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CTGE: Teaching Beginning Reading and Writing
"Final Reflection"

EMERGING

"Throughout our history, African Americans have sought literacy and have been willing to make sacrifices for the literacy education of their children. These sacrifices have been obvious in the development of community schools created as secret learning environments in places such as Savannah, Georgia and Natchez, Mississippi where slaves and ex-slaves learned to read and write. Later, normal schools across the South and parts of the North continued this tradition. These schools and the self-help educational efforts of African Americans throughout the South attest to the importance assigned to literacy learning as enlightenment and cultural uplift, encouraged through churches and other community institutions (Anderson, 1988). *Similarly, the ability of African Americans to achieve high levels of literacy is demonstrated in the literacy accomplishments and educational contributions of countless numbers of individuals."*[1]

Last Saturday afternoon, hundreds of men, women, and children thronged 135th Street between Malcolm X Boulevard and 8th Avenue to attend the annual Harlem Book Fair. Leading publishing companies were out in force; self-published hopefuls manned their tables while a friend or family member lured browsers with promotional bookmarks. With the help of a microphone, writers drowned out the sounds of traffic as they stood at the center of the street stage to read their poetry and prose. Inside the massive, brick building on the corner—the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—long lines of book lovers waited to enter the auditorium where panels of well-known authors appeared throughout the day.

The merchants had placed the children's titles in prominent positions. (Or perhaps it was the excitement created by wondrous illustrations that made the "kiddie" fare seem to pop up everywhere.) As much as one longed to do so, there was no opportunity to

interview the parents and grandparents who purchased youth-oriented stories about sports figures, Cheetah girls, freedom fighters, and brainy black kids who solve mysteries. Still the question burned: Did this community consider the importance of shared reading? On this sunny Saturday did the intricacies of phonemics give them pause? Did black-and-white statistics regarding literacy dampen their book searches and spending sprees?

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Beginning to teach reading and writing to students within a community renowned for its oral tradition already has proven to be more than a notion and less of a desperate endeavor; it is both a challenge and a joy. Expecting children to comprehend standards-driven texts and vocabulary while muting their appreciation of rhyme and rhythm ignores the schemata educators otherwise rely upon to usher children into written language. On one morning last week, I decided to go with the flow.

Four of the girls in my third-grade summer school class had arrived early, still enjoying a collaboration started during playtime the day before. They whispered and giggled for a while and then seemed to decide that the classroom was their terrain, teacher or no teacher. *"Nappy, nappy, nappy,"* the lead sing-songer began to chant. I was aghast. *"We're happy, happy, happy,"* chimed the other girls, *"happy to be nappy…"*

I combed my mental notes on appropriate public school behavior because this clearly was an insurrection in the making. All four insurgents smiled at me daringly then proceeded as planned: *"We're so very happy; happy to be nappy!"* Was it yet time to begin the shared reading session about Sue the Dinosaur? I prayed quickly that the

[1] Gadsden, Vivian (1995). "Literacy and African-American Youth: Legacy and Struggle." *Literacy and African-American Youth—Issues in Learning, Teaching, and Schooling* (pp. 3-4). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Regular Teacher would be delayed in the hallway. She conveys only a fleeting tolerance for smarties and nonsense.

"Nappy, nappy, nappy," the girls continued toying with fate, *"so happy to be nappy!"*

I considered phoning Scholastic Books and begging them to fax over some honorary, emergency seal of approval. But how would I convince a stranger in a Soho office that significant words were erupting in Harlem? I envisioned a book cover illustration—a group of young girls jumping rope, their dreadlocks blowing in the wind.

Eureka!

"Is that a poem?" I asked.

"No, it's a song," the ringleader answered suspiciously.

"Have you written it down?" Figuring that aliens had abducted the Regular Teacher, I decided to go for broke.

"We don't need to write it down," a new spokesgirlfriend answered. "It's our song and we know it."

I feigned nonchalance, began passing out sharpened pencils. "Oh, really?" I countered with just enough attitude. "Real songwriters *write down* their lyrics. That's how their work is sold."

They took only a couple of seconds to do the math. "We don't have any paper," a negotiator said.

