

“PUBLISHED? GIMME A PENCIL.”

BARBARA J. POORE

The above quote came from a fourth grade inner city student who, by anyone's standards, could be considered a "reluctant writer." His reaction to the idea of publication of his work probably best illustrates the influence which this powerful tool can have on a child's incentive to write.

As Publisher of the *Peanut Butter Press*, I visit many Central Indiana classrooms to do workshops on journalism and creative writing. No situation has been more challenging to me than the one from which this comment came. The students were mostly boys: fourth, fifth and sixth grade "street kid" types. The very fact that I was proposing to inspire them to write on this warm, spring afternoon might have been considered preposterous by some.

I had approached the situation with some trepidation knowing that the going could be rough. I had carefully laid the groundwork for what I considered to be a very creative assignment, and the group was beginning to warm to the idea. So far no one had come forth with the, "Yuk, I don't want to write" response, which I was so afraid I would hear. In my mind I had rehearsed a thousand times what I would say if the comment was made, and all of my responses were totally inadequate.

Then HE came in the door, a little late and obviously not too concerned about tardiness. I said, "Hi, you're just in time to help us with a terrific writing idea."

His reply, "Yuk, I don't want to write."

There it was, the comment I had been dreading! With my back against the wall I decided to call out the heavy ammunition and I said, "You mean you don't want to get published?"

There wasn't a moment's hesitation as he said, "Published? Gimme a pencil."

Barbara Poore is publisher of the *Peanut Butter Press* and a former elementary school teacher.

What a terrific feeling to see the group settle down to the task at hand with such enthusiasm.

When I began *Peanut Butter Press* nearly two years ago, I thought that one of the most important things it could offer to children was an opportunity to have their written work published. In retrospect, I now believe that even I underestimated just how important that opportunity can be to a child. Our newspaper is distributed to 75,000 area children, primarily through their schools, and many of these students send written work to the paper every month. The Junior Press section of the *Peanut Butter Press* is the part of our paper devoted to children's original writing. The problem of course is how to have the space to print it all. I confess that my criterion is not always excellence. Sometimes I am swayed by an obviously laboriously done piece by a first or second grader. The result of his or her efforts may be mediocre by the world's standards, but the work clearly shows that it was a labor of love.

I think it is very important for teachers at all levels to remember what a powerful force writing for publication and contests can be. All of us need to be recognized. When our writing is held up for the world to see, the result is a desire to write more and better. You can capitalize on this fact by trading writing samples with another class. I'll guarantee you that the kids will enjoy hearing what their friends down the hall wrote and will be doubly inspired to write more.

Once you have them writing, look for ways to show it off. Use bulletin boards, walls, or maybe the school intercom. A small child, or a big one, can write an original thought for the day and share it with the whole school via the intercom. Students who are given an opportunity to write on a regular basis will enjoy starting their own book of their compositions. Some of the entries may be small poems, jokes, or riddles. The length of the composition is not important, but the child should be able to look back through his book and see an improvement in his writing over a period of time.

Teachers can schedule a time for students to read their writing to classes of younger students. A Brown Bag Writer's Lunch can be very popular, and is used in some schools as an effective means of encouragement. Perhaps one or two students from each classroom can attend this sharing session on a weekly basis. Ask the PTA about space in their

newsletter, or perhaps a parent group would like to take on the publication of a whole booklet of student writing from the school. Call your local paper and see if the editor would be interested in publishing your students' written work. He may love the idea.

And grab every piece of writing contest literature that comes your way. Check with local service clubs, libraries, and school administrators to find out about any contests open to children in your area. Students — all of them — love to enter contests, but you have to provide the opportunity.

Recently I discovered something else about the phenomenon of putting children's writing in print. Other kids love to read their peers' writing as much as the authors love seeing themselves in print. I have taken material sent in by children into classrooms and read it to other children on several occasions. They are mesmerized and can't wait to get started with their own compositions. This is an extra bonus I hadn't really expected.

In a recent issue of the *Peanut Butter Press* we printed a student evaluation form for our young readers to tell us what they thought of the paper. Completed forms have come in by the thousands and the responses to some of the questions are amazing. Their favorite part of the *Peanut Butter Press* is the Junior Press section. Are you listening, teachers?

I am positively convinced that the popularity of the *Peanut Butter Press* can be attributed to the level of student involvement in the creation of the material. Not only do we publish student writing, but we invite children into the total communication process through their activities as reporters. Almost all of our stories are done with student reporters who conduct the interviews and ask questions according to their interests. No child is ever told what to ask and the result is refreshing and interesting copy for the kids to read that could only have been done with the help of other kids.

The reporters work in groups of 4 to 6, and each one writes a report after the interview is concluded. The reports are then sent to the paper; next I begin the task of combining them. It's important to make sure that some of each child's ideas appear in the final version. We all have different communication skills, just as children do. It often happens that some children will make a greater contribution verbally in the course of the interview than they will on paper. Some will ask little or no questions but write detailed, accurate reports

of the experience. The result is that everyone makes a contribution, and everyone comes away with a good feeling, knowing that he or she helped form the final product.

When I finish putting the individual reports together, I give the story to other children to read. They can be merciless with a red pen in hand. But their efforts make the final product more readable, more understandable, and more enjoyable to their peers.

Special education students should be provided with the opportunity to create and share something, too. In my work with children of all abilities I see students whose writing ability is severely limited, but who nonetheless have wonderful ideas to share. These students need the teacher's assistance in finding a way to get those ideas on paper. A tape recorder is a natural way to solve this problem. Some very good compositions have been done by special students who were provided with a quiet place and a tape recorder. Transcribing can be done by an older student, a teacher, or a volunteer parent. Sometimes special students can be successfully paired with a student who can write down their ideas for them. It is amazing to see what happens when a very verbal special education student is grouped with another student whose mechanical writing skills are good, but whose creative thought processes are hard to get started.

So much of what I am learning from the publication of *Peanut Butter Press* can be applied to the teaching of writing in the classroom — the joy of creating something and sharing it with one's peers. Once this environment of enthusiastic participation is present, a teacher can skillfully mold writing techniques into increasingly proficient styles which will serve a child well all his life. And somewhere in that process those old mistrusts that writing is a bore will have slipped away.