5 Being Normal, Being Labeled: Language and the Learning-Disabled Student

It is October, and the classroom is bright and beautiful. The early autumn sun glints off the still-green leaves of the maple just outside, turning the window into an impressionist pattern of gold and chartreuse. Along the windows, on a slate ledge, grow philodendrons and a collection of sugar crystals, each sample marked with a child's name. Creatures of another sort stand beside them: strange clay figurines, each distinct, each again labeled by the children. These make up a fantastic menagerie inspired by Dr. Seuss's *If I Ran the Zoo,* as announced by the colorful poster behind the figurines.

Also by the window, Alice Howe, teacher's aide, carefully stirs a hot saucepan of sugar syrup, makings for more crystals, while seven children peer at the notebooks on their desks, their pencils moving in hushed counterpoint to Howe's stirring of the sugar. The children's teacher, Elly Uehling, is also writing, her gaze intent on the page.

Every morning begins with the journals. In this, the beginning of the second month of school, these nine and ten year olds have already become independent journal keepers, no longer needing their teacher's prompts of "things to write about." At first, she had given them suggestions: something special that happened to you, something that made you afraid, families, pets, things you like to do. "From Monday through Thursday," says Uehling, "they write about things that are 'true'—that's my condition. It's important to me that they learn to appreciate that their lives are worth writing about. On Fridays, however, we write about anything we like, and here the children can fantasize, which some of them love to do."

That Uehling is so concerned with the children's self-appreciation stems from their alienation within the school and, to some extent, in the society outside the school as well. These children have been judged to be "learning disabled," a label that defines no specific thing, but that means a distinct inability to "keep up" with children of the same age in reading, writing, physical activity, or other standard facets of school life. Understandably, these children often find it difficult to work with their peers and may be either severely withdrawn or unusually disruptive.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, where Elly Uehling teaches, some of the most severely affected children are taken out of their regular classes and brought together in special classes, like Uehling's, where they learn all the subjects except music and physical education. The class size is small, because it is felt that these children will benefit most from much individual attention, and because the step is not taken lightly. A long process of screening for sensory-motor difficulties is undertaken before placing a child in this class, since every effort is made to keep the child "mainstreamed" in a regular school classroom. Thus, Uehling's class of seven is comprised of third, fourth, and fifth graders from four different schools.

The classroom, which appears so normal—except for the small class size—is fraught with paradox, as Uehling sees it. While her goal is to bring these children up to the learning level of other nine and ten year olds so that they can again be mainstreamed, she sees this result as highly unlikely, except in one or two cases. She worries not only that the children's disabilities will keep them from making rapid progress, even with special attention, but also that the "specialness" of the class will make them even less able to readjust to the social environment of the typical classroom. So she has tried to balance her curriculum between independent deskwork (math exercises and the like) and one-to-one or one-to-two sessions that focus on particular deficiencies of the students. She knows that these children need to develop self-reliance, hence self-confidence, and that these qualities will lead to their ability to work productively in a larger, more heterogeneous group.

So, on this October morning, as on most mornings, when the children have completed their journal entries, the group subdivides into pairs or individuals who go about distinct tasks: while Sheba, Tyron, and Molly are doing assigned reading or arithmetic at their desks, Uehling talks with Daniel and Fred about their journal entries, teacher aide Howe helps Jason with his spelling, and Mark takes his turn at the computer at the back of the room. The roles will change throughout the morning, as Uehling and Howe give their attention to each child, while the others work by themselves. The atmosphere is cheerful and businesslike. The children seem secure in the knowledge that they'll get whatever help they need.

How does the way language is used in this classroom contribute to this atmosphere? One vital manifestation of Uehling's use of language as a learning tool is the daily journal. As the very first assignment of the day, the journals demand the children's attention and their independence. The journal is a group activity, yet it encourages the children to create, to pursue some of their own ideas. On any given

day the children will work in their journals about twenty minutes. Just as their independence in choosing topics is sacrosanct, so is what they say. Each day, in the time she gives to working individually or in pairs with the children, Uehling invites each child to read aloud his or her journal entry and to talk about it. She never corrects their words in these sessions. A misspelling may find its way into a spelling lesson later in the week, but for now Uehling is the active listener who wants to hear of the child's latest adventure or project and to find out more through questions. These questions are purposeful: first, they show appreciation for and attention to what the child has written; second, they push the child to reflect further on the events of the story and, over time, to develop a richer feeling for what the reader might like to know from a writer; third, they show the child that a piece of writing is not a static object, but part of a conversation. As such, it may lead to responses, questions, further writings, and so on.

