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Language and Literature in Childhood

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Language and Literature in Childhood

In this discussion I am going to consider some of the relationships between literature and language and present a few observations and questions relative to ways teachers can help young children extend their concepts and develop their expressive powers.

Are we doing all we can, for instance, to stimulate children to make the most of that natural tool of theirs for discovery and learning—the ability to think in terms of metaphor and simile? As all teachers know, even very young children can create images of striking suggestiveness, as they reach out to understand the flow of words and things around them. A five year old, trying to describe the look of water glinting with sun and shadow under a bridge, says, "It rattles around. The shadows crawl around like a worm, with the water." Another, listening to a story of a lighthouse, comments that the stairs go "like a drill." A kindergartner, just back from a trip to a heliport, remarks that the helicopter "stands up like a dog." And in the realm of fantasy, a five year old gives us a masterpiece of imagination as he dictates a story to go with his drawing of a "Moon Monster":

> Moon Monster is blowing his head off—RRaaah, RRaaah—blowing fire out of his nose. He's a moon dragon. He was roaring so loud he blew the moon apart, he blew every star apart. He blew the whole outer space apart. He blew so hard he blew the dark to light.

Finally, a little girl of four-and-a-half, talking to her mother about the moon and the sun, sees a startling likeness. She links the disappearing moon with the melting of marshmallows in her cup of hot chocolate:

> Morning rises
> And the moon is not there.
> The sun is in the moon's place.
>
> The moon is magic
> Like the cups I use
> To melt my marshmallows.

The major question for us in this: What do we teachers do about such flights of thought, besides enjoy them? Do we sufficiently realize that this sorting out and organizing of impressions is related not only to poetic creation but to concept formation, that process underlying all our adult abilities to generalize and to think abstractly? Indeed, the use of metaphor is "the power whereby language, even with a small vocabulary, manages to embrace a multimillion things," as Susanne Langer has pointed out.[1]

Do we encourage children to grasp their experiences in this way that comes so easily to them? Do we make a practice of asking for analogies when we are presenting new

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[1] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key.* New York: Mentor Books, 1958, p. 125.

words and concepts? Do we consider the style, the use of metaphor and simile, in the books we are bringing into the classroom? And when we find a book that is rich in imagery—perhaps one like Yashima's *Plenty to Watch,*[2] about village life in Japan—do we call attention to the vivid similes and let the children try their own?

Perhaps one of the reasons we are not always successful in presenting poetry and stimulating the writing of it is that we do not give children enough credit for genuine interest in metaphorical images. We mistakenly believe that a jingly rhythm must always be offered as a lure.

Recently a young fourth-grade teacher tried an experiment. She knew that her children had been exposed previously only to jingles, and she was determined to introduce some new thoughts about poetry. "Would you like to hear a poem?" she asked one day. Boredom was the response. "Wait and see," she said, using a little necessary patience as well as humor. Then she read Carl Sandburg's well-known "Fog":[3]

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

The poem was, of course, a fortunate choice. It was brief; it contained an arresting image; and its content was familiar to these city children whose school stood near a harbor. Only a little discussion was necessary. "Fog doesn't really do these things, does it?" the teacher said. "Do you see how a poet gets an idea and thinks around it, and tries to get you to *feel* what he means?" The children were quick to agree that they could indeed feel the fog on its silent haunches; and they offered no resistance to a second reading of the poem. With the teacher's encouragement they then went on to dictate a few lines of their own, on a subject of their own choice, concentrating on expression of their feelings, without concern for rhyme; and in fact one little boy was so carried away by this new approach that he continued to write poetry in the following days and weeks, only occasionally reverting to the too-easy jingle form.

Of course, children love rhyme and rhythm, as indeed we all do. But there are many ways of helping them go beyond the empty, rattling jingle. Recently a witch story by an eight-year-old girl has come to my attention. Throughout this story the witches speak in verse. Upon their first appearance they chant:

Sprinkle specker
Prickle pelter
Take us to our
Special shelter.

And again:

Powery powery
Pinker pot
Take us to
Our evil spot.

Finally, as they throw purple juices into a pot:

Brendel and shake,
Boil and bake.

These witches, of course, faintly suggest Shakespeare. And no wonder—the child's mother had just been reading aloud to her the witch scenes in *Macbeth.*

At this point we can raise another important question: What do we know about the power of literature to help young children master vocabulary, experience the meaning of a style, and extend their own imaginative uses of words? And here I am implying more than use of metaphor, when I speak of "style."

