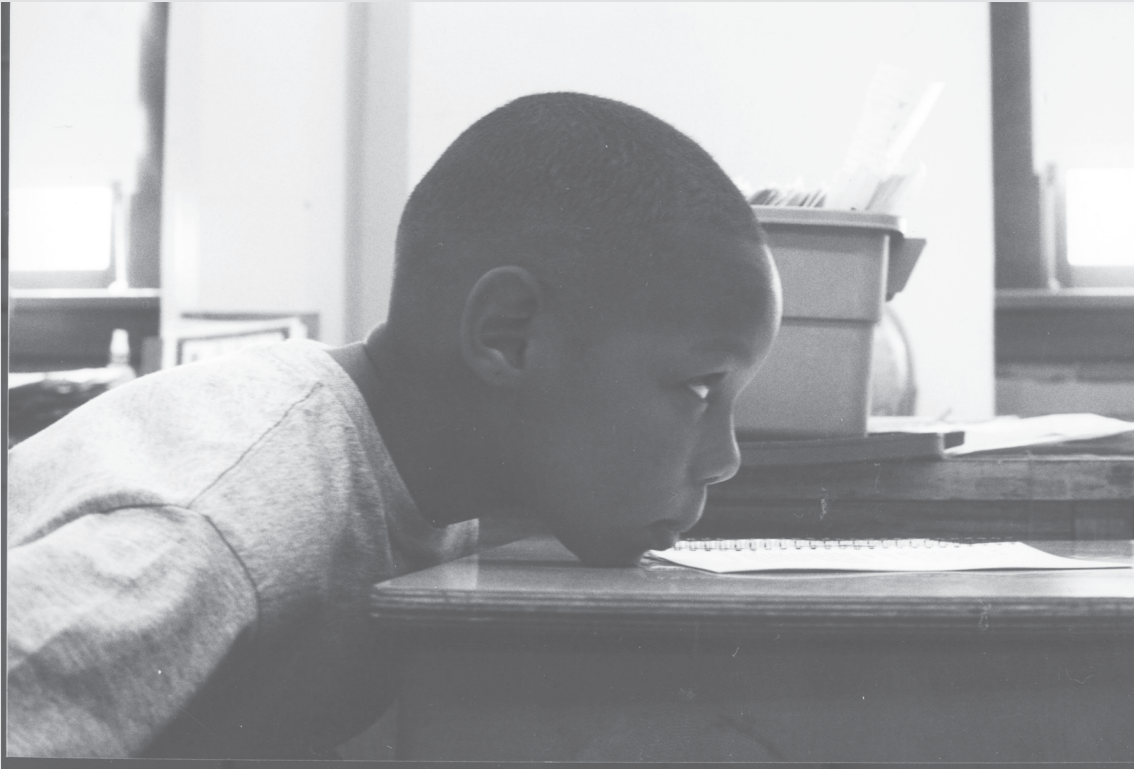




Joanna Furhman



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The Poetry Reading

Lessons Learned from a Struggling Student

ADRIANA AÑON

I had no doubt Henry would read his poems that afternoon. He was ready. The music room that our third-grade class had been assigned for the occasion was beginning to host a small crowd. Parents, brothers, sisters, and friends slowly made their way to a limited number of seats, or stood along the walls, cameras in hand.

Among them, toward the back row, sat Henry's parents and his older sister, looking tense but hopeful. The two front rows of chairs were reserved for the class members. The children's cheeks were flushed hot-pink from playing outside, and from their growing excitement.

Suffering from nerves on behalf of my students, I had refrained from eating the more exotic dishes served earlier at the international buffet in the school cafeteria. It would all soon be over, I'd said to myself, feeling the classroom grow smaller and warmer. Although I

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hadn't prepared a speech, I knew I would say something about writing; about how difficult it was, and about how proud I was of all the work the children had accomplished. Five minutes after the scheduled hour of two, I stalled for late arrivals by pretending to prepare the stage. Henry would read second.

As I adjusted the microphone to suit the children's height, as I'd done in our many rehearsals, I glanced at him long enough to notice his sweet brown eyes following me from behind the three strands of tight black curls that often hid them. Today not even his permanent disarray of hair could shade their desperate call. He was slouching over his seat, as he often did in anticipation of anything slightly difficult. After that, I noticed his left knee beginning to shake up and down with impending panic so I knelt before him and listened.

"I'm nervous, Ms. Añon," he whispered.

"It's okay to be nervous, Henry. I'm nervous, too. But you're going to be great. Just read your poems slowly, and you'll be fine. And Henry," I said, as if I were asking nothing of him, "try to have fun while you're reading."



His leg continued to shake and his eyes begged once again.

“What is it, Henry?” I whispered.

“Do I have to use the mic? Could I just say it?” His voice was now dressed in fear and hesitant, but I couldn’t falter.

