

2007 Winner of the Bechtel Prize

Writing Standards

Finding One's Way With Words

ANNA SOPKO

Content standards were developed by the California State Board of Education to encourage the highest achievement of every student, by defining the knowledge, concepts, and skills that students should acquire at each grade level.

MY THIRD-GRADE CLASSROOM FACES SOUTH. The high windows flood the purple, pink, and orange-papered walls with afternoon sunshine. Children sit at square tables made up of two desks pushed together. They store their math folders and their writing notebooks and their sharpened pencils in the plastic cubby built into the underside of the desk.

I assign Andre a seat near the edges. In the center of the room he is too distracted by his classmates. He touches Cinthia's long black braid. He breaks his eraser into little pieces and throws them across the room. The other students laugh. It is hard to resist Andre's mischievous grin or his innocent eyes. But his constant movement disrupts the energy of the class. He is not the only student who has trouble concentrating and the others are quickly drawn into his vortex. The volume in the classroom rises. One after another the students stand to sharpen pencils, to walk to another table, to look out the wide windows at the playground below.

To learn, Andre needs the classroom to be calm and to be safe. So does everyone else. So do I. To create a safe space where children can learn, take risks, and be themselves, I must control my own energy. I try to be aware of my reaction to stress, to approach Andre calmly, and even when my instinct is to yell and to punish I try to be kind and quiet with the 20 eight- and nine-year-olds entrusted to my care.

1.0 Writing Strategies

Students will write clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows they consider the audience and purpose.

Students progress through the stages of the writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing successive versions).

ANDRE has suffered what psychologists call complex trauma. He has been exposed to violent events in his home over time, and witnessed one traumatic event from which he will never recover. This kind of trauma affects the ability of his brain to adapt

Andre is overwhelmed by new and challenging work and often puts his head down and says, "I can't do it." . . . He always knows exactly what is going on around him, even though he is rarely looking at his teacher or doing the assigned task. He sings commercial jingles when we are in line. He rips entire notebooks in half and makes thick angry lines through page after page until his pencil breaks.

and learn and his capacity to regulate his emotions. As they grow, children exposed to complex trauma may have trouble trusting adults and other children, and their emotions will not always be directly linked to their current circumstance. In school they are labeled as behavior problems and misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities.

Andre is overwhelmed by new and challenging work and often puts his head down and says, "I can't do it." He shouts out when we are sitting in a quiet circle on the carpet and throws his body on the floor. He is learning how to sit apart until he is able

to calm himself. He says, "I'm not ready. I will do my math in five minutes." He always knows exactly what is going on around him, even though he is rarely looking at his teacher or doing the assigned task. He sings commercial jingles when we are in line. He rips entire notebooks in half and makes thick angry lines through page after page until his pencil breaks. At least once a week he works himself into such a state of hysteria that he cannot control himself. He throws crayons and twists paperclips backwards. He needs to be removed from the classroom. I explain to him that we cannot tolerate violence. School is a safe place. He sits still in his chair or lets me hold his hand to keep him at my side until he begins to cry quietly. Subdued, he lines up with the other children, two by two.

I do not always know the private traumas that the children in my classroom have suffered. With Andre, I am given the gift of access; knowing what happened, I can try to learn what to do to best address his needs and to create a healthy learning environment. Because of him I am learning how to be a better teacher.

For the first few weeks of school Andre could not work at all. I sat him down beside me and urged him to untangle the paperclips, which he did with intense concentration. One morning I handed him the stapler and asked him to collate and staple the homework.

"Look," he said. He held up his thumb and showed me the staple he had just driven into his soft flesh. I walked with him, speaking gently and calmly, while my heart hammered out of my chest until we were outside the classroom and I pulled the staple out.

"Andre, I have to ask you if you did that on purpose," I said. His grandmother and legal guardian had told me to keep an eye on him because he had been trying to hurt himself at home. It was cool and quiet in the hall. We could hear the sounds of kindergarteners singing in the classroom next door.

