Voices

The Teacher

KATIE JOHNSON

Writer's Welfare

About once a year, a child in 1st grade will write "I can't think of anything to write about." When Justin first came to 1st grade, for example, into a class already writing, he had no idea what I was talking about that first day.

"It's writing time," I said cheerfully.

He sat up straight in his seat and waited for me to go on.

"Here is a writing folder for you, just like everybody else has. They are reading what they wrote yesterday to each other right now, and then they will write about something for today."

He was still attentive, though silent, so I asked, "What would you like to write today, Justin?"

He looked at me, perhaps for more clues, and then smiled a wonderful smile, hitched himself into an even straighter position and set the writing folder neatly tilted so that it made a diamond in the center of his desk.

"I can make my name pretty good," he said, picking up the pencil. "Wanna see?" And he slowly made absolutely perfect J-U-S-T-I-N. "There. There's my writing." The smile again. "Okay? What letter do I do next, teacher?"

Justin had learned that writing is penmanship. He'd been taught how to make his letters, and he expected to sit still and print exactly what I told him to. Because he is only six, he quickly fell into the wonderful "I-like" pattern, beginning that morning with "I like Nick" and working up to pages of "I like Ryan. I like Billy. I like Matt . . .," listing the whole class. A week after arriving, he began "I like my Mom" and wrote a two-day story about his family all on his own. Soon after that he began a continuing adventure about a monster. He's in charge of his writing now. He never asks me what to do next. In fact, when I am so unwise as to suggest something, he politely says that he might do that someday but he's working on an idea of his own, now. So I go away and leave him to it. I don't mind a bit watching him do all the work.

Donald Graves, a writing teacher at the University of New Hampshire, uses the expression "writer's welfare" to describe what happens to kids whose teachers always give them a topic to write about. These children learn to assume that what they have to say and what they think to write are not as good as the teachers' ideas. This is a subtle lesson, a subliminal learning. No teacher says "my ideas are better than yours" out loud, but the implication is pretty clear when she says, over and over, that she has chosen the subject for the children. In addition to taking the decision out of the children's hands and minds, it's hard work for the teacher. Most teachers work hard at thinking about what the children will write and spend a lot of energy working on story starters, prompts, and "ideas the kids might like" to motivate them. All this teacher energy, with the best of intentions, Graves says, relentlessly leads to child dependence. I've heard a million times from teachers: "But I have to give them ideas," "They can't think of anything to write about."

Most people in charge of classrooms today were brought up by writing teachers who always gave them topics. "Let's write about our summer vacation," the 3rd grade teacher would inevitably say in a sprightly voice at the beginning of September. Yours probably did, too. I remember always expecting the teacher would decide what I would do, no questions asked. In the classrooms of my childhood there were always certain times for certain subjects and rarely were they mixed. Writing was assigned on Mondays and collected on Fridays, and the teacher's word was law.

It was easier when someone else made all the decisions. It might be easier for Justin, too, if I made his decisions and always told him what to do. One of the things I wanted to learn in school, certainly, is how to follow directions; but another thing I want equally for him is that he be able to make intelligent choices in his life, even if it's a 1st grade life. So I don't want to make Justin's decisions. I want Justin to decide what to write about. I want Justin and his classmates to decide what to write, and how to make choices, and also how to be in charge of themselves. I can help, instruct, explain, facilitate, react—but not control. Because I was schooled differently, it's hard to let go of that control.

That's *my* decision to make.□

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