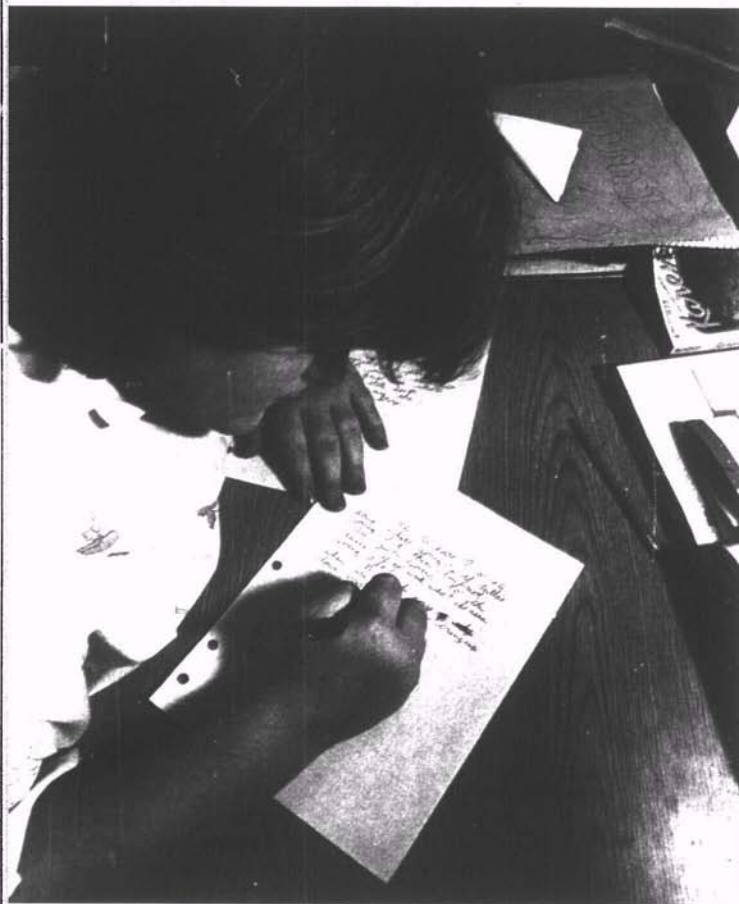


## It's *Just* a Note

Middle school students would never think of them as "writing," but notes serve many social purposes—and may even sharpen communication skills.



Photograph by Kenneth F. Hailley

*Student writers use their communication skills regularly and often in a familiar format adults often deplore.*

How many of our students would call themselves "writers"? Five percent? Two percent? Not many. Yet in our society the economic and social futures of children rest in part on their mastery of communication skills, and for this reason the teaching of writing is a national priority. In my middle school language arts classes, I face a wide range of writing proficiencies, which forces me to ask, "What makes a difference in children's success at learning to write?"

Florio (1979) and Florio and Clark (1982) have described writing as a form of tacit cultural knowledge that emerges gradually within the context of a community. They suggest that writing skills are largely acquired or absorbed from living within the community, rather than learned. Further, Benjamin Bloom (1986) reports that "the mastery of any skill, whether a routine daily task or a highly refined talent, depends on the ability to perform it unconsciously with speed and accuracy while consciously carrying on other brain functions" (p. 70). Bloom's research suggests that this automaticity develops only if these processes and skills are frequently used outside the classroom, for the student's own purposes.

### **My Search for Student Writers**

I wondered if middle school students were writing for their own purposes outside their classrooms. My search for an answer began in the cafeteria before school. I asked two students

huddled over a one-page manuscript, "Could you tell me about your writing?"

With a quick flip of her paper, one of them snapped, "It's *just* a note."

In retrospect, I know that my preconceived notion of "writing" had made me as blind as the city slicker who asked directions to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park while standing at Clingman's Dome. He had expected an amusement park with ferris wheels and hawkers, not ridge upon ridge of blue mountains. I had anticipated finding student writers at work on short stories or poems, not notes.