"No," he said, his big brown eyes filling with tears. "It was an accident."

"Does it hurt?" I asked, and he nodded.

We walked back into the classroom. I cleaned the two bright spots of blood

with an alcohol wipe and wrapped a peach-colored Bandaid tightly around the walnut skin of this thumb.

“I don’t want to you hurt yourself, Andre,” I said to him.

He sat down at his desk and put his head in his hands to hide his tears from his classmates.

“What’s wrong with Andre?” asked Zachary, coming close. Other children are ineffably drawn to Andre, his rare and playful smile, his dizzy hoarse laugh.

“He feels sad,” I explained.

“I’m going to leave a piece of paper here,” I told Andre. “When you’re ready I want you to write.” At the top of the page I wrote, “What’s wrong?”

The other nineteen students lined up for lunch. I walked them downstairs to the cafeteria. When I came back Andre had written across the page in big letters falling off of the blue line, missing the red margin:

When I walk my leg hurts so much like it is going to break. Some pages are too difficult and I don’t want to do them. Everything hurts.
Andre 9-26-06

We sat together silently. Sometimes we are able to write the things that we are afraid to say. Sometimes by writing we are able to let go of the emotions that overwhelm us.

“Are you ready for lunch?” I asked Andre after we had breathed in and out ten times. He rubbed his eyes, nodded, and picked up his lunch box, which Zachary had left for him on his square table. He handed me the tear-stained paper and reached for my hand as we walked down the stairs to the cafeteria.

Organization and Focus

1.1 Create a single paragraph

a. Develop a topic sentence

EVERY month the third-graders are required to write a paragraph that we hang on the wall. One month we work on topic sentences, the next on transition words, then conclusions. They are learning how to organize their thoughts into big ideas and details. We call them monthly writing samples.

One day Andre sits still and writes his paragraph from beginning to end. He is calm for the rest of the morning. He finishes all of his work. He reads quietly. He raises his hand before he talks. During recess he says to the principal, “Did my teacher tell you about the good day I’m having?”

I write a note to his grandmother about his good day and then call to make sure she has received it.

“Oh, thank you,” she says. “He lost the note. He responds so well to anything positive. Any bit of joy he can have in his life means so much.”

Andre’s mother, Tonya, was killed by her husband last summer.

I did not know Andre then, but I knew his brother Cory who had spent first

grade with me, and then when I moved up another year in third grade. I knew his mother. I read the news and saw her tall and calm and beautiful. Her skin was cinnamon and her hair straightened and elegant. I pictured her standing in her white nurse's uniform in the school lobby at the end of the day, the boys' baby sister in her stroller. I remembered our parent-teacher conferences. "Cory is just like his dad," she had said. "He's a perfectionist."

When Cory was in third grade, Tonya and her husband had walked with us every Wednesday to the swimming pool. Cory Sr. had stood in the street stopping traffic until all twenty children were across the intersection.

Cory Sr. was at large for five weeks after Tonya's death.

I introduced myself to Cheryl, Tonya's mother and the boys' grandmother, on the first day of school. Cory smiled his brilliant smile up at me. Cheryl had her daughter's fine features and cinnamon skin. She met my eyes.

"They caught him yesterday," she told me. Cory Sr. had been arrested at a bus stop in a neighboring city and was being held without bail.

Andre moved from her side to mine and we walked across to the basketball court to where the other children were lining up to start third grade.

b. Include simple supporting facts and details

"Who is your hero?" I ask Andre and he answers, "The computer. It teaches me things." "It has to be a person," I tell him. "Not an animal or a machine or a cartoon. It has to be a person, though that person doesn't have to be alive anymore." "My hero is my teacher then," he says without hesitating.

