

## JUST FOR FUN

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On an author visit last year, I brought head boppers (headbands with two hairy antennae) for all the teachers to wear as we acted out my poem, "Is Your Hair on Nice and Tight?" The teachers were soon caught up in the spirit of "playing poetry" and some of them wore the head boppers all day. A bewildered second grader asked the librarian, "Why are the teachers wearing those things?" "Just for fun," she replied. "No," he said, "Why are they wearing them? There must be a reason?" "Just for fun," she repeated, but he shook his head again, and asked, "But why?" This 7-year-old could understand homework, testing, assignments, report cards, and grades, but he was unable to comprehend, "Just for fun!"

### Dying of seriousness

Hundreds of miles away, in another school, a first grader was having a very stressful day. As she was leaving school, she turned to her teacher, sighed, and said, "I think we are all dying of seriousness."

I have written over 2,000 poems about life in our elementary school classrooms and they have taught me that this very "seriousness" is counterproductive, and that we have our greatest power as educators when we teach from within the playful spirit of childhood itself.

My favorite educator, Albert Cullum, wrote, "If we can't enter their world, we can never reach them." He encouraged teachers to "don a feathered cap, wave a wooden sword and push back their desks" (1967, p. 21).

My poems, head boppers, and other toys let me enter the world where children learn for the pure joy of it. Poetry comes alive within this spirit, inspiring students to read with passion and to write because they have so much to share. Above all, they celebrate the joy that is the gift of childhood itself.

Students will do their best to enter this world, even if their school is "dying of seriousness" and "childhood" is not on the curriculum. They will discover the most important stories of all—the stories of their own lives.

### The best stories of all

I visited a school on Long Island, New York, last year, and nearly had a heart attack in the girls' bathroom. There is a full-length mirror that made me look shorter, fatter, and as though I had giant feet. I ran out of the bathroom wondering what a circus mirror was doing in a school. That mirror is a legend in the school, and as the day went on, I discovered endless stories about it. The fifth- and sixth-grade girls told me that you could see two black boots in the mirror if you stood at a certain angle. I tried, and sure enough, I could identify the outline of two boots. Some students were afraid to be alone in the bathroom because they could feel a ghostly presence, and once a student actually saw a strange girl in the school wearing those very boots. The teachers were unaware that "the black boot tales" were being circulated in the school, and passed on from grade to grade. But here were the best stories of all, inspired by a strange mirror and fueled with students' imaginations.

In another bathroom hundreds of miles away in South Carolina, the second- and third-grade boys were conducting research of their own, and discovered that if they flushed all the toilets at once, the pipes made eerie sounds through the walls.

My favorite story is about a teacher who was told by Jonathon, a 7-year-old, that someone wrote a bad word on the bathroom wall. She was told to crawl under the sink, and go way back to a crevice in the concrete where the word was written in crayon. Crawling on the bathroom floor, among the dirt and pipes, she became exasperated, and cried, "What were you doing back here anyway?" "The Bad Word in the Boy's Bathroom" became the title to the next poem in that classroom. How did the word get there? Why was Jonathon crawling on the bathroom floor? Of course, the teacher had her own take on the subject.

These stories of everyday life should be captured in poetry, remembered in journals, written in stories and plays, published in classroom anthologies and books, illustrated with the best artwork, and brought back to life through dramatization and classroom theater.

In fact, I think every teacher should begin the year with a "memory book" that sits on his or her desk in a sacred place. As the classroom stories unfold, they should be recorded in this most special of all books.

### Enjoying the joy

A teacher once told me that there were so many demands on her day that she couldn't "enjoy the joy" in her classroom. And yet it is this very joy that empowers our literacy programs with the best stories of all.

My new book, *Our Principal Promised to Kiss a Pig*, is about a Principal (Ms. Juliet) and a pig (Hamlet) who speaks in Shakespearean verse. On author visits, the story is brought to life, when the principal of the school leans forward to kiss Hamlet, my big inflatable pig. At this moment, she is communicating with the children in a language they totally understand, and, at the same time, she is pulling them into the book, the Shakespearean verse, and a celebration of literacy as well.

There is a librarian in South Carolina who says "when I die, I don't want my students to cry, but to laugh and to remember how I took on the roller skate challenge and skated with a pillow on my butt for safety down the hallways of the school."

There is the teacher who opened the crazy glue one day with her teeth and glued her lips together. There is "the juice man," a first grader who doesn't like the juice his mother gives him, so he is stockpiling it in his desk. And there are ghosts in the 100-year-old basement (dungeon) of a school.

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## JUST FOR FUN (Continued)

There are so many stories to celebrate, and so much joy in this very act of celebration. I am convinced that this "just for fun," this very joy, is our greatest educational tool, and allows us to enter the world of childhood where we have our greatest power to teach reading and writing.

As another school year begins, I am saddened by the knowledge that so many teachers and students will soon be "dying from seriousness" and that "just for fun" might be relegated to the back burner of most reading and writing programs.

But, like Albert Cullum before me, I dream of teachers who wave a wooden sword, and place a bopper on their heads. These teachers realize that by "enjoying the joy" in their lives, and celebrating the spirit of childhood, they light up the best literacy programs of all.

Cullum, A. (1967). *Push back the desks*. New York: Citation Press.