“No, Henry. Use the mic. You speak too softly and if you don’t use it no one will hear the beautiful words you wrote.” I placed my hand on his shaking knee and settling it, repeated slowly, “Don’t worry, Henry. You’re going to be great. Just read your poems, okay?” I said it in that motherly tone I often used with him. He nodded with unconvinced resignation, but his leg had stopped shaking.

We had been working on the poetry unit for a couple of weeks. The children had shown quite an interest in the possibility of playing around with words in order to write something unique. As usual, Henry had taken longer to warm up to the idea of working on something new. Instead, he had slipped away in daydreams, until I called him over to my desk one day and found that the poem he had started to write the previous week was still unfinished.

“Look, Henry,” I said, “You have to do this. I’m not saying it’s easy. It’s not, but you need to think and write something down.”

“I don’t know what to write,” he said.

“But you’ve started off so well. You just need to keep going, Henry. Let’s just try finishing this one.” I pointed, “What does this word make you think of?” We worked on it together, and he found an ending to each prompt I gave him.

After dismissal that afternoon, I finally had time to look out the window and delight in the way the East River sparkled. The silence of the classroom was filled with lingering sounds, reverberating from the

walls. It was loaded with laughter, complaints, moans, and jokes, the smells of sharpened pencils, mixed in with that of left-over snacks, and I got the feeling someone was still calling out “Ms. Añon?” Henry’s poetry notebook beckoned from my desk so I began to leaf through it. Trying to find something there was a bit like trying to understand Henry; it was disorganized, and at times a number of pages had been left blank, but if you took your time to look carefully, something worth finding was always hidden there.

When I found the poem we had been working on, I saw that both our handwritings were on the page. Henry had a way of getting his points across, even if sometimes his methods were unorthodox. He had dictated part of the poem to me.

It was the only way to get it done, and I thought it didn’t matter that it was my handwriting, as long as the words were his. I realized then that I hadn’t really listened to him, I’d simply written down the words. As I read them now and understood them, they overwhelmed me.

To the prompt “I am” he hadn’t added the usual third-grade continuation: “a boy” or “a nice boy.” Henry had written, “I am the sun and the stars.” To “I love,” he’d added “my family,” to “I dream,” he’d added “big,” to “I cry,” he hadn’t added, as most children did, “when I’m sad,” but instead had written, “I cry for help.” And to “I understand,” he’d finished with “sadness”:

I am the sun and the stars,
I love my family,
I dream big,
I cry for help,
I understand sadness.

I loved reading this poem alone in our empty classroom because it gave me a chance to cry in peace,

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after which I went around the school reading it to several of my friends with pride and then heard myself ask every single time, “And do you know who wrote it?”

When Henry stood and walked up to the small podium, he readjusted the mic, opened his poetry folder and holding it up with his skinny arms, delivered the poems the same way he had thought them up, from somewhere deep inside his heart. This resulted in a magical silence spared of coughs, chair noises, or any of the other usual crowds-in-a-small-room sounds. As a result I was sure the tears that had spontaneously begun to fall from my eyes were loudly audible. The bit of me that cares about what people will think screamed, “Are you crazy? Stop crying and keep it together!” but the whole other side of me, the rest of me, just couldn’t stop.

