



WRITING FROM THE HEART

I am investigating a theory about the value of holding writing classes for children and youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties. At this point I cannot show enough data to prove my theory, but I can tell you what I have been doing with seven youth writers from the Dawn Project in Indianapolis.

As a fifth grade teacher, I have recently learned new ways to help students write about subjects close to their hearts, subjects that have meaning in their individual lives. As the mother of a youth with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties, I have some sense of how much frustration, anxiety, anger and other strong emotion seems to reside in the heads and hearts of many adolescents. In June 2001, I decided to launch a writing project with youth from the Dawn Project.

During the summer I worked with a total of seven adolescent writers and the seven adults who brought them to the class (service coordinators in six cases, a mother in the other case), though all seven never showed up at the same time. Although the writers received more individualized attention when only one or two came to the class, all of them seemed to prefer classes with more than two students. All of the youth writers were in middle school or high school, and all of them seemed to enjoy having the adults write along with them.

I began by explaining that this class would probably not resemble writing they had done in school with lots of rules and formulas to follow. I asked them if they ever had thoughts and feelings that no one knew they had, opinions that no one had ever asked them to share, and ideas about all the things they had been through. Every young writer readily acknowledged having had such thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas. I told them this would be a chance to write about some of those things.

Students selected pens and writers' notebooks from a selection I put before them, and we all began writing. Occasionally I would suggest a topic if they didn't have something to write about. (Do you remember

A Broken Heart and Shattered Dreams By Amber Helpingstine

A broken heart and shattered dreams,
Things are not really as they seem,
Years of abandonment and pain,
Things just seem like they will never
be the same.
Searching for answers
But really not knowing the questions
to ask,
A lot of times children will put on these
invisible masks.
They put on the masks to hide their hurt,
Afraid that if someone knows
They will get stepped on like a piece
of dirt,
Scared and confused, these kids
really don't know
What to say or do,
They have little ways of reaching out
For help and advice,
But because of their masks,
Sometimes people can't hear their cries
—And they just go on about their daily
lives,
As if everything is okay.
But what these children really need
Is to release their anger, hurt, and pain.
They need a helping hand and a person,
Or rather a mentor, who will understand.
Who will take the time to listen and
help remove
Their masks to see what's behind the
disguise,
And see beyond their lies.
A person who will show them that life is
not really
What it seems and that they truly can
overcome
Their problems and achieve their
dreams.
—December 17, 2001

a favorite toy from your childhood? Do you remember a time when you were really happy? Or really angry?) Often the topics I suggested caused them to remember particular incidents. Their lives had been filled with incidents, and from the beginning they chose to write about things that had happened to them or feelings they had.

These students were much more eager to share what they had written, even when their topics involved painful emotions, than students in my regular classroom. Admittedly, the ones who came to the writing class came voluntarily while my students at school must write, but the sharing in the summer writing class became almost as important as the writing itself.

Our class met for an hour once a week. Sometimes the students still wanted to keep writing and sharing even though it was time for the class to end. Two of the students brought in writing they had done before coming to the class. In both cases, they brought in things they had written during a time of crisis.

By the end of the summer I knew I had not fully explored the idea of having a writing class or writing club for youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties. I had read enough of their poignant reflections to know all of them had more to write. Several of them liked the idea of writing to let people know what it was like to walk in their shoes when it came to issues like therapy, school, and upheavals at home. This was important writing both

for them and for the people who would read what they had written. I knew we needed to continue the writing. I still have more questions than answers, but each Monday afternoon from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m., I take my bag of notebooks and fancy pens to a conference room at the Dawn Project offices. I write and confer with those who can make it to class. We are working to bring the group up to 10 or 12 youth who attend on a regular basis. I plan to listen to their ideas about whether we should make it more of a club than a class. I will help them revise and edit their pieces so many of them will be ready to publish.

My theory is that writing workshops can be important enrichment activities that bring rewards to the writers and better understanding to their audiences. I encourage others to experiment with writers' notebooks and classes where students can find the encouragement and mentoring they need to write from their hearts about things that are important to them.

Julie Berry teaches fifth grade at the Orchard School in Indianapolis, Indiana, and spends her volunteer time as president of Families Reaching for Rainbows, the Marion County, Indiana chapter of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. At home, she and her husband, Ron, face the continuing challenge of helping their two teenage sons grow into the best men that they can possibly be. Email: jberry@kidwrap.org

My Step Dad Wayne Fixed My Bike For Me By Phillip Shepherd

My step dad Wayne fixed my bike for me. Normally this would have been just an everyday normal thing. I broke my bike by running over a stick. I have lied in the past about other broken bike incidents, but Wayne believed me this time. That really meant a lot to me. It's really hard for my step dad to forget about the past. Sometimes I wonder why he believes that I'm telling the truth, 'cause at first he wasn't going to believe me. I wonder what made him change his mind so quickly like that. My step dad has really changed in the past year. He has changed in many ways. He's very forgiving. He stops and thinks about what he says, and he catches himself before saying something he knows would hurt me.

—July 24, 2001