And with a Light Touch
Learning About Reading, Writing, and Teaching with First Graders
Carol Avery
Foreword by Donald Graves
...And with a Light Touch

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SECOND EDITION

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HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH
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BEGINNING
The Butterflies Are Being Born

The little boy yawned. His name was John and he sat at my feet in a circle of five or six of his first-grade peers for his daily reading lesson. Carefully, precisely, he printed a word in his workbook, looked up, and yawned again. And then I yawned too. I opened my eyes to find John watching me. We exchanged quiet smiles and waited for the others to finish writing the same word so we could continue the fill-in-the-blank exercises. I glanced around the classroom where the other three reading groups spent their seatwork time writing. They were all engaged in their work. And it hit me. The energy in this classroom was there: with the children writing at their seats.
Suddenly I knew: “It will work!” The it, a gentle suggestion by Rose Stetler, the reading coordinator, was to abandon the basal reader and “to teach reading through writing.” When I’d first heard this notion the previous fall I’d thought, “That’s crazy!” Now, on a morning in early March, I saw clearly that my first graders learned more about reading from the writing they were doing at their seats than they did from the carefully orchestrated lessons I presented to achievement-ranked reading groups. I knew at that moment that Rose’s suggestion was anything but crazy. Writing was a powerful, efficient, and natural way to learn language.

Our district was easing writing into the curriculum, basing it on the research Donald Graves was doing in Atkinson, New Hampshire, in elementary classrooms. Because children in his research classrooms spent time writing every day, their teachers devoted less time to teaching reading. Despite this shift in time distribution, reading scores went up. “Writing made the difference,” was the answer coming from this research. Hence the phrase, “learning to read through writing.”

I had been following Graves’ research as it appeared in the journal *Language Arts*. It all seemed so real, so different, from other research that I found myself thinking, “I bet my kids can do that.” So, following the New Hampshire model for the past two years I had had my first graders writing, encouraging them to choose their own topics and spell as best as they could.

The first year I discovered that the children did far better with their own topics than with my story starters and, with concern for perfect mechanics set aside, they took off. They loved this writing so much that by spring of that year I had them writing daily as part of seatwork during reading instruction. Based on this success, the second year I started the children writing the first week of school in small groups, then continued daily writing as a seatwork activity. I enlisted the help of an aide and two mothers so that every day during the reading instructional period, an adult sat in the back of the room and listened to the children read their writing. Sometimes the adult lightly penciled in words or phrases that were undecipherable because of the phonetic spelling, but basically she listened and talked with the child about the ideas in the writing.

The results astounded me. I discovered that not only could first graders select topics, but also they could present coherent and detailed information about those topics on paper. I chose the best of their pieces, corrected spelling and punctuation, typed them, and bound them into little books. We had a whole shelf of these books, and they were the favorite reading material in the classroom. Though I felt comfortable developing writing among my first graders, I dismissed any hint of “abandoning the basal and teaching reading through the children’s writing” as foolish and irresponsible. Now, on this morning in March, I saw a brief vision of a different way in the faces of the children. The next day I approached Rose Stetler about the prospect.
“We will need to do some planning and maybe get you some training,” Rose responded, and then she went to work. She arranged a visit to Atkinson, New Hampshire where I saw writing in the first-grade classrooms that matched that of my own students. I returned home eager to encourage my students to write even more. I’d also learned of a graduate course, Teaching Writing in the Elementary School, which Mary Ellen Giacobbe and Lucy Calkins planned to teach that summer for Northeastern University. Mary Ellen was the first-grade teacher in Don Graves’ study and Lucy was a research assistant. Within a few days, I’d sent my registration for the course.

I spent the remainder of the school year reading articles funneled to me by Rose and thinking about the following year. Sometimes I fought off misgivings: What kind of imprudent undertaking had I gotten myself into? But reading the stories from the New Hampshire research buoyed my optimism. I sensed that I had touched on something authentic both for the children and for me. I couldn’t turn back.

