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FROM OVERSEAS

#LANGUAGE ENERGIZED, PARTICIPATION MAXIMIZED: THE GROWTH OF A WRITING PROJECT

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Sitting at my desk, I was reviewing the school's standardized test scores. Although I did not make time to eat lunch that day, I was feeling rather satisfied. The third grade had achieved grammar scores which averaged one and one-half grade equivalents higher than two years ago. Digesting the results, I heard some students talking at the office window.

The second grade girls were discussing the spelling of the word cafeteria, as they methodically completed the Complaint Form. In their earnest dialogue, they switched back and forth from English to Navajo. With their three noses competing for room over the form on the front office counter, the students were filing a grievance. The students had a problem and filling out the complaint form was the best way to get help in this school. Although the form would air their grievance, the students' conduct represented an even deeper message: Children attending Ganado Primary School are expected to write and the students know that their writing is taken seriously.

These students are participants in a unique school-wide writing project which was first implemented in 1980. The K-3 writing program, known as the GLAD (Ganado Language Arts Development) Project, has published thirty-one (31) volumes of student writing. In addition, this year, nine issues of a new school newspaper were published, complete with literary supplement.

At the same time, positive changes are taking place within the school community. Surveys indicate that 98% of the parents support continuation of the Project and at many school functions this year, there was standing room only. Students also seem to be more comfortable with the school environment as absences averaged less than five days per child in 1982-83, a startling 50% decrease over three years ago. Teacher collaboration, a most important part of the Project,

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is high and teachers voluntarily participate in two to three monthly writing seminars, where writing research, methodology, and local successes are discussed and demonstrated.

As I listened to those girls in deep discussion, I was reminded of how serious children are and of the pride that students exhibit when they pull their crumbled jokes and wordlists from their pockets. I thought back to where this all began. Before the "Joke of the Day", the "Work of the Day", the Complaint Forms and the writing contests began. I thought back to that classroom eleven years ago. I was a first year teacher, and first year teachers just try to survive.

LOOKING BACK

Teaching an eager class of second grade Navajo students that first year, I was amazed by their alertness and by their desire to learn. However, I soon realized how frustrated they were by the materials and content of the class which were so vastly different from their world. The language of instruction and the content in that class was the language and content of the English middle class and they were Navajo. Convinced that my teaching needed to be adjusted and that the students participation in their own education needed to be maximized, what I would later refer to as energizing the curriculum, I implemented new strategies.

I began slowly, finding that concentrating on only one new approach each few weeks worked best. We frequently talked and wrote about the real world, the first hand experiences which they lived or which I could offer. Discussing field trips into the community and writing about the hands-on activities, we used the videotape machine to produce bilingual films about designing, building, and firing model rockets and about how to use the telephone. Our bilingual book about the construction of our road was published by the school's curriculum center.

We video-taped pantomimes of stories as they were told on records, established pen-pals across the country, translated Navajo Radio commercials into English and made word lists of everything. One might say that the early seeds of the GLAD project were planted within that second grade classroom seventy miles away. Planted, not because someone told me that allowing students to participate in their own education would work, but because it did work.

Each new year offered my students greater educational and more productive writing challenges. I learned not to expect large immediate changes in my students and to allow new projects time to

develop and mature before discarding them. Of course there were disappointments, but then good writing is not easy to teach, and miracles are few and far between.

My goal was to make everyone feel good about themselves, and I came to see that writing was the greatest equalizer. Since every student wrote on his own level, assignments outcomes were individualized. The students seldom competed against anyone, instead they frequently interacted and shared. Therefore, every completed writing assignment held some success.

Learning more about the process of writing and its teaching over the years, I still do not understand its full potential. Looking back, we were involved in what is now commonly called peer editing, conferencing, publishing, and many other strategies. However, I also realize that I held a narrow view of writing.

The writing process was oversimplified and writing was viewed by me as an end rather than the means. Writing could have been used to develop and refine the students' critical thinking skills. The emphasis should have been taken off the conventions of language and been allowed to play with language more fully, to experiment with inventive spelling and to create and test their own theories about how English can best be communicated. The richness in the various forms of writing, such as cinquain, acrostics, diamante, concrete poetry, riddles, and advertisements were missed. Finally, I might have integrated writing more fully across the curriculum and in the process, maximized instructional time, rather than viewing writing as a separate subject.

I mused the "should have dones," without guilt. How much more has yet to be learned by me looms as wonderous. I thought of the past and of the future as I watched the girls leave their written complaint and scamper off to recess to await some administrative intervention. I heard the complaint form slip into my box and even though I had not written it, I felt the pride of accomplishment. These students were participating in their own education by applying language skills in meaningful ways. Their education had not stopped for recess.

THE *GLAD* PROJECT

My early years as a teacher, had given the principal I became the courage to risk. It has been an exciting three years working within and building, along with my staff, the *GLAD* Project. Growing tremendously in size and complexity, the Project is now a way of doing things more than a set of things, and it touches all aspects

of the school. During this time I have become convinced of the benefits of effective writing in the classroom as a sound beginning towards quality education for all children.

In the first year the Project was an informal part of interested teachers' curricula. Actually, we did not begin with the idea of establishing a writing project but to promote writing. In fact, it was not until April of 1981 that the Project was named GLAD and that the three primary goals were established. These were:

1. to develop the foundation for literacy in each of its kindergarten through third grade students;
2. to expand and enrich the pedagogical competencies of each staff member in the teaching of the Language Arts; and
3. to develop and strengthen parental awareness of and support for school programming.

