COLLABORATION AND CHILDREN'S WRITING: WHAT "REAL" AUTHORS DO, WHAT CHILDREN DO

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Children have a wonderful knack for working together. I watch admiringly as my son, Adam, age nine, shows his seven-year-old brother, Aaron, how to put together a Lego truck kit Aaron has received for his birthday.

"Like this," Adam says, fitting two pieces together and then pointing to the instructions, which are spread out before them on the floor. Aaron takes the incomplete truck from his brother's hands and tries to fit another piece to it.

"See how it goes?" Adam asks, again pointing to the instructions. Aaron looks at the instructions, then at the truck.

"Oh, like this," he says.

"Yeah," Adam replies, satisfied as he watches Aaron successfully fit the new piece to the truck.

There are pleasure and benefit for both children in such an encounter. They teach and learn from each other in a refreshingly comfortable way. We know from our experience how powerful such collaboration can be, and researchers have documented the influence of collaboration on learning, particularly in the language arts. As Pamela Crouse and Mary Davey concluded in their study of their first and second grade class-

rooms, "We now understand that learning is best facilitated when children are allowed to collaborate with one another" (766).

This easy, almost routine nature of collaboration among children may lead us to overlook how sophisticated—and useful—such collaboration can be when children read and write. As whole language practices and process-oriented approaches to teaching writing and reading gain wider acceptance among educators, children regularly share their writing with each other in school, talk about it in groups, and write and read together in one-on-one conferences, at the author's chair, in workshops (see Graves; Graves and Hansen; Dyson, "Individual," and "Transitions"). Yet we have only begun to understand the specific nature of such collaborative interactions among young writers and readers and the potentially powerful role of collaboration in children's development as writers and readers.

My recent work on a children's picture book and in two elementary classrooms suggests that we might do well to look more closely at how children collaborate in writing and how teachers can make the most of such collaboration. The growing acceptance of whole language and process-oriented pedagogies, which involve many collaborative activities, and the evolving view of literacy as a social phenomenon (e.g. Heath; Taylor; Walters et al.) raise questions about what happens when children collaborate, specifically in their writing: In what ways do children collaborate in writing? How does such collaboration take place? What are the potential benefits of such collaboration? Should we encourage collaborative writing among young children? How can we do so? In this article I'd like to begin to address these questions by sharing some of what my experience might tell us about children's collaborative writing; I'd also like to suggest some ways in which an understanding of the social nature of writing can help us create more effective classroom learning environments in the language arts.

Collaboration and the Children's Book Author

In recent years, scholars have begun to re-examine our traditional notions about authorship and writing to reveal the

inherently social and collaborative nature of writing. Some of these scholars, particularly post-structuralist thinkers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, challenge the very notion of individual authorship as a construct rooted in social, economic, cultural, and historical contexts. Researchers in writing, notably Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, offer empirical support for these theoretical arguments by documenting the astonishing variety and routine nature of collaborative writing in professions like engineering and medical science (see also Reither and Vipond, "Writing"). Lunsford and Ede conclude that "the concept of individual authorship, which strikes most people as not only commonsensical but also somehow inevitable, is actually a cultural construct, and a recent one at that" (77).

Such scholarship suggests strongly that writing is an intensely social activity and that collaborative creation of written texts is not only widespread but in many ways essential. My own experience as the "writer" (it will shortly become clear why quotation marks are necessary here) of a children's book underscores this sense of writing as collaborative in ways that have surprised me. As I look back on the creation of the book, I am struck by how little of the book might justifiably be called "mine" and how much of it "belongs" to others. Indeed, the lines between "my" parts of the book and those of the others—my children, editors, the illustrator—who contributed to it are so blurred that printing "written by Robert Yagelski" on the cover without qualification is a misrepresentation. If that statement sounds a bit dissonant to ears more accustomed to the sounds of individual authorship, consider the complicated ways in which this book was conceived as a story, revised as a written text, and illustrated as a children's picture book.

The book began as an impromptu bedtime story for my sons, then ages two and four. On an evening when the boys were particularly active, I decided to deviate from our routine of reading a bedtime story; instead, I simply made up a story on the spot. I created the plot from elements familiar to them: the hydraulic lift bridges in Portsmouth, NH, where we had spent many sunny afternoons watching boats come in, and the toy trucks the boys played with; the plastic figurines from those trucks provided the characters for the tale. The ploy worked: intrigued, Adam and Aaron settled into bed and listened intently.

