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BEFORE THE FIRST WORDS SPOKEN: A COLLAGE BY URBAN EDUCATORS

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before the first words spoken

WHEN YOU SPEAK, YOUR WORDS WEAVE STRANDS OF LIGHT
INTO 'BEING' SHAPES...



Edwin, age 6

It's not bad once you get use to it

I FiaL Like I aM RELY LeRnenG

At makes me fell haPPy

in my classroom I listen for the message
concentrate on breathing
just breath

...

children work building
paper
scissors
tape glue

sailing ships fill the room
amazed [again]

at the simplicity [complexity]

of their learning...

She is alone, standing with her arms crossed over her skinny chest watching the other children playing on the adventure playground. Her face betrays no emotion as she stands in her long A-line dress and matching pantaloons...I notice her as I return from my lunch time walk because of her solitariness and because she is beautiful, her dark hair, cut bluntly, curling under slightly, frames a well-shaped face. *Who are you little girl? Where are you from? Are you new here like me? Why such silence? Can you speak English? I was a child like you once, in a world that I didn't understand. Don't worry it won't take long and you'll know how it all works and how to join in.*

Thursday morning.

My classroom is full of light.

This time I announce to my students: *"We will CREATE our own, totally new play where OUR words will be said by US. Not somebody else's words and somebody else's life, but OUR life."*

I was only trying to write.

No one screamed.

No one accused.

**quiet words of understanding
terror averted...for now.**

and monitors the students' work.
offers feedback to various individuals.

"Yes, you can draw that."

"That is where you write the words."

"Look on the chart."

"Colour the pictures."

"Write your name."

Some of the students require specific directions
in their roles in this performance of learning.

*How does one address the individual needs of diverse learners?
Can we meet all the needs of our students? Is it possible?*

Come and take a walk with me through the hallways and classrooms of an urban school in Canada...

...You will find students whose first language is not English; students who span the ability level above and below the grade in which they are registered; students who come to school hungry; students who are classified as gifted or learning disabled; students whose families are on social assistance; students who are on medication, students who come from broken homes; students who have been (or are being) abused.

I hate school!

It makes me feel sometimes **grumpy**

Its very cumfturbull

How come I was feeling so self-conscious, so inadequate?

And so It had begun. Not pleasantly. Not necessarily unpleasantly. Sort of reminiscent of puberty, without me being in control. Growing in ways that I wasn't prepared for. Growing without a set pattern or plan. Growing, stretching, meandering, thinking, wandering, wondering, slamming into...

Doors

a metaphor for teaching and learning.

Opening feeling free.

Closingsealingup

today was a really **good day**

I just that evrebody cood reed

Make shur now wone is sad or mad

Suddenly silence.

She complains about being hungry.
I tell her to tell her mother
what she wants for lunch
and then they can make it together.
This doesn't happen. I notice that there is
no problem when she is
dropped at school
by her father.
She has lunch and eats it and she
comes on time.

It's a relief. I don't know what's
going on on the other side of the
door and I don't want to know. I just
need to breathe.

education play in today's society?
to deal with such complex problems? What support can
moving forward when you're always looking back?
Aware these situations
be offered? Is the education
do you keep you life
education system even equipped
a student's life? What role does

*mom and Tony always made sure
the teachers knew my situation
they were afraid dad might come
try to get me back
they all knew
who was supposed to pick me up
who wasn't allowed to*

How do people live in constant fear? How
important for schools to be aware of? Is the
system even meant to take into account all aspects of

Sometimes we go in the woods
And learn about stuff there
School is important

It is early November. In the reading group Tamara's lips move as we practice a unison reading of the story. When she reads to me individually she is tentative, she reads the words she knows, but falls silent when there is an unfamiliar word. She waits until I tell her the word before she carries on. We practise the little stories over and over and eventually she learns a story very well. I am effusive in my praise, she listens with downcast eyes.

And the other question in February, often wondered about, sometimes
Asked and rarely answered:
Why does February have 29 days every four years.
And does it really make sense to a 7 year-old to say that we have 365
And a quarter days each year and have to make up that quarter with one
day every four years?
How can you have a quarter day?
You just told us that a day always has 24 hours.
Sometimes teachers just don't talk any sense.

Due to the cut-backs in services your special needs student who qualifies for full time help will be without help for three hours a day. We have to spread our aides to cover more children.

