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Lisa, Rosa, and Paul

"I'M GLAD I WROTE, INSTEAD OF JUST TELLING IT TO SOMEBODY"

(Grade 4)

Contributed by William McGinley & George Kamberelis

For the past several years, we have been working with Victoria Rybicki and her fourth-grade children helping to create a literate classroom community where children can use reading and writing in ways that they find personally meaningful and where their voices can be heard and celebrated. Within this community, children have been encouraged to discuss and write about their lives, their families, and the community in which they live. Indeed, children have responded to this invitation with excitement and enthusiasm, sharing with one another many of their experiences, aspirations, and visions for themselves, their families and friends, and their community. They have been particularly enthusiastic about getting their ideas and experiences "down on paper" and helping each other out in all aspects of the writing process. At the end of each year, children have published an anthology of their work, leaving a trace of themselves in the larger world.

Our work with Victoria and her children over the past several years has clearly shown us that writing is much more than the ability to communicate a particular message. The talk and texts produced by the children with whom we have worked have provided us with insight into the many ways that children use writing to understand themselves in relation to other people and the world in which they live. In this chapter, the voices of three children illustrate some of the personal and social functions that underlie and motivate children's writing.

We begin with Lisa whose vision of family and community life is embodied in her essay "Living the Black Life." In this piece she envisages possible worlds for herself, for others, and for society, while remaining naively yet painfully aware of past and present social injustices. Next, Rosa discusses how she came to write the published piece she called "My Mom" and how the story has functioned in her life. Particularly intriguing is Rosa's use of writing to externalize difficult emotions and to create openings for social exchanges that help her to work through those emotions. Finally, as Paul talks about his essay "Enslaved," he shares his sense of joy at thinking about himself as a writer, the importance of self-expression through writing that he has come to believe in, and his perceptions about the potential power of the written word to transform social meanings and practices.

FIGURE 16-1 "Living in the Black Life"

Living in the Black
It's nice living in the Black life -
I haven't been harassed in Detroit Back
Then Blacks were treated bad and beaten
and spit at. But right now it is better
and I'm happy that I am living in the
Black life. Some people don't like
living in the Black life. Back then white
people hated Blacks but now White people
really like Blacks. We communicate
with each other and it's a wonderful life
being Black. And I don't hate for being
Black and other Blacks shouldn't hate
being Black. They should be happy
who they are and no matter what
Whites do to Blacks we are good
people still
So love who you are don't hate
yourself and thank God for making
you a person. It doesn't matter if
you're White or Black, just know
who you are. So living in the
Black life is a good life to live.

LISA: "PEOPLE SHOULD LOVE WHO THEY ARE AND STAY TOGETHER"

I wrote about how Black life was, and how it is now, and stuff. I wanted people to know about the history of Black people, and stuff like that. Probably people want to know how I knew about how it was back then. When I read in the history books, they said that Black people were slaves and they was treated bad. And then I thought, I'm happy that I'm living in the Black life because White people are treating me right.

My cousin gave me a suggestion to write about Blacks and how they were treated. And Ms. Rybicki was reading us stories about how some White people didn't like Blacks and how some Blacks didn't like themselves. So I thought of some ideas . . . that's why I wrote my story. Some of it was in the 1950s. Some of it was in the 1850s. In the 1950s was Alabama and stuff like that, and some was in the 1800s, about like Harriet Tubman. A lot of Blacks were treated bad, like Martin Luther King was treated bad. Harriet Tubman and all other Black Americans were treated bad.

Some people, some White people are prejudiced of us, like in Mississippi, like the Ku Klux Klan. My mother said that my great grandma, she didn't like being Black. She wished she was White so people wouldn't beat on her 'cause she was a slave back then. But she got free, and she wished she was White, so she wouldn't have to be hurt during the troubles.

I wanted to tell the world don't hate who you are—don't hate being Black. If some people don't like being Black, don't hate being Black too 'cause God made you a happy person. So be happy with who you are. A White person could have that message if they don't like themselves. . . . So don't hate who you are and thank God for being alive, whatever color you are. Jesse Jackson was preaching that on TV one day. I want the world to know that. So, I'm glad I'm Black.