On the last day of school that year, as the children hurried out the door, a quiet boy named George stopped to hug me. “Good-bye, Mrs. Avery,” he said and he was gone. I felt a tinge of sadness. The reading program hadn’t served George very well. He was in the low reading group and probably would stay there throughout his school career. I watched him leave and remembered the butterflies. In the fall George had brought a caterpillar to school in a jar. A few days later he brought a plastic box especially designed to hold caterpillars. His parents had gotten it for him, he explained, and he’d caught more caterpillars. Several caterpillars crawled around inside the box and from the lid hung a dozen or more green chrysalises, each with a fine strand of gold beads along one side. They were exquisite. We kept the box on the corner of my desk. In a couple of days the remaining caterpillars hung in tiny green and gold sacks. After a time the chrysalises turned black. Thinking them dead, I came close to discarding them or sending them home with George. Then one day in the middle of my teacher-directed reading lesson, monarch butterflies began unfolding from those seemingly dead chrysalises. George spied them first and cried out, “Look, the butterflies are being born!”

The principal, who had stopped in for an observation, sat with his pad and pencil. I glanced at him, struggled a moment, then looked at George and decided. “Let’s watch the butterflies for a few minutes.” We watched those butterflies unfold and dry their wings throughout the day. By the following noon a delicate sea of orange and black fluttered under the box lid. A couple days later we quietly, carefully carried the box outside. George lifted the lid and held it while, one by one, the butterflies took their leave and headed on their migratory journeys. George watched them until the last one was out of sight. He had known all along that inside those black chrysalises lived the developing butterflies. George knew lots of things that I didn’t. I realized that there was much about George I didn’t understand. I’d been too busy to see
really, too busy “teaching.” In that empty classroom, I felt a stab of guilt. My teaching had barely touched George’s capacity as a learner.

This school year was over. Though the children had been different as they were every year, in many ways—except for the writing—the year had been like all the others before it. We’d read the same books, followed the same sequence of lessons, completed the same drill and practice exercises. Worst of all, the spread in reading achievement—the basic measurement of success in first grade—had widened. Every year brought children like John to the classroom, who ended as they began—on the top. And every year there were others like George, who for one reason or another moved through the system but never really became competent readers. This year, writing had brought life to an otherwise boring landscape by providing a forum where every child participated successfully.

A couple of weeks after school ended, I headed back to New England to learn more about this new phenomenon of teaching writing and, through writing, reading. The challenge of exploring writing kindled a renewal for teaching within me and put at bay an encroaching sense of burnout. I had no clue that I was embarking on a course that would change me as a teacher and turn me into a learner in my own classroom.

The burnout never returned. I would come to know that teaching begins with understanding—not getting the children to understand, but rather, about my understanding of each of them—what they understand, know, and care about and how they work in a classroom. I would realize that a significant aspect of teaching was listening to, honoring, and responding to children individually, and that I needed to be learning myself by reading, writing, observing, reflecting, and continually refining my classroom practice in light of the children and who they are rather than just the demands of curriculum.

This professional journey led me to write articles for professional journals, present at local, state, and national conventions, and write a book! Me, a classroom teacher, author of a book about teaching! Now, twenty years from this beginning, I find myself writing the second edition of And with a Light Touch. Since the publication of the first in 1993, I’ve taught my own first-, fourth- and sixth-grade classes and demonstrated writing and reading workshops in many classrooms in every grade from preschool through high school. I’ve learned how the specific circumstances I told about in the first edition may be different, but the underlying theories and principles still apply. I can still say teaching doesn’t follow a prescription; it’s far more than implementing activities, programs, or plans. If a single thread runs through these experiences, it is that teaching requires listening and responding to the individual student and approaching the classroom knowing I am a learner there, not the final authority.

