

# LISTENING TO WHISPERED VOICES AND HEART MELODIES - EMPOWERING THE YOUNG POET

**Andrea Smith**

In February, I crouched down and listened to the whispered dreams of my first graders.

Bad guys of the world, listen to me.  
I am shooting hearts through my hands  
To make you good again...  
Please stop in the name of justice  
And hearts.

Samantha M.

I wish everyone had a house...  
Close to their Mom and Dad  
Dreaming comfy in bed with a soft pillow  
With a house I am a better kid  
I feel like I'm a man.

Gustavo M.

It was my first year teaching first grade. I watched my hair gray and my laugh lines become more pronounced. But for this month I remembered why teaching was my chosen profession. Things were about to change. As I listened and watched closely, the children would invite me to share their world and

their way of living in the world. (Calkins 53-54) As Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Georgia Heard before me, I would gain a respect for the wisdom of children and their truths. Six-year-olds would become teachers, and I would become a believer in the power of our youngest voices.

I teach at Greenwood Elementary in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Kennett Square is the mushroom capital of the United States and the home of Longwood Gardens, The Brandywine River Museum and Winterthur. The school is fifteen miles from Wilmington, Delaware, and 36 miles from Philadelphia. Greenwood is the home to 630 kindergarten through six graders. Twenty percent of the students are Hispanic, many the children of migrant mushroom workers. Twenty percent receive free lunch and another twenty percent come from economically advantaged families, many children of Dupont and Astra Zeneca executives. This economic and cultural diversity is both a blessing and a challenge for the school.

In my class of 19, two students were English Language Learners, an additional five lived in households where Spanish was the predominant language, one lived in a home where Persian was spoken, and another, in a home where Hindi was spoken. The students' initial writing samples varied. Some simply drew pictures, several wrote strings of random letters, and my most proficient students wrote in simple sentences. The economic diversity and cultural diversity that make Greenwood special were *very* present in Room 8.

Writing workshop was a place where my students found refuge from the differences between them. In September, we started with journals and moved on to small-moment stories. The students had begun to share the details of their lives. I knew that when they began to write, they would peel away the layers, and reveal themselves. I had included poetry in our Writing Workshop from early on as I believed it could help my students reach into their emotional lives like no other form of writing

could. (Heard xviii) I hoped our Writing Workshop would bring a moment of real eye contact, a moment of person-to-person contact so that each of my students would emerge as an individual rather than as a Hispanic student or an economically advantaged student. (Calkins18) Then, true friendships would blossom.

In November, our Poet-In-Residence, Joanne Sutton-Smith, approached me about participating in a regional “Dream Flag Project” which would introduce my first graders to the work of the celebrated African-American poet Langston Hughes and would have them write poems about their own dreams. I embraced the idea although I knew there were those who would question the choice of Hughes for first graders, asking whether such a project was a wise use of valuable instructional time. I believed that Langston Hughes would become a mentor/role model for my young authors. In Hughes the students would see a minority, an African-American, who, despite challenges posed by the time in which he lived and his broken family, refused to let his dreams die. Even as a young man Hughes recognized the need to nurture dreams as his dreams would sustain him in hard times. The Dream Flag Project was also a vehicle for further bridge building in my diverse classroom community.

With little time before the project began, my traditional preparations became a luxury. The project became an organic experience that at times took on a life of its own but was always guided by the “heart melodies” of the children in my classroom. I read picture books to introduce the children to Langston Hughes. At home in the evening, I read Hughes’ autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and in the morning I recounted vignettes to the students. We talked about Langston’s pet monkey Jocko, his travels to Africa, his fiery relationship with his father, and what it was like being African American in the early 1900s. They felt as if they were getting to know a friend. To get a feel for the time period, I read books to the children about the Harlem Renaissance, and we listened to jazz and the blues. They danced

to Charlie Parker. Oh, what a dance it was! Typing on an Underwood No. 5 similar to the one Langston had used, the young poets learned there were no delete or backspace keys. Most importantly, the students listened to Langston's poetry. Listening to Langston's words, bathing in the beauty of the words and the music of the verse, would teach them more than I alone could. (Ray 9) I read them *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book*, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "My People," "When Sue Wears Red," "Dreams," "Dream Variation" and "The Dream Keeper." We came back to "The Dream Keeper." We listened, we studied, we chanted:

Bring me all of your dreams you dreamers.  
Bring me all of your heart melodies  
that I may wrap them up in a blue cloud cloth  
Away from the too rough fingers of the world.

