

A Sense of Agency

As I consider our goals as educators, I have come to believe that helping children develop a sense of agency is at the top of the list. Peter Johnson, author of *Choice Words*, describes this sense of agency as the understanding that “if I act and act strategically, I can accomplish things.” I happen to have the best job in the world, because I am able to walk into Lovett Lower School classrooms and see the sense of agency bubbling up in our students.

Recently, author Katie Wood Ray returned to Lovett to work alongside teachers and students, developing our understandings about writing. She spent time in Kindergarten, third, and fifth grade classes over three consecutive days. We charted new territory—even for Katie—in Lainie Gatch’s fifth grade class by launching a study of Slice-of-Life writing. This is a kind of writing we’ve all read, while we may have never put a name to it. We frequently see it in the Living section of newspapers. I remember my father doubling over with laughter reading Lewis Grizzard’s column many years ago. And, now my husband, John, reacts the same way each Wednesday when he opens up *USA Today* and flips first to the Life section to read Craig Wilson’s weekly column. Some of you may enjoy reading the article at the back of *Southern Living* each month. I would venture to say Katie considers this kind of writing, Slice-of-Life.

Katie began the study by having the children read selected articles by Craig Wilson to develop a sense of how this kind of writing goes. She read aloud to the children, and through this reading the boys and girls discovered qualities that make this kind of writing distinct in the world of writing. They noticed that in most—but not all—of the columns, the writing had humor. Unlike a story, there really was no defined beginning, middle or end, yet the story was woven into each piece. While it was essay-like, the organization had a bit of a random quality. The articles were written in a conversational tone about everyday things. And, the children sensed, as soon-to-be authors of this kind of writing, they too would be writing about ordinary things in new and interesting ways.

Writer Ralph Fletcher says that (we) “celebrate writing for what kids can show us about themselves,” and choice plays a large part in this. By day three, after lots of reading and inquiry and thinking about topics, the children shared ideas they had for their writing. They were clearly envisioning how they could write about a topic that interested them in a Slice-of-Life container. Topics ranged from what to think/say when relatives give you knickers for Christmas, to dads on Blackberries, to little league coaches, to potatoes!

When Katie left, the writing continued in Ms. Gatch’s 5th grade classroom. With a sense of agency!

Mary Baldwin | Lower School Principal

Here is an example of the Slice of Life writing done in Ms. Gatch’s class:

The Problem with Naming a Dog

By Rhodes Denny/ Grade 5

My name is Rhodes. That is what people call me and that is what I write on my papers. It has been days and still no name for my new puppy. I thought my parents were good at naming.

They named three children, but they can’t even name a dog. Wow! I mean, come on. How hard is it to name a simple little dog?

The problem began three days ago when we got the cutest little puppy ever. If you think dog naming is easy, come to our house.

Has it ever taken you that long to name a dog?

If dog naming was a subject in school, our family would get an “F.” That would mean summer school.

When we sat down and began to think of names like Winston, Sarge, and Bear, we knew we had a problem. Nothing seemed to suit our little, brown-spotted puppy.

I don’t know how we named our other dog so quickly. Well, she does act really “sassy.” We figured that out fast.

Our old dog, Trooper, really fit his name, too. He lived to be 19 years old, a real trooper. So I guess this new dog name puts us under a lot of pressure. Even though it is just a dog, I mean people take it seriously.

I know that we picked a bad name.

We picked the wrong name for our little dog. Bear, yes Bear. That name is for old fuzzy, fluff balls. I imagine some giant dog with that name. What were we thinking?

I think people have a problem of getting over excited about naming their dog before getting to know them. Well, at least, that is what happened to us.

Don't you hate it when people try to give you names for your own pet? Or worse, after you have already named it, they even tell you that they don't like it.

We were in a quandary. This puppy dog needed a new name, and fast.

Our family was outside sitting down on the patio watching our cute, little, brown-spotted puppy dog bouncing and hopping frantically around chasing squirrels in our backyard.

You know how dads just sing random songs out of the blue? I know our dad does. Do you want to know what song he was singing? "Duke of Earl." It was an old time song. It gave me an idea. I had come up with the perfect new name for our dog.

I was inspired.

We should change that name to Duke of Squirrel in honor of our new puppy, now known as Duke, for short.

Do you know what Duke was probably thinking all this time? "Hey, make up your minds you people. I would really like to know what my name is going to be."

So, guess what I am doing now? I am sitting in the backyard watching Duke doing what he does best, chasing those squirrels. Come to think of it, our family might get an "A" at dog naming.

No summer school for us!