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Metamorphosis of a First Grade Teacher

by Pamela Gray-Scherer

It is just another, cold wintry day in first grade. The teacher is preparing her first graders for their weekly writing lesson. For this, the children select an interesting picture from her magazine file of story starters. Sometimes she reads a library book and asks them to write something in response to the story.

The results will be less than satisfying for both the teacher and the students; they always are. A few of the children complain that they cannot think of anything to write about their picture, so they just sit and stare at the blank paper. A few have wonderful ideas but they struggle to be precise in their handwriting so they never accomplish very much. The only positive part is the invented spelling that some children are successful in doing. However, even they are handicapped because they remember the previous hour's spelling lesson. These first graders know there is a right and wrong way to spell a word when they have been drilled in correctness. The weekly writing lesson concludes with only a few of the children volunteering to read their stories to the class.

Of course, a few of the children have totally blank papers or nearly blank papers. They are the ones who failed to be inspired by an "interesting" magazine picture or captivated by one of the suggestions from the chart

entitled "One Hundred and One Ideas for Story Starters." There are many children who are so handicapped by the desire for conventional spelling or the need for precise printing that their wonderful ideas never make it to the paper.

In the end, the weekly writing lesson is frustrating and unsatisfying for both the teacher and her students. Why can't they all write like the few who did manage to get some ideas on their papers? After all, the teacher is enthusiastic and certainly believes in invented spelling. It is obvious that many of the children want to write but there is too much outside interference. The teacher vows that something is going to change or she might as well just look for another job.

And change it does.

Even before she returns to the university for classes on reading and writing instruction, she begins doing things a little bit differently. One of the first things to be modified is the basal reader system. Oh, she has the children continue reading the stories in the book, but the focus is on comprehension rather than skill development. Skill lessons that often were dull and out of context are abandoned along with the dittos and workbooks. She begins experimenting with the "low" reading group by allowing them to dictate

group experience chart stories. She is often amazed at how this "low" group can indeed read and write their own stories. Their enthusiasm and attention level is ten times better than it has ever been with the regular basal reading lesson.

By the end of the year, she has allowed the children to write a little bit more often and has allowed them to choose their own topics. Unfortunately, a lot of damage has been done by always providing story starters or pictures, but writing still proves to be a more satisfying experience than the previous method. The year comes to its usual end but her successful changes have given her a glimmer of hope that next year will be better.

The weather is hot and humid in the beginning of her sixteenth year in the classroom, but that is the only similarity to the previous years. Since she no longer has formalized reading groups there is no need for that dreaded boardwork. Oh, what a relief! She hates having to write it almost as much as the kids hate doing it. The district helps by actually insisting that everyone be in the same basal but without workbooks or dittos, and the district even encourages teachers to use cooperative learning and a read aloud program as well as supplemental "trade" books for reading instruction. Children are now expected to read real library books, not just the basal.

The teacher isn't sure other teachers will understand the increased noise level in her classroom or the extra movement that is required for a writing workshop, so she keeps the door closed. From day one in August, she tells her new first graders that they are already readers and writers. This is easy enough to prove by holding up cereal boxes, Burger King ads, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle pictures. Every child can

read some or all of this environmental print. After the first writing experience, she introduces the "author's chair." Sure enough, there is one child who is brave enough to do invented spelling on this first day. He also is eager to sit in the "chair" to read his writing. His story won't win a Pulitzer Prize, but when he shows his paper to the class, the teacher is able to show how wonderfully Brent can spell with invented spelling. She seems to be contributing much to the confidence of this six-year-old author and to the risk taking of many others. In her classroom, only one rule remains constant: try your best.

The teacher introduces invented spelling in the whole group lessons. While a few children are reluctant to try, it isn't long before everyone is trying to just "do their best." She also abandons the formalized handwriting lessons. She continues to write experience chart stories on the chart paper using her usual precise letter formation to model adult handwriting. She suspects, however, that the children's willingness to write is greatly enhanced by the absence of formalized spelling and handwriting lessons.

Now the picture file is somewhere in the back of the closet collecting dust along with the chart, "One Hundred and One Ideas for Writing." She reads to the children more than ever before but seldom asks them to write in response to the literature unless they choose to do so. It has become quite apparent to her that these six-year-olds are overflowing with their own ideas. They certainly don't need any suggestions from her or anyone else. Oh, occasionally even a six-year-old has writer's block, but it takes only a few well-asked questions about her family, friends, pets, hobbies, vacations or even her hopes and fears before the child is

writing again.

Another contributing factor to this positive experience is the realization that the children are not only author's but also teachers. They don't have just one teacher in this first grade but twenty-three this year. They are expected to help each other by listening to a friend read his/her story, making positive comments about the writing, and asking questions about parts that are confusing. This isn't "cheating" but important learning. The teacher never hears a child make a negative comment to another child about his/her writing; in fact the children are their own best editors.

There are no more blank papers in this first grade. The children have written hundreds of stories and a few have even tried poetry. There are still occasional behavior problems during writing, but who can expect six-year-olds to be perfect? Their problems

certainly are minimal compared to those experienced in past reading and writing lessons.

Almost daily now, the children come in the school door with smudged pieces of paper from home on which they have written more stories. Even before they take off their hats and coats, they are asking if they can sit in the author's chair. If they have come so far in the first few months of school, the teacher can hardly wait for the spring. Thank heavens things have changed. I guess she won't have to leave teaching after all!

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DeWitt, Michigan.

Children's Book Awards Announced

The winners of the 1990-91 International Reading Association Children's Book Awards and Paul A. Witty Short Story Award were announced May 10 at the Association's Annual Convention in Las Vegas. The US \$1,000 book awards are presented each year for an author's first or second published book, and were created to encourage promising new authors of children's literature. The short story award recognizes the author of an outstanding contribution to a periodical for children, and carries a US \$1,000 prize.

In the Younger Reader category, the award was presented to Megan McDonald and S.D. Schindler (illustrator) for **Is This a House for Hermit Crab?** published by Orchard Books, New York. Hermit Crab's dilemma is introduced in the first sentence, as readers learn that "Hermit Crab was forever growing too big for the house on his back." The captivating story of Hermit Crab's search for the right "house" began as a story told to young listeners at the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, Penn., where McDonald worked as a children's librarian.

In the Older Reader category, Marita Conlon-McKenna was honored for her novel **Under the Hawthorn Tree** published in the U.S. by Holiday House, New York. The book is set in famine-stricken Ireland in the 1840s, and chronicles the adventures of twelve-year-old Eily O'Driscoll and her younger brother and sister. The children's courage and resourcefulness during a long and dangerous journey make for a rewarding story of family, faith, and perseverance. Conlon-

McKenna resides in Dublin, and **Under the Hawthorn Tree** was originally published in Ireland by the O'Brien Press, Ltd., Dublin.

The Paul A. Witty Short Story Award was presented to Anthony Holcroft for his short story "Chen-li and the River Spirit," published in the February 1990 issue of **Cricket Magazine**. When Chen-li is visited by the River Spirit, the spirit gives him a glimpse of the past that becomes Chen-li's dream for the future. Chen-li spends his lifetime replanting and tending trees where a forest once stood, and in so doing learns the rewards of self-sacrifice. **Cricket Magazine** also published the Witty Award winning stories for 1988, 1989, and 1990.

The International Reading Association is a 94,000-member, nonprofit professional organization dedicated to improving reading instruction and promoting literacy worldwide. The Association each year presents 17 awards and US \$10,000 in prize money to recognize outstanding achievement in research, teaching, journalism, community service, and writing.