To become better writers, children need opportunities to write and freedom to let their ideas flow.

Learning to Write by Writing

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Choquita McGriff's fifth-grade students work in a hot, stuffy classroom on the second floor of the Anne E. West Elementary School in Atlanta. Now and then during the 40-minute homeroom period, a gravelly voice from the PA orders students to the office or warns them not to use the east stairway while painters are working. Despite this enervating atmosphere, something electric is happening.

Oblivious to the loudspeaker and the sauna-like conditions, children sit in small groups intently discussing the writing they did the previous morning. As each child reads his or her work, the others listen carefully, then comment, congratulating the writer on a good piece, suggesting changes.

In the room next door, groups of seventh graders busily critique their mystery stories while seventh graders across the hall go over their essays on U.S. and Russian relations. At the end of the corridor, sixth graders work on expressive writing about their most embarrassing moments.

In order to improve student writing, it became apparent to McGriff

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while attending a summer workshop, a satellite of the Bay Area Writing Project, that students needed a daily period devoted to writing. Home- room seemed an opportune time for a schoolwide program.

The principal supported her idea and sponsored a staff development workshop for the faculty in early fall. McGriff and a consultant from the summer program introduced the staff to the idea and helped train them in methods to use. The faculty enthusiastically agreed to have students write every Monday and Wednesday and discuss their writing in groups on Tuesday and Thursday. On Friday students revise their best piece to hand in for teacher evaluation.

Other teachers attending the summer workshop also recognized the need for a daily writing period. At Atlanta's Grove Park Elementary School students are involved in a write-a-thon, a variation on McGriff's theme. For two weeks at ten o'clock sharp in every area of the school, children turn expectantly toward the brown speaker box on the wall as Saulsbury welcomes them over the PA to another "Literature and Writing Time."

One morning when students arrived at school they found giant footprints leading from the main door to the storage room. Later, Saulsbury asked them to write a story about the mystery feet. On another morning teachers wore exotic headgear, and Saulsbury asked them to write about "magic hats."

After Saulsbury sets the stage, the students spend ten minutes writing. Then they read their first drafts aloud to the class. Additional time is provided during the day for students to make revisions, and at the end of the day the papers are collected. Teachers submit the best work to Saulsbury to post on a bulletin board in the main foyer.

At the end of the two-week period, Saulsbury went off the air and returned to her duties as reading specialist, but many teachers continued to set aside a writing period which followed the established prewriting-drafting-reading-revising format.

What have been the results of these writing periods? Teachers at both schools agree that the students have learned to be more creative and to express themselves better. Even after two weeks, the teachers at Grove Park noticed an improvement in students' fluency. Teachers commented, "They're beginning to write what they think, not what they think the teacher wants."" As one teacher explained, "They're realizing that their opinions are worth something," referring to one child's essay suggesting that school vacations should occur in winter instead of summer since "some kids don't have proper clothes or shoes."

Children need to become more fluent and more creative and to acquire confidence in expressing their thoughts if they are to learn to shape their ideas and communicate them in writing to others. Children can't learn to organize their ideas if they are afraid to express them. They can't learn to punctuate if they write only simple sentences.

To increase fluency, educators recommend meaningful daily writing experiences, such as journal writing, free writing, and the kinds of structured writing required in programs like those described.

But children must also be motivated to express their thoughts. The experiences of the teachers at Anne E. West and Grove Park indicate that another factor—the teacher's interest in the content of the students' papers—is also very important.

Children don't write sentences or paragraphs; they write ideas—and they want the reader to respond to those ideas. Teachers at Anne E. West and Grove Park who enjoyed reading the children's work and who discovered through it insights into the children were the ones who continued the writing programs on their own initiative.

"If the children are in a bad mood, it comes out in their writing and helps me understand and manage them the rest of the day," commented Merita Brown.

Teachers who decided to discontinue the program after a term because they felt the children were bored or because they thought they needed to spend time on other areas were the ones most concerned with grammar and punctuation. Their first reaction was disappointment with students who continued to make errors on drafts. These teachers admitted seeing an improvement in the children's creativity and ability to express themselves only after being directly questioned about these factors.

Neatness Inhibits
Some traditional methods for teaching writing are too concerned with neatness, the flow of their ideas will be impeded. In addition, children need to be allowed to make changes and corrections to improve their work. They need to be free to squeeze words between lines and add sentences if they believe these changes will allow them to communicate their ideas better.

As with handwriting and neatness, if children pay too much attention to syntax, grammar, and punctuation while they are drafting, they begin to worry about whether they are saying something correctly and stop saying very much. Many adults have difficulty writing because they are inhibited by fear of making mistakes. It is important to permit children to say what they want and then later help them make corrections without punishment for making errors.

This period of revision is a good time for students to work together in small groups so they can help each other improve their work. Students need the opportunity to revise and improve what they've written, and finally to rewrite their papers neatly, using the conventions of standard edited English, before turning them in for grading. The drafting-revising-rewriting process is the way professional writers prepare articles for publication. Children should be provided the same opportunity.

When children believe the most valuable audience for their writing—their teacher—is interested in their thoughts, when they have ample opportunity to write, and when there are no constraints to hinder their writing, their ideas will flow freely. Through writing, they will learn to write.
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