

WRITING, NOT FIGHTING: STUDENT LETTERS AS PROBLEM-SOLVING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

VOLNEY WHITE AND EDWARD WHITE

The maintenance of reasonable discipline in the elementary school is one of the more resistant of educational problems, particularly in inner-city schools. Draconian measures do seem to work, at least in the short run, but many educators are reluctant to resort to military methods that reduce the children to mindless obeyers of rules through fear: such procedures seem counter to a concept of education as freeing the minds and spirits of the young. Yet without an orderly environment little learning takes place and parents (not to speak of teachers and principals) repeatedly stress disorder in the schools as a continuing problem for them and their children. We have seen this situation constantly interrupt the crucial teaching of basic skills in the inner-city grade schools where we teach, schools which reflect the social problems of the community—not only poverty and broken homes, but crimes such as gang warfare, drug abuse, child abuse, and prostitution.

What can writing teachers do under such circumstances? We can complain, of course, that conditions do not allow for orderly instruction in writing, and therefore restrict ourselves to meaningless

spelling and grammar drill. Or we can seize the unpleasant moment as a situation ready-made for writing instruction that matters. If we define writing as a form of problem-solving and a tool for critical thinking, as we should, writing can become an effective way to defuse and make productive the tense confrontations that are a part of daily life in many elementary schools. The popular sage of our times, Ann Landers, advises us, when given lemons, to make lemonade. We have sought to turn fighting into writing and have found it a valuable and workable conversion.

Simply put, we use letter writing by the student as a powerful disciplinary tool with important instructional effects. While what we do is no panacea, it does offer a practical way of coping with disciplinary problems; our procedure also leads to the best kind of instruction in both critical thinking and writing. What we have been doing is both theoretically sound and immediately practical. Teachers will in fact use this procedure, simply because it works to reduce destructive behavior that makes teaching (and life) so difficult in many schools. Principals will support it, since it reduces the time and energy they put into routine discipline cases and turns such cases into learning experiences for the student. Students will participate, usually willingly, since it allows them to have their say and to be heard. Our experience suggests that our procedure is likely to be effective generally; we have surely been testing it under severe conditions.

There are three important premises behind the way we use letter writing, premises which must be clearly understood by both teacher and principal: (1) the student writing needs to be real communication, (2) the writing must not be seen as a punishment for but a consequence of misbehavior, and (3) clarity, not formal correctness, is what counts.

When we speak of letter writing, we need to stress, we are not referring to the mindless and negative repetition writing of the bad old days: we are *not* asking students to write "I will not fight on the playground" one hundred times. Rather, in the case of a fight, we bring both combatants to desks, sit them down, and have each silently write out his or her side of the quarrel. Then they exchange papers and write rebuttals. The letters might go back and forth several times until the writers have solved the problem and have thoroughly evaluated the situation. While this is going on, another kind of problem solving is also under way: how are the students going to get out of this writing situation and back

into their regular schedule? This may require more writing still, perhaps an apology and explanation to their teacher (if she is not the one requiring the writing) about their lateness. We are not claiming too much originality here: many teachers know about and use "time out" in such situations, that is, students are removed from the situation ("go sit on the bench!") to cool off. But we use the time out for writing.

Dear Mrs. White,

When me and my friends playing basketball. Gabriel jump and he kick me. When Gabriel kick me, I told him to be careful. But he said no. So I started hiting him back.

Victor

Dear Mrs. White,

I was playing basket ball. Then Victor had the ball and I tried to get the ball but when I was going to get the ball I hit Victor for axident. The ball got on Victor's legs and fall down. He thought that I trip him but I did not. Then he pushed me and thats why we where fighting.

Gabriel

Dear Gabriel,

I did not no you kick me for axident. Im sorry I hit you back and kick you. I told you be careful.

Victor

Dear Victor,

I didnt jump and kick you I was gettin the ball.

Gabriel

Dear Mrs. White,

We can be frnds. We wont fight no more. We will play fair.

Victor and Gabriel

Dear April,

I am sorry for calling you names. I only call you names because you call me names.

Mary

Dear Mary,

I call you names because your my friend. I didnt think it would make you mad.

April

Dear Mrs. White,

We wont call each other names any more because we bother you. Were friends and we don't want to get into trouble and have to write more letters.

Your friends,
April and Mary

Obviously, this is writing as an act of real communication, not mindless repetition or rote telling the teacher what she wants to hear. Many teachers will go to considerable effort to construct artificial writing assignments that contain the essential components of these letters: a real and knowable audience, internal motivation for the writing, a serious concern that the message be clear enough to get through. The disciplinary situation is an interesting version of what some researchers call "found data," an existing condition that offers what we would otherwise try to construct.