My teaching practice continues to evolve as I learn from children in classrooms and as I consider new ideas and practices emerging in the educational
world. This second edition attempts to address my evolving beliefs and changing practices. One area of change is the teaching of writing. I continue to be amazed at what young children are capable of as writers. Children, especially those in the primary grades, when provided with a nurturing environment, write, revise, and edit with more thought, care, and sophistication than I ever imagined. I refine my role to keep up with them! Teaching writing requires showing children how to craft quality pieces of writing, a skill that goes beyond correcting mechanics. I learned early on the importance of teaching by demonstrating with my own writing. I've learned that showing children how to revise and shape meaning is fundamental to teaching them to write. I'm no longer nervous about being a vulnerable writer in front of a class, and I understand that showing children a perfect draft can be intimidating but that showing children my process as I work toward that draft is instructive. Also, I've continued to refine the way I handle writing conferences. I listen more, talk less, and ask better questions. I now better appreciate how critical frequent and effective conferences are in helping children develop as writers. And I've learned that being responsive to children does not mean “anything goes.” I set high standards and expect children to invest their energies. In this second edition, I share strategies I've refined for the writing workshop to help children grow further as writers.

I also examine more extensively my read-aloud practices. I better understand now that reading aloud to children is teaching and that how I read and the talk surrounding that reading has a direct influence on children’s growth as readers and writers. Daily read-aloud time cannot be shortchanged for it helps children understand the fundamental purpose of the written word. As a direct result of read alouds, children approach independent reading striving for comprehension and understanding. This attitude remains at the heart of reading for the children. There’s a whole wide world of good books to share with children and I don’t need to narrow my selections to the “best,” or to those that connect with curriculum, or to ones leading to activities. There’s much joy in finding and exploring the new together.

Like the rest of the educational community—and the country, for that matter—I’ve wrestled with the complex issues surrounding reading instruction. Teaching reading has become a political issue. Government-initiated reports cite “scientific” findings on how to teach reading even as almost anyone would agree that their child doesn’t quite fit any scientific paradigm. And, competency in reading these days seems to be determined solely by test scores. At the same time, practices for teaching reading become more complex and more prescriptive. Guided reading and literature circles, for example, offer the potential of responding to individual uniqueness, but it’s also possible for these practices to become complicated structures that come dangerously close to the rigidity of archaic reading programs. Teaching reading seems more perplexing—and confusing—than ever. If I’ve learned anything, it’s not to
jump on the bandwagon quickly or reject ideas outright, but to be thoughtful about change. This edition addresses my thinking as I consider current ideas and issues in light of classroom practice and the children. It is the educational needs of children—and what ultimately will be helpful for each one of them—that guide my teaching practices and that I hope readers will find on the pages ofleromorphosis as I listen to children and learn with them.

In a talk titled “The Enemy Is Orthodoxy,” reprinted in A Researcher Learns to Write, Don Graves (1984) reminds us how easily we can slip into formulas for teaching. There is always a danger of creating a methodology that becomes written in stone, to be applied to all children. He cautioned against plans and procedures that become so ritualistic that the methodology, rather than the children and their learning, becomes our focus. I know this trap well. In the early years of my teaching I worked hard on developing “teaching practices.” I cluttered my classroom, the curriculum, and my teaching itself with trappings: decorations for the room, activities and frills for the curriculum, myriad “creative” approaches. It was all very organized but very full. There was comfort in the certainty and the sense of control it appeared to bring. But I’ve come to see that control is an illusion; I never really had it in the classroom. Things just appeared under control. The complexity of individual human growth—and therefore our teaching practices—defies “control.” All that clutter kept me from seeing the children and truly taking them into account. I cleaned stuff out—file cabinets and closets first, then preconceived plans and procedures. Eliminating the clutter cleared my mind. The temptation is always there to clutter our teaching with more or new practices. When I focused on children rather than practices, teaching became not only more challenging but also more rewarding and, more important, more effective for the children. I was able to let the children shine through.

