

# What I Learned from Teaching Marisol

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EVEN BACK BEFORE I EVER HEARD about Marie Clay, Donald Graves, Richard Gentry, Vivian Paley and the many other influential writers in the field of early literacy I knew that I loved teaching writing to my 5-year old students. I didn't know why, certainly I wasn't a writer myself (so I thought), and sometimes I felt guilty, especially when I let journal time run over because the kids seemed to be learning something. At the time, not having read the theories and practices of those mentioned above, I didn't fully grasp the significance of their learning. But I was convinced that somehow this journal writing was carrying over into their budding reading skills as well as teaching them to write.

Still, some things bothered me. Why, for instance, did Marisol (not her real name) write the same thing every day in her journal for what seemed like weeks at the beginning of the school year? "I love my family." This was accompanied by another picture of her with her parents and proudly shown to me day after day. I had told the children they could write whatever they wanted in their journals, but this was beginning to worry me. How could this be useful to her learning? Should I let her continue?

"Why don't you write about something else, Marisol?" I'd ask.

An extremely shy child from a dual-language (Spanish and English) family, she would

look down and say, "But I love my family."

In the first weeks of kindergarten Marisol asked me, the recognized writing expert of the classroom, how to spell the words "love" and "family" every day. A newly certified teacher, unsure of myself, especially in this subject that I did not feel I had been adequately prepared to teach (after all, there had not been a Writing Methods course), I spelled them for her for a few days. Then it dawned on me.

"Marisol, just look on the page before today's and all the words will be spelled for you." I turned back to the other students who needed new words spelled. It was still early in the school year and most of them did

not yet know letter sounds. Hardly any of my students had attended preschool and about half of them spoke Spanish at home. They lived in the zip code that includes East St. Louis, Illinois, an extremely poverty-stricken area.

Marisol was independent of me now, I thought, at least as long as she keeps on writing the same sentence over and over. Was I failing her by not making her branch out and write something new?

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As the other students, only ten in what would always be remembered as my dream kindergarten class, crowded around me asking how to spell words for their writing that day an idea occurred to me. I could make all of the students less dependent on me by making sure

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the words they needed were in their journals, too. I began writing the words the other students asked for on the last page of their journals. It became a writing resource for them and I soon discovered that most of them could read these words even days later because they had asked for them and used them right away. What a powerful discovery for all of us. Journal time went on, but now there were less words I needed to spell due to the growing collection of words in the back of their journals.

With spelling needs under control I had time to consider other elements of the students' writing. Each child seemed to be at a different level. While some students were still struggling

to leave a space between each word others were ready for periods, capital letters and additional rules of grammar and conventions. I began giving what I would later find out were "mini-lessons" to individual students, and then to small groups who were ready for the same concept. Telling Savannah and Enrique how to add an "s" to words to make them plural when they needed that skill resulted in better retention of the new information. Teaching a whole class lesson on the same concept to everyone, regardless of their level, did not have the same result. I was learning right along with them. Kindergarteners aren't the only ones who thrive on "discovery-based" learning.

One day Marisol showed me her journal as usual. Only this time she had written "I love

Miss A." (Miss A was one of the *Letter People* on a poster hanging in the room.) Marisol had come up with the idea of using the first two words of the one sentence she knew and substituting two new words at the end. I recognized this as a breakthrough right away. This discovery gave her flexibility which she took full advantage of, varying her writing almost every day by changing the object of love in her journal.

Later, I would come to know that Marie Clay calls what she was doing the *generating principle* (56). But that year I was oblivious to the names of the theories my students and I were discovering – I was just thrilled to be an observer as they manipulated letters and words on the page, creating personal records of their learning.

Marisol's breakthrough gave me an idea. We began making classroom books using the same principle. Our first book was entitled *I Like*. Each student wrote and illustrated one page keeping to a simple format. The pages all read something like this: "I like my dog." Bound and sent home with the children to be read to the family, this book was a hit. We soon made more, including *I Have* and *I Am*. These books were in constant use during our free reading times.

At the time I did not recognize my good fortune to be at a school with no curriculum for kindergarten. It was a small private school that was adding a full-day kindergarten program for the first time. Unable to pay what public schools in the area were paying for teacher salaries they had to settle for a newly-credentialed, inexperienced kindergarten teacher. I was tasked with developing my own curriculum.

Today with all the required testing and canned instruction being required of teachers it's hard to believe what a gift it was to be allowed to do whatever felt best for my students. It was a gift I did not fully appreciate until a couple of years later when I moved to Florida and was introduced to teaching to benchmark tests.

Two other classroom practices that I developed, largely to save myself time, wound up having an unintended, yet positive, effect on

the developing literacy of my students. They had to do with classroom jobs. Everyone remembers jobs such as line leader and messenger. Well, I included the jobs of Mail Deliverer and Librarian to our daily house-keeping tasks.

The Mail Deliverer actually required someone who could read, or at least recognize and match up the letters of the name on a paper with the name on a mailbox slot. Not all of my students could do that at the beginning of the year. But I quietly made sure each week that, if one of my students who had not yet mastered those skills was assigned the job, they had a capable assistant helping them. This task not only saved me time, it sharpened the alphabet recognition and one-to-one correspondence skills of my students.

The job of Librarian worked that way as well. Our school had no library. I couldn't imagine a whole year of kindergarten for these students without the opportunity to bring home picture books from school. My own children were middle-school aged by then, so I raided our home library and brought in all of their picture books, including such classics as *Where the Wild Things Are*, our collections of Dr. Seuss and Mercer Mayer, and especially those Berenstain Bear books (that I always secretly hated but my kids had loved). I opened a classroom library and set up shop. My students were allowed to check out one book a day. As soon as they returned one they could have another. After a couple of weeks, though, I decided that I didn't want to spend my precious time each morning checking the books in and out. So I assigned that job to a student. I had been recording the transactions on a six-by-nine-inch steno pad, but it was hard for my kindergarteners to write that small. I made a rule. The Librarian had to write the name of the child who was checking out the book on the line first, then they were to write down as many of the letters of the title of the book as they could fit on that line and stop. Entries would read "Timmy - Green E" in giant, wobbly, kindergarten letters to record Timmy checking out *Green Eggs and Ham*. As the year progressed and the children's handwriting improved we started seeing more and more let-

ters on each line. Soon some students could fit whole titles on the line.

I learned a lot that year from my students about how kids learn literacy. It doesn't take beautifully packaged curriculum with canned scripts to deliver instruction for kindergarten students to learn. The reading and writing for meaningful purposes my students engaged in resulted not only in real literacy growth during the year but in an appreciation for the real-world uses of literacy. My students took part in many other literacy activities such as read-alouds, story-writing and hands-on literacy centers, but the highly coveted yet simple housekeeping tasks of Mail Deliverer and Librarian, as well as the informal journal writing did as much to increase academic skills as any of our more formal lessons.

I reflect on that first year teaching kindergarten as I am about to enter another type of classroom for the first time. I will be moving from teaching primary students to teaching at the college level this fall. I'll be teaching both my most beloved subject, writing, as well as teaching children's literature. You'd better believe I will be on the lookout for what my students can teach *me* about how they learn best.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kate Cusumano has taught grades K-2 for twelve years and will be transitioning from teaching at the primary classroom to teaching Children's Literature at University of Arizona, South as well as teaching Writing at Pima Community College in Tucson.*