If these student letters are to function as real writing, the teacher needs to ensure that the writing is a *consequence* of the misbehavior, not a *punishment* for it. Nothing so fully teaches students to hate writing as to turn writing into punishment. However, when writing becomes a way to extricate themselves from a bad situation, to explain their side of a story, to be heard, the writing becomes problem-solving in school, just as it does in the world outside. Writing then becomes a valuable tool, a means of power, to be studied and mastered for a genuine purpose beside the passing of tests.

In order to keep the focus on problem-solving and communication, we never mark or grade the letters. At the worst, we tell a student we cannot understand a word or an idea. Since the whole point of the letter is to communicate, the student willingly revises whatever is not clear; this is a writer with a real stake in being understood. There is substantial research support for leaving uncorrected certain kinds of writing; indeed, the evidence is unequivocal that the constant teaching of grammar and correct-

ness inhibits the learning of writing (Hillocks 133-151). Because our concern here is to take advantage of the student's intense need to communicate and to solve a problem, we leave issues of correctness for other times and other places.

For small classroom disturbances, we demand a letter of explanation: write out why you continue this behavior in my classroom. We control the numbers of letters, to whom they are written (the teacher, parents, principal, etc.), when they are written, the quality and neatness of the letter, and the acceptability of the explanation or solutions to the problem or the apology. (Remember, these are tough, street-wise kids in a disciplinary situation; some strong controls are needed to get their attention.) While letters are particularly useful when students have been fighting, writing can be appropriate for any situation which calls for the student to reflect upon his or her behavior and to propose alternate courses of action. Angry students will often pretend not to understand (though they almost always do) and claim they don't know what to say. Our reply: would you like to write another letter about why you continue to interrupt my class, or would you like to write your parents about your disruptive behavior?

Dear Mrs. White,

One of your students called me a braud. I really do not like it.

Jannice

Dear Jannice,

I did not call you a broud. I think you heard someone else. I know I did not call you that name.

Joey

Dear Mrs. White,

You are suppose to look at the film. Your also suppose to listen incase you have to right about it. The reason you have listen also is because the techer may ask you question. Thats how you are suppose to act.

Jose

Dear Mrs. White,

The way we are to play on the playground is without hands and feet and we are not to kick or hit anyone else.

Kevin

Dear Mrs. White,

When me Jorge and David where siting down. Crissy came and hit me on my butt, and then I whent after Crissy. When she was running she stop and turned around she hit Jorge to and when she was hitting Jorge I got her hand to hold her and when I keep her there. And then he hit Crissy. After he hit Cirssy I het her to. And it start to be a game. And it was the girls against the boys and we wer pulling Crissy and Wendy sleps and fell on Crissy and hert her and Crissy start to cry and she blamed it on me and Jorge.

Felipe

Dear Mrs. White,

Yes we did sittle it. I am sorry using youre time up for art and macking you go out ther to stop us of fiting.

Your friend,
Max

Dear Mom,

I was puting chalk on my hair and I got to write this letter because I was not listening to my teacher. You will have come to school if I don't act like a proper student.

Mark

Dear Mrs. White,

Quando la campana sona tenemos que nos a firmar en la linia para que no estimos tarde. Nopodemos estar aqui ninos aparara ma alimamor y por anor bien para que no nos reganen y no estimos aqui.

Juan

Sometimes, though very rarely, a student simply refuses to write. We do not waver, since this is invariably a child with severe behavior problems. We provide older peer tutors for younger

children, so they can express themselves in more complex ways than their writing skills allow. With older children, if the conflict is with another student, we wait until one student writes and then ask the other to respond. In extreme cases, we arrange a parent conference as soon as possible and we explain to the parent (who is frequently at wit's end with the child at home) what we asked the child to do and why; we stress that it is important for a student to follow through with his or her responsibilities. We have had to go this far only twice in the last three years (almost all students want to solve their own problems) and in both cases have found the parents very happy to follow through; the child returned to school the following day with the writing done.

WRITING WITH A PURPOSE

When we compare the nature of the writing that students do in this disciplinary situation to the usual school writing, we begin to discover why the exercise is so effective. Unlike the world outside school, institutional writing is usually without purpose and audience. Students write, when they do write, solely to receive a grade or, at best, to demonstrate they have learned something. Some teachers may ask for stories or poems, which may touch upon some internal motivations. But for most students, at all levels, writing in school has little intrinsic value. Some research, in fact, has shown that the best writing in writing classes takes place in the subversive notes that are exchanged between students and hidden from the teacher (Britton and others; Kroll; Staton and others).

Because the disciplinary situation, however, is painfully real, the writing in that situation has a real function. Students understand that a good and clear explanation may get them out of trouble. Writing with clarity and detail not only helps others see what happened but also helps the writer see what happened, particularly when confronted with a contrary version of the events by another. Curiously, we have found that the children we have been working with find it much harder to lie about what happened on paper than orally; the written record (which the teacher keeps) is a *document* demanding a peculiar kind of morality, which children feel keenly. For perhaps the first time, students feel that it is important to develop writing skill, for writing here becomes for them a means of perception, of problem solving, of crucial communication. Thus

we have observed raging quasi-literates chewing their pencils in ferocious concentration, working on their explanations of events just this side of criminal. Before writing instruction can begin, students need to feel that writing matters. In disciplinary situations, when writing is the only way to make their case, they do.

