“WHOSE WRITING IS IT ANYWAY?”

Kids Love To Write...Don't Wait Until They Read

Think of your children at two and three years old and you’ll remember how little circles and squiggles on paper became a whole story. Remember how they wrote, marked, and colored everywhere: walls, doors, floors, furniture, nothing in the house was sacred or saved from that little “writer.” But for some reason when that same child went to school the writing stopped. Why? For the same reasons that many adults have a hard time putting their thoughts down on paper—the emphasis changed from thoughts, ideas, and self-expression to an emphasis on correctness too early in the process.

We have found, in our writing program at McNeil Canyon Elementary School in Homer, Alaska, that we can reverse or even eliminate that negative experience by providing a natural environment for the child’s writing. When children are respected as writers and carefully led through the process, they are freed to write, and they do it gladly with a sense of enthusiasm that resembles that of the toddler writer.

Our kindergarten students write from the first day they start school. Write before they read? Sound impossible? Well, it’s not. In fact, teachers, students, and parents of the children at our school are seeing the amazing results of a school-wide writing program in action. Called “Writing in a Natural Environment,” the program recognizes that children can already write when they come to school. With that assumption comes a sense of trust and self-confidence that nurtures children’s self image and view of themselves as writers.

Jolee Ellis, kindergarten teacher at McNeil Canyon, has pencils, crayons, and markers ready on the first day of school for her students. When told it’s time to write, they do so eagerly and proudly. Seldom if ever does she hear the words, “but I don’t know how to write.” In fact, quite the contrary. These little tykes know they can write and can’t wait to “read” their writing to others. The occasional child who has a hard time getting started is most often the child who has already started to read, has already gotten into the correctness trap and is worried about spelling. This child is already concerned with neatness, correctness, and product. But that child too will begin to write more freely as a sense of trust and self-confidence begins to develop and the emphasis changes from product to process.

That a sense of trust is an essential element has been brought home to staff members on a variety of occasions. If for some reason children begin to think that the teacher is looking for correctness in a particular lesson, they quickly become self-conscious and begin to worry about their spelling, neatness, and correctness rather than what they want to say. “I tried my best,” said Sarah when she noticed her teacher writing down what her writing was “supposed” to say. “Let me see how yours looks,” said Gregg when he noticed the teacher was copying his writing in a different way.

With the help of a small grant from Breadloaf School of English, teacher/researcher Karen Friedman observed and interviewed these kindergarten

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"Children can already write when they come to school."

Tommy Gee
writers. Interviewing proved to be an effective tool for collecting data as the children moved through the writing process. Some interesting facts emerged from these interviews. Children

1. prefer to write their own stories
2. can read their own invented spelling more readily than the teacher’s writing
3. develop a very strong sense of ownership or authorship even at an early age
4. respond positively to a sense of trust and respect for their writing
5. write freely, without self-consciousness, when process rather than product is emphasized.

Like other educators, our staff had assumed that the way for kindergarten students to write was through dictation to the teacher, another adult, or an older student. Not so said our young authors. When asked, “Do you prefer to write yourself or dictate your stories to someone else?” five year old Damon answered, “Whose writing is it anyway?” Damon’s classmates gave the same response. They preferred to write their own stories down. “It’s easier,” was another common response.

It certainly didn’t look easier. We observed these children seeming to labor over every letter and sound. But they were determined and wanted teachers and others to stay out of their writing. When asked, “How is it easier?” they replied, “It is easier for us to read it back when we write it ourselves.” So that seemed to be the key. Their own invented spelling meant something to them. Sometimes they forgot it by the time they were asked to read it again, but that was all right as long as they had written it themselves. These same children used vocabulary that was obviously well above their reading or spelling level. Why? Because they were words in their spoken vocabulary, and they were free to write them down as best they could. When worried about correctness we found the writing became boring, stilted, and “safe.” Vocabulary, word usage, and sentence structure seem to come naturally as the children gain an understanding of the sound/symbol relationship and realize that they can write down what they think and say aloud. Those thoughts and ideas have meaning, are valuable to others, and provide learning for the writers and their classmates.

Watching the transition from scribble to random letters to invented spelling to correct spelling is as exciting for the teacher as for the child. Collecting samples of writing and documenting that process makes the changes even more dramatic and obvious. Such documentation is also helpful for parents who might be hesitant about this approach. It will give

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Heather McHaffie

I wrr for in mi car

td go to teh bar

I ltd a makew.

Shelley Dietrich

them clear evidence of how the process works and how their child is emerging as a writer and learner. That writing is a tool for learning becomes more and more apparent as children use writing to test their ideas, formulate questions, and put down their understanding of concepts.

It is important to recognize that fluency is the goal for writers at this young age. This is a time for them to formulate and try out their ideas. Their "writing" will vary from scribble to actual words and there will be a great deal of individual difference within the classroom—but it is writing and must be recognized and encouraged as such.

Although these young writers are usually not ready for revising their own writing, they can begin to learn skills that will lead to that part of the process. Responding to the writing of others is well within their grasp and provides a valuable experience for them. In our writing program, these young writers are led to respond positively by the teacher modeling and asking questions about their writing. The teacher also leads the children to ask questions of their classmates' writing, of books they read in class, and even of their own writing. Questions such as "What did you like about this story? What else would you like to know? How would you change something that happened in the story?" are thought-provoking and lead children to make positive contributions to the writing of others. Raising questions about published writing also sets the stage for children to accept such questions about their own writing. For example a child who wrote a story about a little brother might be asked, "What is his name? What does he like to do? What do you like to play with him?" The teacher might then point out that the child could add that information to the story if he wished or include it next time he writes about his brother.
I love to play in the rainbow
on the porch and feed all day long.

MommyClose me in I bring my
book. In a little it is time to go to sleep.
I have a rose bed.

Katie Shows

Once upon a time, there was
a hours call home gay to.
She was a boyfull hours.
She needed to a princess.

Shelley Dietrich

Kindergarten students at McNeil Canyon write
in journals on a regular basis, read their writing to
their classmates, write about concepts learned in
social studies, math, and other content areas just as
their counterparts do in the upper grades: Their
writing is published on a regular basis on bulletin
boards, in school newsletters, the local newspaper,
and in a variety of other ways. Their writing has
meaning for them and for everyone else around
them. What better way to start one's young life than
with a sense of self-confidence as a learner and
writer? Why wait to read when you can write
already and everyone else knows it!

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mentary School, Homer, Alaska, is a Fellow of the
Alaska State Writing Consortium.