I shared my theory and my disillusion with colleagues. Mrs. Williams, a 6th grade math and science teacher, sympathized, "I know how hard you English teachers work to get kids to write and read. And it's interesting because now and then in my class I can't get the kids to do their math because all they want to do is read and write."

"Read and write what?" I asked in frustration.

"Notes!"

"You know," Mr. Grantley, a 6th grade history and English teacher, mused, "lots of times I have intercepted notes and have found that the child writing the note does a better job of putting down his thoughts on paper, and in punctuating, for a friend than for the work he hands in for a grade. It's always puzzled me."

"It's because notes have a real purpose," Mrs. Williams explained. "This is my own idea, but I think they are trying to tell someone else something they think is important. They don't see the work they do for us as important."

Consequently, my search for student writers expanded to include authors of personal notes. I covered all the traditional free times: homeroom, before and after school, between classes, and during lunch. Notes were everywhere. From the perspective of a new definition for "writing," I was beginning to see notes as voluntary writing-practice worksheets. However, if I wanted to probe beneath the sur-



*Passing notes directly under the nose of the teacher is part of the mystique of this subversive middle school activity.*

face of this hunch, I would have to ask the students.

Mrs. Epsom, the assistant principal, helped me schedule student interviews. During one of these planning conferences, she confided, "I'd never thought much about student notes before you began your study. It's just part of the middle school environment. Anybody who notices what happens in the halls and in the cafeteria sees kids passing notes. They do it all day long. Sometimes it's the most important thing that's happening to them at that moment. They will risk it all to write those notes."

### **An Informal Network**

The students who helped expand my investigation were the first six 6th

graders observed passing or receiving notes before school on the day of the interview: Belle, Jane, Julie, Colleen, Shanon, and Marsha. Much to my delight, they represented a wide range of student achievement. Much to my horror, they were united in an overwhelming hatred for writing.

"Tell me about your writing," I had asked at the beginning of the interview.

"I hate to write," Colleen spat the word *write* as she made her declaration among the nodding heads of the others. Their definition of "writing" was as limited as mine had been. Yet, as the interview progressed, they all described their roles as volunteer writers for a widespread natural informal communication network.

Driving this network among students are multiple real-life concerns. The middle school years, psychiatrists warn, are the second most traumatic time in a human's life—second only to being born. The reason for this trauma is the quantity of changes taking place: physical, emotional, and social.

Rapid physical growth and development may lead to personality changes and personal problems. Most middle school children have an insecure sense of identity, a poor self-image, and a poor ego. These feelings of uncertainty are a direct result of rapid changes that cannot be integrated into the self-concept as fast as they occur.

Mrs. Epsom believes that this insecurity may be one of the forces behind note writing. "Sometimes it is easier to write to somebody than to talk directly, person to person. Note writing is a communication that is not eyeball to eyeball, and not a put-down. It's safer, and it is probably beneficial. It says to the kids, 'Hey, someone cares enough about me to write a note. She is asking for a response back. Hey, I'm an important person.'"

The students agree that receiving a note can alter their attitudes toward life. Belle related this episode. "I think notes are nice to get from other people, 'cause you know, like if I give somebody a note—like if someone gives me a note, they make me feel good. So notes make people feel nice. Like that somebody likes them."

### Of Suicide and Sex

Notes "make kids feel special and make them feel that they are liked by someone," Mr. Grantley confirmed. However, he quickly spelled out an even greater function of student notes: a suicide hot line. Because middle school students don't assimilate rapid changes well, the resulting frustration may lead to suicide, the second largest killer of this age group. "They write encouragement back and forth to each other," Mr. Grantley explained. "One child came to me worried because she had received a note from a friend about committing suicide. I referred her to guidance."