Dear Mrs. White,

In a movie you are suppose to listen to the movie. You are also suppose to watch it in case she ask questions about the movie. You should not play with youre pencils in a movie beuase it is dark and you might stick yourself with it.

Sam

Dear Mrs. White,

I am sorry I did not go out with the outhers because Marketh said he was going to kick mye but. He threatend to kill me with a rifle after school and I am sceired and he said you wont stop it. Please talk to him with me.

Your friend,
James

We see more profound reasons still why the least likely students will sit at desks and write out their cases—and find the task worthwhile. The work actually improves the students' self-esteem. Such students are rarely asked to give their side of events and even more rarely listened to. This activity actually involves them in discussion of the problem and in proposing solutions to it. The discipline continues until the letter is done and done to the teacher's satisfaction; no recess, no free time, no after-school time until the task is completed. But often, by the time the letter is finished and approved, the problem has in fact been solved.

Furthermore, the writing can be genuinely therapeutic, particularly in an angry confrontation. An exchange of letters, without talking, between students who have been fighting helps them deal with their anger in a productive way. As the students are forced to think about their conflict in the way that writing requires, the anger is focused at a point outside of themselves; the writing clarifies the issues as the students exchange papers and write rebuttals and

the anger dissipates. Seeing and coming to understand another's point of view leads to problem solving instead of rage. If the incident concludes with a joint letter proposing solutions, the combatants are forced to see the effects of their actions on others, such as other students, the teacher, the principal. The anger dissipates; the writers' self esteem increases because they were forced to take responsibility for their actions and follow through with a solution in relation to their worlds.

We are not interested, therefore, in hearing excuses for what happened or in reading mere repetition of school rules. We want to hear what the child saw and did, and, most particularly, how he or she *feels* about what happened. If the letter is to be a problem-solving exercise, it should also focus upon what the child will do differently in the future. Furthermore, if the letter is to be truly effective, we must read and respond to it as an act of human communication. When we see, as we often do, traces of internalized controls in the writing, we react as positively as we can; we must and do respect the writer's feelings, however outrageous the actions may have been, and this respect helps the student gain and maintain ownership of the plan proposed in the letter.

The beneficial effects of letter writing for discipline extend beyond the behavioral, instructional, and therapeutic gains. If many teachers and the principal work together, the atmosphere of the school can change for the better. Our colleagues have told us that their stress levels have gone down, as students realize that quiet letter writing is their only way out of a bad situation. Principals are able to delay suspensions or other punishments in the light of letters proposing less drastic solutions; since the culprits are proposing their own problem solving methods, they are much more likely to follow them than those proposed by school officials. And parents are particularly supportive, as they see potential punishments turned into genuine instructional activities. Finally, in the worst cases, there is written evidence in a student's file (perhaps with added commentary by the teacher or principal) for the drastic action that still may need to be taken.

The teachers in charge of this disciplinary program need to be aware of reasonable expectations for writing and of problem solving techniques. They also need to respect students, particularly the most disruptive students, who are sometimes the most original

and creative students, enough to want to hear what they have to say. If the students write as neatly as they can and convey ideas clearly, they are entitled to a respectful hearing and even some praise. They are learning valuable lessons about writing, problem solving, thinking clearly, and considering others. Not a bad pay-off for replacing the paddle with the pen.

Dear Mom,

I was cussing in class to day. I was flipping Pepe off. I was yelling, messing around, pushing. Mrs. White want you to come to school and take care of me in class untel I could act like a ganoummen in class.

Victor

Dear Mom,

Donte said that I did it to the trashcan. I said that he did it to his Mother. Then he wanted to start a fight. He busted me I hit him. The substute caught me and took me out of the class. She asked if we go to the office. The lady in the libery said no. Then she said send them to Mrs. Whites class to write a letter.

Sincerely,
Trisha

Volney S. White teaches at Martin Luther King Middle School in San Bernardino, California. Edward M. White is Professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino and the author of *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, Jossey-Bass, 1985, and *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*, Jossey-Bass, 1989.

WORKS CITED

- Britton, James, and others. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- Hillocks, George Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, Ill.: National Conference on Research in English and ERIC, 1986.
- Kroll, Barry. "Cognitive Egocentrism and the Problem of Audience Awareness in Written Discourse." *Research in the Teaching of English* 12 (1978): 269-281.
- Staton, J., and others. *Dialogue Journal Writing as a Communicative Event*. Vol. 2. Research Paper No. NIE-G-80-0122. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982.