

Creative Writing in the Junior High School

Since the early 1920's the schools have made gains in art, music and drama, but creative writing seems to have lost the prominence it once had. In our emphasis on socialization, have we neglected the importance of developing the unique, the personal and the creative attributes of the individual?

SOME OF US who have observed young people over a period of the past 20 years feel that the individual is losing his identity in the increased emphasis upon the group. Witnesses of the changing American character, such as David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*, support our feeling that the initiator and the creator may be in danger of becoming lost in the mass. When the timid hand is lowered in the classroom, waiting for a stronger hand to be raised or a more courageous voice to speak first, we teachers may well look to our task of developing the individual, of helping the lone student feel that he is important, not only as a member of the group, but apart from it. When most of our classroom projects become group-planned, group-centered, group-reported, we educators of youth may be failing to develop the concept of self, which is so vital to personality development.

There are many ways that the young person may be given a feeling that he is important to himself and to the world in which he has his time and place. All of the creative implements may come to his assistance—the pen, the brush, the dance.

Any one, or all, of the creative arts may help him develop from the inside-out, may reassure him of where he stands with himself, his peers, his family, his community, his world. This article is concerned with only one of these creative acts of expression, that of personal, individual writing. It is concerned with the need so aptly voiced by Anne Frank¹ when she wrote for "Kitty" the following explanation for keeping a diary:

Saturday, 20 June, 1942

I haven't written for a few days because I wanted first of all to think about my diary. It's an odd idea for someone like me because it seems to me that neither I—nor for that matter, anyone else—will be interested in the unburdenings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. Still, what does that matter? I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart. . . .

In this excerpt from *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne expressed her need to talk out, to write out her experiences and feelings to someone who will understand them. This need is a universal one of the lonely adolescent.

¹ Anne Frank. *Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1952.

The Rich Spring

Throughout the junior high years, the bulk of the writing program should be built upon the personal, firsthand experiences and observations of young people. The student should be encouraged to begin with what he knows and has experienced. Any young person who has lived to be 12 or 13 years old has much to write about that is important to himself and to his contemporaries, much that should be important to his teacher. Since each individual reacts to people, places and events in terms of what he has experienced in the past, we know that each student's writing will be different from that of every other. We also know that the rich store from which the adolescent draws his writing of personal experiences never runs low, because as he lives he replenishes. It is the business of the teacher to help the young person see the importance of his daily living and learn to tell and write about it in such a way that others will listen and want to write, too.

The teacher may give impetus to experiential writing through his own willingness to talk about his daily experiences or about those that happened to him when he was the age of his pupils. "I remember when . . ." said by the teacher, often acts as an impetus to the young adolescent's remembering his own experiences and being reassured that they are important enough to put on paper. As teacher and students talk together of daily happenings, an individual may become trustful of the audience—teacher and peer group—who should eventually listen to his written expression. The experiences about which he first talks and then writes need not be "the most exciting" or "the most embarrassing" or "the most memorable." When students have

finished with the "most," where can they go next—surely not to "the less" and finally to "the least."

The young writer may need to be reassured more than once that any experience, if carefully and faithfully told, is worthy of being written about. He need not feel that he must search for a most exciting event or a most terrifying moment. After all, most of us have not taken a trip to the moon or lived beneath the sea's surface. If one thinks that what one knows and has experienced is too ordinary a source for writing, he may remember that it was the rich spring from which came Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Almost any happening can be important if it is told clearly and sincerely. An eighth grade girl wrote a beautiful vivid description of her first blister; she called the piece "discovery." A boy in the same class wrote a humorous bit about his trip to a supermarket, where he came out with three two-pound broilers instead of his mother's order of two three-pound broilers. A third student, a city child of New York, wrote about his seeing the fruit and vegetables tumble out of the stands along Amsterdam Avenue. Here are other possible topics to guide junior high school students in selecting subjects close to their own experience:

1. A trip I once made to a new (or a familiar) place
2. A favorite family story, one that I have heard often and know well
3. A game I like to play
4. A holiday I enjoyed (or failed to enjoy)
5. Troubles with mowing the lawn, baby-

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The point of view advanced in this article is well illustrated by the work of ANNE SPELLICY, a core teacher in the South Pasadena, California, Junior High School. The poems in this issue of Educational Leadership are by her pupils and are taken from Young Voices, a book of verse published several years ago by the South Pasadena Junior High School. We are grateful to Miss Spellicy and her pupils for their permission to reproduce these poems.

sitting, delivering papers, making a bed, cooking a meal

6. What a close observer can see in the woods

7. Making some money

8. Trying to settle down to study

9. An interesting visitor who came to my home

10. The first time I went shopping for clothes alone.

As such experiences are shared in class, they will suggest other experiences to be written about, and the writing program should be off to a good start. Whatever the individual chooses to tell should be treated with respect and consideration by the teacher. A simple comment like "Yes, that is the way it might happen" or "I had an experience like that once; I know just how you feel" is so much more encouraging to the young writer than a grade or a mark without comment.

In addition to the writing that grows from personal experience, there is a place for the imaginative composition. A young person sometimes needs to say through fantasy what he cannot say in reality. This need often takes the form of science fiction, a highly imaginative tale beloved by many seventh and eighth graders. Their fantastic tales usually predict some of the marvels that science may make possible, tales about space ships, robots, time machines, life on other planets, or life on this planet thousands of years from now. Just for variety, a teacher may encourage a young group to take the

wings of fancy and imagine such impossible and curious situations as the following:

1. Imagine that you are a star creature and make a visit to this world we know. Tell of your surprises.

2. Imagine that you have a space ship that can take you to another planet. Tell of your experiences.

3. Imagine that you have an animal that can talk. Tell of your experiences with this animal.

4. Imagine you have a pair of seven-league boots. Describe a day's adventure in time and space.

5. Imagine that you can put on a special pair of glasses and see a thousand years into the future. Describe a scene that you might witness.

