

A Creative Writing Inquiry in the Second Grade Classroom

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Question: "Creative Writing: How will sharing stories from a teacher's life affect the creative writing of her students?"

"Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils... anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am.' " (Graves, 1983)

"When children enter into story, they are transported to other worlds, joining in the adventure and the excitement... and (are) somehow changed by the experience. They learn about the lives of others and in doing so develop a better understanding of their own lives." (Barton and Booth, 1990).

Rationale

I love to write. I love to write about my childhood, sledding down darkening streets with my sisters or hiding with my cousins during long games of sardines. I also love to share my life with my students. They seem wholly focused when I tell them stories about making waffle cones at Baskin Robbins or the time I broke my wrist on the way to the swimming pool. This year, I wanted to pair writing and telling stories in a way that would enrich my classroom and the creative writing skills of my students. I also wanted children to write about their own experiences, and to tell their own stories. In effect, I hoped their natural desire to write would couple with their love for sharing stories and inspire them to make their own "marks" in writing. This hope led to my research question: How will sharing stories from a teacher's life affect the creative writing of her students?

Process

To answer this question, I set up a unique kind of Writer's Workshop time. On Wednesday mornings we would sit on the carpet together and I would tell my class a story about me. Generally, I told stories about my childhood. The children then went to their desks and I would use the overhead to share the same story in written format. While reading this written story, we would pause for comments or questions and to share similar experiences. Finally, the children would begin to write themselves. Isolating their desks by pulling back from others and propping

folders, they would busily write. During the months of September through December, we wrote and wrote. As children finished stories, they published those stories by typing them on the computers in the room and celebrated by sharing with others. Little attention was paid to process or editing, because I really wanted the children to write creatively; not to worry about words they couldn't spell or commas they couldn't place. Later, after December, I added two pieces to the Writer's Workshop time: planning and editing. For the planning time, we used a format called CSPACE (Characters Setting Problem Action Action Conclusion Emotion) and for editing we used a five-fingered editing hand (spacing, punctuation, spelling, capitals and does it make sense?).

Findings

I immediately noticed two things. First, that nearly all children were completely engaged as I shared stories on the carpet. They laughed at my childhood mishaps and waved hands extravagantly, desperate to share their own tales. They nearly always asked, "Did that really happen, Miss Mount?" or, "Is that story really true?" Second, I noticed that I had more children mimic my writing than in previous classes I have taught. For example, I might share a story about a long drive in the family station wagon on a trip. I would then find a handful of children writing about long drives, and another handful of children writing about family vacations. What follows are my findings; examples comparing my stories to those students wrote during Writer's Workshop.

Examples of Findings

The Middle Seat (excerpt from my story)

Nobody wants the middle seat for a long car trip, even in a wide station wagon. In my family, my little sister was usually stuck there, while my older sister and I got the windows. This trip was no exception. Genevieve in the middle, Jessica and I designating spaces with imaginary lines and daring her to cross them.

Untitled (excerpt from a student's story)

The next morning we woke up at six o'clock. My cousin Katie slept with me. Me and my brother squished in a seat in the car, but some of the time we did not wear a seat belt. Katie did not wear a seat belt the whole time. Me and my brother told her she had to stay on her side.

Sardines (excerpt from my story)

One hot afternoon all the parents were sitting in the backyard drinking cool iced teas. They talked and talked. Bored, my sisters and cousins and I decided to play sardines. Sardines is like hide-and-go-seek, but everyone hides together like a can of squashed up sardines. I got to pick the hiding place first. Around the front

of our house were tall green bushes. They were prickly, but made for good camouflage.

Untitled (excerpt from a student's story)

Once me and my sister and my friends were playing sardines in my neighborhood. Mariana was the person who had to find me, my sister and my friends Christina and Katie. We were hiding in my front yard behind prickly bushes.

Sledding (excerpt from my story)

Dusk in Stuttgart meant that the bells of churches were ringing and the sky was deep dark blue like cathedral windows. We were out behind my house at the top of the hill that sloped down into the city and it was snowing. Snow had fallen all day on the black asphalt streets and now that my father was home we could all sled together.

The Hill (excerpt from a student's story)

A year ago my babysitter took us to a hill. We went sledding. We went almost at night. The hill sloped down to the grass. If you got to the bottom it would be really hard to get up. My sister and brother would have to help me. I even noticed times when the children would mimic my own phrasing and tone, either in part of, or throughout a story.

me: "after all, Jessica seemed to have regretted not letting us play."

student: "*after all I regretted not letting him play in the first place,*"

me: "it was fun for a while, but then the snow was too deep..."

student: "*it was fun for a while, but then we had to go home.*"

me: "You made me fall,' I said with a wicked grin..."

student: "*You dropped the jam on purpose,' said my mom.*

'Yes,' I said with a wicked grin."

Conclusion

I have been genuinely pleased with the quality of creative writing in my class this year. While the general change or progression of writing does not seem to differ much from that of previous years with second graders, I believe that the enthusiasm for and creativity in writing has been different. I have never had a

child complain that, "there's nothing to write about," and feel we have benefited as a community from the shared experiences our stories tell. I think these things hold true for all writers in my classroom, including the students I have who are working below grade level in language arts areas. I also felt that the excitement I generated from telling a story and then sharing the written form of that story helped students. I really didn't mind that they mimicked my writing, because their stories carried so much energy. Once, I shared a story about a restaurant experience I had as a child. After church, we went for brunch at a place called Lums and I dropped my whip cream topped hot chocolate. Here is what one of my struggling writers wrote after I shared that story

Sunday

On Sunday I went to church. After church we went to a restaurant. I broke a glass plate. My brother threw up a storm. He threw a car, he scraped his nose. We went to the bathroom. When we came back my dad was laughing. Then my brother spilled the whole orange juice. Spilled all over him. Then when he went in the door (revolving door) he was like help help I am stuck help help. Then he said I'm moving that's good I'm out. It was funny and gross.

I also noticed an increase in the quality of creative writing in other curricular areas. In those areas, students did not mimic my writing as much as they did during Writer's Workshop.

Therefore, to answer my research question, I found that sharing stories from a teacher's life encourages students to write about their own lives, fosters enthusiasm about writing in general, and raises the ceiling for writers at all levels.

"Children enjoy stories. They sense the freedom in the structure, the elixir in the container. They begin to anticipate and predict from the first moments of a story's beginning. They gather round the storyer and know that the experience will be worthwhile. There will be learning, but first there will be a story..." (Barton and Booth, 1990).

Bibliography

Barton, B. and Booth, D., Stories in the Classroom (Markham: Pembroke Publishers, 1990).

Graves, Donald J., Writing: Teachers & Children At Work (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1983).