

## 4 Tales from the Author's Office: Language and Learning in First Grade

Clifton School stands atop a green hill that overlooks the tiny nineteenth-century town of Clifton, in western Fairfax County, some thirty miles southwest of Washington, D.C. To reach Mary Browning Schulman's first-grade classroom, I pass through the original half of the school, built early this century, and into the modern wing, built in the last decade. Like the town, whose oldest buildings preserve the rural past but whose residents, in increasing proportion, consist of Washington commuters who inhabit the new developments that ring the town, the school clings to its roots even as it responds to present ideas and their technological symbols. In the common workspace surrounded by the classrooms of the new wing, a computer hugs one wall, while cabinets of crayons, paste, and tempera guard another. Children's paintings cover the other walls: some are of flowers and animals, some of robots and extraterrestrials.

Having arrived early, accompanied by my five-year-old son, Christopher, I admire the art while waiting for Schulman to conclude her conference with a parent. The children have not yet arrived; the school is quiet, ready. Even in this recent addition, I feel caught up in a comfortable tradition, as the old school in the old town begins the new day.

There is nothing quintessentially old, or new, about Mary Schulman's teaching. This is first grade, so the children are young, but they are not "new" to school—most of them have been in a school environment two years or more. In basic terms, *what* Schulman teaches is not new either; the children read, they write, they add and subtract, and they learn (one trusts) to be good citizens of the school while at the same time developing their uniqueness.

What may be new, or at least different from the stereotype of the first-grade class, is *how* these goals are met. And how these goals are met depends, at least in part, on relatively new assumptions that teachers such as Schulman bring to their work each day. Having studied researchers from Britton to Graves, Schulman assumes, for example, that her students bring with them to first grade years of practical experience with language, hence much practical expertise in English grammar, plus some knowledge of spelling. More important,

she makes the basic assumption that children bring with them a great fascination with words, a yearning to communicate, and a yearning to understand. She knows that with opportunity and encouragement, children not only can read and write, talk and listen, but they can grow to perceive themselves as "readers," "writers," "speakers," and "listeners." The distinction between ability and self-awareness of those abilities is crucial for the child's sense of self, and in classrooms like Schulman's the distinction is made deliberately, carefully, and emphatically.

In Schulman's class, everyone is an author, and it is authorship, with its connotations of *authority* and *authenticity*, that distinguishes the language work in this environment from the more passive, fragmented "reading," "writing," etc., that occurs in the conventional first grade. In Schulman's class, reading, writing, speaking, and listening all contribute to authorship. In this environment, people read to comprehend more than just combinations of letters and words, as they do in many first grades. Here the goals are more ambitious. The children read as authors do: to learn new things, to learn what other people think about things, and to learn how people say things. On any given morning, as on this November morning when Christopher and I visit, Schulman's students will read (or listen to) three basic types of texts: the "books" and journal entries written by their classmates, published books for children written by adults, and basal texts that the children read and analyze in small-group workshops. Each type of reading contributes to the idea that "everyone is an author." The children read one another's original drafts because of the mutual reward received by being and having a good audience. They do this because they have already learned that authors help one another in this way. As soon as a child finishes reading his or her story to another student or to a group, the author tells what he or she likes best about the manuscript and then asks for questions and comments, as these are the two response methods by which writers learn about their work. In addition to each other's writings, the children read published books because they want to learn new things, new ways of imagining, and new ways of writing. Though the children may not yet conceptualize these reasons, they act on them by adapting to their own work the styles or techniques of the professional writers they encounter. For example, Kimberly tells the class that the "zigzag" printing style in her own book on autumn was something she saw and liked in a book about Halloween. The children are also attracted to the small library of published books in the classroom because of the veneration in which the authors are held. Every Monday sees a new "Author of the Week"—this week Stan and Jan Berenstain are

featured—and the children bring in books by these authors to display and share during the week.

