

Creating with Words in the Kindergarten

The kindergarten is never a happier place than when the children and their teacher are watching a story or a poem being born.

CHILDREN between the ages of five and six are still very much in the exploratory world of sound, when language and music and movement are as interwoven as the three strands of a pig-tail, when speaking and singing and skipping are wonderful and new, and nothing is dull. They seem to possess instinctively certain qualities which adult writers of professional caliber often must struggle to reacquire. These small children are in the very special stage of development between the mastery of articulation and oral communication for all practical purposes, and the utter inability to use effectively the printed symbols.

Chants are basic to this age level. Calling one's mother to the window is, to children in the street, an intricate process of imperatives, crescendos, and foot-stomplings; "galloping, galloping, galloping" is as suitable an accompaniment to make-believe ponies as the William Tell Overture; and the banana peddler with his improvised arias holds enough enchantment to widen the eyes of even the most realistic five-year-old.

Rhymes are everywhere present and, like the chants, rhythm-full. "Flippity-floppity, clippity-cloppity, bippity-boppity" go the hopscotch feet of "Marilyn-Carolyn-Barrelyn" over the "potsy-motsy-

wotsy-totsy." Nursery rhymes fed glibly to toddlers reappear with more adventurous verses as the five-year-old whimsically offers, "One, two, eat up the goo . . . three, four, sit on the floor . . ." and the six-year-old rewords, "My country tizzily, sweet land of liver tea . . ."

Along with its ups, this period of development has its downs. The small child gropes for words to present an idea in his mind. He stutters, stammers, leans upon "Yuh-know-what," is easily distracted in his thinking, misuses three-syllable words, and manages to completely overlook the English system of grammar. Nevertheless, "I-could-play-with-the-puppy" may be intoned in any tense or mood from past affirmative to future imperative according to intonation and inflection. The kindergarten child makes himself understood.

But the most wonderful aspect of the five-to-six-year-old's language life lies in its all-consuming growth. No longer impeded by the primary difficulties of articulation, the youngster rushes pell-mell out of baby talk into the awareness of new meanings, uses, and sound possibilities of words. "Elevator" is fascinating to him, as are "parakeet," "apologize," and "drizzle." How many poets have spent endless hours groping into long-forgotten

corners for an effective verb to use in describing a phenomenon as common as falling rain? For the five-year-old it's simple; if he doesn't know which verb to use, he invents a new one. The rain comes "bling-bling-bling-bling down," it "dribbles down your forehead," "scooches under the big boots," "tippy-tip-tips" on the window. "Pitter-patter" has not yet tyrannized his word-world. There are refreshingly few stereotypes or cliché addictions in a five-year-old's vocabulary; everything is too remarkable. New words are constantly appearing in his basic vocabulary, and a good part of them are wonderfully expressive gems which never quite made the dictionary. But "scooches" and "bling-bling-bling-bling" are just as meaningful to small children as "pitter-patter," and the attentive adult must admit that they are just as onomatopoeic.

How the Teacher Helps

The kindergarten teacher needs to be alert to the impulsive creativity of her children and not to stifle them too quickly with the "pitter-patters" and structural grammar of the grown-up world. At this age level, the child is like a highly sensitive tape recorder set to pick up and retain any sound within its range. Children need to be surrounded by good English not only through the samples of adults, radio and television programs, records, here-and-now story books, but through making contact with truly fine literature. Longfellow's "Rain in Summer"¹ (" . . . Across the window-pane it pours and pours . . .") and Christopher Morley's "Smells"² ("My daddy smells like tobacco and books. . .") are loved by children as well as by adults.

¹ *A Book of Children's Literature*. Edited by Lillian Hollowell. Rinehart and Co. 1952. p. 603.

² *Ibid.*, p. 580.

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And there are little poems written especially for children by adult poets such as James S. Tippet, Rachel Field, and Dorothy Aldis who are truly gifted. Although the child needs to be spoken to in language acceptable by adult standards, he must be listened to on his own level.

Listening. Listening to children is fun. It can be as revitalizing for the adult listener as for the child who is expressing himself. The most basic step in encouraging creative writing in the kindergarten lies in the teacher's sincere interest in listening to her children.

