

The Truth about Lightning Bugs:

What our Children Know

BY KIM PATTERSON

I am driving back to the campus of Mississippi State University from a staff development session in a rural county school some 30 miles from Starkville, Mississippi. Maneuvering the rough-patched asphalt road, I am haunted by a question one second grade teacher had raised during the final few minutes of the session.

It seems as if this woman had been waiting all day to get my response. For several hours I'd been mingling with a group of K-7 teachers. This was the first of ten staff development sessions I would be leading in this Clay County community. I'd listened to these teachers talk during breaks about their children's poor handwriting, the kids they were upset to find were on their class rolls, and the poor conditions in which their students lived. I'd heard very few positive comments about anyone under the age of fourteen all day long.

During the day I had modeled writing process strategies I use in my 6th grade classroom to generate ideas for student writing about a memory, as well as techniques I use to help students revise and edit writing and respond to the writing of others. As I spoke several in the group nodded their heads in agreement, others stared without commitment and still others—like the teacher who asked the question—furrowed their brows and shook their head skeptically.

At the end of the session I stood posed ready to hear how these teachers would apply in their classrooms some of the ideas and strategies I'd presented. That's when the question came. I hadn't expected it, and I

certainly did not have the answer that this teacher wanted to hear.

"How can I increase my students' experiences so that they'll have something to write about?" she wanted to know. I stumbled around for an answer, something like, "Oh there are some really great field trip opportunities close by and I can help you with resources for grants or other funds that might be available." But now, driving back to MSU, I realize that I'd certainly not answered her the way I wanted to nor the way I should have.

Her question is on my mind as I drive past open fields where cattle graze peacefully. I see old men sitting on the crumbling porches of decaying stores, whiling away the time, drinking beer and spitting. I pass black children playing makeshift games of baseball in dirt front yards and I drive by shanty houses where colorful curtains flap through open windows. And I begin to construct the answer I should have given.

I should have said, "These students *do* have experiences to write about." True, most have never ridden an escalator, picked up shells on the beach or attended a Broadway production, but they know about planting something in the ground and watching it grow. They know about the harvest season, the specialness of grandmothers, the feel of squishy, black mud between their toes right after a quick June rain, and they know about the quietness of sitting on a front porch watching lightning bugs trying to escape the heat of a late August night. They know the sting of fire ants and the brilliance of early morning. They know

the smell of wood smoke and the joy of teasing a crawfish from its hole.

True, in their spoken and written language they rarely use possessive nouns. Their sentences are often fragments or run-ons. They use verbs that don't agree with subjects and they leave off ending sounds of words. But their stories are full of laughter, scenes of family unity and strife, tales of adventure, fear and sorrow. Their experience is of universal human emotions that need to be told whether one lives in rural Mississippi or midtown Manhattan. Our job is to begin where the child is, to help students who know about "ya'll" and "ain't" and speaking and writing in fragments to learn about "you" and "will not" and strong standard English sentences.

I grew up in a rural community 15 miles from the nearest town of 5000 people. My childhood stories were of nights on the back porch eating homemade ice cream, trips to the country store to sell eggs and long, lazy summer days. These are still the stories I have to tell. As my family never visited the Grand Canyon on summer vacations, I did not and do not have the language to describe the Grand Canyon. I can only write about the things I do experience and that I do know.

Once I became part of the MSU Writing/Thinking Project, I was able to use my language to describe my experiences in a safe environment. I realized others wanted to hear my stories. I learned that by engaging in writing as a process and by listening to the response of my colleagues my tentative language could be translated into a firm, more diversified voice that grew out of my experience.

I believe the student in our rural classrooms can embark on the same journey. Why are we so concerned so early about what children don't know? Shouldn't we begin by valuing what our students do know? By allowing students to explore in writing the cotton fields and stray dogs and small bedrooms shared with three brothers that are their lives, they may emerge with an increased sense of self-worth, a sense of the value of their own stories, and a new confidence that wills them to dream.

Some weeks after my workshop, I return to the same Clay County school. I visit two classrooms-side by side, Rooms 29 and 31. Entering Room 29, I am struck by the quietness of these young children. They're all busy writing. "Wonderful," I say to myself. Some pencils scurry across their pages in furious motion, a few children sit wrinkling their little foreheads in thought, and one or two are staring out the window. The teacher tells these students to get busy or they won't finish their stories. Curious about these stories, I wander the rows of desks hoping a few of the students will share their stories with me. When they don't, I peep over a few shoulders at what they're writing. They're all writing about birthday parties. Some pages are blank, others contain only a few lines written about a birthday cake or a bicycle present. I notice no evidence that they've talked about birthdays or celebrations before this moment. No charts, lists, pictures or graphs are on the walls of the room.

As I walk into Room 31, a quiet hum radiates through the room. The students sit

in groups of 4 or 5, but right now they seem to be working individually. A few huddle together discussing something, but they're careful not to disturb the rest of the class. The students in this class are also writing. As was true in Room 29, two students stare out the window. However, this behavior doesn't seem to bother their teacher. Some of the huddled groups of children disband and settle into writing individually. Now it seems quieter than when I first entered, but there's still a hum of activity. I again look over the children's shoulders, observing their writing. One student is making a list of kinds, shapes and colors of leaves he has scattered in front of him on the table. Another student is drawing a forest of fall foliage in colors of green, yellow, orange, brown and brilliant red. Another child is well into what appears to be a fictional account of children playing in a fall-colored forest. How did these children come to be writing such different accounts? Then I notice things around the room. There are charts of leaves, pictures of trees in fall, real leaves scattered on two tables and student-made lists of things about fall-colors, temperatures, signs, animals, memories. The room is wallpapered with these lists, written by the teacher, many of them, but obviously created by the students in the room.

The students in Room 29 are the students of the teacher in the staff development session who worried that her students had no experiences, therefore they couldn't write. The students in Room 31 belong to a teacher in that same staff development session, one who didn't voice the concern of her colleague. Why were the students in one

room actively engaged in writing while students in the other room struggled to put words on paper? Here's how I see it. The teacher in Room 31 knows that student come to school with valuable experiences to share with her and each other. She knows those kids know something about leaves. Her job, then, becomes to figure out a way to use their knowledge and experiences to help these children learn new things about leaves, or the season of fall, or trees, or fictional stories set in the forest. The teacher knows of the importance of helping students make a personal connection to their learning. To do this she must value her students' experiences.

Like the rest of us who live in this special place, our children are blessed with a rich culture and a beautiful environment. I think about this as I drive to school early in the morning, passing the quilt of cotton fields ready for harvest. I pass field after field, broken only by patches of soy beans or stitched by an occasional stream. In the near distance are house trailers and small wooden-frame houses, their paint peeling and screen doors hanging. I pass a small country store, waved on by a small group of men gathered in front.

Few people in the world know what we who live here know, and we and our children should be allowed to tell our stories.

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