The way in which groups of students in reading workshops read and talk about basal stories mirrors to a great extent the way Schulman wants the children to pay attention to their own and each other's writing. Schulman will project, or display on newsprint, an extended passage from a story, and the group will begin the workshop by reading the passage aloud in unison. Then each child in turn will read a section of the passage and identify particular words to which Schulman points. Schulman will then consider the text in various ways. She'll point out new or difficult words and ask the children for other words they'd like repeated or defined. She'll ask them for questions about the plot or about relationships of characters—anything they are puzzled about or would like to comment on. She'll also point out grammatical features that the students might adapt to their own stories: using quotation marks to show dialogue, for example. Finally, she'll ask them, as she does when they listen to one another's writings, to suggest a clearer or "better" way of saying something:

*Schulman:* How would you change the text?

*Gavin:* I think it should say "said the duck," not "he said," because it's easier to understand.

By treating the published text in this way, she reinforces for the children the idea that all texts, even printed ones, are revisable. The workshop also allows the children to practice the kinds of analysis and response that are appropriate when considering each other's work. Another function of the group is that it allows the airing of different opinions:

*Mark:* I think you could say "he said" because it says "the duck" in the line before.

Better than any lecture by the teacher, this reiterated experience teaches these six-year-old authors about the variety of audiences and about alternative ways of viewing.

When "everyone is an author," the milieu of authorship, even in first grade, can be so invigorating, so inherently exciting, that the members of the community seek every opportunity to engage in its routines. During the ample amount of unstructured time in which the children can work on their writings-in-progress, students continually seek out one another as listeners to their drafts, or ask for comments on the pictures to accompany the stories, or invite other children to join them in reading books from the Author of the Week display. Christopher, a year younger than the regular class members, is quickly made a part of the community through invitations to listen to, look

at, and talk about the prized prose of different individuals. Every child in the class seems proud of his or her work and eager to share it.

The prestige of authorship in Mary Schulman's room is tangibly symbolized. As in Carin Hauser's class, Schulman has arranged the desks in "tables" of five or six to make small-group workshops easier. In addition, an assortment of chairs of different sizes and designs forms a kind of reading room beside the Author of the Week display, and these are available for impromptu pairs or threes that want a bit of privacy for their literary conversations.

One special symbol of authorial prestige is the "Author's Office"—a brown cardboard playhouse with a door and a window. Within it are a chair, a desk, and a lamp. The "office" dominates the back wall of the room. Every day a different child is "in residence" there, for as much privacy as he or she wishes. Of course, since the children much prefer one another's company—and attentiveness—the "author" spends little time there. Still, holding the office is a real source of pride. The boy who holds the honor on the day we visited invites both Christopher and me into "his" office to try out "his" chair and desk.

Perhaps the central routine of the morning is Sharing Time. About ten o'clock, the entire class gathers on the carpet near the Author's Office, and one child sits in a small rocker and reads aloud from his or her writing. As they listen, the children munch on midmorning snacks—the granola bars, pretzels, or cheese cubes they've brought from home just for Sharing Time.

On this morning, Stephanie reads her current work, a Christmas morning story that she has written and illustrated on both sides of an 11" x 16" poster. As she reads, she holds up the poster so all can see her drawings. When her reading is concluded, she, according to practice, asks for comments and questions:

*Kevin:* How did you get the idea to write about Christmas?

*Stephanie:* It's coming soon. I knew that Santa would be here with lots of toys.

*Mary:* I like the way you did the sequins on the tree.

*Kimberly:* So do I. I like the story, too.

*Mary:* Is that you in the picture?

*Stephanie:* No. Santa. We aren't there, because we went out to eat. I didn't say it was Santa because I didn't have time.

*Mary:* What would you add if you could?

*Stephanie:* I'd add a note that says, "Dear Santa—We're not here."

When the questions and comments conclude, all the children applaud the author. Sharing Time continues with two or three other children reading their writings aloud. About once a week each child has a turn.

their writing and often questioned them about things I wanted to know more about or that I didn't understand. Modeling questions and responses—such as “Read what you wrote,” “Tell me more about . . .,” “This isn't clear to me. Explain what you mean,” “Does that make sense?”—helped the children think about clarifying, adding to, and evaluating what they wrote. Gradually many of the same questions and responses were adopted by the children as they listened to each other's writings during Sharing Time. As they wrote and as they talked about their writings, they began to think about others' viewpoints. A sense of audience began to develop as they listened to each other's writings. One day when Jennifer read her story to the class during Sharing Time, someone asked her the name of her cat. She responded, “I should tell my cat's name 'cause some people might not know.”