☹ Sorry D

where are we going?
what are we doing?

Oh my god – w5
who
what
where

when
why
add in how

Information overload
we must learn more
we must know more
we must...
what – why

a cycle that
never ceases
a treadmill that
never stops
the hamster in its wheel
constantly turning



Iva, age 8

The students provide an interesting array of answers and responses: "Flashlight, lightning, moon, stars, sun, streetlight, traffic light, headlights, lamp, candle,..."

Once they reach twenty-two ideas, the student teacher stops recording any further ideas. Directions are given out for the follow up activity to the read aloud story. Each student is to complete a page for a class book, and each page needs to be a different idea. The student teacher shares her example of a colourful picture and idea that was prepared ahead of time...

The bell rings.
Papers are gathered.
The student teacher dismisses the class for recess.

Children rush to the coat room and move outdoors to where the sun is beckoning them to play.

*Cinderella dressed in yella went upstairs to kiss a fella,
By mistake she kissed a snake,
How many doctors did it take?
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8...*

children call & invite me to skip
both a wink & a dare

I throw down my sweatshirt
prepare myself
knees bent slightly
weight on my right foot
lean forward
watch the rope
rock slightly
long rope arches high after the familiar click
one quick leap & I am in
rope over now under then over

*Strawberry shortcake, huckleberry pie,
Who will be your lucky guy?
A,B,C,D,E,F,G...*

Faster! Turn faster!

The instructions for becoming an urban teacher are not written in books or journals, there are no workshops and no courses. You learn how to teach from your children. And there are many lessons...

One day in the gym the children are tossing bean bags high up into the air. They are instructed to watch the bean bag closely as it lofts up out of their hand and back into their palm. The development of hand/eye coordination is the goal. Repeatedly, I put the bean bag into his hand and cup his hand inside mine to demonstrate how to toss the bean bag up into the air. Hand-over-hand instruction like this is not necessary with a typical learner but it is very effective with him.

After some time working alone Geoffrey returns to me and says "I want another bean bag."

I check the bean bag carefully expecting the beans to be falling out. "There is nothing wrong with this one, Geoffrey."

"I want a bean bag that goes higher," he demands. He does not realize that it is well coordinated movements that send those bean bags flying up to the rafters from his classmates' hands. He believes that some quality in that, otherwise, inanimate bean bag allows it to fly higher than his will go.

... I realize that I am looking at this teaching performance through a small lens which pushes me to reflect upon my teaching perspective. Watching this act of teaching, I compare what I observed with what I do. I think about my practice and beliefs about teaching, learning, and children.

I remember student teaching
Being told the hardest job was
Knowing myself
Being myself
Standing up for myself
Living my philosophy
Living and being my philosophy
Understanding feeling believing
Standing strong

gating tritid with Respekt

But who is caring for the teachers?... Glancing at the closed door of the administrators we wonder what does the administration do?

**THIS IS MY JOB? I WANT THEM TO CHANGE! DO THEY CHANGE?
WILL THEY BE BACK IN TO SEE ME AGAIN? DO THEY HEAR WHAT I
AM SAYING? Will they get the message? DO WE HEAR WHAT THEY SAY?
Will we get the message? MAYBE I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT THIS JOB...**

What's wrong? What did I do?
[What the fuck does he want?]

Come on into my office and have a seat...
So Ivan, what can you tell me about
what happened earlier today?

I dunno.

[Who fuckin ratted?]

Come on Ivan, what happened today in the front hall?

Oh, that. Nothin. We worked it out.

[I'm going to kill that kid.]

What did you do Ivan?

...

I punched him in the head

Why did you do that?

Because he jacked my friend's cologne

[Yeh, he fuckin deserves to be beat on.]

...Did Dragon give it back, before or after you punched him?

Before.

[before, so what?]

[What??? He gives it back and you rock him?...Shades of last year. So much for my intervention and behavior modification. This little bugger doesn't get it....Stay calm and help him to understand that this is not okay behavior.]

Why did you do that?

Because I felt like it.

[Because, he deserves it! He stole the fuckin cologne, remember?!]

Fragility! My web hangs on a weak frame. The support strands have been cut. No more home school workers, fewer psychologists, area counselors, speech pathologists, staff assistance. Puffs of political hot air rock my web. Still I cling and spin.