For part of this morning, Uehling talks with Fred about his latest entry, in which the boy describes a weekend Cub Scout visit to the public library, where he was accidentally left behind by the others. Fred has written four cramped lines, perhaps twenty-five words, on his topic—writing comes less easily for him than for any other child in the class. Still, Uehling responds to Fred's very brief story as to a synopsis of any good adventure. Her questions urge Fred to fill in the details and the sequence: why the scouts went to the library, what he read about while he was there, how he got left behind, what he did when he discovered the others had gone, and how he got home. Each question comes easily and naturally during the conversation. Fred warms to the task, his answers becoming more graphic as he realizes that, yes, this *is* a good story. When the interview closes, he tells his teacher that he'll write more about his adventure in his journal and will read it to the class on Friday.

On Friday, Fred will have the chance to reach the wider audience of the class, because on that day Uehling devotes a substantial part of the morning to using the class as a "reading/writing group." In the group, each child reads aloud one of the week's journal entries and the others comment. Because the one-to-one interviews give the children continuous modeling of how comments and questions can help a writer, the children have become good aids to one another in the Friday sessions. "When we first started," Uehling says, "I gave them some direction as to what to talk about." These were basically the same simple guidelines Uehling herself followed in the reading/writing group of which she had been a part in the Northern Virginia Writing Project summer institute, and the guidelines seemed adaptable to her classes because they could be geared to any level of proficiency

either of writing or of responding to it. "The children learned very quickly," Uehling says. "They now handle the sessions themselves."

In the reading/writing group, the children play the same role that Uehling plays in the interviews: they are interested listeners who want to tell the writer what they particularly like in the shared entry and what they'd like to know more about. The listeners are also encouraged to talk about incidents in their own lives that are recalled by the writer's entry, though Uehling is careful to keep the conversation from leaping too far from what the writer has brought to the group.

This technique has succeeded so well that the children have asked Uehling for more reading/writing group sessions. This request has posed a dilemma for her. Should she follow this "learning lead" that they have given her, or should she resist it, on the grounds that the children need all the time they currently spend on math, science, reading, computers, etc.—work that Uehling herself considers more "academic," i.e., closer to what the county's Program of Studies has mandated for "regular" fourth and fifth graders? The dilemma is real. The choice seems to lie between increasing and reinforcing the vital, multifaceted learning brought about by the journals and the response groups, and risking, in other subject areas, further separation of her students from those in the mainstream. A possible solution—though questions of time in the classroom are rarely solvable—may be for Uehling to adapt to her teaching of other required subjects the language-rich approach that has worked so well for her with the "personal events" journals and the reading/writing groups. This might mean in science, for example, two or three entries per week in a "science notebook," where students could write how they did in their experiments with sugar crystals and the like, what changes they observed, what problems they faced, what questions they have. If time did not allow every child to share in group discussion one of his or her entries per week, at least some could, and everyone would have the challenge and privilege of helping another student solve a scientific question. Moreover, the children could share their notebooks in pairs or in threes, so that each could get frequent comments on his or her work. The group example set by the Friday sessions would teach the children how to respond to the science entries.

The dilemma Uehling faces is actually a happy one, since it has been occasioned by the success of the journals and the many language activities surrounding them. Whether she extends these techniques to other areas of the curriculum or not, she is seeing that this particular blend of writing, reading, speaking, and listening has helped the children learn. This new expertise would be useful in any class, labeled or not. The children are finding it easier to express themselves

both in their writing and their speaking; they are becoming better able to manage their own communication, and that of others, in the whole group. The process also helps them become adept with audiences of different size and composition, since they are learning to write for themselves, their teachers, and their peers; the interviews and the groups teach them how to conduct both dialogues and formal conversations.