Providing these kindergarten children with the opportunity to generate writing and to talk about their writing in a short conference was but one way to help them explore writing. Listening to books written by professional authors provided another occasion for the children to respond to and question written language. In addition, it also exposed them to a rich variety of language models. In what I refer to as a “literature conference,” questioning went beyond who was in the story and what happened when. When I first began reading aloud to the children, I modeled my thinking process as a reader interacting with the story or text. Soon we began to work through it as a group. The children began summarizing what the story text was about as I read, discussing things that were not clear to them (i.e., monitoring to make sense), predicting what might come next, and using background knowledge and new information to form their own opinions and ideas.

When I followed the children from kindergarten to first grade, I decided to design my reading program to meet, support, and extend the development of the children's writing abilities. I was aware of the pressures of administrators, colleagues, and parents to teach reading through the basal text program, and like many teachers, I was cognizant of the shortcomings of the basal texts. Since these children, as kindergarteners, were capable of writing more meaningful text and using more complex sentence patterns than the basal text, my asking them to read the same word repeatedly seemed an insult to their intelligence. When the children began to read the basal text, I did not want them to assume that any failure on their part to understand or make sense of the text meant there was some deficit in their understanding; I wanted them to be aware of the shortcomings that resided

in the reading matter. When children are made to read such conversations as "Good morning, Buffy. Good morning, Mack. Good morning, Buffy. Good morning, Mack. Good morning, Buffy and Mack," they might have little incentive to read books on their own if they think that such reading is all that school has to offer.

Early in September, I began using a reading conference quite similar to the writing conference and the literature conference. I had the children read from the basal text independently, and our conference did not include using the questions in the teacher's manual. Prior to the actual reading conference, I met with the group to introduce new vocabulary from the basal text and to set the purpose for reading. The children read the text on their own and returned later in the morning or the next day to discuss the text. The reading conference often began with the children telling what they liked about the basal story (what had happened). Next, they asked questions about what they were still curious to know or what they didn't understand. Finally, they asked questions of the basal text author(s) and made suggestions.

The reading conference provided an opportunity for children to apply some of the same evaluative standards to the basal texts that they applied to their own writings and the writings of professional authors, as demonstrated in this discussion.

*Teacher:* What did you like in this story?

*Child 1:* I like how he makes Mack carry the sign and balloons . . . and how he made Mack write on the balloons.

*Child 2:* I liked how the author used an exclamation point after "Lost" and "Buffy" on the balloon. You know he means lost and wants Buffy.

*Child 3:* I like how he asked a question and then answered it [referring to the text: "Was Mack lost? Mack was lost!"].

*Teacher:* What is it that you're still curious about knowing?

*Child 4:* Back here I'd ask why all the balloons are the same [referring to height in the air]. He [Mack] let go at different times, so some should be higher, not the same like here.

*Child 5:* I'd ask where they go. I know it says they went up to the hill, but I want to know after that.

*Teacher:* [Turning back to first page in story] I want to know why Mack walked into the high grass in the first place to put the sign up. It doesn't seem like the best place for it.

*Child 5:* Maybe he didn't realize he'd get lost.

The reading conference helped the children begin to predict and reflect on the story's content, to search for clarifications and elaborations, and to accept the responsibility for interpreting and constructing their own meaning. As makers of language, they were not intimidated by written language—not even when that written language was part of a published basal text. They had become active writers and readers intent on creating meaning. They had become aware of the choices facing them and the strategies they could use to get their meanings across, and like Kirstin, many of these first graders had come to regard themselves as veteran writers.

### **Reference**

Early, Margaret, Elizabeth K. Cooper, and Nancy Santeusanio. *Sun Up*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.