When people read my story they can feel how it was painful living in the Black life, how Blacks was beaten, and beaten on, and beaten on like we was just animals. And they can try to stop it [racial injustice]. The message is for Whites too. I want White people to get the message not to try to start killing. If you don't like Blacks, don't just beat on them. Try your best not to do nothin' bad to them. If they read my story, well, the people who don't like Blacks will probably change their ways. It makes me feel sad when I read my story, but I got to get it out and show other people how it is, how I felt.

I want people to understand how I really felt when I wrote about the Black life. See, I said the Black life was nice. But back then [during slavery] it was very painful. So, I want people to see how Blacks stayed together so they can understand how it was. They stayed together and tried to get free, 'cause if they got separated or fell down when they were trying to run away, they just got beaten

Writing my story made me feel good. I didn't think of the accident too much anymore—about how it happened and I was so scared. The story helped me think of my mother as always there for me when I need her, and it brought to me how it feels. When other people read my story I would like them to know that me and my mom have great times together. And my family, that we spend lots of time together. It's important to me because I like telling about my mother a lot.

I think my story gives other people ideas—to talk, be together, and have fun with their mother. If people don't have fun with their mother, and they don't do a lot of things with their mother, my story may give them ideas. Sometimes when my mother's sick, I still be tired, but I still help my mother. Sometimes I get on my mother's nerves 'cause when me and my brother and sister be playing together, I be just going down there to play with them. And then when I go down there they start making noise, and then I may get in trouble, and they may get in trouble. But I try to get along with my mother and be good to her.

PAUL: "IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE TO WRITE"

I never thought about writing about what happens to me. Before, I would like tell about stuff that happened. I'd tell like a story. But I would never have dreamed about writing it down. It never came into my mind. I'm the same person I use to be, but I can write. I knew like I could copy something down and write it really good. Something like that. I could write up on the board. I could write what the teacher writes about. Now I can write about something that happened to one of my family. My aunt was telling me about when my grandma and my other aunt was little girls, and they were chased by the bull. I could tell about that. And when I do write it, I can make another copy. It changes me because I can write about and other people can read it.

I got my ideas for my story when I was over at my cousins' house, and they taped this movie about Dr. Martin Luther King, and then I was like thinking about it. I got some more ideas from movies that I've seen about slavery. I saw *Mississippi Burning* and some about Dr. Martin Luther King. And then it was Black History Month, and I was wondering what could I do for it. And we were talking about slavery about that time, and then I just went on to write a story about slavery.

I wanted to know why people be treated that way, and why did they have to come to the northern side, because they didn't harm White people so why should they harm Black people? I wanted to know like why they hurt Black people? The laws was prejudiced 'cause they was back then when there was slaves, but then like in the sixties when the White people met Dr. Martin Luther King, they was like . . . Dr. Martin Luther King was showing them the right way, and they didn't like that, so they try to do everything they could to get them away from Dr. Martin Luther King. Like if they see somebody

FIGURE 16-3 "Enslaved"

Enslaved

Slavery was unfair because they were beaten and taken from their family. And I bet you that the hardest part is to be taken from your family because they took care of you since you were born. And most of the white people did not care about how the slaves felt. Those white people were too lazy and they wanted to take slaves from their home in Africa.

All the slaves were on a ship. The ship was on bigger than the classroom. The slaves were dying because if somebody get sick then the others will get sick and they will die too. When they made it to the south they were to sign a contract to do service for twenty years, but they got tricked to serve for life! I don't think that was fair, do you? But how about now.

Now, I want to tell you about Nelson Mandela. He was a leader in Africa. He showed them the right way for a long time. Then he went to court and lost the case and he was in jail for twenty-seven years. He's out now in 1990. He is all around the world, I'm

drinking out of the good water fountains, they would arrest them for nothing—something like that. But don't you see, I'm not so sure of that of what really happened.

First, I wrote my feelings to show other people how it was . . . to show kids how it was back before our parents were born, and before we were born. And I wrote it mostly so they can get around prejudiced people like the Ku Klux Klan. We can turn around, and we can join each other. It's like this because the color of our skin. Like if we

FIGURE 16-3 "Enslaved" (continued)

glad he's out to turn the idea of Blacks getting along with whites the right way.