Perhaps, above all, the journal keeping, the reading aloud, and the sharing of other people's feelings and experiences are teaching them something vital about the relationship of the self and the world. Elly Uehling said that one purpose of the journals was to help these children appreciate their lives. What the journals also do, because they are in words, is to help the children appreciate *what they say* about their lives. If we accept the theory that we cannot learn anything until we can put it into our own words, then surely we cannot learn anything unless we respect the tools—of which language is one—that we use to make that learning happen. Journals and the process by which they are shared and responded to may not be the only way to bring about this respect, but they have proven to be a powerful one for Uehling's students.

Elly Uehling Comments on Her Teaching: "I Am Displeased and Very Mad with Mrs. Uehling"

> May 1985
>
> Last night was very bad.
> This morning I am not talking to Mrs. Ueling. . . .
> It is all Because Mrs. Uehling called my mother on the phone and said I was not doing my homework. . . .
> I am displeased and very mad with Mrs. Uehling.
> I wish I was in a another class
> I am very sad.
> I wonder why Mrs. Uehling is doing this to me.

Daniel handed this journal entry in as he left for a work period in the library across the hall. The first twenty minutes of the day had been unusually quiet because Daniel, a fifth grader, spent that time giving me very angry looks and not talking to anyone. It was obvious that something was wrong, which he revealed in his full-page journal entry.

I responded in a letter beginning "I am sorry you were so unhappy." I finished the letter just as Daniel came back to get some colored pencils. I had him read it right then. He stuck out a hand and

we shook hands. We talked briefly. However, as he left, he said over his shoulder, "But I'm still mad at you!"

That was okay. We had communicated and understood each other a little better, and writing had been the vehicle. I was excited that Daniel had realized that writing, through his journal, was a flexible tool he could use. It was a way by which he could sort out and share his feelings.

When I taught regular classes of third graders, I learned about the children through their journals and saw how the journals helped them build fluency. So when I returned to a Learning-Disabled Self-Contained class after eight years, I naturally tried using journals with my new class to see what would happen. I hoped that journal writing would increase the children's fluency, but I was not even sure they could or would write.

My beginning instructions were: "You may write about anything you want, but if you have trouble thinking of a topic, you may write about how school is going for you." The children wrote, but I found some were writing only one sentence. Here are two of Fred's early entries:

> I wish I could be like superman more power fur. 9-5-85
>
> I like school because you have lunch. 9-7-85

In my own growth as a writer, I knew that the acceptance and acknowledgment of my reading/writing group was essential to my development of fluency. I tried to build the same atmosphere of acceptance and acknowledgment for the children.

Also, I knew that reluctant third-grade writers needed goals to increase fluency. I started requiring a minimum of three sentences and increasing the minimum number by one each marking period. Often children think that they cannot write, and so they do not. But my students accepted the increases. In fact, when May began, Fred matter-of-factly said, "I guess today we have to write seven." The other children corrected him quickly. We had not started a new marking period, only a new month.

The children occasionally wrote more when a topic gripped them, as Daniel had. Jason, early in the year, wrote about his concerns of fitting into his new class and wrote that he, a fifth grader, was paired up to help a third grader. He was bothered that the third grader could write better than he. Several others wrote about their excitement at having a new boy join our class and their anger at the resulting turmoil of adjustment. Sheba wrote about her pleasure at being chosen for the sub-patrol and her devastation at being labeled "LD."

This year has been a year of searching for the connection between writing and learning with my class of learning-disabled students. Most of them were labeled distractable, but their problem could also be called undisciplined thinking. They had a hard time focusing on a task, for whatever reason, and would rather flow with any distraction, whether internal or external. I felt that writing would help them focus their thinking. It did not matter that the writing might be unreadable later. Few rules existed, so the journal was a safe place where they could gain confidence by putting thoughts into words on paper. The journals, therefore, were a logical starting point.

As the year of "what happens if" progressed, the children wrote stories and had reading/writing groups almost every Friday. We published class books and individual ones. They developed a strong sense of ownership, authority, and voice in their writings. This sense of individuality became particularly obvious one Friday when Sheba did not want to share her story with the reading/writing group. An aide, working with the school publishing center, had spent some time helping Sheba with her story. But apparently the aide, in her desire to help, had helped too much. Through tears, Sheba exclaimed, "She may be right and the story may be better, but it's not what I want!" The empathy for her from the others touched me greatly. Sheba asked me to rewrite her story just as she wanted it. As I remember, we disbanded the reading/writing group right then, each child returning to his or her work, and I acted as a scribe for Sheba. Many others had this sense of ownership, which Daniel expressed well on another Friday in a reading/writing group. The children were offering Daniel ideas. His reply to them was "Yes, but it's *my* paper!" We all were quiet, accepting his declaration, and I felt very proud of my class.