The next night at bedtime they surprised me by asking to hear the story again. This time, however, they asked questions and made suggestions as I tried to recount the tale: "Why did the bridge get stuck?" "How come Joe couldn't fix it?" "Who was driving the tow truck?" 'I think Chet should be driving the tow truck." And so on. During the next several months the story began to evolve as a result of these discussions and retellings. The children's suggestions and questions shaped the story and helped create the version that was finally committed to paper. I was the "writer" who entered the "text" into a file on my word processor, but the children had helped "write" the story; it came from their imaginations and experiences as much as from my own.

By the time the story was accepted for publication as a picture book, it had gone through too many revisions to count, many of which had resulted from my readings of the developing text to Adam and Aaron. The evolution of the story continued as the editor made suggestions for further revisions. These suggestions went beyond an effort to improve the language of the text or to clarify the plot; they involved the very essence of the story. For example, the version I originally submitted included seven characters, all of whom were connected to each other by their occupations (e.g. a farmer who grows vegetables; a worker who drives the machines that harvest the vegetables; a truck driver who delivers the vegetables to market; and so on). To my mind, this interconnectedness was the heart of the story. The editor, however, suggested that I expand the scope of the story to include more characters. Next to a passage in the manuscript that described the seven original characters, she wrote, "This is wonderful, and I can imagine a terrific illustration. I think, though, that you should keep going and give us *more*—a wider spectrum of life. How about some kids? A school bus going to school? A mom driving a carpool to preschool? . . . It's neat how you have connected people and jobs . . . but a farm is a very small part of life." Clearly, her perspective on the evolving story—that of an editor whose task is to make the text a whole book, complete with illustrations—differed from mine. I had never considered the story "visual" in this way; for me, it was a written text to be read, silently or aloud. But my interactions with the editor began to influence my perspective and ultimately shaped my revisions. The final version of the story, for example, had ten characters rather than seven, and

the focus of the story shifted subtly from the interconnectedness of those characters to a greater emphasis on the scale of that interconnectedness. In several important respects, the story was a different story than I had originally submitted; it was now partly a product of the editor's vision and of our discussions regarding re-visions.

Once the illustrator sent in her preliminary pen-and-ink sketches and "dummy" of the story, I realized that her interpretation of the characters and the setting represented yet another perspective on the story. I had that feeling I often get when I see for the first time a film version of a novel I particularly like. My son Aaron summed up my feelings when he saw the early sketches: "That's not what Rocky looks like!"

Whatever our reactions to the early sketches, though, the illustrations began to shape further revisions of the text. The illustrator, often in consultation with the editor, added elements to the story that I had never even considered, and she embellished the tale in ways that both reinforced and altered some of its key elements. For instance, in the illustrations the main character became an obviously jovial chap. Although my text doesn't explicitly suggest that he should be so, his jovial nature seemed to become central to the plot in the illustrated version: it reinforces a sense of confidence in the reader that this character will eventually overcome the crisis facing him—a sense of confidence that doesn't come through strongly in the written text alone. In addition, the illustrator added characters who visually enhanced the plot. For example, several illustrations depict two small children who accompany one of the original characters; these children, who appear nowhere in the original text, react to various happenings of the plot in ways that create a kind of parallel subplot. Moreover, the illustrator was able to include elements of the story in her drawings that obviated the need for certain passages of text, which were eventually deleted. In short, the work of the illustrator, and her consultations with the editor and with me (through the editor), influenced the development of the story as it evolved from written manuscript to illustrated children's book; she, too, helped "write" the story.

I have barely begun to describe the many interactions that occurred among the illustrator, the editor, and me as this book took shape over the months we worked on it. And yet it seems quite obvious that the collaboration among the three of us—and a few others (editors at the press, friends of mine)—was pro-

found. We "wrote" this book together—after, that is, my sons and I "wrote" the story. The creation of this text was a decidedly social and collaborative affair.

