

## The Teacher

KATIE JOHNSON

### The Test That Wounds

With infinite variety, learning happens in 1st grade. I watch and I marvel at the human mind unfolding. After Christmas vacation, there's nothing much going on outside, or if there is, it's usually too cold to notice, so the action is inside the schoolroom. Read read read. Talk talk talk. Think think think. Discover discover discover. Abilities and confidence grow hand in hand.

The stories they write get longer. I find that I don't need to teach them about beginnings, middles, and endings: they have figured that out. They begin writing notes, too. After a discussion of water, Nicholas leaves a note on my book bag: "Get me a mikrskip!" I get a lot of drawings of rainbows or a house and an apple tree, with "I love you Msr. Jonhsn" printed on a blue cloud.

And they can read. Writers can always read. They read all the books I have read aloud, they read all the books that kids have loved forever, they read books I secretly can't imagine that they could read. Then, on March 25, the California Test of Basic

Skills arrives in the night. Suddenly I have to put the chairs and desks in rows, everyone separated from each other. Suddenly there is a rule: *No talking during this test*. Suddenly nothing else happens at school except this one fat purple booklet full of little circles to fill in.

"Turn to page three," I have to say. She's never said that in her life before, the kids think. This class never looks at the same page in a book at the same

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time: there are always different books to look at and read. But I've usually made sense to them before, so they all turn to page three, and there they see short groups of words with little circles after them.

*Bill can run.*

Run can Bill?

Can Bill run?

Bill can run?

"Read the first sentence," I sadly read the directions. "Choose one of the other ones that asks what the first one says."

And the kids try to do this. But it doesn't make any sense.

This part of the CTBS looks easy, because of the short groups of words. No one, though, in this class would ever write such a short sentence, unless it were an "I-like" sentence; no one would be reading sentences so short in the real books they are used to reading. And it gets worse in the purple booklet. The next day it's "Turn to page 17. It says 'Reading' at the top." There are stories here, it's true, chunks of print at least. But these are long stories, half a page of single-spaced text, a format that no children's book uses. And these are stories related to absolutely nothing in the lives of these children, who have been taught that reading does connect with what they think and feel and are fascinated by.

One "story" is about painting at school, one is about a birthday, one is about a bad dream, one—the longest—is about keeping bees. The painting story and the birthday story might possibly be accessible to these children, or they would be if the children could discuss them a little. *No talking during this test*. But the painting story is how the teacher will hang up the products of the painting lesson. Children almost never think of that problem—that's one of the things the teacher gets paid for! The birthday story is about what the child is going to get for Grandma's birthday. As much as they love their grandmothers, most

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6-year-olds have to be reminded to *get* something for her.

In the normal run of reading, a story or book is discussed first. "What do you think this will be about?" I ask, and we look for clues on the cover or in the title. We make a big deal about predicting, about connecting this new reading material to what the children already know. That's what grown-ups do, too. It's a sensible strategy. First graders might even be able to understand the story about bee-keeping, if they could come at it in their usual inquiring way. But discussion and inquiry are not part of the testing procedure. I have heard, here and there, that standardized test results are not statistically valid for children younger than 2nd grade. Since statistics is a foreign language to me, I cannot corroborate this. My intuition, however, is that it's true. I've watched a lot of children make any old mark in those little circles. They have figured out that "it doesn't make any sense, teacher," and they resolve the dilemma by simply getting it over with.

When all the little circles have been filled in, the disheartened children close the booklets for the last time. The heartsore teacher puts their chairs back into groups, and the children, looking for security blankets, all get out their writing folders. Many of these first after-test stories are the most extravagantly imaginary stories they have written. It is as if the testing has made the classroom, that secure and exciting place, a reality they need to escape from for a while. The test has made them doubt: they wonder if their writing is "right"; they wonder if they can read, after all; I wonder if they will ever believe me again. We are all unsettled.

Nobody writes me a love note for days and days. □

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