Now I want to tell you about Harriet Tubman. I learned this in a book and in a story that my teacher read to our class. Harriet was a slave since she was 4 years old. She had take care of one, two, and three year olds when she was only four or five years old herself. And if she didn't do right she would get locked in a box for a lot of hours or for a day. I know Harriet was treated bad but the white people did not have any feelings for slaves. They had no feeling for slaves. All they wanted was to get their house cleaned. Some of the slaves didn't know how to read. Some of the slaves had to sneak to learn to read. Back to the story. The part I did not like was when she had got hit in the head with a weight. She was out for a week and then she was not feeling right. Nobody wanted her but she started the underground railroad. She made it to the free side, but she was not happy because she was thinking about her family. She went back to the South to free her family. She tricked everybody

take off our skin, we both look . . . if we take off our skin, we look the same way.

In my story I think I was trying to explain, to say something about the family in times of slavery, because they took care of you, fed you, clothed you, had a house, had a roof over our heads. And then all of a sudden somebody would come and take it all away from you and have you working out in a cornfield somewhere. I was thinking about like what if my aunt and uncles were in this position, of being a slave, or my grandma or grandmother, or my grandmother's mother, or mother.

I started with this story and I just put it in the back of my writing folder. I wasn't even thinking about doin', uh, 'til we got into that

FIGURE 16-3 "Enslaved" (continued)

on the south side. They wanted her dead or alive. But they could not find her because her family was free. But you are still a slave to drugs because drugs can make you a slave. Say like I was on drugs I will be a slave. Because drugs is telling me what to do. Drugs can be harmful. There are steroids, crack, pot, weed alcohol, and cigarettes. Back to the point. How can drugs affect your life? They can kill you in a week or probably a day. I don't see why people do drugs. It's killing our city. People kill each other over crack. You are addict to crack. You are robbing and killing, smoking and dealing. Crack is stupid. But people think it is fun, and they get high off it, making people go and kill each other, because drugs is telling them what to do. I hope that the world will stop killing because I don't want my family to get killed over drugs because I will die before my family.

discussion about guns and about violence, and all that stuff like that. Then it just made me remember about how I would be watching shows like Dr. Martin Luther King, and videos, and I just started thinking about it, for a long time. Two days. And I just thought about it, and I said to myself, "I think I should get back to my story, that I wrote." So when the next day came I started working on it. Then, I realized that's all I really knew about slavery. That's when I asked Michael, Dr. Johnson [a local university professor]. And then I got most of my information from him.

At the same time I was writing about drugs. I forget why. Then once we started getting on to slavery on Black History Month, I didn't know that drugs could make you a slave. And then when we was talkin' about Anthony's story about guns and drugs and stuff, then I just added that into the story—about how drugs can make you a slave. 'Cause I was thinkin' about my own uncle. My uncle was tellin' me how drugs was affecting his life, and Ms. Rybicki was tellin' us how drugs can tell you what to do, and I was seein all this stuff on TV about how drugs was killin' people. I had a little help from Mrs. Rybicki, and she was showin' me how drugs can make you a slave

and how you can add drugs onto the slavery paper. She was telling me how it could take over your life. You would give anything to get it, and my uncle he did it. He did anything to get him some, just to go around the corner and get some drugs. What she was telling me was true.

I wrote my story because I don't want anyone in my family to use drugs, cause my uncle he was using drugs, but he helped hisself. He went to this clinic, and he stayed there for five months. Now he only smokes cigarettes. He don't drink nothin'. He recovered hisself. And he be at meetings and stuff, and he's havin' speeches and stuff. They can't be doin' it anymore, and stuff like that.

When someone reads my story I like them to think about it. And if they're on drugs, I'd like them to think about it and see how they could turn theyselves around and become a normal person like my uncle. Hmm, it's like a new version of slavery. What if drugs is telling you to do and stuff. And you gonna do it! It's a different version. It's still the same. You could get like addicted to it, and then you could do like stupid stuff 'cause it's telling you what to do.

I felt like I really could write it. Then after I wrote it, I felt great . . . because I wrote something that I could understand and get around. I don't know. I would hope that people will actually read it. And I felt happy. If I meet more friends and stuff I could show them and maybe I could turn them on to being a writer, but that is only if they want to be a writer. It makes a big difference to write because if you write about it and you put it in a book, more people get to know about it. People that don't even know you. Everybody could get the message that people all over the world should stop doing drugs. Maybe they'll stop crack houses, and that's good enough for me. Now I can write something, like when something happened to me. It's like very important to me because I never thought I would write about something—never thought I'd be a writer.