Langston Hughes, "The Dream Keeper"

Joanne and I asked the children to think about dreams they had for themselves, their families, or the world. Hands shot up and voices called out. The discussion began. "I wish my dog Yoshi felt better . . . I hit him in the eye by accident and he had to go to the vet this morning." "I wish my turtle would come back." "I wish there was clean air so people could breathe," added a student with asthma. "And please tell them to stop cutting down the trees," cried a budding environmentalist.

In contrast there was Karen, a bright shy Hispanic student. She sat motionless as the other students scurried back to their desks to get their journals and begin writing. I knelt down and asked, "So what's your dream, Karen?" She replied, "I don't have one." Karen sat frozen before a blank piece of paper. Since September, Karen had spoken very little in the class and often reminded me of Langston's poem "Quiet Girl."

I would liken you  
To a night without stars  
Were it not for your eyes  
I would liken you  
To sleep without dreams  
Were it not for your songs.

Langston Hughes, "Quiet Girl"

I suspected that Karen had a lot to share, so I suggested she draw her dream. Karen drew a picture with six heads around a table with a bowl in the middle. When I asked about the picture, she told me it was her family in Mexico. Karen said she wished the people of Mexico didn't have to be poor. I congratulated her on being brave, and I encouraged her to keep writing. Karen wrote:

God  
I wish the people in Mexico weren't poor  
I wish my grandmam and grandpa three uncles  
and three aunts could all be together  
eating lots of spaghetti  
I wish they wouldn't be starving and  
feel like an empty pot  
When I think about my grandmam and  
grandpa  
I feel sad.

God

I wish the people of Mexico were not poor.  
I wish my grandmom, grandpa, three uncles and three aunts  
could all be together eating lots of spaghetti  
I wish they wouldn't be starving and  
feel like an empty pot  
when I think about my grandmom and grandpa  
I feel sad

Karen G.

Karen and her writing taught me the real lesson of our project. It was not all about the richness of the similes. It was about empowering these young authors and letting their personal voices be heard. It was as Georgia Heard terms a "life lesson" (Heard xvii). At parent conferences I shared Karen's dream poem with her parents. As I read and translated into Spanish, I looked up to see Karen's mother crying quietly. I tried to reassure her saying it was lovely that Karen felt so much for her grandparents. Then her father, looking at his wife, also began to cry. I couldn't help but join in. Karen's mother explained that Karen had only met her grandparents once and that she hadn't recognized them. Several weeks later I got a phone call from Karen's father. He wanted to know if it would be alright for Karen to miss school and go to Mexico to see her grandparents. Only Karen and her mother could go, because it was too expensive for the entire family. I asked why Karen, the youngest in her family, was going with her mom. Karen's father replied, "Karen wants to see her grandparents . . . the poem." A six year-old's "heart melody" had been heard. She had learned the power of her personal voice.

Morgan S. came to me to show me her picture. It was a typical first grade drawing of a home - a rectangle with a triangle on top. At the top of the page was scrawled phonetically, "Yiy I Have a Has." I knew that Morgan's family had been homeless and

that only this year had been able to move into an apartment. I asked Morgan to tell me about her drawing. This elf-like six-year-old looked me squarely in the eye and spoke with uncharacteristic authority, "I wish everyone could have a house." I waited and Morgan wrote:

I wish everyone could have a house  
Safe and comfy like my Dad smiling  
Warm like mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese  
If you don't have a house, sometimes you will die  
In case you want to know how you die,  
it storms, and it rains, and it snows  
and you die from freezing  
You are cold like icy winter.

Morgan S.

Morgan read her finished poem to the class. The children in the room heard the authority in her voice and applauded. Morgan S. had been heard.

