

Making Writing Fun by George Bennett Village School 4th-6th grade teacher

One of the aims of every language arts teacher is to have children become motivated writers, and a good way to do this is to have them write a play together. At the Village School, an independent elementary school in Royalston, the 4th-6th grade class has written and performed an original play annually for the past dozen years.

The class works with a year-long theme - this year it has been Ancient Greece - and our annual play is designed to give the children an opportunity to bring together the various strands of the year's theme study. Besides this, there are two underlying principles behind the Village School play-writing process; the play will be written by the children themselves, and every child will have a speaking part.

In the first instance, therefore, the play is simply a writing exercise, but one that turns even the most reluctant writer into an enthusiast. The play is devised by the children themselves, and begins with a somewhat chaotic, but very creative pooling of ideas which draws on myths, history and literature. These ideas are distilled down into an opening scene between several of the main characters, with the outline situation and initial plot direction agreed by the class.

Each child then writes his or her own version of the scene - often for homework - and the class teacher takes all the individual scripts and chooses various lines from each of them to form a composite script. The class reads each scene together, and makes adjustments where necessary. Sometimes these minor changes simply make the dialogue flow better or, as the play progresses, later scenes have to be adjusted to make them consistent with what was written earlier. Invariably it's the children rather than the teacher who notice any anomalies. In the early stages we may not have decided the whole plot, or even worked out who all the characters will be, but these become clear as we continue writing. As the play develops, each child produces his or her own complete script, while contributing lines to the overall combined script that the class will eventually perform.

The children write to a tight deadline, typically having only one lesson or one homework assignment for each scene. Even so, they often write as many as half a dozen pages of script, and all the students, even hesitant writers, find themselves highly motivated. Several children have noted that this motivation spills over into their other writing, not least because producing their own play script has proved to them that they can write successfully.

The children's scripts are full of humor, and this year was particularly notable for the way various children picked up another student's jokes, and developed them in later scenes. This sharing of ideas is a good example of the way the play process allows the children to work creatively together.

The plays have also lengthened over the years, as both teachers and students have become more confident in what is possible for a 4th- 5th- or 6th-grader to achieve. This year's play ran for seventy minutes, and with a cast of only thirteen students, each one had between forty and seventy-five cues to remember. They managed it with scarcely a stumble.

The whole play process gives the children confidence. We've had children who were chronically shy but found that they were able to step onto the stage and perform with gusto. Because having everyone perform is part of our play culture, the children know, even before they join the 4th-6th grade class, that they will be speaking in the public performances. As

2nd-3rd-graders, they join the play as non-speaking extras, which also helps accustom them to the idea of acting when they enter the older class. The fact that everyone contributes to the script also gives them ownership of the whole play, and this in turn builds the children's confidence in their writing and in their ability to act a part in public.

Finally (although this is not an exhaustive list of benefits) the play brings the class together and creates, or reinforces, a strong community feeling, and a shared pride in the whole endeavor. Year after year we have seen the class come closer together as the writing, rehearsing and performing unfold in a period of just seven weeks. In a three-grade class, this carries over into the following years for the younger grades, while the graduating 6th-graders, with three plays behind them, approach middle and high school with an assurance that spills over into everything they do.