*Friends sometimes confide intense emotions to each other; once in a while, if the sender seems vulnerable, the message may prompt the receiver to seek guidance from a trusted teacher.*

Mrs. Epsom recalled the situation. "It looked like perhaps it was a suicide note. It was definitely an I'm-going-to-run-away note. Even though the missing student's friend feared getting into trouble, she gave the police a seven-page note, containing personal information that had been written from one student to another, to help them find her lost friend."

This opening of the inner world of personal notes to an adult is rare. The social growth of this age group is marked by the increasing importance of being a part of the peer group. Students are testing their independence from adults, challenging authority, and taking risks—getting away with things.

*Interviewer:* When do you write notes?

*Marsba:* I write them in class right next to my work while the teacher is talking.

*Shanon:* Like you are getting away with something. It's fun getting away with things.

*Jane:* I'm not good at that.

*Colleen:* Sometimes writing isn't good 'cause I got a referral. I had a note, and [the teacher] told me to give it to her, and I started screaming and yelling. Well, I wasn't really yelling; I was crying.

*Jane:* I give them to the teacher if she says she won't read it, but if she does read it, it really gets me upset.

Emotions in the middle school student are intense. A great deal of vacillation between control and outburst is normal. Students use notes as a kind of

release. "Sometimes they are so upset that they can't talk about it, but they surely can write," Mrs. Epsom grinned. "Often teachers collect these notes and send them up to us before a fight develops." More often, students work things out and avoid the fight through their notes.

The following conversation about "getting mad" occurred when students were asked if they reread the notes they received.

*Jane:* If they are from a boy.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me about that?

*Jane:* I don't reread the sad ones, only the happy ones.

*Colleen:* Just don't read the sad ones when you're happy. I don't save many sad ones. If I get mad and someone writes me a note, and if they are mad at me, I'll rip it up.

*Jane:* If you're mad at somebody, you can write to her.

*Colleen:* When I am so mad, I write that person a note, and he writes back. Maybe two or three times.

*Interviewer:* Then what happens?

*Colleen:* We write maybe two or three times, and we become friends

again. Like talking it out.

*Marsha:* If it was a mistake, you didn't mean to be angry, then writing about it helps make up, especially with boys.

*Belle:* Sixth grade is a hard grade. You have to get used to everybody.

During this discussion, Marsha looked up at me, then lowered her eyes, twisted the sleeve on her coat and said, "I throw [my notes] away, cause some of them can be bad, and I don't want my mom to read them."

The process of sexual maturation also leads to a great deal of emotional trauma, which middle school students ease through note writing. A parent expressed concern over her children's "written competence" in sexual matters: "My only objection [to notes] is when one is left lying around, and there's ummm, I guess it's the sexual connotations to them that I don't like. I know that they are sexually aware, and I think that they are too sexually aware. That's the only time I really get upset."

This type of note writing doesn't stop just because the student is caught. "We've noticed that even when notes

are collected and the students punished, they get caught again and again with notes that they wouldn't want their parents, principal, or teachers to know about," Mrs. Epsom affirmed. "Sometimes the teachers collect this type of note and send them up to us. Often it is something we need to let the parents in on."

### Too Important to Leave to Chance

Note writing, then, is not only a natural response to real social and emotional needs of middle school students, but it functions as an adult tap on their growing pains as well. But does this self-initiated writing also give them the practice necessary for acquiring the mature writing skills and processes prerequisite to success in our society?

There are too many questions yet to answer before we know if note writing makes a difference in children's success at learning to write. Which students are writing notes? Which writing skills are being practiced? How can writing teachers help? Even though note writing in the middle school community is natural, writing is too important to leave to chance.

I turned from the chalkboard in time to observe a tightly folded triangle of paper slither across the floor. As I retrieved it, a student protested, "It's just a note, Mrs. Jackson." Without a word I returned to the assignment, but I thought to myself, "No, dear. It is much more than just a note." □

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Notes convey a personal world of great importance, such importance that the practice of note-writing doesn't stop even when the notes are collected and the students are punished.

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