Book Review

WRITING: TEACHERS AND CHILDREN AT WORK
by Donald Graves
Heinemann Educational Books, 1983

In the introductory acknowledgements of Writing: Teachers and Children at Work, Donald Graves tells of writing parts of the book in Scotland, surrounded by piles of data, video equipment, typewriter, and tapes. A Scottish neighbor, surveying the cluttered scene, said in his Scot's burr, "Ahm, Dan, wouldn't ya rather be writin' a love story?"

Writing IS a love story. It glows with Graves' love of children, of writing, and of teaching. For those of us fortunate to have attended a Graves workshop, Writing is an extension of that experience. His calm, wise voice sounds on every page. Readers still unacquainted with Donald Graves will delight in encountering his warm, caring, supportive personality and his gentle humor.

In a workshop session on teaching researchers, Graves advised, "Say what you saw." Following this principle, Writing's narratives present information gathered from video tapes, notes of classroom observations, tape recordings, student writings, and teacher records. Graves' "how-to" comments grow out of his demonstrations of successful techniques. Reading Writing is like visiting a classroom to observe a good teacher in action, accompanied by a knowledgeable mentor to point out all the subtleties which might otherwise be missed.

Usually when I read articles on teaching, I finish in frustration. Yes, the results sound good, but how did the authors achieve them? What actually happens in the classroom? The most valid theories are no good to me if I can't make them work. With Graves' narrative presentations, I can follow teachers step by step as they solve problems familiar to all teachers. In these excerpts I have retained as much as I could of Graves' own voice.

What Do I Do on Day One of a Writing Program?

Pat, who hated teaching writing, strode to the front of the room and said to her students. "I'm going to write and I need help." With an easel and large sheets of newsprint, she began to brainstorm topics for writing. An hour later she reported, elated. "They suggested words, asked questions, all the things that really helped."

How Do I Manage Writing Conferences with Thirty Students in the Class?

Betty Altman didn't appear to be in a hurry. But after five minutes she had already had conferences with six children. Head lowered, she moved quietly from child to child, spending about forty seconds per child, responding to their writing. In these responding conferences, Graves says, "receive the student work in such a way that the child is teaching you about what he knows."

After rounds, Betty met with four students scheduled for more extensive conferences. As she worked with them, she sat with her back to the wall looking down through the long room to see how the other twenty-six students were working during writing time. In these conferences, the children hold the papers, keeping control of their work. Betty is prepared to wait for the child's response to her questions. Fifteen seconds is a luxury for the child, Graves says. The child knows silence means it is his time to formulate a response.

How Can I Utilize Student Folders?

In addition to holding all the student's writing, folders are used to record completed student work, achievement in skills, and topics for future writing. If Jason finishes while everyone else is still working, he checks his folder list, "Some new ideas to write about," and begins work on his next composition. His teacher reviews the work in the folders to prepare for student observations and for parent and student conferences. One teacher said, "The folders speak for themselves. Take a look in any folder and you will know how the children are changing."

What About Spelling?

Students do not stop writing because they can't spell a word. They use invented spellings, writing a word by sounds. Or they leave a blank to be filled in later. Before the teacher conference, students circle all words they think may be misspelled. Students learn the value of correct spelling when their readers, their classmates say, "We can't read your words."

A Parent Says, "My Child Is Not Learning Skills."

Mrs. Judson objected because the teacher had not marked all the errors in a paper. "In our family, we don't say, 'me and my sister.'"

"That made me a little itchy, too," responded the teacher. Then she explained that she emphasized one skill per paper. Using the

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folder, she showed Mrs. Judson Cheryl's over-all improvement in skills during the year.

Although most of the students in Writing are elementary or intermediate age, the problems with which they struggle still plague the high school student and the adult writer. In the chapter, "See the Writing Process Develop," Graves parallels the same process ingredients in three writers: Mary, first grade; John, fourth grade; and his own writing as an adult. In narrative vignettes he follows the work from the choice of topic and rehearsal through the first composing and text revisions. The writers are on different levels, but the process is the same.

Voice is a major concern of Graves's. Two drafts by Kristina, a professional writer, are printed side by side in two columns. Kristina takes away unnecessary information and heightens what is left with more detail. A comparison of her revisions shows her article developing "a new, resolute voice."

Charts, schedules, diagrams, statistics, sample teacher records—all the apparatus of research—occur where they can be helpful in presenting the generalizations drawn from the teachers' experiences. The focus in this very readable research product is always, "What is going on?" Throughout the book Graves communicates the same reassuring warmth that he shows in his workshops, a belief in the teachers in his audience, and in their capabilities.

"Writing demands discipline, the waiting response. . . . There is no hurry. There is only the need for the persistent, aided demand that the child may become what he wants to become. . . . The marvelous part about waiting for children, and helping them teach us, is what we learn ourselves. . . . The top teachers . . . have an insatiable appetite for learning. When teachers learn, the children learn."

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