FOUNDATIONS FOR LITERACY

The development of foundations for literacy were facilitated through the Project's philosophy:

There is a need for each child to be heard. A child will only learn to use a language if he has the opportunity to use the language. A child will learn to read a language if he finds meaning in that language. A child will learn to write a language if he finds that others find meaning in his work.

Boloz, 1980

Working from these ideals, the classroom climate and instruction were established. In order to give the students an opportunity to use English, curriculum was shifted to student-oriented interests. While the ultimate aim is English language literacy for all students, the child, his cultural values, and the experiences which are brought to the school environment are central to the project's methodology. Focusing on each child as an individual, instruction begins at that child's functional level.

In the beginning states of the Project, student writing assignments supplemented the adopted text. However, at the request of the teachers, the texts no longer dictated instruction. Now, first and second grades no longer work in language textbooks.

As one teacher argues, "What do we need the workbooks for, they (the students) are getting the skills from the writing." Our test scores appear to support this and no commercial language programs can be more relevant to the child than his own set of experiences. Finally, without a dependence on language workbooks, district funds began being directed toward and last year totally financed the Project.

As part of the Project, students are provided with opportunities for an abundance of writing, in many forms, for many purposes, and for many audiences. The demonstrated results are promising, and have encouraged many teachers to allow inventive spelling. These teachers note that students write more freely and that the volume of student writing and the richness of their word choices has increased.

In order to encourage the students to view writing as a meaningful experience, books written by individual classes, by grade levels, and by school-wide writing competitions are regularly published at the district's Curriculum Center. All students whose work appears in the book receive a copy and at sixty cents each, the district's investment is minimal.

During 1982, a newspaper was added to the Project. Second and third grade students take responsibility for the main body of the paper. A literary supplement regularly exhibits the work of many students. Both the newspaper and the literary supplement are rich in variety of writing forms: from advertisements, interviews, and mini autobiographies; to class theme writings and even original, three-act plays.

In addition to the books, the newspapers, the Complaint Forms, penpals projects, and school-wide competitions, the school has implemented the "Joke of the Day", which doubled in submissions last year and the "Word of the Day". In these two approaches, students are encouraged to submit found or original jokes and to submit lists of words which have been compiled by the students. Each day a new word is selected as the word of the day and two jokes are read. As jokes are read and word lists are acknowledged over the intercom, the students are recognized as the submitters.

EXPANDING PEDAGOGICAL COMPETENCIES

The role of the teacher is to provide a supportive learning environment which promotes a positive self-concept and to create situations which encourage active participation in learning and free expression of cultural values. Teachers are to foster a writing environment which encourages composition by withholding extensive

critical evaluations, by demonstrating sensitivity to the student's cultural identity, and by implementing frequent and varied writing and publishing experiences.

Although a sound language arts curriculum offers a rich source of guidance, one can not presume that all who utilize the curriculum will bring to its implementation the same level of competence. The GLAD project recognizes this reality and attempts to expand and enrich each staff member's competencies through a series of writing seminars, a classroom support network and the establishment of a professional library.

The writing seminars are usually held twice monthly and have replaced the traditional teachers' meeting. Topics include research findings, methodology, and promising practices. All staff members are invited to the seminars and both teachers and administrators share the responsibility for the presentation of materials. The response of classroom teachers is indicated by their attendance. Most teachers attend regularly and some of those who can not, usually ask for handouts.

The Classroom Support Network emphasizes hands-on demonstrations within the classrooms and intra-classroom visitations by teachers and administrators. The emphasis is on collaboration. Teachers who are interested in an approach but who want more detailed instruction on its application, request assistance with the implementation of the idea. For example, one teacher who desired to establish a journal project was assisted on a daily basis for two weeks, while another, who wanted to know more about how semantic association could be used to build word power was assisted for an hour. However, assistance is not forced on the teacher, rather, these services are offered only at the request of the staff member.

Lastly, over the past three years, consistent budget commitments have built a professional library which includes 180 new titles and several major journal subscriptions. Staff members are encouraged to suggest titles and frequently check out the materials for ideas and as resources in their own professional training.

ESTABLISHING PARENT SUPPORT

While both staff and curricula development increase the success of the program, a goal of the GLAD project is to strive for parental awareness of and support for this language arts approach. Realizing that parents can have the greatest influence on a student's school success, attempts to keep parents informed of their child's involvement in the writing process are paramount. Communication lines which

had been developed through traditional means, are supplemented by the distribution of class and school publications.

Supplemental reading materials which the student has a part in creating and school newspapers are directed and into the homes of the young authors. Parents report that these publications have created an intense demonstration of pride on the part of both the student and the parents and that interest in the books has stimulated the reading of publications together and with other family members.

An ongoing, five-item survey is sent to the home of students whose work appears in a book. Parents are asked to report if they had prior knowledge of the Project, the child's and family's reactions to the book, whether they have seen the child reading the book at home, whether they felt that the books helped the child to read, and to report whether they felt that the Project should be continued. Although at first approximately 20 per cent of the parents reported being aware of the Project, 98 per cent reported support for continuation of the program, 92 per cent reported feeling that the Project would help their child learn to read, and 86 per cent reported that they had seen the child reading the book. Many parents added favorable comments and several of the parents commented that their child's teacher should be given special awards for the efforts.

As I returned to analyzing those test scores, I heard a surge of discussion as the wind had blown in another group of children. Pointing fingers and accusing each other, I smiled when I heard someone in the office say, "Now quiet down. Just fill out the form and then sit over there. He'll get to you when you're finished."

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