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The Colors of Poetry: Student Poets in the Washington Reading Corps

Second Place

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I. Hazel Valley's Third Graders -- What Color Are You?

"What are some things that are blue?" The five third graders looked at me like I was speaking another language. We had been talking about poetry for 10 minutes now and Triet, a Vietnamese boy, had already called me "weird." Kayla, a blond-haired girl of 10, had told me twice that she was a poet and promised to bring "dozens" of her poems in for me to read. Lindsey hadn't said much, but was writing in the notebook I had given her, while Martin rolled his eyes and said he "hated poems." Samuel, an ESL student just arrived from Honduras, didn't say much, but his eyes were bright and he was just leaning over to whisper something to his teacher.

"What are some things that are blue?" We were going to write color poems, but first I wanted to talk with the kids a little bit about what they thought of different colors. Kayla raised her hand (a habit I said wasn't necessary for poetry class) and ventured, "The sky?" As I nodded, Lindsey followed up with, "The ocean," more confidently now. Samuel was still in consultation with his teacher, but then abruptly broke off and looked over at me. "Samuel," I said, "Do you have something that's blue?" He nodded and said, in a voice just barely over a whisper, "A shadow?" Martin snickered and Lindsey smiled. "A shadow's not blue." But then Triet said, "A tree's shadow is." I asked him what he meant by that and he replied, "Like in the night when the sky is dark blue and everything's dark so the tree's shadow looks like the sky." Everyone was quiet except for Samuel who was saying, "Yes, yes." Even

Martin began to nod and added, "A cloud is blue." By now all our imaginations were working and we all wrote poems about our favorite colors. Triet wrote about blue.

I like blue.

Blue is like a magic hat.

Blue is the color that makes me happy.

Blue is like a very small star.

Blue is like the rainbow.

It is just like the world's ocean.

I like blue.

Yellow blue.

Green blue.

Purple blue.

Blue blue.

I like blue.

We ended by reading our poems to each other. I mentioned a "green smile" in mine and as they were leaving Kayla said to me, "Mr. McCann, you are weird. But I like your poetry."

II. The WRC and the Highline School District -- Project Background

The Washington Reading Corps is a nonprofit statewide initiative sponsored by Governor Locke with the express purpose of providing extra help to those elementary school age children who are having a difficult time learning how to read. As an AmeriCorps*VISTA for the WRC I have many roles. My first and foremost responsibility is to recruit and manage community volunteers, thus ensuring the sustainability of the program in the years to come. However, I also take responsibility for maintaining a consistent level of tutoring during the year so as to help the students in my assigned schools, Bow Lake and Madrona.

When I arrived in September I found that many of the first graders we had committed to serve did not know the sounds of the alphabet. The second and third graders were reading at below first-grade level; the fourth and fifth graders at second-grade level. Clearly, we had much to do. The Highline School District has a great problem with mobility and student turnover that contributes to the poor

reading scores of the children we serve. For example, at Madrona Elementary last year, there was a turnover rate of over 85 percent. What that breaks down into is that over 40 percent of the students left to attend another school and were replaced by new kids. Therefore, the classes at Madrona had very little stability and children would develop friendships only to come into class after a weekend and find out that their friends had moved. For kids who have the emotional and physical stress of moving several times in one year it is no wonder that reading comes only with difficulty, if at all.

The WRC schools in the Highline School District have committed to a rigorous schedule of tutoring throughout this academic year. AmeriCorps members, community volunteers, and peer tutors work with children one-on-one or in small groups to provide the extra assistance these kids need. The tutoring curriculum varies by school, but one component I felt was missing from all of them was creativity. Most of the tutoring lessons focus on certain sounds or combinations of sounds so as to build a solid foundation of both decoding techniques and sight words on which the child will be able to draw. However, in their attention to detail, they neglect to harness one of the most powerful learning tools any child has: her own creativity and the enthusiasm it engenders.

In his book, *Creating the World: Poetry, Art, and Children*, John Carpenter writes, "I was struck, above all, by the very close relationship between the creative act and the act of learning." I had the idea that by encouraging kids to apply their natural creativity to the activity of writing, I would see a greater desire to learn develop. With this in mind, I designed a series of poetry workshops to conduct with varying grade-level students throughout the district. I hoped to inspire an excitement about language in these children and, consequently, ignite a greater desire to improve their reading skills. Lucy McCormick Calkins, a teacher at the Teachers' College at Columbia University, asserts, "Because the children perceive themselves as authors, they will make connections with the books they read. They'll notice the way a word is spelled, the use of the table of contents, the presence of exclamation marks." I had a feeling this was true, but I wanted to see for myself.