THIS month our writing sample's topic is "heroes." We discuss how a hero is someone you can admire, someone who did something that made things better, someone who was brave or who taught us something. These are the children's ideas. I write them in my big clear handwriting on the whiteboard with a green Expo marker.

"Amelia Earhart was brave because she flew around the world and she was the first woman to do that," says Zelda.

"My little sister is my hero," says Ricardo. "I used to think that babies were annoying, but when she was born I realized that I was wrong. I love to play with her and I like it when she learns new things."

"Are we doing one of those things?" asks Andre, pointing excitedly to the writing sample wall.

"Duh," says Ricardo. "Why do you think I'm talking about my little sister?"

"Who is your hero?" I ask Andre and he answers, "The computer. It teaches me things."

"It has to be a person," I tell him. "Not an animal or a machine or a cartoon. It has to be a person, though that person doesn't have to be alive anymore."

"My hero is my teacher then," he says without hesitating.

"Me?" I ask, not understanding why he is speaking to me in the third person.

He nods and looks away. In his paragraph he writes:

My teacher Anna is my hero for three reasons. First she is good with the boys and the girls in the class. Second she is smart and she teaches me words that I didn't know. Third when I feel sick she gives me my asthma medication.

He draws a happy cartoon picture of a big pink woman with glasses saying in a bubble, "You did a good job, Andre," and a little brown boy with a round face saying, "Thank you." He forgets to write his conclusion.

At the end of the day I sit in my quiet classroom smelling the forgotten lunches and puddles of spilled Elmer's glue and think: Andre is my hero. I admire the way the emotion comes tumbling out of him like mismatched tangled socks and underwear from an overheated dryer. Andre is teaching me how to put the children's behavior in the classroom in context.

There are boys in my class who cry when they get pushed during recess; girls who rip their papers when they make a mistake; Jason who whistles while I am talking, and talks when everyone else is silent; and Daniel who harasses other children, looking for someone weaker than himself to hold his power over. I am kind and patient with

Andre because I know he has lost his mother. I cannot know how many of Andre's eight years were lived with the threat of violence in his home. I allow his unpredictable behavior because I know the trauma he experienced makes it difficult for him to regulate his own emotions. What if I knew the life story of every student in my class? Would I be more tolerant of their sudden outbursts? Would I find more effective ways to deal with their destructive behavior?

We all carry a heaviness inside of us. We all have secrets. Some people have learned to look like they are not suffering. Others act like they are the only ones who know what pain is. I watch Andre's brother, Cory, sitting on the bench at the end of school waiting for his grandmother to come pick them up in her baby blue mini-van and I see the way his face has closed down. He deals with sadness the way that I do. He locks it inside and prays that it will not come out at unexpected moments. He puts his sadness in a bottle and seals it with a rock. I recognize his silent stare.

Penmanship

1.2 Write legibly in cursive or joined italic, allowing margins and correct spacing between letters in a word and words in a sentence

I set up a single desk that I call the "peace table" in the corner of my classroom. I explain to the children that they can go there if they are having a feeling and they need a break from working. We name some basic feelings together: happy, sad, angry. I have learned that children who have experienced complex trauma may have trouble both identifying and regulating their emotions. I suggest some more complex feelings: frustrated, proud, confused. We go around the circle and each child says how they are feeling that day.

When Andre sits at the table he draws pictures of dragons breathing fire. Sometimes he takes a red pencil and draws hard circles through page after page of lined paper. He crumples the paper and throws it away. Sometimes he staples the pages together.

“Can I pass?” says Andre when it is his turn. I nod. When we come back to him he says, “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

“That’s OK too,” I say to the class. “Sometimes we don’t know what we’re feeling.”

He listens to the other children talk about their feelings. He watches them sit at the peace table and write using the

sentence frame that I have posted above it: I feel tired because I didn’t get enough sleep last night. To solve the problem I think I need to rest. Or: I feel frustrated because the math test was too hard. To solve the problem I need you to give me a copy of my times tables to practice.