Collaboration and the Child Author

Despite our deepening understanding of the social nature of writing—and the growing body of research that gives scholarly weight to that understanding—we seem to resist this notion of writing as inherently social and collaborative. It runs counter to our deeply ingrained sense of the author as individual visionary—what Lunsford and Ede call the "commonsensical" concept of individual authorship. During the time we were working on this book, I commented to the editor that her name should also appear on the cover; this book, I said, was as much hers as mine. She resisted the idea, protesting that "it was *your* imagination that brought it all to life."

Perhaps that comment suggests one reason that some teachers seem to have such antipathy toward collaboration among their students: they tend to view a piece of writing as uniquely the product of the "writer's" own imagination and ability. And indeed, the very nature of evaluation and assessment in schools—which so powerfully shape the culture of schools—reinforces this antipathy toward the notion that writing is social and ultimately discourages collaboration among students; collaborative writing in schools strikes many as a form of cheating.

But a careful look at how children write under certain circumstances reveals striking similarities to how adults write; it reveals that for children, as for adults, writing can be an intensely social and collaborative activity. During the time that I was working on the children's book, I was also spending several hours each week in my sons' first and second grade classrooms as a parent volunteer, helping their teachers with writing activities. What I observed (and recorded in field notes) in those classrooms were communities of language users in which the children collaboratively wrote stories much as adult writers do. Over time the children became collaborators in the sense that the editor and illustrator and my sons and I were collaborators, and as a result of such collaboration they broadened their experience as users of language, both written and oral.

The classroom environments that Adam's and Aaron's respective teachers created, of course, fostered the kind of collab-

oration I'm describing. A wealth of research in recent years has underscored the vital role of the classroom environment in fostering—or inhibiting—children's learning generally and, in particular, their development as writers and readers (e.g. Bloome; Cazden; Michaels). Both teachers, Mrs. Whitt in her second grade classroom and Mr. Day in his first grade classroom, created supportive classroom environments rich with opportunities for their children to read and write.[1] A key feature of these classroom environments was "language block." Each day during these one-hour "blocks," children had time for "free choice" reading (which Mr. Day called "dear time"). "Free choice" reading meant that the children could choose from the substantial collections of books in the classrooms, the school library, or books they brought from home to read individually, in pairs, or in small groups. In this setting, reading became a daily, very social, but essentially self-directed activity for the children.

Language block was also devoted to the children's own writing. Usually, the children engaged in free choice reading for about half an hour and then moved on to their writing. This writing was also "free choice" in the sense that the children could write about whatever topics they chose. The teachers outlined for the children the basic steps they needed to take as they wrote their stories, and the children completed those steps at their own pace with minimal direct teacher supervision. The steps included compiling a "topic list" from which to choose story ideas, writing a rough draft of a story, sharing a draft with a classmate and then with the teacher, revising the draft, and then editing the finished story. A final step for some stories was submission to the school's publishing shop. During language block the teachers worked individually with children at various stages of writing: they might help one child formulate an idea for a story, respond to another's rough draft, and guide a third child's editing. And during this time the children routinely worked with each other, reading each other's stories, commenting on them, making suggestions for revisions, asking for each other's help, and, in many cases, writing together. Like reading, writing in this setting was a regular, largely self-directed, but decidedly social activity.[2]

In this context, the children collaborated on stories in three important ways: in creating the plots and characters of stories, in illustrating stories, and in creating entire "books" by several

"authors." What is striking about these instances of collaboration is that the children were not explicitly instructed or encouraged to collaborate; they simply began to collaborate in an environment that provided opportunities for them to do so.

In both Mr. Day's and Mrs. Witt's classrooms, the children often collaborated informally as they worked on their stories during language block. For instance, children at the same worktable casually suggested ideas to each other for a character's name or for the turn of events in a plot. Sometimes a child would ask for advice; sometimes it might be offered unsolicited. Periodically, though, within this atmosphere of casual and routine interaction and sharing, a few students would embark on a much larger project together. One such project was a story that Adam and his classmate, Luis, began to write together during language block. They called their story "Cool Intruders."