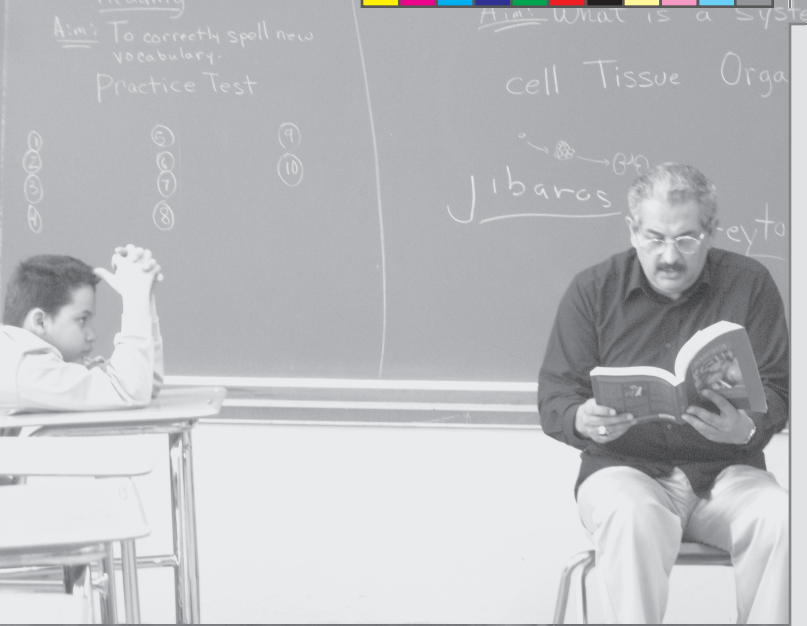
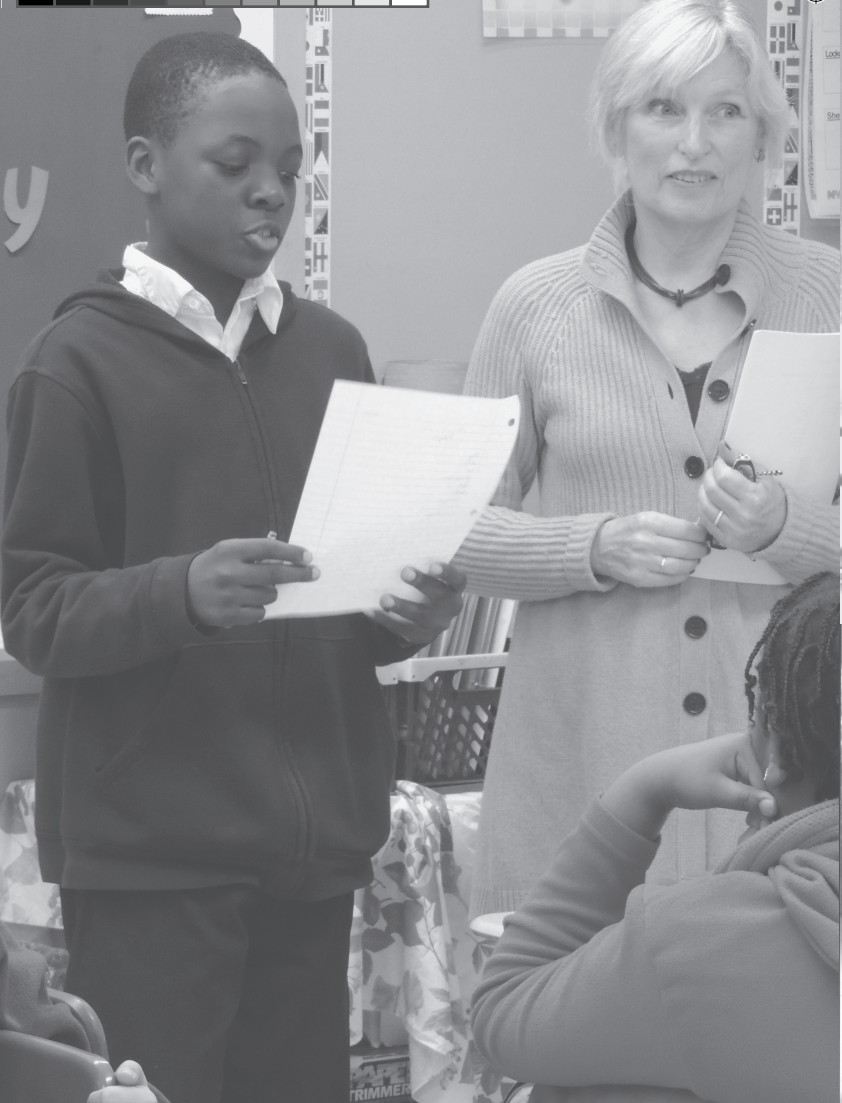
My tears had a story to tell that would never be told. Everyone could see how Henry had grown, how he’d changed, “how much” they said I’d “helped him,” but did anyone know how much he’d taught me? Had I not doubted myself? And on dreary winter mornings, when the end of the school year seemed eternally distant, was it not the thought of Henry that took me to school? No one would know except me how much this boy had helped ease my own doubts, had taught me again and again that my resource of patience was perpetually renewable because of how much I wanted to help him. No one would ever know

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that Henry was the only child who had noticed my red eyes one day when, overwhelmed by work, I had thought about quitting right there and then, until he had placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “Are you okay today?”

Luckily, Henry had to focus on his paper and read. Had he looked up, it is very likely he would have stopped and said, “Why are you crying, Ms. Añon?” Instead he focused and read fairly quickly, as if wanting to spare his family and me from holding our breath for too long. Coming into school I’d bumped into his mom who had said to me, “I hope he reads this year. Last year he didn’t go up. He was too nervous.”

The warm clamor that followed his reading awoke me, and I wiped my face clean with the back of my hand and made a silly joke about feeling free to cry if anyone needed to. There were still eighteen children to take their turn. Evangeline, who suffers from stage fright would need me to hold her hand while she read. The mic would have to be adjusted several times, and turned on and off because it was old and faulty. Ren would shine. Leo would hurry. Nikolai would speak too softly. And Alexandra would be the last to read because she was flawless and calm enough to wait patiently for everyone else. But Henry was finished. When he sat back down on his chair he instinctively turned around to see his family, who smiled behind their tears. As he turned around I saw his proud and boyish grin. ☺



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