazy." Well! He likes to overstate things, but there's something in it. Children long for this—voice, a way of being heard—but many sense that there is no one in the world to hear their words, so they are drawn to ways of malice. If they cannot sing, they scream. They are vessels of the spirit but the spirit sometimes is entombed; it can't get out, and so they smash it.

—Jean Bautista Castro, poet of Mott Haven in *Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Kozol

"It sure is hard to leave this room." Shantel spoke these words repeatedly over our last weeks of school in the spring. And she was right. I was seated at a work table helping Dejarnay cement a graph to her project board. Marquita grabbed the camera that I kept on my desk this time of year, loaded and ready to capture little moments like this. It is hard to end our school year together. Every spring the reality hits and we all begin to come to terms with the fact that the community we created from late August to mid-June will no longer exist for all of us. The kids will move down the hall to a seventh-grade teacher and I'll receive a new group of children: new faces, new names, new struggles, and new challenges. Some things will seem familiar. I've come to know the age group, blossoming preteens entering their first official year in middle school, some in crisp, clean uniforms, others in mismatched sweats. Most of them enter with eager, smiling faces that reveal their excitement and joy to be back in a school that's safe as well as stimulating, and they're curious to see what sixth grade is really like.

Learning and Teaching

For the past twenty-five years I have been teaching in urban Detroit. For eighteen of those years I have taught in an infamous part of the city known as the Cass Corridor, a struggling, diverse, and economically depressed neighborhood. In the early 1980s I was introduced to the whole-language philosophy of teaching and learning by my friend and peer-mentor Debra Goodman. From that time

forward, I have been reading, writing, and thinking about how we learn and teach. As a becoming-whole-language teacher, I have struggled for years to immerse my students in valuable text and engage them in exploring the world around us. Besides striving for a deep understanding of the processes of reading and writing, inherent in the philosophy of whole language is the belief that students and teachers are researchers who study the real world that surrounds them. In whole-language classrooms we do what authors, scientists, writers, and problem solvers do in the real world: we read a rich variety of authors and genres, we write for real purposes and audiences, we select research questions to explore in which we have a genuine interest, and we share our research findings with others in hopes of making our world a little bit better than the way we found it. Anyone who has ever assisted thirty inquiring little minds to explore in thirty different directions, simultaneously, knows that it takes an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and financial support to create this kind of learning environment.

Becoming Part of a Network

The invitation I received several years ago to become part of the Write For Your Life grant has had a major impact on my inner-city classroom. Write For Your Life, funded by the Bingham Trust, has provided me and my students with numerous assets that an isolated whole-language teacher would struggle tremendously to provide. First, this

grant has supported my students with necessary resources to research a topic in depth, connecting them to professional resources whenever possible. When my students and I wanted to look at the issue of equity in Michigan's and America's public schools, our research was enlarged and legitimized by the support of our grant host, Michigan State University. With the help of Janet Swenson from MSU's Writing Center, our WFYL grant site, we were able to develop a survey for teachers and students and send it throughout the state and to our sister WFYL sites throughout the country. My students learned how to collect and organize data, the protocol courtesies of gathering data from a variety of sources, how to share their findings with others, and finally how data can seem skewed if the researcher isn't able to collect a large enough or broad enough sampling.

My students have also benefited indirectly from our participation because their teacher has had a support system for her own inquiry. Write For Your Life has given me a larger community of teachers to reflect and engage with, as well as a variety of resources that provide me with the latest research and thinking on teaching and learning. Every teacher knows how hard it is to find time to nurture her own professional development. Once she begins to see herself as a teacher researcher, it is often difficult to find other teacher researchers with whom she can collaborate. Write For Your Life supports teachers in viewing themselves as cultural anthropologists in their own classrooms by valuing what they know, and giving them the professional consideration and support to help them step back and look at the artifacts of their teaching from a distance, helping them reflect and rethink the rituals and rhythms of their classroom life. In comparison to how many school districts all over the country view professional development as "teacher training" the collegial, respectful teacher-research community designed into WFYL is an extraordinary asset for participating teachers.

Writing For a Wider Audience

Possibly the most critical impact that WFYL has had for my classroom is the opportunity for my students to engage with a larger community of learners for their discourse, a broader audience for their published research findings, and a reliable, consistent resource for publishing their memoirs and essays. As Juan Bautista Castro said in *Amazing Grace*, "children long for this voice—a way of being heard." Many writing teachers may come to view the publishing of our students' work as mundane or common place and perhaps in a middle-class world it is. But in the community where I teach, like that of the South Bronx, children must be given a

voice to write because as Castro knows, many of our children "sense that there is no one in the world to hear their words, so they are drawn to ways of malice." Whether we believe that silencing children brings malice of action or malice of the heart, we must not minimize the importance of giving children, especially marginalized children, a voice to be heard by a larger audience. Human beings write for a variety of reasons, especially youngsters trying to make sense of the world around them. In whole-language classrooms we write to respond to authors and books, to organize and analyze our research, to work through relationships with others, to recall and reflect on our life experiences and sometimes to create new worlds of imagination and fantasy. Write For Your Life has supported and enlarged our writing experiences by helping us obtain a variety of texts, extending our discussions of literature and life into a larger academic community, and by publishing our life stories and helping us to connect to other children's' lives in their communities.