III. The Trouble with Sixth Graders -- A Study in Perseverance

After my third workshop with a classroom full of sixth graders I was feeling fairly depressed. I did not sense very much enthusiasm for poetry amongst these kids and it was very difficult to keep them focused for the hour that I was there. My mind kept returning to the conversation I had with their teacher before we started. Barb Carmichael had said to me, "I am so excited that you're going to be able to come in to my class and do this. We just don't have anyone who wants to teach poetry to these kids and I have the feeling that they'll love it." But now, I wasn't so sure. I sought her out at the end of class as the kids were pushing by me to get to lunch, and I asked her, "Do you think I should come back for the last workshop?" I was half hoping she would say no. Instead, she looked at me as though I were crazy. "Why wouldn't you come back? My kids love what you're doing. They come up to me on the playground and ask if 'Mr. Poetry Man' is coming today." I smiled, but really wasn't convinced. "So you think they're getting something out of it?" She said, "Listen to this poem that Trina wrote today." Trina was a very shy girl who rarely spoke above a whisper if at all. We had been writing poems about animals that live in urban settings, a topic that was tied to the unit they were studying. Trina had written this poem:

I am a finch and I am so shy

That I like to sit in my nest

And sing to myself.

When along came another bird

And said, "Hello."

He asked me what I was doing

And I said, "I'm just sitting here

And singing to myself

Because I'm too shy to go out there

And let everyone see me like this.

I was amazed and couldn't think of anything to say. I had expected that everyone who enjoyed writing poetry would tell me about it and be very visibly excited. Here was a student who had found a perfect outlet for her ideas and emotions and who would have never said a word about it. Needless to say, I returned for the fourth and final session, which proved to be a great success.

V. The Structure of the Poetry Workshop

The workshops are consistent. Before our first session I create notebooks for the kids. I make construction paper covers and staple the books together. For the front cover of each one I select a poem by a known poet (Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Shiki, Louise Gluck) and paste it on. On the first page of the book, I paste a poem written by a child of the equivalent grade level in a New York Public School. These poems come from a book called *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* by poet Kenneth Koch. He spent several years in the New York City school system teaching kids how to write poetry and this book is an anthology of his students' poems and a primer on how to teach poetry to children. For each subsequent session I paste a new poem written by a student. The children are especially excited about these poems and by the idea that kids their age have written them.

The first lesson consists of a brief period of getting to know each other, followed by a reading of the poems on the front covers of the students' notebooks. We spend a little time discussing each poem and then move on to the poems written by students from New York. These poems treat certain subjects and themes like colors, lies, noises, the way you used to be versus how you are now, and the way you appear to be versus the way you really are. We talk about the subject for a few minutes and then write a collaborative poem that I write down in a notebook or on a blackboard. After reading our collaborative poem aloud, we take about 10 minutes and each write our own poems. Finally, in the last few minutes, we read our poems aloud.

The kids seem to enjoy the collaborative poem because it allows them to test out some of their ideas with the others before committing them to paper. The collaborative poem sometimes inspires a sort of friendly competition amongst them as they each try to top each other with the next line. This is especially true in the poems we write about lies where each shouted-out untruth is wilder than the one

before it. No one is entirely satisfied with the result of these poems we write together and, consequently, the kids become excited to write their own poems and have total creative control. Thus, the collaborative poem is the crux of the workshop, fostering a spirit of wild creativity and inspiring the kids to work independently.

VI. Stan and the Cheetahs -- Alternative Solutions

Stan, an African American second grader, didn't want to write any poetry at all. He was reticent about his reasons, but he seemed to feel uncomfortable in a group that included several very vocal poets. The third time I met with this group of kids, I knew I had to do something to draw Stan out. I had talked to him many times before and knew him to be an intelligent and creative child. The previous evening I had been thumbing through an issue of *National Geographic* and had come across an article on cheetahs. I knew that Stan loved to run and had accumulated more "lap tickets" for running around the soccer field at recess than anyone else I knew. I thought that this might be a way to get him interested in writing. When I gave him the magazine the next afternoon, Stan looked up at me and asked, "How did you know that cheetahs were my favorite animal?" We sat down and looked through the magazine a little bit before the other kids arrived. That afternoon, in his "Wish" poem, Stan wrote the following lines:

I wish you were a butterfly

And I wish I was a bumblebee.

I wish I had a cheetah so I could race him

And be faster than Dexter.

I wish I was a cheetah

So I could race across Africa

In the night with all the stars.

I wish I could run so fast

I would be invisible

Like a flash of light.

I have since moved on to other schools, but when I see Stan in the hallways of Madrona he tells me that he still writes poetry in the notebook I gave him and that someday he will show it to me.

VII. The Other Side of the Project -- Community Impact

The Washington Reading Corps program in the Highline School District struggles every year to recruit enough volunteers to fully serve all of the target student population in the elementary schools.

The HSD has a few VISTAs, but not nearly enough to serve every school to its level of need. The goal of the WRC program is to achieve self-sufficiency by the time the AmeriCorps members leave the schools. The only way to achieve this sustainability is to have in place a firm foundation of community volunteers who plan to return. I want to develop as many strong relationships between community volunteers and the schools as possible in the hopes that these volunteers will continue to come into the schools and tutor needy students.