When Andre sits at the table he draws pictures of dragons breathing fire. Sometimes he takes a red pencil and draws hard circles through page after page of lined paper. He crumples the paper and throws it away. Sometimes he staples the pages together.

One day he says, “I’m not ready to work,” and he goes to sit at the peace table. The students have already gone down to lunch when I find his note on my desk. With his thick uneven letters Andre has written: I feel happy because I am at school today and I am with my friends. I think that today is going to be a good day.

Research

1.3 Understand the structure and organization of various reference materials.

WE are doing a research project about immigration. Students interview a family member to find out who was their first ancestor to immigrate to the United States. Many of the children are first-generation. They tell stories of crossing the Mexican border with their parents. They interview their dads and their moms.

“You’re lucky because you have a great-grandmother,” I tell Andre. “You can interview her.” He is unconvinced. Day after day he refuses to turn in his interview. Finally he says, “I think that someone in my family was from Africa.”

I explain that ancestor means someone from a long time ago and tell him that his ancestors were probably forced to come to the United States on a boat. I give him a book of photographs called *A Day in the Life of Africa*. He sits quietly turning the pages. “Look,” he says, “they have computers. There’s a beach.”

Sitting in the circle overwhelms Andre. He cannot help talking to his friends and is tired of my reprimands. “Can I sit and look at the book about Africa instead?” he asks, and I agree.

I am also doing research. I understand that complex trauma causes children to struggle with their emotions. But I also learn that it actually makes parts of their brains

shut down. In *Reaching and Teaching Stressed and Anxious Learners in Grades 4–8: Strategies for Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms*, Barbara E. Oehlberg explains that “when in a state of anxiety, the brain cannot recall information processed and stored successfully during less stressful times. This limits the student’s ability to demonstrate successful learning—and successful teaching. Test-taking becomes an intimidating nightmare for such a student.” (p. 13)

When it is time to take the California Standards Test (CST), the week-long high-stakes standardized exam, Andre shuts down. “I’m not smart,” he says and refuses to fill in the bubbles in the booklet in front of him. He has made so much progress. His frightening drawings of dragons breathing fire have converted into brightly colored dogs with big eyes. Sometimes a tear comes out of the dog’s eye. Sometimes a cartoon bubble comes out of his mouth and says, “I feel sad.” But now he puts his head down over the test. He throws erasers across the room. I tell Cheryl that she has the option of pulling Andre out and exempting him from the standardized testing, but he keeps coming to school.

“Do your best,” I say. I try to stay calm in the face of Andre’s rage. “During stressful times, teachers can easily get ‘hooked’ by a student’s behavior, only to discover we ourselves have been triggered into down-shifting, making it unlikely that we could choose our response,” Oehlberg writes. “In other words, we find ourselves reacting.” (p. 20) I try to project something calm and quiet. I let myself be calm and quiet inside myself so that the projection is real. Andre hands me his test and reaches for the colored pencils. I am not only learning about teaching; Andre is showing me how to be a better person.

I try to project something calm and quiet. I let myself be calm and quiet inside myself so that the projection is real. Andre hands me his test and reaches for the colored pencils. I am not only learning about teaching; Andre is showing me how to be a better person.

Evaluations and Revision

1.4 Revise drafts to improve the coherence and logical progression of ideas using an established rubric

ANDRE asks if he can re-write his story. As part of our fiction unit we have been talking about main characters, setting, problem, and solution. He doesn’t want to write about the lost dog anymore. I tell him yes, he can re-write his story as many times as he needs to.

In “Turtle at the Beach,” the sand is just right, not too warm and not too cold. A turtle goes out to find food for his family. He walks and walks until he finds the food and comes back. Then his wife gives him a big old kiss. They eat the food with the children, just like it was dinner.

Andre cannot get his drawing right. He asks if his brother Cory can come over from fourth grade to help him. Cory comes and they lie on the carpet together arguing about the shape of the shell of the father turtle.