Responding to Literature

Our work throughout our Write For Your Life sites has taught us that when our students feel empowered as learners, they begin to think about the choices that lie ahead of them. Our children have taught us that students who are valued and given the opportunity to closely examine and explore the critical issues of their lived lives are able to make healthier choices for their own futures and the futures of their individual communities. Students often begin to examine and reflect on their lives through their reading and response to literature.

When responding to the book *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen, Brandy, one of my sixth graders, kept a running narrative of her response to the text (as did most of her classmates) and often shared her observations orally (an informal way of publishing) with the class during journal share.

January 25. I was right. This is a slave story and Sarny must be one of them. That's why her mother was a breeder. Is Nightjohn one of the most special people in this story? Why can't the slaves have privacy, just like every other human? I wish I could save them. I think they like tobacco as a treat. Do they get in trouble for reading and writing? This is a great book.

January 26. Why do they have to watch people get whipped? I wouldn't try to escape because it seems like once you are caught you are dead. Why weren't these things illegal a long time ago? I wonder, was anyone in my family a slave?

Brandy's response as a reader is valued when her voice is heard. Her thoughts, shared with others, opened doors for our class into discussions of historical events and institutions like slavery, as well as reflections on American Culture and racism.

In a reader response to Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Arthur, another sixth grader, recorded his strong response of disbelief and confusion to a sometimes frightening futuristic tale.

November 28. Jonas was consumed by questions. What would it be like in this world without color? Well, in Jonas' world they don't have any color! When they go get food, the people that live there don't go out of the boundary lines of the community. I am starting to dislike this story. They lack many things in their life. Things that we have. I wouldn't want to live in their world.

January 2. Jonas did something that I think, if I were him, I would be embarrassed. He asked his parents, do they love him? Is this the future? I hope this isn't. Because if it is, we won't be able to do anything. We'll live in a kind of dome. I like the story. It's kind of good and information filled. But their life is also bad and so empty. I am so confused. One feeling with this and one feeling with that. My mind is going crazy! This story is so good yet so bad.

Arthur's confusion and ambivalence gave other children permission to voice their own questions and conflicts that the story provoked. Class discussions took place where we analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of our inner-city life and compared and contrasted our urban world to Jonas' controlled, yet safe, fantasy world. Arthur's questioning voice gave strength to others by demonstrating to the less able readers how everyone struggles to make sense of text, even proficient readers like Arthur.

When children's writing such as this is valued, their words published, their research recognized, and their voices heard, they feel safer in the world, more in control of their lives, and more valued as human beings. For me, the creation and support of a healthy, humane, and literate learning community for my students is the single most important challenge of my job.

Building a Safe Classroom Community

Creating this literate, safe haven is probably the most critical goal that I have for myself as a teacher. I begin building this safety net on the first day of school, and I continue its growth until we part in June, sometimes keeping in touch with my stu-

dents during the summer months depending on what my schedule will allow. Building and maintaining this healthy classroom family underpins my whole teaching life and supports the academic work of our classroom. We celebrate holidays and birthdays together. Everyone has a classroom job and everyone is expected to participate. We color eggs and make Easter basket centerpieces for our families. We write Mother's Day cards for special women in our lives. At Thanksgiving and Christmas we collect food for needy families and deliver it to the rescue mission behind our school. In every way that I can imagine, I blanket my students in love and acceptance. This loving, caring classroom community recognizes that my children are what Juan Bautista Castro calls "vessels of the spirit." Above everything academic, I have learned that I must strive to nurture the humanity of my children. For without our humanity, what are we?

There are probably many teachers and academicians who reject this facet of schooling. So be it. Perhaps they have never had one of their students shot the night before their class was scheduled to take the district-mandated standardized test. Or perhaps they've never needed clean, dry clothes for the eleven-year-old student who arrived late for school in wet clothing because he didn't want to wait any longer for the clothes dryer to finish. Perhaps that teacher would make an issue about the tardiness or a public pronouncement about why an eleven-year-old is doing the laundry at 7 a.m. I prefer going to my classroom closet and pulling out a clean, dry sweatshirt that my student can wear for the morning, bringing that child quickly and securely back to our morning routines of journal writing and independent work. Later, in private, I will contact the school counselor and ask her to flag that child's family as a possible high need situation. Maybe other teachers' students don't lose relatives to AIDS and street violence or perhaps their children are never seduced by gangs and drug use.

I have learned with years of experience and through the wisdom of one of my dearest mentors, Professor Yetta Goodman, that whole language will not solve the economic and social problems of urban America. Neither will literate, supportive grant projects like Write For Your Life. But a healthy, literate whole-language classroom, supported by the collegial community of Write For Your Life helps me give each of my students the very best year that I can. A year where they are challenged intellectually, supported socially, nurtured emotionally, and eventually come to realize that in the end they are the ones who will make the important choices that will determine the quality of their lives.

Works Cited

- Kozol, Jonathan. *Amazing Grace*. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Paulsen, Gary. *Nightjohn*. New York: Dell, 1993.

About the Author

Toby Kahn Curry, a middle school teacher at the Dewey Center in Detroit and a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, is an advocate for equity in education. She is a frequent conference presenter both nationally and locally.