The origins of the title itself begin to suggest the complexity of the collaboration between the two children. Adam first approached Luis during language block with his idea for the plot, which was based on a science fiction story he had recently read. They discussed the idea for several minutes, after which they began to write a draft of the story at Adam's desk. Toward the end of language block that day, Adam suggested the title, "The Intruders," explaining that he took the name from a type of military aircraft, the A-6. Luis liked the idea and, after the two talked about it for a moment, he suggested adding the adjective, "cool." Smiling, Adam wrote the new title at the bottom of the first page of their rough draft (see Appendix A). In working together in this fashion, the two children brought their respective ideas, experiences, and abilities to their work in ways that were shaped by their close interactions with each other.

To listen and watch the two children as they worked on their story during language block was to get a glimpse of two young authors negotiating the creation of a story. Once Adam had explained the basic idea for the story to Luis, the two literally wrote the piece together line by line, taking turns at the pen. Each line was suggested by one child, discussed by both, revised orally, then written down on paper and sometimes revised again as the discussion continued. Together, the children created a fantastic underground world complete with mutant

monsters and high-tech machinery, a world they inhabited as characters involved in a plot they collaboratively constructed. The following exchange, which occurred a few days after they began the story and which I observed and recorded in my notes, illustrates how their collaboration shaped their emerging text:

Adam: (looking up from the paper after finishing a sentence): OK, what happens next?
Luis: I don't know.
Adam: How about you see a monster? [Both children were "characters" in their story]
Luis: Yeah! Through a periscope!
Adam: OK! (Speaking slowly as he writes) So my brother Luis was going very fast and then Luis saw through his periscope the monster—
Louis: No! The Big Hairy Thing.
Adam: (laughing) Yeah! OK. (Erases and then writes again) saw through his periscope the Big Hairy Thing . . .

When they returned to the draft the next day, they reread what they had written and discussed changes. In this way, the children negotiated such broad aspects of the story as the plot and more local concerns, such as the names of characters and the phrasing of the text.

As their draft developed over the course of several days, Mrs. Whitt sensed their excitement about their project (the two children even worked on their story outside of school) and allowed them to use language block to continue work on the story. Through their collaboration, Adam and Luis not only had the joy of creating something uniquely theirs—something both had a stake in—but they also gained experience in using written language to create meaning and in negotiating meanings with others. Moreover, in writing this story together, they could practice what they had been learning in school about plot and character. Indeed, their collaboration may have resulted in a much more profound learning about these aspects of story than would have occurred individually, since the act of negotiation between the two often required each to articulate ideas and to justify those ideas to the other as they wrote together. In other words, they were using language in rather sophisticated ways

that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to encourage in a planned, required assignment.

Adam and Luis were working at this stage only with a written text, but in both these classrooms, illustrating was a significant part of the children's work. As I suggested above, illustrations do more than simply represent a written text: they are an important point of intersection between the textual and the visual aspects of a story and they can shape the way readers make meaning of that text. In Mrs. Whitt's and Mr. Day's classrooms, the children routinely spent a great deal of time illustrating their stories. In many instances, illustrations represented the basis for collaboration among the children.

In Mr. Day's first grade classroom, the children's work on their stories during language block sometimes resembled play: the children drew pictures, shared them with each other, and talked about them—much as young children will play with coloring books at home. Indeed, this "play" itself was integral to the children's learning, as some researchers have demonstrated (e.g. Daiute). The children also worked during this time on stories that they hoped to "publish" as books in the school publishing shop, and Mr. Day often supervised those children who were preparing stories for the publication. And often children would simply make their own "books" during this time, using construction paper and other materials that Mr. Day provided. It was during this last sort of activity that some of the most interesting kinds of collaboration between the children occurred.

Consider, for instance, the "book" created by Aaron and Hanna called "The Vallintime Dog" (see Appendix B). Hanna was regarded by her classmates as the most accomplished illustrator in the class, and her drawings suggest that her reputation was warranted. Some of the children, including Aaron, routinely asked to work with Hanna during language block. As Valentine's Day approached, Aaron and Hanna were drawing together at one worktable. Taking a cue from some of the stories about Valentine's Day that Mr. Day had recently read to the class, Aaron suggested that he and Hanna write a story about a Valentine Dog, with Hanna, of course, doing the illustrations.