Through writing the children have often discovered, as did Daniel, what they think and feel. I have also used writing to help them define and clarify their thoughts in the more cognitive areas. In science, for example, a unit on rocks required that characteristics or qualities of the rocks be defined. In order to organize their observations, the children were to write on a chart what they found out about each rock: color, weight, texture, hardness, flakiness. As we discussed the rocks, I recorded our mutual adjectives and adverbs on the board.

"How would you describe rock number three?" I asked.

"Black."

"It's shiny."

"That's a good word." I wrote *shiny* on the blackboard.

"It's got smooth parts."

"But it's got sharp points."

There were many "black" rocks that needed to be classified further: shiny, glassy, flaky, smooth, smoky. We talked about subtle differences in meaning, such as *glassy* versus *shiny*. Many of the children entered into the discussion, but they resisted committing their language to paper. It was the Oh-you-mean-I-have-to-write-it-down? reflex. When they knew that they had to record the information, they looked at the rocks more closely. Thus, language became a tool to clarify their observations through the act of labeling the characteristics of rocks.

In another science unit on caterpillars and butterflies, I used more writing. I asked the children to observe, talk about, draw, and write about their observations. I found the first set of papers discouraging. Some students hardly wrote anything about what they saw. But, I reminded myself, I was asking them to do some tasks that they resist—visually absorbing information, translating those ideas into words, and then putting those words on paper. Many of the children in my class had a hard time processing information and focusing visually in their daily lives, so it was understandably difficult for them to deal with a new experience: creepy, crawly, one-inch-long caterpillars. I was asking them to "look and write"—to discipline their observations and thinking and to translate them into the act of writing those thoughts on paper. I persisted, and, happily, the children have shown improvement in being able to write down more of what they see.

Tyron's first writing about the caterpillars was brief and vague:

> Today is April 1985 First day. Mess. uehling brought some caterpillars are neat.

This says very little about what he was observing. On the second day, Tyron began to record what he saw:

> Some caterpillars are trying to Form a net. The caterpillars are trying to form into a chrysalis. one looks like he is brek Dancing

On the third day, Tyron was more detailed:

> on his back he has bristles. And he moves with his muscles of his body. And sometimes he just sites on my paper. He trys to spin a weeb on my arm. But they are neat. And I wish I could have him for a pet.

Fred showed similar progress. He began by writing:

> A caterpillar has 19 legs. We have six larva.

A few days later, he wrote:

> One of the chysails hatch and a butterfly was come out it had grump up wings. A butterfly can tocket to a other butterfly. A butterfly wing has two hours in to his wings to dry. There are

> only one caterpillar left. One of the butterfly are having a hurt wing.

During these days of looking at, talking about, drawing, and writing about the caterpillars, I gave my students information and encouraged them to use descriptive words. We shared interesting phrases from their writings or comments, and I praised their fluency. I tried to establish an atmosphere of involvement in the miracle of life before us. I felt pleased that their ability to generate ideas had improved.

These examples show the children's progress, even within a brief time span of a few days. Most of the children progressed in a similar way. I feel progress was made because they understood what was expected and because a written product was required.

Two passages from Donald Murray's *Write to Learn* (1984) sum up my present attitude toward language and learning:

> Writing, in fact, is the most disciplined form of thinking. It allows us to be precise, to stand back and examine what we have thought, to see what our words really mean, to see if they stand up to our own critical eye, make sense, will be understood by someone else. (4)

> Words are the symbols for specific information. We use words so that we can arrange information into meaningful patterns. Words are a sort of shorthand by which we can capture, comprehend, and communicate experience. Man is the animal that uses words to think and share. (17)

The children in my class have begun to realize that they, too, have power to communicate their ideas—their fears, fantasies, and frustrations—through their writing.

Reference

Murray, Donald. *Write to Learn.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.