It begins, simply enough, with everyday conversations. Children love to chatter. They are continuously exchanging their impressions and ideas as best they can with each other, but they crave adult recognition and will often hang onto a teacher's skirt until they receive an appropriate nod or comment. A little one says, "Isn't the clay gloopy today?" and waits. A nod of the teacher's head may be sufficient in this instance, but the power of honest adult appreciation or sympathy cannot be overestimated. The next day, the same five-year-old may remark, "The clay feels like cheese; it's all bumpy and smooth and cheesy." This time the teacher owes some verbalized encouragement to the child who has used effectively three adjectives in expressing his idea. A question like, "How's the clay today?" from the teacher is a significant go-ahead signal to the child. Eventually, a full-sentence idea such as, "I've made a cottage-cheese castle; all the little bits are bricks" may emerge, and the creative word-process has definitely begun with a

full-fledged metaphor. This particular child already has one foot on the roadway to real creative writing. He is expressing his imagination through a real medium of sensory perception.

Providing a rich variety of experience.

As a second basic step, the teacher needs to provide a rich variety of experiences which will encourage sensory perceptions and the verbal expression of these sensations. Wet clay, paste, fingerpaints, and cookie dough provide such stimulation. Comments such as, "It's squooshy!" should be noticed and encouraged without "pushing" for words. Colors are interesting to play with on the verbal level, as are sizes and shapes. Questions such as, "What is yellow?" or "What is a happy-feeling color to you?" or "What do you see when you close your eyes in the sunshine?" sometimes evoke almost poetic answers.

A "feel box" may do wonders in encouraging verbalization. The child reaches into a box with different kinds and textures of material, selects one, feels it without looking at it, then tries to describe what he has felt to other children. The rules of the game keep the child from telling the name of the material, even if he knows it. He can only describe what it feels like. Responses such as, "It's all soft and mellow" (for velvet) or, "It's slippery and crunchy" (for cellophane) are excellent beginnings.

A "smell box" helps to clarify odor adjectives for the young child. A little bit of soap, a tea bag, a pinch of pepper in a small plastic bag, a piece of cheese wrapped in aluminum foil, and other such things provide infinite possibilities for word descriptions of sensory perception. When played like the game of the "feel box," children will come up with comments such as, "It's sneezy-smelling" or "It smells all yum-yum."

The mid-morning snack period is a natural lead into the taste adjective field. Children will enjoy describing what their milk or cookies taste like to them. Fresh fruits or carrots and celery sticks at parties are special treats along with candy. And a peanut has real descriptive possibilities.

Experiences in hearing are rich with verbal potential. A high trill on the piano evokes a variety of responses which the children need to express: images, feeling, moods. The rhythm sticks alone can be woodpeckers, clock factories, high heels clicking on the sidewalk, or just plain "click-clacks." High and low, loud and soft, fast and slow music patterns can be explored for their mood-expressiveness as well as for other uses. During rhythms, for example, the teacher may ask, "What kind of music shall I play while you skip?" In dramatics, she may ask, "What should the giant sound like on the piano?" The value comes in describing the sound which he needs for his purpose.

There are also innumerable possibilities for exploring all five senses at once through common kindergarten experiences, and they quite naturally open the path to creative expression. Scooping a pumpkin at Halloween provides an abundance of smells, tastes, sights, sounds, and tactile experiences. A walk in the park, a kitten brought to school, or even the kind of weather outdoors are materials for colorful discussions and creating with words. Trying to tell about a cloud, or how it feels to fly, or what crying is, offers stimulating subjects for poetic contemplation. And responses such as, "The cloud looks like a great big whup cream," "I close my eyes and go whoooops up to the moooon," and "Crying is making all wet when it is terrible" from five-year-olds are bits of poetry.

Once the teacher has learned to listen openly to the conversation of the children, she will find it as fascinating as a never-ending poem filled with the most unique metaphors, similes, images, moods, and verbs imaginable. If she is careful to avoid judging the comments of the little ones with the red pencil of the adult editor, if she allows free range of imagination to go along hand in hand with guided exploration of reality, if she encourages all the new words, even made-up ones—so long as they are communicative and expressive—and if she is flexible enough to allow ample time for talk, talk, talk and time to listen, listen, listen, she will find the reward of a class-full of kindergarten children who will find poetry an exciting part of every day.

Samples and How They Grew

The following samples of poetry and stories and how they grew have been collected by one kindergarten teacher in a Brooklyn public school. The setting, the conversation, and the teacher's role will fill in the picture of creative moments with these children. The quotes are actual responses as they occurred in the group.