Later Cory is gone and we are assembling ourselves into a circle on the carpet. Andre is bent over the recycling box ripping his picture into tiny pieces.

“After all that?” I ask, teasing him, and he starts sobbing. He buries his head in his arms, covers his face with his black T-shirt and sobs.

“What’s wrong?” asks Daniel. Daniel is mainstreamed from special education. His English is nearly unintelligible, but he and Andre adore each other. They have built a house out of an abandoned table in the playground and invite anyone to join them in it during recess. They embrace each other every morning. “My friend,” says Daniel quietly. Andre does not lift his head. I explain that Andre’s turtle did not come out the way he wanted it and Daniel nods seriously. I wrap my arm around Andre’s sweaty shoulder and tell him we have lots more time. He

I wrap my arm around Andre’s sweaty shoulder and tell him we have lots more time. He can draw another turtle tomorrow.

It doesn’t have to be perfect.

“Yes it does,” he says angrily.

“It does have to be perfect.”

can draw another turtle tomorrow. It doesn’t have to be perfect.

“Yes it does,” he says angrily. “It does have to be perfect.”

Andre and Cory are witnesses in their father’s trial. During the pre-trial hearing Andre asks his grandmother Cheryl to sit where he can see her so that he doesn’t have to look into his father’s eyes while he is speaking. The lawyer suggests

that he use his “outside voice” and so Andre testifies loudly and clearly about what he heard on the morning of his mother’s murder.

“I am learning more than I ever wanted to know about the legal system,” Cheryl tells me. The children are offered no protection, no anonymity. Their father has insisted on his “right to face his accuser,” a right guaranteed by the Constitution, a right that cannot be waived even in the extreme circumstance that the “accusers” are eight- and nine-year old boys, his sons.

Now Andre twists his paper in his hands, the picture of a turtle that he cannot get right, the picture of the perfect father, and he rips it to shreds.

Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

Students will write compositions that explain familiar objects, events, and experiences.

- a. Provide a context within which an action takes place

CHERYL sits in my classroom one autumn day with her calendar in front of her. I hold Andre’s notebook in my lap. Neither one of us opens them. “He is beating himself up for what happened,” she tells me. I feel the loss of Tonya’s gentle presence in the school, her white uniform standing in the lobby, and I feel a sadness deep inside my stomach for the lives of these two boys and their baby sister who will continue to live without her. I have started writing about Andre. Putting the words on paper helps me to detach myself from the terrible sadness.

Cheryl tells me about the day her daughter died.

I do not wipe away the hot tears that roll down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” I say.

She nods.

“They are lucky to be with you,” I tell her.

“No, Anna,” she says. “I’m the lucky one. I lost my daughter, but I see her living on every day in those children. We’re lucky to have them.”

c. Provide insight into why the selected incident is memorable

THE colorful dogs with their big eyes are gone, and Andre is back to drawing the scary dragons with their mouths full of teeth. He draws compulsively, in his math notebook, on scrap paper from the recycling box, on other people’s papers, on his desk, on a fat pink eraser. The dragon’s teeth are exquisitely detailed. Andre’s father’s trial is coming up. He meets with the lawyer to prepare his testimony.

One day Cheryl calls to tell me that the boys will be late to school. They have been asked to come into the police station to give DNA samples.

“It’s the same station they went to when she died,” Cheryl says. She is outraged. “If this is hard for me as a fifty-something-year-old grandmother, what is it like for these boys? They’re children, Anna,” she says. “They’re only children.”

The trial has been delayed again.

“We need this to be over,” Cheryl tells me. “We need to get on with our lives.”

The next day Andre puts his head down during social studies and sleeps. “He’s snoring,” says Kendra who is supposed to be his partner but is content to do her work by herself.

“Are you sick?” I ask when he sits up. He shakes his head.

“I’ll try to work,” he says. He tries to hold his heavy eyes open but his head dips and falls over his textbook.

