1996

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Maggie G. Miles

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Recommended Citation

Miles, Maggie G. (1996) "'Crayons Are Made Of Liquid Sunshine:" Fun with the Writing Process," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1488>

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“Crayons Are Made Of Liquid Sunshine:” Fun with the Writing Process

Maggie G. Miles

Twenty-five third graders clutch crayons in their fists. They close their eyes, put their hands on either side of their heads, and pretend to pull something out of their heads. As they move their hands away from their heads, they make high-pitched noises. Some children dissolve into giggles; others glance nervously at their teacher at the back of the class. I am showing them how to stretch their imaginations. The writing lesson has begun, and their teacher isn't quite sure where I am going with this. What does this antic have to do with the writing process?

It has everything to do with having fun—something that can motivate both teachers and their students like little else, and something that is inexplicably disappearing from today's classrooms.

As a curriculum consultant, I work in eleven rural school districts in southwest Michigan. One of the favorite parts of my job is venturing into classrooms and giving on-site demonstration lessons. Teachers observe the lessons, learn a few new strategies, and in turn, see their own students in a new light.

On this particular day I am involving students in the writing process. I am showing children how we can use crayons from Crayola's box of 96 colors to help us write poems. I hold up such crayons as “Electric Lime,” “Wild Watermelon,” and “Tickle Me Pink.” We talk about how colors

can remind us of people, places, and feelings. I suggest we write a group poem on the board using “Sea Green” as our color.

First, we put the word in a circle and cluster, thinking of all the things we associate with the color. The title of the poem is the name of the crayon. Each of our three sentences will begin with the color. One girl volunteers, “Sea Green is a mermaid sitting on a rock.” I have her repeat her sentence. I write it on the board and then I say, “I think I am going to faint. That is such good writing.” I pretend to collapse into a chair. The class bursts out laughing. Hands shoot up. Everyone is anxious to share. I glance at the classroom teacher, wondering if she is now questioning my dramatics.

Using their crayons, the children draw a small circle or square on their papers and shade it in to help them get to know their color. They then write three lines about their color—but with a pencil in order to help preserve the life of my crayons.

A freckle-faced boy in the back reads his first line about “Wild Watermelon.” He holds up his crayon and reads, “*Wild Watermelon is a cat's tongue in the summer.*” I clutch my heart and pretend to gasp for air. “That is terrific. Let's clap!”

I travel up and down the aisle and each child is madly scribbling. “*Plum is the inside of a bulldog's lip*” is scrawled on one boy's paper.

I ask him how that idea popped into his head. He replies, "Haven't you ever pulled down your dog's lip?"

Wow. No more pretending now. I truly am knocked over and a bit speechless by the class's ability to work with metaphors and to create such vivid images.

"*Salmon is a pair of frozen feet,*" shouts Josh. His teacher tells me later that he never shares his writing.

We are playing with words and the children are delighting in the wonder of words. All of a sudden, a girl in the front row blurts out, "*Wild Strawberry is the grandmother of Brick Red.*" I ask her how she came up with that thought and she replies, "Well, both colors are in the same color family and strawberries are wrinkled, just like my Grandma!"

I immediately switch gears and decide that we should write poems about the colors and their relationships to each other—the only rule is to stay within the same color family. I put on the board, "*Magenta is the big brother of Tickle Me Pink*" and the kids volunteer:

"Pine Green is the Daddy of Forest Green."

"Aquamarine is the Aunt of Sky Blue."

"Razzle Dazzle Rose is the big sister of Cerise."

After the children write three or four lines about their colors, I tell them that at the count of three, they must run to someone in the room and exchange crayons. Kids fly around, crash into each other but quickly return to their desks. Without pause, they again draw small circles with their new crayons, shade them in, and write a poem about the new color.

One boy writes:

Plum is a spider vein in your arm.

Plum is the shine in a person's eyes when he is angry.

Plum is powerful and bold.

A girl writes:

Maize is rude.

Maize is your cousin when she's stuck up.

Maize is curry powder stuck in a jar.