Sample I. One lazy summer morning in June, the kindergarten class and their teacher took a slow quiet walk in the park across the street from the school. When they returned to the classroom, all sat around in an informal circle, talking about things they particularly remembered having seen during their walk. Patricia said, "Oh, I liked the morning glories, the baby morning glories that were all folded up." Sonia, apparently not listening to Patricia but concentrating on her own remembrances, commented, "The butterfly was all yellow, mostly, and it went so fast I couldn't tell if it has polka-dots." David, a reserved

child, continued, "It looked like Mary Ann's hair ribbon, sort of streaky." Everyone was quiet for a few seconds until the teacher said, "That is an idea—a butterfly looking like a hair ribbon, isn't it?" There followed several "Oooohs" and remarks such as, "I like a great big purple hair ribbon, all silky," "But the butterfly can fly away," "Maybe I could catch one and bring it in to school and put it on the science table, and then we could play it was a ribbon sometimes." One little girl, Janet, stood and exclaimed loudly to all. "I'm gonna get one and put it on my head!" The teacher picked up this last comment and said to Janet, "That might make a special story. Could you tell a story about a little girl with a butterfly-ribbon in her hair?" The following little story was Janet's contribution mainly, with a few side comments from Patricia and David:

Once upon a time there was a poor little girl named Lulu and she didn't have any hair ribbons. No hair ribbons at all. So she said, "Oh, I wish I had a pretty yellow ribbon to put on my hair." Then she went for a walk in the park and she saw morning glories and flowers. She couldn't pick the flowers because then they would die, but she found one lying on the ground so she said, "Well, this one fell off a tree, so I can pick it up." And then she found some more flowers on the ground and picked them up and she had lots of beautiful flowers.

Then a butterfly came flying and it liked all the pretty flowers that Lulu had, so the butterfly sat on Lulu's head to have a better look. And Lulu said, "Now I have a good butterfly-ribbon in my hair," and she looked very beautiful.

Sample II. The center of interest in the kindergarten class during the last few weeks of April was "rain." The children had talked about clouds, raindrops, rainbows, and had systematically observed water evaporate from a small jar. They made a picture chart of a row of jars the exact size of the glass jar. Each day they

marked the water level with crayon on the next picture on the chart. Most of the children understood the basic idea of the water cycle, with water going into the air and into clouds until the clouds were so full they couldn't hold any more, and water falling down again as rain. One day the class was talking about clouds and how they might be described. George told this little story which included many of the things he had learned as the unit had progressed:

A cloud looks like a big white sheet. When Mommy hangs a sheet on the line, it is all full of water, and when she takes it off the line it is all dry. The water has gone away up into the clouds and some day it will come down again when it rains.

The sheet is all white and big and smooth, just like a cloud.

Sample III. One morning in February it began to snow just as the children were coming to school. When they entered the classroom, they all ran to the windows to look out and see how the snowfall was progressing. They chattered excitedly about making snowballs, building snow men, and romping about in the snow after school. Later in the morning, the children seemed to have quieted down considerably, and the teacher thought it might be a good time to see if some creative poetry was being contained inside the five-year-olds, waiting for a chance to emerge. After resting time, she had a discussion about snow, first letting all the children look outside for a while and then having them sit quietly down to talk about it. The atmosphere in the room seemed ideal; each child looked relaxed and pensive. Virginia began with, "The snow looks like a lamb." "Why?" asked the teacher. Virginia replied softly, "Because the lamb is white and snow is white." "Oh," said the teacher, "tell us more about the snow and the lamb." George picked this up and added

quickly, "The snow feels like a lamb," possibly trying to repeat Virginia's original sentence, but changing one word accidentally. After a few seconds Virginia remarked, "The snow feels like a lamb because the lamb is soft and snow is soft." To this Michael, more realistically oriented, commented, "But the lamb goes baa-a-a-a." Virginia, still apparently deep in thought, said almost in a whisper, "And the snow doesn't make a sound." The teacher made a mental note of Virginia's sensitivity to this word situation then said to the class, "I've written down what you've said. It sounds very much like a poem when it's all said together. Would you like to hear it?" Then she read this little poem, which is essentially Virginia's, to the obvious approval of the whole group:

The snow looks like a lamb
Because the lamb is white and snow is
white.

The snow feels like a lamb
Because the lamb is soft and snow is
soft.

But the lamb goes baa-a-a-a,
And the snow doesn't make a sound.

The children decided they would like the principal to hear the poem they had made up, so the teacher gave the copy she had written to Virginia, who took it to the principal's office and "read" it to her, looking at the paper and reciting the whole poem. It was subsequently published in the school magazine.