Their collaboration on this project differed from that of Adam and Luis. In this case, Hanna took on the role of illustrator, while Aaron assumed the role of "author" of the text.

Yet each contributed to the other's work. Essentially, the two children would discuss the plot of the story and Aaron would write some text on a page. Then Hanna would illustrate that page. Sometimes, Aaron would suggest an event, such as the main character's mother calling him to bed, and then Hanna would make the appropriate picture, after which Aaron would write the text. In other cases, Hanna's idea for an illustration influenced the text Aaron wrote. For instance, Hanna proposed an illustration depicting the main character, a dog named "Danger," delivering a valentine to Ashley (who was one of Hanna's best friends); Aaron then wrote the accompanying text. The plot of the story evolved in this fashion as the two children moved from one event/illustration to the next until they decided that they had reached a conclusion. The "book" that resulted was thus a product of a sophisticated collaboration between the children, in which both "author" and "illustrator" shaped the story.

As with Adam and Luis, this collaboration between Aaron and Hanna encouraged the two children to put into practice important concepts associated with narrative (plot, conclusion) and to consider the ways in which illustrations relate to written text and vice versa. This kind of interaction, which resembled in striking ways the interactions among the illustrator, editor, and myself in an adult context, represented a meaningful use of language and visual art for the two children; moreover, it encouraged the children to extend themselves as writers in ways that more traditional writing and reading instruction often cannot. For example, Aaron's "single-authored" work usually consisted of stories about animals or about sporting events. The former tended to be "informational" rather than plot-driven. In working with Hanna, however, Aaron helped create a story in which both humans and animals were characters and in which the main character was an anthropomorphized animal. Such a story represented a departure for him, one he was, perhaps, unlikely to make on his own. In this sense, his collaboration with Hanna, I think, fostered learning beyond such "basic" skills as writing words in "correct" sentences.

The children in Mr. Day's class worked together in pairs, as Aaron and Hanna did, as well as in larger informal groups to create "books" during language block. As the example of Aaron and Hanna's work together suggests, such collaborations

seemed to encourage the children to try out new ideas in their work. Moreover, the discussions among the children encouraged them to operationalize their conceptions of theme and plot and similar concepts as they considered together the appropriate pictures and text to include in their books. In short, in a variety of ways, the seemingly simple and playful collaborative efforts to create "books" encouraged sophisticated learning among the children.

Collaboration and The Language Arts Classroom

My discussion of collaboration among the children in these classrooms is necessarily oversimplified and abbreviated. It is not the result of an empirical study designed to document children's collaborative writing; rather, it represents the observations and experiences of a single writer, parent, and teacher as he watched various kinds of texts emerge from particular settings. At the same time, these observations, along with the research I have cited in this article, suggest that using written and oral language to make meaning is a profoundly social activity, for children as well as for adults; they suggest further that when children collaborate in writing and reading, they do so in remarkably sophisticated ways—ways that can enhance their development as writers and readers.

I am struck by how easily I have overlooked the very social nature of the writing I have done. I am struck even more so by how readily we tend to overlook the intensely social ways in which children use language, especially written language. Our classrooms should be environments that encourage such language use in all its variety and functions. To do otherwise is to throw away opportunities to capitalize on our children's proclivity to revel in language. Indeed, our inattention to the social nature of writing and reading and our tendency to overlook young children's excitement about using language might contribute to the drudgery that language arts classes too often become for most students by the time they reach middle school.

To create the kind of classrooms described above can be complicated, given the many constraints that limit what teachers and children can do in school settings. I have already mentioned, for example, the ways in which standard methods of assessment shape instruction and inhibit collaboration in language arts clas-

ses. Yet the two classrooms I have described here reveal that teachers can create rich and supportive environments for language learning without compromising other expectations they must meet as teachers. What was most striking about those classrooms was not the particular activities that the children and their teachers engaged in, but the contagious exuberance that defined those activities and the obvious ways in which the children's enthusiasm enhanced their learning. Both classrooms were environments in which reading and writing were meaningful, social activities for both students and teachers, regardless of the forms the reading and writing took.