"You came to school without a notebook?"

I was surprised by the ease with which I had lobbed this teacher trick, I was even more startled to watch it work. A notebook appeared, pages were torn out and distributed

among the chanteuses. During the next ten minutes they all scribbled furiously, comparing entries for a moment or two and then returning to their own material. The Regular Teacher's writing lessons sometimes yielded as many as two or three meandering sentences, but as their brainstorm was lifting, I could see that for this labor of love, the girls constructed stanzas to do justice to their verse. The emergent writers and readers passed their work around for a few minutes, chanting for a while to make sure that all of the *"nappys"* and *"happys"* were in place.

To my astonishment, the classroom seemed normal when the Regular Teacher returned.

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It is my hope to work with students on an individual basis as much as possible; I realize that providing one-on-one attention probably will pose my greatest challenge as a teacher. The time restrictions are devastating. "Sounding out" words already is proving to be effective, but only when I have the opportunity to "climb into" a student's ear, ask him/her what they have written or said, and then ask them to repeat the word or sentence slowly. Helping students to compare the words they hear and think with the words that they write often enables them to self-correct. Commuting words into their plural form seems to be the easiest of these corrections so far, but I also have noticed an improvement in word selection.

Reading to the class would be a part of my reading program throughout the week, but not necessarily at the same time of day. I want students to trust the consistency of the activity but not to take the process for granted. I also would like to see if their receptivity is altered if I read to them at the beginning or at the end of a day. Structured reading

would be essential and varied in format. All literary genres would be included—fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry—and each reading unit would be paired with writing assignments that allow the students to create their own works. To help them understand the lasting value of their efforts, I would promise students at the beginning of the year that a literary journal of their best works would be published at the year's end. The class members would select entries; parents would be invited to the book party.

Preparing this collection for publication would involve students further in the processes of rewriting and editing, and also require that they tackle such editorial responsibilities as proofreading, copy editing, and writing brief biographies of the contributors. (The latter task would require one or two students to interview the writers and then to prepare brief descriptions of their classmates' lives and goals.) Illustrations would be welcomed, the selection of these would enable students to consider the relationship between words and images; this should segue into the writing of captions.

So far, during my brief time as a teacher, I have been surprised to discover how many of the basic needs of reading and writing have been neglected. Not all of the students have library cards. Many are not yet comfortable with reference materials such as dictionaries and thesauruses. Their affinities for words are left unsupported by this neglect, and it would be my intention to help students appreciate that their poems, lyrics, correspondence, cartoons, short stories, essays, and term papers all would be better if they spent time refining their use of words. The students with whom I work in Harlem are creative, smart, and savvy, but they have not enjoyed the wealth of educational opportunities needed to inspire young minds.

University of Pennsylvania professor Vivian Gadsden (1995) concurs. She writes: "The African-American youth of the 1990s have not lost the legacy of literacy publicly stated by ex-slaves in1865, but they are in search of a way to reconcile the desire for literacy with the realities of living. The legacy demands much that current literacy practices in school and social conditions out of school cannot ensure—social uplift, liberation, power, and community improvement."[2]

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Creating a reading environment like the one described by Leslie Mandel Morrow in her article about the Rainbow Express Club, "Promoting Innercity Children's Recreational Reading," [3]is so far my ideal. I agree with Morrow's assertion that readers and writers who are comfortable in their surroundings are more likely to focus and far more likely to succeed. Therefore, the classroom environment that I hope to create would contain art, periodicals as well as books, and comfortable reading spaces for individuals and for groups. I would try to set a tone in which the ongoing discussion of reading is enjoyed. Student critiques of books would be posted on bulletin boards and printed in a bimonthly book review. Students also would be encouraged to submit their responses to poetry, films, and lyrics, as long as their criticisms are focused on words or literary devices.

By next summer, I hope that many of the students that I have reached will be a part of the crowd of readers that floods their community for the book fair. I will be happiest if they have to emerge from Harlem's extraordinary libraries in order to do so.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Morrow, Lesley Mandel . "Promoting Innercity Children's Recreational Reading." *The Reading Teacher,* December 1987.