“Rest,” I say, and put my hand on his head, feeling for a moment the coarse curls of his short hair. I lift my hand. I watch his shoulders rise and fall regularly. I want to take it all away. I want the world to be safe for him again. I do not know where to draw the line between my job and responsibilities and the tremendous love that I feel for this child.

Oehlberg writes, “Only when the youngster feels totally safe will the numbing begin to subside. Unfortunately, the adults in that student’s life have moved beyond recalling the event, and the student may be with a different teacher.” (p. 15) The school year is almost over. I’m not sure I’m ready to let Andre go to fourth grade.

I look away. The afternoon sun pours through the wide open windows of the classroom. The children are working quietly, brown heads and blond bent over the sec-

“Rest,” I say, and put my hand on his head, feeling for a moment the coarse curls of his short hair. I lift my hand. I watch his shoulders rise and fall regularly. I want to take it all away. I want the world to be safe for him again. I do not know where to draw the line between my job and responsibilities and the tremendous love that I feel for this child.

tion of their textbook that has photographs of the Gold Rush and paragraphs about how immigration changed the face of San Francisco forever. The room smells like apples and microwave popcorn and outside we can hear the fourth-graders shouting in the yard.

I rest my hand on Andre's shoulder. He does not move. "Do you need help?" I ask Kendra.

"No," she grins as Andre snores beside her. "It's easier without him."

2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.

ON picture day Andre sits with an ashy cloud of sadness around him. His eyelids are heavy and his face hardly moves. His dark skin is several shades darker than usual, with smudges of almost purple under his eyes. His hair is freshly cut close to his skull and when I bend over his desk he smells of lemon. His red and white striped shirt is pressed.

As the children arrange themselves on the bleachers by height he hands me an envelope. "Smile," I call brightly, but his face does not change.

I open the envelope. Paper-clipped to his photo order is a note in Cheryl's neat cursive handwriting:

Dear Anna, FYI today is Tonya's birthday. She would have been 32 years old.

She is my age. Or would have been.

The children tickle each other and make rabbit ears for the camera. Andre pushes half-heartedly at the boy beside him. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, rub my eyes, and step beside them for the group picture.

2.3 Write personal and formal letters, thank-you notes, and invitations: show awareness of the knowledge and interests of the audience and establish a purpose and context

I find Andre's drawings and notes crumpled at the end of the day under his desk, under my desk, under the carpet. The notebook that I have left at the peace table is full of dragons, dogs, and his thick angry lines. In the interest of cleaning the classroom I take the notebook away and replace it with a pile of loose-leaf paper on a clipboard. I leave a new blue notebook on Andre's desk. I write a note to him on the front page telling him that it is for writing or drawing. I tell him to please stop drawing everywhere else, but to use this notebook anytime that he wants, and to know that I may look at it sometimes.

"It's for me?" he asks and smiles. He starts writing. He sits and writes for nearly half an hour. I have never seen him this still or this quiet. When he is finished he says, "I can't believe that I wrote seven pages!" We go outside for recess. We come back inside. He keeps writing.

I wonder if he will tell his story. I wonder if he will write about his mother. I think about the power of writing. We can change the world through writing. We can regain strength. We can survive.

But when I open the notebook I see my name. He has written me seven pages of letters. The first one says:

I want to stay with Anna because she is my good teacher for me and I know I need to go to fourth grade but if I can stay with her I will be very happy. I am learning a lot of words. If I have a problem at recess she helps me solve it. I am trying to be good.

I write him a note inside a card with a photograph of a dog. I thank him for his letter. "You do have to go to fourth grade, but we will always be friends," I write and I sign my name.