Regardless of the class, grade level, or school, this lesson is always an automatic success. Why? Simply, everyone is having fun. We are clustering, prewriting, and drafting our ideas. We are working on vocabulary development, metaphors, and images. Every single child creates a poem and wants to share. Not once do I mention the writing process or the stages of writing. We look at some of the colors in the crayon box, and we slowly say their names aloud: "Goldenrod," "Purple Mountain's Majesty," "Timberwolf." We let the words slide off our tongues. Some children begin to make up little songs to go with the words. One girl shouts, "*The color Razzmatazz makes you want to dance!*"

In my job, I am in and out of a lot of teachers' lounges. One of the comments I hear over and over again from both experienced and beginning teachers is, "I am not having any fun." Somewhere, the joy of teaching has disappeared or, I hope, is only temporarily misplaced. In many cases, the teaching of writing has become a chore, a drudgery, consisting of a series of "process steps" one must go through.

As I travel from school to school, I hear similar stories—too much material to cover and not enough time, and certainly no time for "fun."

The importance of allowing "time for fun" was brought home to me a few years ago when my family and I were facing a major decision. My husband's job took us to northern Italy for what was initially supposed to be a one-year assignment. At the end of our first six months, my husband was given the choice to remain in Italy for two more years. The family and I agonized over our decision. We made elaborate lists, carefully weighing the pros and cons and the implications an extended assignment would have on us, our children, and our careers. Finally, I called my parents in Washington, D.C. My father listened as we outlined our dilemma. Then, very matter of - factly, he said, "Where do you think you will have the most fun—Italy or back in the States?"

I remember being shocked when I heard this. "The most fun?" That word wasn't even on our lists, nor had we talked about it. And yet, what my father was really talking about was the quality of

our day-to-day lives. He was absolutely right. "Fun" should have been high on our lists. We had become so serious, so immersed in our decision, that we had overlooked something so obvious. Within a few days, we did make the decision to extend our stay in Italy, and, yes, we had loads of fun.

What has all this to do with teaching? Many classroom teachers also have their lists and agonize what to include and not include in their daily lesson plans. They, too, are constantly weighing what is good for kids and how they'll cover all their material. And if something has to go, well, "having fun" can certainly be tossed. And yet, once my family and I stopped to think about what an important value "fun" is, we began to make time for it.

William Glasser, author of *Control Therapy*, identifies fun as one of the four psychological needs of all people. He describes fun as a basic genetic instruction for all higher animals because it is the way we learn.

I fear many classroom teachers have trouble justifying the time for fun. In the race to get to the

finish line, to cover units, they have become too serious. They don't laugh enough with their students. Perhaps they need permission to know that it is OK to pretend to fall to the floor, and to act goofy now and then. It is OK to play with words, to write silly poems, to burst into laughter.

Back to that third grade classroom: While the children were writing their color poems, a boy named Alex called me over to show me what he had written. "*Crayons are made of liquid sunshine.*"

I asked him how he came up with this thought. Alex looked up and said, "I once had a box of crayons, and I left it in the driveway. All the crayons melted, and all I had left was liquid sunshine."

Here is a list of unusual colors from the 96 crayon box and they are even residing in their proper families. Have fun!

Works Cited

Glasser, William. *Control Therapy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

COLORS HIDING IN THE 96 CRAYOLA CRAYON BOX

RED FAMILY

Magenta	Hot Magenta	Indian Red
Tickle Me Pink	Salmon	Carnation Pink
Wild Strawberry	Razzle Dazzle Rose	Brick Red
Mulberry	Maroon	Cerise
Shocking Pink	Razzmatazz	Red Violet
Violet Red	Wild Watermelon	Fushia
	Radical Red	

PURPLE FAMILY

Lavender	Orchid	Wisteria
Purple Pizzazz	Royal Purple	Thistle
Plum	Violet	Blue Violet
Purple Mountain Majesty	Mauvelous	

BLUE FAMILY

Teal Blue
Turquoise Blue
Pacific Blue
Aquamarine

Blue Green
Robin's Egg Blue
Blizzard Blue
Midnight Blue
Sky Blue

Periwinkle
Cornflower
Denim
Navy Blue

GREY FAMILY

Timberwolf

Silver

BROWN FAMILY

Mahogany
Tan

Tumbleweed
Burnt Sienna

Bittersweet
Sepia

ORANGE FAMILY

Burnt Orange
Outrageous Orange
Macaroni & Cheese

Melon
Neon Carrot
Atomic Tangerine

Red Orange
Apricot
Sunglow

YELLOW FAMILY

Dandelion

Lazer Lemon
Unmellow Yellow

Goldenrod

GREEN FAMILY

Shamrock
Magic Mint
Sea Green
Screamin' Green

Electric Lime
Green Yellow
Tropical Rain Forest
Forest Green
Granny Smith Apple

Yellow Green
Jungle Green
Spring Green
Pine Green
Olive Green