Ultimately to create such classrooms teachers must understand the social nature of writing and be willing to allow students to use language in meaningful ways. The children's book I worked on revealed to me the ways in which writing is social and collaborative, but it was created out of my use of language, both written and oral, to make meaning with and for my children. In the same way, the stories the children wrote in Mr. Day's and Mrs. Whitt's classrooms grew out of the children's use of language to make meaning with and for each other. Adult writers and children writers share this need to make meaning through language—they share, too, it would seem, some of the same ways of doing so.

NOTES

[1]The names of the two teachers, as well as the names of all the children mentioned below (except those of my sons, Adam and Aaron), are pseudonyms, used to preserve anonymity.

[2]In both these classrooms, there was routine direct instruction in spelling, usage, and handwriting at other times during the day, but language block was reserved for the children's unassigned writing and "free choice" reading. Often the teachers would try to coordinate the more traditional instruction in spelling and usage with language block activities. For example, the spelling lists might be supplemented with words from some of the books the children were reading. In addition, in Mrs. Whitt's class, each child kept a "spelling log," into which he or she entered words that were misspelled on drafts of stories. These spelling logs supplemented the more traditional spelling lists on which quizzes were based. In this fashion, Mrs. Whitt could "teach" spelling to the entire class at the same time that she could tailor spelling instruction to individual students; moreover, spelling seemed to become less of a burden for some children, since they were learning to spell words they wanted to use in their own stories rather than learning only words that appeared on a list provided by the teacher.