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[2] Mitsu and Taro Yashima, *Plenty to Watch.* New York: Viking 1954.

[3] Carl Sandburg, "Fog." Copyright 1916 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright 1944 by Carl Sandburg. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

The wonderful thing about the witch chants is that though they are influenced by Shakespeare, they are the child's own creation. Hearing "Double, double toil and trouble" sparked her inventiveness, and did not restrict her to copying. Not that anyone would object to a child's liking Shakespeare's lines so much that she wanted to learn them, say them, use them. In fact, this whole matter of the "influence" of literature on language may begin in just this way. The child hears interesting words and phrases that he likes to repeat. Certainly many teachers must have heard children using in their play expressive phrases straight from the storybooks. I myself recall a child who loved to shout, ". . . dash away! dash away! dash away, all!"[4] as she ran about the play yard.

And just recently a teacher mentioned to me that her five year olds were spontaneously chanting certain of the lyric phrases from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are,* that favorite picture book of children in the kindergarten and primary grades: ". . . his ceiling hung with vines/ and the walls became the world all around." "He sailed through night and day/ and in and out of weeks/ and almost over a year."[5]

Is the next step an ability to adapt, to let the flow and structure of a particular style color one's own usage, for particular purposes? Research is lacking. We don't know under what circumstances children can begin to do this. Nevertheless, we can assemble examples, such as the witch story, that are impressive.

Recently a class of nine year olds spontaneously dramatized scenes from the *Iliad,* in preparation for a play. The tapes of these sessions reveal that while by and large the children used their own everyday language, here and there the noble diction of the story they had been hearing, in Jane Werner Watson's version,[6] crept in. For instance, when the child playing Achilles hears that his friend Patroclus has been slain and left to the dogs, he says:

> My best friend deserved a proper burial. . . . Well, if they left Patroclus for the dogs, Hector himself will be food for the dogs! I'll kill him! I'll slaughter him! I'll take his armor and feed *him* to the dogs. I don't care about Agamemnon any more. I'll fight for Patroclus! Bring my armor! Call the men to battle!

Perhaps it is not an accident that this charged language came to the aid of the child at a moment when feelings were charged and high.

All of this seems to say that when children are strongly involved, they listen and learn. A teacher's problem is often mainly to find the literature that young children can give themselves up to with wrapt and active attention.

But we know that even four year olds will listen to quite difficult story material if the content is especially charged with meaning for them. In a recent story-reading experiment conducted by Bank Street College of Education with "disadvantaged" four and five year olds, it was found that the children could give close attention only to stories whose themes touched upon conflicts that were crucial to them at the time, or involved expression of negative feelings and behavior.[7] Among the successful books was Charlotte Zolotow's *The Quarreling Book*,[8] a complicated story ostensibly not very suitable for young children from such deprived backgrounds. But in spite of its length and complexity, the children listened with absorption. For here was a story about quarreling people and angry feelings—indeed matters of vital interest.

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[4] Clement C. Moore, *The Night Before Christmas.* Garden City: Garden City Books, 1954.

[5] Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are.* New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

[6] Jane Werner Watson, *The Iliad and the Odyssey.* New York: Golden Press, 1964.

[7] Virginia Stern, "The Story Reader as Teacher," *Young Children,* October 1966, 31-43.

Teachers in the large city ghettos face a special problem in the selection of literature that will have meaning for their children. It is generally assumed that an all-over impoverishment of language, ideas, and experience keeps these children back, dooms them to plodding through simple readers, and limits severely what the teacher can read aloud to them. But isn't it time to ask: Is the limitation partly in the teachers themselves? How many of us recognize how sophisticated in matters of everyday living many of these ghetto children are? Even first graders chat about gangs and knifings, and develop great ingenuity in, say, smuggling home half-empty cartons of milk for small brothers. And many are exposed to a tough, rough vocabulary and lore that teachers may hear only small bits of in school. An example recently relayed to me resembled one of the "jokes" about the Irishman, the Jew, and the colored man, appearing in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, Roger Abraham's collection of Negro narrative folklore from the streets of Philadelphia.[9] It was a thoroughly adult piece of wit, and far too obscene for me to quote here.