6. Imagine that you are an inch high or three times your size. How would the dimensions of your present world seem to you?

7. Imagine that you can make yourself invisible by using magic fluid or by putting on a special garment. Describe your adventures.

Such suggestions are more fascinating to the young junior high student than to the maturer high school student, who, we hope, is more interested in writing about how he feels and what he thinks than about escapes into the unknown. The healthy 15-year-old should be learning to turn his imagination into the kind of fiction that the novelist uses. This fiction becomes the thread that sews together and embroiders what the writer knows and has observed about people, places and things.

Projection

Certain projective techniques are very helpful in stimulating creative expression. The individual is constantly reacting to objects outside himself, to a book, a picture, a place, a person. But these objects must be within the adolescent's understanding before he can write about them responsively and responsibly. For example, a photograph of a house in the

snow, with one lone upstairs window lit in the night, is a better stimulant to writing than a modern painting completely outside the comprehension of the young writer. If projective materials are carefully chosen, they may serve the teacher as a clue to the writer's emotional needs. Unless, however, the teacher is soundly grounded in psychological understanding, he should not choose projective materials which will cause the student to react too violently. Use of the mother-figure, for example, or a church symbol may be unwise. Whatever pictures are used, three questions are often helpful in getting the writer to react: (a) What do you think has happened before this scene? (b) What do you think is happening now? (c) What do you think will be the result? If projective techniques are employed as aids to the writing programs, they should help the individual become aware of his experiences, not take him away from them.

Descriptive writing, stemming from the writer's senses—what he sees, hears, smells, tastes and feels—may help the adolescent understand something about himself as an individual apart from others. At the same time, a semantic concept can be taught: people react according to what has happened to them in the past, in all the experiential moments of their lives. With the younger adolescent, suggestions such as the following encourage descriptive writing:

1. Blindfold yourself and ask someone to hand you an object that he chooses. After you have examined the object carefully without seeing it, write a description of the object before naming it.
2. Describe the sound of the footsteps of two of the members of your family.
3. Describe the face of a person you know intimately.
4. Describe the color and texture of a favorite garment.
5. Describe the sounds of a party, a

American Scene

Billboards
 Signs
 and
 Papers
 Everywhere you turn.
 Shoes
 Books
 and
 Houses
 On very easy terms.

—LARRY THOMPSON—*Grade 9B, South Pasadena, California, Junior High School.*

game, or a pep rally you have attended recently.

6. Describe the odors that come to you as you approach the school cafeteria on a particular day.

7. Describe the feel of a snowball in your hand or of wet grass beneath your feet:

Such writing assignments, shared in class, prove that no two individuals see, hear, smell, taste and touch in exactly the same way.

The older student is often capable of handling description based on seeing from a point of view or from a point of time. For example, the high school student may take a trip back into memory, looking backward to see how a time span can change places, events and people. Here are a few suggestions that have been effective in helping the older adolescent see how individual experiences of the past change the way he sees and feels:

1. Write a description of a place, such as your own backyard, telling how it looked to you when you were six years old and how it looks now.

2. Write a description of a favorite toy, telling how the toy looked to you when you were a young child and how it looks to you now that you have outgrown it.

3. Write a description of a trip you have taken frequently since you were younger. Tell what you saw when you first made the trip and what you see now.

4. When you were small, did your parents expect you to do things that seemed to you unreasonable? Do these things now seem not

to have been unreasonable? How do you account for your change in feeling?

Individual or group poems may result from the individual's recording his sense impressions associated with a particular season of the year: spring, summer, autumn, winter.

Up to this point, this article has treated topics and stimulants to creative expression, but has said nothing about the forms creative writing may take. Surely the personal writing program should be flexible enough to allow the individual to make choices of the writing form of simple narration, description, essay. It is not unusual for the junior high school student to undertake a long, even a continued, story—a mystery, detective, or adventure tale. As the student grows older, however, the teacher should probably try to guide him in the direction of reality, without, of course, hurting his feeling of creativity. The older high school student may try to handle the more complicated, tight, concise form of the short story. Many young people en-

joy writing poetry, but it is questionable whether the writing of verse should be assigned to a whole class. Such over-all, inflexible assignments often result in forced, contrived rhyme and insincere lines, expressing only what the young novice thinks a poet ought to say. If, however, the individual's efforts with verses are encouraged and criticized for sense as well as for form, a considerable amount of interesting verse may be produced within a classroom.

This article has intended to say that the realization of self should, and can, be developed within the individual. Surely the authors do not believe that personal writing is the only way to encourage this concept. Creative writing is, however, one important way to show the individual that his mind and his experiences and his pen, his imagination and his senses and his feelings, can create things which express him and him alone. They can also lead him to identify himself with others who have needs and feelings similar to, but never identical with, his own.

Fragility

Thoughts are like camellias—
Fresh and frail until you bother them.
Then they lose their wistfulness.

—MARGARET McDONALD—*Grade 8A, South Pasadena, California, Junior High School.*

Precision

The moon drove its silver dagger
straight into the heart of the
forest.

—MIRIAN KACY—*Grade 9B, South Pasadena, California, Junior High School.*

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