Sample IV. On a rainy afternoon in early spring, the children in the afternoon kindergarten seemed to be working and playing extremely quietly. The teacher sat down at a table with three little boys who were doing nothing but chatting. One said, "It's very quiet in here today." Then the conversation turned to the weather outdoors, and there were several general comments about rain. James said he didn't want it to

rain today, because when it rains he can't play outdoors. The other children agreed. Then James, a mature, sensitive child with a natural ability toward humor said, "Some day I'm gonna go right up there and zip up those clouds!" The other boys laughed and said they thought that would be good. One of them added, "And if you wanted it to rain again, you could just unzip the zippers." "Why would you want it to rain?" asked the teacher. "Oh, to make the flowers grow," said one of the boys. "And to fill up the oceans," added another. "Yuh know, we have to drink it, too, only it's fixed up in the faucet," added James. The teacher said, "That might make a good story, about a little boy zipping up the clouds and then unzipping them again when he wanted it to rain. If you made up a whole story about it, I'd write it down for you and it could be your own story." The three children decided this would be a commendable procedure and one immediately piped up with, "Once upon a time there was a little boy . . ." One boy wanted the hero to be named "Peter," while James insisted on "Tommy." They debated this for a few minutes and then compromised, calling him "Tommy Peter," since it was James's idea. James then continued to dictate most of the story, with one of the boys adding the sound words such as "bling-bling-bling-bling" and "zoo-o-o-m" and the other adding little realistic details such as Tommy Peter taking a rocket ship to get up to the clouds.

After the teacher finished writing down the story as dictated, the children drew pictures illustrating the various scenes. Both the pictures and the written words were stapled together into story book form and placed in the library corner, where the children could see it and "read" it to each other. Frequently, James

would be seen "reading" the story to the other children. A copy was sent to the principal, and this, too, was published eventually in the school magazine. The names of all three boys appeared as authors, since all had helped in the wording and in drawing pictures, but the children decided that James's name should come first since it was mostly his.

This is the story as it appeared in the "Bulletin of P.S. 169":

Once upon a time there was a little boy named Tommy Peter. He didn't want it to rain because he was going on a picnic. So he got a rocket ship and he went zooo-o-o-m up to the clouds. Then he sewed zippers on the clouds and zipped them all up. Then Tommy Peter flew down again to earth and he went to the picnic.

When spring came, all the flowers wanted to grow. But they couldn't grow because they didn't have any rain-water. When Tommy Peter turned on the faucet, no water came out. And when the ships wanted to sail on the rivers, they couldn't because the rivers weren't deep enough. The water had all dried up and no rain came down from the clouds.

Then Tommy Peter got his rocket ship and he went zooo-o-o-m up to the clouds. He unzipped the zippers and all the rain came bling-bling-bling-bling down. Then all the flowers grew. The water came out of the faucets. And then the boats could sail.

Tommy Peter said, "Oh, it's good for it to rain a little bit." And he promised never again to zip up the clouds.

In both cases, when the finished products were published, the children especially seemed to appreciate seeing the printed copies. All the little authors could recognize their own names in print, and later they enjoyed telling the stories while looking at the printed pages. After a while, James was able to point out the words, "Once upon a time," "zooo-o-o-m," and "bling-bling-bling-bling," although no actual instruction in reading was given. In all instances where a finished product was achieved, the children

wanted to see it written down and craved the recognition of others through telling their own stories or poems to other persons. Adult appreciation was particularly important. Every attempt ever made by a child at creative writing, singing, or moving, was deserving of sensitive recognition, and many were truly worthy of the popular acclaim they received in the kindergarten world of that public school.

Realism and Fantasy

In the realm of creating with words with young children, one inevitably deals with "made-up" words and fantasy. Did this hold some dangers for five-to-six-year-olds who were still sifting their lives and surroundings for what is "real" and what is "just pretend"? In assessing such possibilities, there appeared to be no increase in confusion of the children between reality and "make believe." On the contrary, they showed increased ability to discriminate between the "here-and-now" world and the world of subjective imagination. They seemed to discern the real elements inherent in all "make believe" without having them detract from the enjoyment value of fantasy. Every bit of creative writing actually

contained some realistic learnings, though many were placed in highly imaginative settings, as was the story of "The Zipped-up Clouds." Quite often, discussions about what was "real" and what was "make believe" in their stories pointed out that the children, themselves, were growing more and more aware of each aspect in their work, and more and more appreciative of each aspect in itself.

Using "make believe" in such a constructive way as the writing of stories for enjoyment seemed to motivate the children to a keener awareness of the world about them, as they explored its realistic aspects and wove the fibers of their learnings into a total composition where science learnings and images of fantasy were enjoyed simultaneously. So long as the children were aware of these two different qualities in their creative work, there was much constructive achievement. And the emotional satisfaction of having found an approved method of "making-believe" seemed to show in the delight and self-confidence of the kindergarteners. This delight was as contagious as the measles—for the kindergarten was never a happier place than when the children and their teacher were watching a story or a poem being born.

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