What are we giving these children in school? I am not suggesting that we attempt to reach them with literature built only upon the crudest aspects of their street language and experience. But if we were daring and ingenious enough, we might find more to use that smacked vigorously of their own kind of reality. We might hunt a little more for sinew in words and sophistication in content; we might unearth a few more "quarreling books." One first-grade teacher in a Harlem school, thrusting around for stories that her class would listen to, discovered that she could capture attention with almost any kind of animal story, the more humorous the better, length and complexity notwithstanding. Is there any relationship here with the fact that Negro folklore itself is full of stories of animals—rabbits, foxes, lions, monkeys? How well do we teachers know Negro folklore?

And how honestly do we convey to all the children we are working with, whoever they may be, that we want to hear *their* stories? That we are interested in what they have to say in their own ways of speaking? And how genuinely do we recognize that their own ways, whether or not they conform to "standard" usage, may have much to recommend them?

A young student teacher's account of what she came up against recently as a volunteer in a summer tutorial program in Harlem is both shocking and sad, revealing an atmosphere completely lacking in the encouragement that releases children to speak, think, and learn, to say nothing of create with imagination:

> The teachers would stand in front of their thirty blank-eyed, restless children, delivering blind monologues in the form of catchy little jingles on how to get from a *boat* to a *goat* by means of dropping a *b* and adding a *g*. When later I would be talking to one of my tutees about this or that grammatical or spelling point, he or she would spout half a jingle learned by rote, full of nonsensical errors. . . . Their own thoughts tumbled out in a polysyllabic line of sound that would not admit of analysis;

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[8] Charlotte Zolotow, *The Quarreling Book*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

[9] Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964, p. 217.

> when I would ask them to speak slowly and pronounce each word distinctly, the request would so paralyze their self-expressiveness that almost all response to me would cease, as I took on the proportions of their own fear of failure.[10]

We'll have to find something better than these boats and goats; and we'll have to try, too, to understand a little better that "polysyllabic line of sound," and accord it our respect, while at the same time we equip the children to use language that will open opportunities for them as they grow older and move into a larger world.

Recently a little picture book called *Pond* has come from a Head Start program in Mississippi. Here the children's own words illustrate their drawings. Grammar is not corrected; the natural flow of the children's speech appears on the pages:

> I been swimming up in the pond. . . . Ole preacher caught two snakes on a hook when he was fishing. . . . A catfish has a mouth like a big smile. We eat 'em up. He taste goood.[11]

Is this perhaps the best way to begin, when we are encouraging the youngest children to express their ideas? As far as older children of low economic status are concerned, we know that many teachers today are courageously bringing the colorful slang phrases of the neighborhood right into the classroom, to look at them with the children, appreciate them, and use them as the basis for study of the standard English equivalents.

Slang, of course, is metaphor. And here I return to the point I made in the beginning. Metaphor, the source of life in language, belongs to us all. Children of any backgrounds whatever, once given the opportunity and stimulus, can think with vividness and individuality in these terms, and can in this way experience the excitement of discovering ideas and finding words to express them. An eight-year-old boy in one of the most deprived neighborhoods in New York City remarks, as he looks at a picture of a church in a picture book: "The steeple is a nose cone, to shoot people up to heaven." And in a third-grade classroom in a Puerto Rican area of New York City, where many of the children are struggling with English, a little boy suggests that the snow outside is falling "as softly as a space cadet tipping across Mars." (These two examples suggest, by the way, that if we want to reach our young children today we'd better get right up there into space with them!)

Finally, an eleven-year-old boy in a large city neighborhood—not one of the most deprived, but by no means the most favored—writes a series of definitions. His concepts about "life" and "death" are startlingly mature and brilliantly expressed. "Life," he writes, "is a box that was used as a box for a circus act and was cut into 84ths and is worthless, but you want it." And death is "something that puts the box together but not as you would have hoped."

What are we working for, if not for this kind of perceptiveness and mental grasp? We may regret the life experience that seems to have led a youngster of eleven to write as he did, but we can't regret his insight and the strong, daring quality of his thought. I feel convinced that this boy's teacher must have a share of daring, too; must be one who sanctions the unusual in the classroom, and finds ways to open doors that others have closed. After all, this is the crux of the whole matter. It is only in association with such teachers that children are going to discover their powers, and develop their potentials for bold, original thought.

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[10] Personal communication.

[11] Children of Mt. Peel Child Development Center, *Pond*. Edwards, Mississippi: MACE press, 1965.

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