**I wonder if he will tell his story.
I wonder if he will write about his
mother. I think about the power
of writing. We can change the
world through writing. We can
regain strength. We can survive.**

b. include the date, proper salutation, body, closing, and signature

ANDRE has taught me to contextualize the behavior of children in my classroom. He has made me think about my own emotions and how we learn to express what we feel. He writes boldly and honestly. He writes about what is real and makes me think I should do the same. I admire his strength. I admire his lack of inhibition. And I need to learn how to let him go.

Andre sits outlining the first of a host of dragons breathing fire. The dragons surround a solitary building. A tiny figure on the ground shoots up at them with a gun.

"Can I keep your drawing?" I request when he is finished. I am saving his work in a file, where I keep his psychological report and notes from his grandmother. I'm not sure what I expect to do with the file, but it seems important to have it.

"I'm sorry," Andre says politely. "I need it for a book that I am making."

"How about I make a photocopy?"

He smiles and nods happily.

It is not until I sit down to look at the photocopy that I see the small figure falling off the multi-story building encircled by dragons. "Help," says the bubble coming out of his tiny mouth.

I know that Andre is sorting things out on paper. I am not frightened for his safety, but I am a mandated reporter. If a child tells me about abuse or expresses suicidal thoughts I have to be a responsible teacher.

"Come talk to me," I tell Andre after recess. The room is hot and the children are ready to go home for the weekend. They push each other out of the way between the tables. Their faces are flushed and tired. Their collective voices rise in volume exponentially for each minute I am not giving them my complete attention. I try to stay calm inside, but I am not.

"Tell me about your picture," I pull Andre closer to me, away from the building chaos.

"The dragons are trying to destroy the city," he says.

"Why?" I ask.

“Tell me about your picture,”
 I pull Andre closer to me, away
 from the building chaos.
 “The dragons are trying to
 destroy the city,” he says.
 “Why?” I ask.
 “They don’t know any
 better,” he explains.
 “And this guy?” I point to the
 small figure. “Why is he jumping
 off the building?”
 “He’s not jumping,” Andre shakes
 his head . . . I see that the figure
 is not, in fact, jumping. His hands
 hold on to the edge of the
 building. He is trying to keep
 from falling.

still have the strength that he wraps around his tiny eight-year-old self when he is a teenager, a man, when he is haunted by the loss of his mother and his bottomless anger towards his father? Will he be able to write about his feelings in fourth grade? Will he draw his dogs with their big eyes? It is not the fall that we fear; it is the landing. Does he have the tools that he needs to survive when he hits the ground? And am I ready to let him fall?

“He isn’t jumping?” I prompt Andre.

“No,” he concurs with my guess. “He’s falling. See? He’s holding on.”

“I see that he’s holding on,” I confirm. “Andre, is he going to be okay?”

“Yes,” he nods, bending and opening the paperclip in his sweating hand. “Yes, he’s going to be okay.”



Note: Children’s names have been changed to protect their identities.

“They don’t know any better,” he explains.

“And this guy?” I point to the small figure. “Why is he jumping off the building?”

“He’s not jumping,” Andre shakes his head, looking away towards Daniel who is wrapping the plastic cord of a pair of binoculars around his neck by the window.

“Daniel, stop,” I yell across the room, willing Andre to stay with me.

I see that the figure is not, in fact, jumping. His hands hold on to the edge of the building. He is trying to keep from falling.

Andre is not afraid of falling. He lets himself feel the rush of emotion and pain and all the violent unpredictable reactions that accompany them. But when Andre lands, who will pick him up? Will he

Sources Cited

NCTSN, *Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents*. White Paper from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Complex Trauma Task Force, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003.

Oehlberg, Barbara E., *Reaching and Teaching Stressed and Anxious Learners in Grades 4–8: Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms*. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, California: 2006.

California State Board of Education Grade Three English-Language Arts Content Standards, www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/enggrade3.asp.

Anna Sopko is a third-grade teacher. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and stepdaughter, who she would like to thank for their laughter and love, and for listening patiently to her stories about "the funny things the kids do." She is completing her MFA in writing at the University of San Francisco.