One of the best ways to achieve this self-sufficiency is to raise the level of awareness and interest about the WRC program in the Highline School District. The main selling point of the WRC program is the opportunity to interact with vibrant and enthusiastic children. I want to entice volunteers through success stories and offer them the chance to both give to and receive from the children with whom they develop relationships. In order to do this, it is necessary to present the children as individuals and, more importantly, as people who have something to give. One of the community volunteers who comes into Bow Lake to tutor two first graders told me, "I feel like I'm getting a lot more out of this experience than I'm giving. My kids are so great. They teach me something every day!" That is the feeling we want to be able to convey in whatever form of public relations we undertake.

For this reason, I decided that compiling an anthology of poetry that the students in the WRC have written would be a perfect marketing tool for the program. The book would frame the kids as creative and dynamic individuals who have something to teach everyone about imagination and enthusiasm. As an attractive, interesting product it would receive wide release and would function as very tangible proof that the program does get results. With distribution to government officials, national AmeriCorps personnel, WRC staff, HSD employees, media, and the kids themselves, the book would become something of a touchstone for the whole program. With the correct timing and placement, the media attention will draw new volunteers into the schools. The roots of sustainability lie in ongoing partnerships with local businesses who will send volunteers every year and it is for this reason that the book is also being distributed to business owners in the HSD as a marketing tool to inspire interest in the WRC. A publishing ceremony in June will involve the students, politicians, business owners, and all aforementioned groups in a media -- covered event that will increase the name recognition of the WRC throughout the area. The end result of all these efforts will be a more sustainable volunteer base for the WRC in the Highline School District.

VIII. Bored Kids? -- Impacts on the Poets

As the final line of one of his poems, Triet, the third grader from Hazel Valley, wrote, "I used to be a bored kid, but now I'm a student poet." Many of the kids with whom I have worked had not been very excited about reading. One second grader told me she "couldn't read," but ended up writing a 15-line poem about all the things she wished were true. A sixth-grade boy said that he "hated to read," but by the end of the fourth and final workshop was asking me for more poems that he could read at home.

School is, for the most part, a very rational place. Teachers concentrate on logic and deduction and give their students a solid foundation in the world of analytical thought. Even first and second graders search diligently for the right answer, the right color crayon to use for a fish, the right way to ask to go to the bathroom. The first five minutes of every workshop we spend on exercises that encourage the kids to think less rationally and more creatively. By using a different part of their brains they are able to tap into the great stores of energy, enthusiasm, and inventiveness that lie there. After they

spend even as little as half an hour writing poetry, I have found that the same kids who would flatly refuse to read before are now asking me for books and begging me to stay longer so that they can experiment some more with language. In *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, Kenneth Koch asserts:

The educational advantages of a creative, intellectual, and emotional activity which children enjoy are clear. Writing poetry makes children feel happy, capable, and creative. It makes them feel more open to understanding and appreciating what others have written (literature). It even makes them want to know how to spell and say things correctly (grammar). Once Mrs. Magnani's students were excited about words, they were dying to know how to spell them. Learning becomes part of an activity they enjoy -- when my fifth graders were writing their Poems Using Spanish Words they were eager to know more words than I had written on the board; one girl left the room to borrow a dictionary. Of all these advantages, the main one is how writing poetry makes children feel:

creative; original; responsive, yet in command.

Over the past few months of teaching these poetry workshops I have discovered this to be very true. The kids with whom I've worked leave the workshops confident and excited about writing poetry and the opportunities it affords. Moreover, they leave more interested in reading than they arrived. Words are something they understand now, because they know how to use them to express their own ideas and their own imaginations. Reading has become accessible.

IX. Yellow Wonderful Things About My Sister - Sustainability and the Future

The best thing about the poetry workshops I've been conducting is that the effects are far reaching. At the publication ceremony in June, each poet will read one of his or her poems and will receive a copy of the WRC Poetry Anthology for the Highline School District. I spoke about sustainability for the program earlier, but the wonderful thing about opening up the world of writing to these kids is that they become truly self-sufficient. Many of these children will continue to write poems long after the four workshops are over because poetry has gotten them excited about language. That enthusiasm and confident creativity are crucial factors in both learning how to read and improving reading skills. In essence, learning how to write poetry allows these kids to utilize another part of their brains in the all-important struggle for literacy.

When I first met Kayla and told her that I was there to write some poems with her and her classmates, the third grader replied, "I'm already a poet." On the same day that Triet wrote his poem about the color blue, she wrote a celebration of yellow that left me speechless.

"Yellow Wonderful Things About My Sister"

My sister's like a smiling sunshine.

My sister's like a sweet lemon.

My sister's like a yellow ice skater.

My sister makes the world laugh.

My sister is the color of her heart.

My sister's like a burst of yellow ice cream.

My sister is like a stream of yellow wildflowers.

My sister makes the world sing.

My sister is like never ending poetry.

To echo one of the community volunteers, I feel that I've learned much more from these student poets than I have taught. When I imagined myself doing "national service," I always saw myself as the teacher. Writing poetry with these children has taught me that I am forever a student. The impact of poetry on these communities of highly mobile, economically disadvantaged kids may not be immediately apparent. However, when I see the eyes of a third grader who "hates to read" brighten at the thought of writing a poem about his dreams I know that a seed has been planted. I have a hope for his future and, more importantly, so does he.

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