

**Marion Nordberg**

## **CLAREMONT READING CONFERENCE PRESENTATION**

### **Personalizing Learning**

I believe it is my responsibility to provide a stimulating, relaxed atmosphere where children do have the freedom to explore and learn in their own way using the many materials available in the classroom. My classroom environment is open in terms of children being free to select learning experiences in which they can work individually or with others, but it is not open in terms of standards for work and conduct. I have a high level of expectation for the quality of each child's work, and the children take great pride in the process of doing, of creating, of learning. Both teacher and children accept responsibility for students who are unable to be responsible for themselves. Loss of the freedom of choice is one of the worst consequences that can befall a child in this kind of learning environment, so consequently irresponsible behavior is seldom observed.

The enrollment in my multi-age classroom is approximately 33 children with their ages ranging from 4 to 9 years. This includes the traditional span from kindergarten through third grade. They are completely heterogeneously grouped with as broad a range as one can imagine. It is a family-type grouping, where brothers and sisters can share the same classroom, and most of the children remain for 3 or 4 years. I am thoroughly convinced of the values of multi-age grouping for both the children and me. Children learn best from one another, not from adults, and as they help one another, they reinforce their own learning and get a strong ego boost as well.

The classroom furniture is arranged to section off areas so visitors are frequently unaware of the large number of K-3 children present. Parents provided the carpet for the classroom, and the room has a very relaxed home-like appearance with its two couches, two stuffed chairs, and the many plants. For want of a better term, a dear friend has called my classroom "warehouse education." The materials in this "warehouse" are on open shelves, and they are easily accessible to the children. Both shelves and boxes are labeled so materials can be more easily found and returned to the same shelf.

In this classroom environment, children are aware that the written expression of their ideas is an integral part of everything they create. Even the youngest ones soon learn to bring their designs and pictures to an adult so that the prefolded writing paper can be pasted on. The youngest then dictate ideas to an adult or to an older child who carefully writes the child's words in pencil. The child traces over some or all of this writing with colorful ink pens so it can be more easily read when it is displayed in the classroom. Beginners are not expected to read what they have dictated. Later when children begin to write their own sentences, they are more able to read what they have written. Older, more knowledgeable children, watched in awe. This September, as one little four year old dictated the following "O 7 S 4." "It's just like a secret code," another child remarked. By the end of September, even this little one was dictating ideas about her pictures, and in October she was occasionally trying to write a few real words of her own. In January, she was using her own dictionary to write her sentences, sometimes seated close to an adult, and at other times coming for help as she requested the spelling of one word at a time as she wrote about her picture.

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When children request a dictionary, they are given one of the two kinds available. One has high frequency words as well as blank pages for the many personal words a child needs. The other has only the alphabetical index tab with no printed words. When requesting the spelling of a word, children are urged to have their dictionaries open to the beginning sound of this word. If the word being asked for is already listed, an oval mark is made around the word with the erasure end of the teacher's pencil, as this helps the young child remember which word to copy.

As children finish their writing, they come to an adult for proofreading. The teacher values each child's oral and written expressions. The writing is read aloud with the adult ignoring any errors so that the ideas being conveyed can be appreciated. Proofreading becomes a learning experience of both child and adult as they freely communicate with one another about the ideas being presented. The adult has the unique opportunity to see things through a child's eyes, and the thinking levels and understanding of both can be extended by comments or questions. When changes are necessary, the adult does the erasing, explains the whys, and even "ghosts" in the correction with light writing when requested to do so by the child. There is no red pencil "hemorrhaging" on the child's paper, and the child does not have to live with a history of his past mistakes.

The teacher uses the child's natural language when refining skills, and the teacher helps children find their own mistakes. The "whys" of correct expression are explained, but children reserve the right to preserve their original language. The "me and my friend" which often sounds best to a little child is genuinely accepted, but an awareness that there is another way is introduced.

After proofreading, children can use colorful ink pens to trace over their writing or they can choose to do so the following day. Any errors when using the pens are usually easily covered by "paper patch ups," white gummed labels which are always available for children's use.

Knowing what to write about is seldom a problem in our busy classroom where the natural language interaction among children is constant. Ideas flourish and are constantly embellished. Children write of their feelings of love, hate, anger, fear, and sorrow. They write about their real or imaginary experiences. TV for many is a stimulus which sparks their imaginations and delightfully creative stories and illustrations result. Some enjoy doing research on timely topics i.e., tarantulas, katydids, or a bat – all of which have been a part of our classroom environment. Writing and illustrating books to be placed on our special shelves reserved for class authors is an honor enjoyed by many.

Children are expected to do some reading, writing, and math each morning before lunch. They know they can be excused from this requirement if they want to spend extra time working in an area of particular interest to them. They show unusual initiative and enthusiasm as they work on specific tasks selected by them, and they are completely unaware of time and the daily schedules found in most classes.

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In an environment where there is freedom, choice, and responsibility, children learn about themselves and the world in an inductive, personal way. In this atmosphere, the relationship between speaking, reading, writing, and math become an integral part of each child's learning in the real world which they bring with them into the classroom.