...

Then darkness began flowing from your pencil

A darkness that had no right in a girl of nine years.

You tried to tell us that you were in danger.

A predator was circling

But you would not name it.
Trusting your ability to run,
You wanted no fences.
Fences work both ways.

We do stuff together

SCHOOL is supposed to be good

Go to school to make friends

I am only a plain brown spider...trapped in a web not of my own making. A web of lies woven into a happy ending that I am not sure I can deliver. Twenty-one grade one children, eight girls, fourteen boys, and one officially numbered Special Needs Child. Spider eyes can not change the view enough to disguise the fact that there are ten challenging children in my room. Gently I continue to invite them to,

"Come and follow me on a line"

only to watch as they bump, jostle and fall unable to see the line. Unable to keep up with their line, I rush to the top of the stairs to hold the hand of a student who has begun to fall, only to have a fist fight break out at the bottom. Can I keep them safe enough to educate them? Or can I only keep them safe?

Still I sit

and

still I spin.

Holding my breath I contemplate the unthinkable and form the question

Who will take my place when my spinning stops?

I know that kids that survive tough lives, the resilient kids, say there was this teacher who cared when no one did at home. I must try to show this little girl that someone cares no matter what. I must try to set aside my irritation at her behaviour, recognize what she truly needs.

Her life lives within her and mine within me. Can we find ways to make our lives work together?



Anna, age 8

we get noleg and want to leren
learn to be smart so I can Get a Job
We haf to go to koLig

...

Faster! Faster! Faster!

H,I,J,K,L,M,

N...

Rope catches my foot
More shouts & cheers

I relent
Bow
Step out

Pick up my clothing
Breathing hard now
Begin walking back
Turn & see Douglas

First he follows
After a few quick steps catches up
Walks beside me
 Saying nothing
Breathe in the cool spring air

It satisfies deeply
This small quiet boy walking next to me

It feels like love
It feels like joy
It rises within me
& sounds like laughter



Misa, age 7

Sports Day... Tamara's teacher is chief organizer of the primary sports day, so I am in charge of her class today. Tamara's excitement is infectious, she is dancing in delighted anticipation. She still wears the long A-line dress and pantaloons, today with running shoes. She has grown over the course of this year, she is one of the taller children in the class and her dress doesn't quite disguise her coltish legginess. She participates with abandon in every event, her energy unflagging. I can see that she is fast, athletic. She is not deterred by the fact that I still can't understand everything that she says to me, she keeps working at it until I do. Her teacher has started to complain, mostly in jest, and entirely with pride, that she is talking too much in class.

The world of learning begins before the first words spoken.
Choice are made.

Early morning daydreams.

The bell rings.

Writers' Profile

before the first words spoken was created as a written collage by Lynn Fels from articles by educators writing about their concerns, passions, and hopes for the children they teach. All authors are urban educators in Vancouver and participants in the UBC Urban Learner Master's Program. The artwork is by students from University Hill Elementary School in Vancouver. See www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/urbanlearner/ for complete transcripts.

Arlene Blond

Grade 1 teacher
from "Urban Webs/A Teacher's Morphin(g)e"

John Cortens

Grade 5 teacher
from "paper ships sail"

Richard Gyurkovits

Grade 6/7 teacher
from "Who Care? Listening Behind School Doors"

Nina Hooker

Grade 1/2/3 teacher
from "Reflection and Shadow Teaching and Motherhood"

Brenda Kvist

Technology consultant
from "you can't say I hated it" and "(un)consciousness"

Kevin Land

Vice-principal
from "Maybe I'm not very good at this job"

MJ Moran

Grade 7 teacher
from "I was only trying to write."

Trish Musselle and her students

Grade 1/2/3 teacher
from "Even in Silence"

Katerina Pogrebinsky

French teacher

from “Etudier le Francais Performing the Language”

Jean Redpath

Resource teacher

from “A Bully in Our Midst: Raven Steals the Light” and “Moving Target.”

Claire Rushton

Grade 2 teacher

from “School Years”

Christina Schut

Resource teacher

from “Tamara”

Monica Turner

Resource teacher

from “Special Children in an Ordinary World”

Gina Wong

Grade 2 teacher

from “student (teach you, teach me) teacher”