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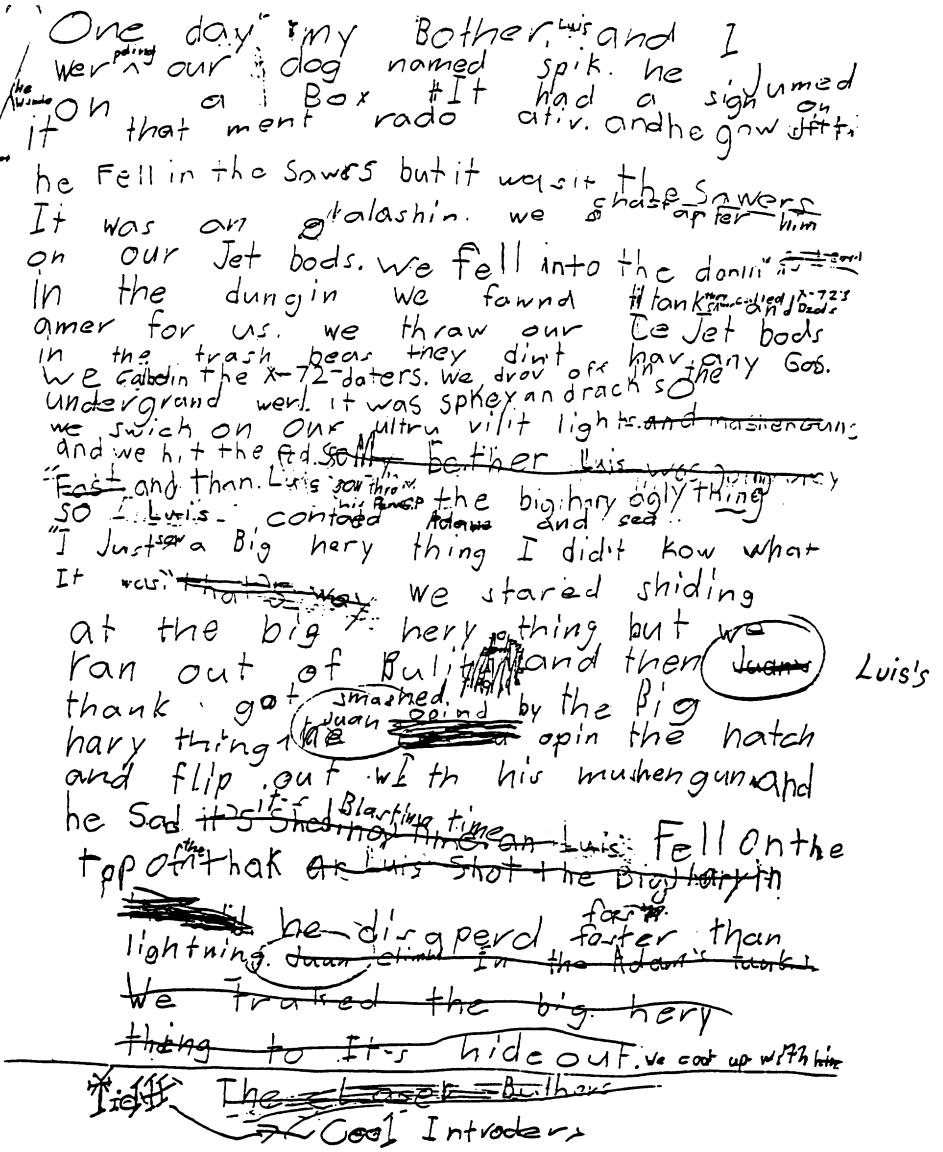
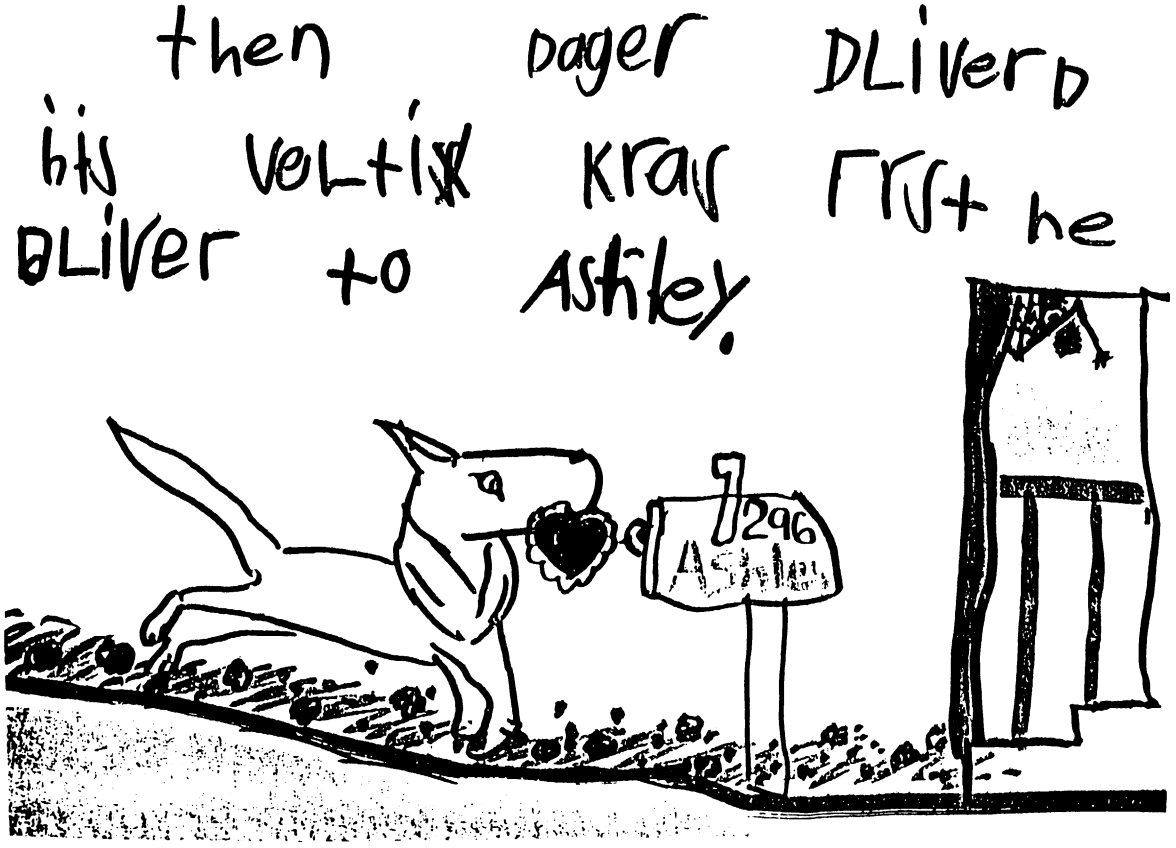
Appendix A

First Page of the Rough Draft of
"Cool Intruders"
by Adam and Luis



Appendix B

Representative Pages from
"The Vallintime Dog"
by Hanna and Aaron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