

Young Children

MIMI BRODSKY CHENFELD

A Letter to Ms. Byrne

When children enter the magical world of Mary C. Byrne's half-day kindergarten, they never have to sit and wait. They are invited to come in, hang up their coats, and "go ahead and get started" in a work choice.

Some of the work choices in Mary's room are: reading a story, writing in journals, housekeeping corner, clay, painting and colored markers, big and little blocks, puzzles, dress-up, music center, math center, and science center.

After a half hour of work choice, the group gathers for discussions, stories, or playful challenges like mystery sentence on the board, softly saying the letters as she writes them. An example of one of the sentences is: *Today is Jennifer's birthday. Yea!*

Then the gang will play a form of "Wheel of Fortune." Mary erases one of the words. The children remember that word and, letter by letter, back on the board it goes. The sentence is presented whole, broken down, and recreated. Games like "Hangman" help the children remember the letters.

Mary's students enjoy only the best of children's literature. Authors and stories are read, discussed, illustrated, and appreciated. "Oh! What a rich word!" Mary stops constantly to admire especially unusual or descriptive language in stories or conversations. Mary loves rich words!

Mary believes that her students are reader writers. She deeply respects their own resources and experiences.

But the children need convincing. It takes Mary about a week to convince them that they are, indeed, readers and writers. She reminds them of words they know like their own names and YES and NO and OK and BINGO and GO.

In Mary's class, every child receives a journal. "Pictures always come first. I write the words they dictate to me under the pictures. After a while, I turn

the writing over to them."

Many of the children are afraid to take over the writing. "Oh, you know how to do it." Mary encourages. "C'mon, take a risk!" She prods, nudges, reassures, reminding her students of their many accomplishments that took courage and determination to master. "Not to worry!" She reminds them that they're in kindergarten and no one in the world expects them to know how to write and spell every word correctly—heavens no—but when they begin writing everything they want to say in their journals, their handwriting and spelling will improve day by day.

And they do. And it does.

One outstanding day was the ING day. At group time, a few children wanted to know how they could write *looking* or *walking*, so Mary introduced them to ING. Such excitement! The children exploded with stories and ideas.

Mary's kindergartners are constantly aware that they are involved in a process. As they write in their journals, more and more every day, they articulate the "step" they are on.

Mary describes her ladder. "We brainstorm together. Then we jot down ideas in our journals. We call that "prewrite." If we especially like a piece, we work on it a little. Revise it, polish it up, and get it ready for a book. The children make hand-bound books with pages. They have title pages and illustrations and, believe it or not, many of the children cut out a pocket and paste it on the first page with an original library card inside!"

Then—yea! author's chair!

"When the children complete their books, they take their turns as celebrity authors, sitting in our special author's chair with the circle of classmates gathered around. After the story is read, we have a kind of Donahue show asking questions about the writing, the story, the ideas."

Mary is a gifted teacher. One of her dearest gifts is a book Lindsay wrote for her and presented to her the last week of school. It is five pages long and packed with sentences. This is the text of Lindsay's book to Ms. Mary C. Byrne (translated into boring, standard English):

I love you, Ms. Byrne. I remember the time I was scared. That day I got very used to you. I knew I was going to like kindergarten. We went outside and I had fun. Then we came inside and we had snack. Then we had a little work choice. I played with Kelly and Lee. We had fun. Then it was time to go home. When I got home I found some balloons on my front stoop of my front door. They said Lindsay on them. I was happy because I had never had some balloons with a basket. Jeffrey had two balloons in baskets.

Some things I like in kindergarten are snack and recess and work choice. I like how you let us take our shoes off and I also like how you taught me to read and write and also how I make new friends. Thank you for teaching me about rich words. I remember when I did not put ING on the ends of my words because I did not know how to spell ING. And you taught me how to spell ING and you taught me how to take a risk. I remember when I first wrote in my journal, you told me to draw flowers in my dress. I liked when you let me take the sheet of paper to the office that said who was absent and said if everyone was there. I liked how you let me get the mail. I liked how you let me go to the teachers lounge to get your purse.

I told Mom the other day that I wanted to stay in kindergarten but Mom said I had to go on. I'm glad I had you for a kindergarten teacher. I wish I could stay with you. I will always love you even when I'm in first grade and even when I'm in 6th grade.

Ms. Byrne, I love you. I wish I did not have to leave you.

Lindsay□

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld is a teacher and consultant and the author of *Creative Activities for Children* and *Teaching Language Arts Creatively* (2nd ed.), both published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. She can be reached at 2670 Halleck Dr., Columbus, OH 43209. **Mary C. Byrne** is a kindergarten teacher at Montrose School in Bexley, Ohio.

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