Then there was Max. There had always been Max up-front, wiggling and calling out. One morning, he broke down during our Class Meeting, crying and saying that his mom wouldn't let him have a play date with Arshia. I tried to comfort him, saying that it was probably just a bad time and that he should ask his Mom if they could play another day. When I asked Max about his dream, he quickly responded, "I wish everybody could do what they want." Max's dream poem reflected his spirit. He wrote:

Everybody should get to do what they want  
Like being free,  
Running with no rules  
Like wild tigers in the jungle.  
Like being an explorer in Africa

Driving a truck on bumpy dusty roads  
Seeing things I never saw before  
Like going to a friend's house  
whenever you want.  
Having a sleepover, playing, staying up REAL late.  
If I can't I am sad, crying, miserable.

Max H.

Wow! Max had spoken. At conferences, when I read Max's poem to his parents, they looked pained. Shortly thereafter, they made arrangements for a play date with Arshia. The play date made the news at Class Meeting. Max's classmates cheered his victory. His poem, his personal voice, had succeeded.

Last, there was Alex. He, brought me his dream poem, asking that I read it. Alex wrote:

I wish my babysitt woud cum from china  
she will be fine like the number one  
when I hold her she will be soft  
like a fetti. in my fingers  
she will smell like roses  
she will keep me cumquene and  
she will make me smile like a ranba.

Alex G.



I wish my baby sister would come from China.  
She will be tiny, tiny like the number one.  
When I hold her, she will be soft  
like a feather in my fingers.  
She will smell like roses.  
She will keep me company and  
make me smile like a rainbow.

Alex G.

Interestingly, Alex had chosen Langston's poem "My People" as his favorite for our illustrated book of Langston's poems.

The night is beautiful,  
So the face of my people.

The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.  
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Langston Hughes "My People"

Alex heard Langston write about the acceptance of his people and celebration of their beauty. This adopted child knew what true acceptance was. It was becoming part of a family. It was not only acceptance but anticipation and celebration of his soon-to-be-sister. Langston had spoken directly to Alex and now Alex's heart was speaking directly to us. Alex had opened his eyes to the beauty of the earth and the power of language and had begun to understand the truths inside himself. (Heard)

Our project did not end with our dream poems. The curator of Special Collections from the Langston Hughes Library at Lincoln University came to visit. She brought baby pictures of Langston, his stuffed toy monkeys, Christmas cards he had

penned, a medal he had been awarded by Congress, and illustrations of his poems drawn by elementary students. The last gave us an idea. We decided to create our own illustrated book of our favorite poems by Langston. I was stunned as the students called out the names of the poems they wanted to illustrate - Cristal, a cuddly ELL (English Language Learner) student with big round dark eyes and an unmistakable *joie de vivre*, called out "When Sue Wears Red." Yashveer screamed, "Negro Speaks of Rivers." Aly called out "Merry-Go-Round." Arshia said, "Turtle" and Alex said, "Oh, oh, oh - 'My People'."

Then came our big day, the regional Dream Flag Ceremony. The children were joining their dream flags with those of approximately 2,000 other students from more than 25 regional schools. It was Saturday morning, the first Saturday of spring break. Students' families made special arrangements and traveled 36 miles into Philadelphia to go to the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. Gustavo's and Lucy's fathers had taken the day off from their work and driven down together. Gustavo's mother, who was eight months pregnant, had come along. As we entered the building, all eyes went up to take in the soaring ceiling, the rich, red wood walls, shiny metal, and glass. But what caught and kept our sights were the students' dream poems typed on painted cloth flags flying from the balconies. What a phenomenal space to have the students dream poems exhibited.

Finally, the children wrote essays about why Langston was their friend. Jailis came to show me her story. She handed it to me. I read and was amazed. She had written,

I like Langston because he writes poems and so do I.

I also like Langston because he likes jazz and the blues and so do I. Another reason I like Langston is he had a dream and so do I.

Jailis C.

She had been touched. She had been changed. She knew the power of her voice, and I knew why I was teaching.

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