Still, it’s not easy. The enemy continues to be orthodoxy. As soon as I say “I do it this way . . .” I find exceptions or realize that “this way” has changed. I say that a mini-lesson for writing is no longer than five to eight minutes and then I present one in thirty seconds and another takes twenty minutes. This kind of tension is inherent in teaching but I think it nourishes a creative energy in the classroom. Guidelines, maybe, are what we need rather than absolutes. I strive to keep things simple, uncomplicated, so that the complex processes of learning can thrive. As I write this second edition, I am well aware that I may sound as though I’m creating another set of orthodoxies but, believe me, there are no intended absolutes here—except possibly one: the uniqueness of each child.

The uniqueness of each child is something Graves discovered in his research on children’s writing. This research certainly made a major contribution to education in that writing opened up in elementary classrooms and today writing is acknowledged as a fundamental part of curriculum. However, the
major finding of that research, and the implications for teaching based on that finding, are highly significant. In capital letters, in his book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Graves (1983) wrote,

**WRITING IS A HIGHLY IDIOSYNCRATIC PROCESS THAT VARIES FROM DAY TO DAY.** Variance is the norm, not the exception. (270)

Almost every teacher I know can concur with this statement. In fact, most of us could substitute “learning” for “writing” and still agree. Teachers know this in their bones. Graves noted that many factors (self-concept, topic choice, organic factors, etc.) influence a writer’s progress on a given day. As I launched writing workshops in my classroom, when doubts crept in, I took comfort in the knowledge that children wrote in “highs” and “lows,” that I could not expect a steady upward spiral of growth, and that I must allow children the luxury of failure and the gift of time. I would remember a line from hearing Graves speak: “In a class of twenty-five on a given day, only five or six children may be working on ‘hot’ topics with the writing going well.” In the final report on his research, Graves wrote about this variability and its implications for teaching.

Many similarities were seen among the children when they wrote, but as the study progressed, individual exceptions to the data increased in dominance. In short, every child had behavioral characteristics in the writing process that applied to that child alone. It is our contention, based on this information, that such variability demands a waiting, responsive type of teaching. (1981)

“A waiting, responsive type of teaching.” I believe this aspect of Graves’ research is critical to teaching young children to write. Fortunately, when I was getting started with writing instruction, it had few of the trappings that surrounded traditional subjects, making it easier to develop this approach. Working with young writers taught me the effectiveness of a responsive approach and I incorporated it into all areas of the curriculum. For me, this means that I establish a classroom environment conducive for learning and then determine what to teach and when by observing and listening to children as they write. And I do teach! A responsive approach does not mean that I ignore curriculum or permit children to run the show! It does mean planning thoughtfully, with flexibility, and for depth of learning. It means organization and structure that children thoroughly understand. It means looking at how children learn throughout the school day and adjusting plans and structures to maximize their growth. Integration, I learned, does not mean teacher-planned activities, but rather, occurs within learners themselves as they take part in purposeful activities.
Previously, I’d seen differences as children wrote and in every aspect of their participation in classroom life. I hated attempting to blot out their differences and make them conform, but success with the curriculum and programmed teaching seemed grounded in uniformity. I much prefer the responsive type of teaching that Graves suggested because it honors individual differences, leads to an investment on the part of the child, and results in solid learning. Remembering to listen for the differences and gently encourage and coax the individual voices of the young writers in my classroom became a guiding principle.

As I’ve helped teachers implement writing workshops in their classrooms, I’ve noticed that success comes most readily when the teacher slows down and strives for this responsive approach. As I reflect on this, I see a “responsive type of teaching” as part of a rich instructional environment. It’s an environment where the teacher listens to and observes each child, striving to understand the child’s intentions and the knowledge that is informing the child’s plans and actions. The teacher responds by questioning to clarify and commenting to validate the child’s thinking. The teacher responds further by suggesting options, providing expertise, and urging the child to consider previously unexplored ideas. The learner takes risks and learning flourishes.

Graves became a profound teacher for me. His work totally revamped my teaching and his support and encouragement has been invaluable. In a panel presentation at an NCTE convention (whose date and time I’ve long since lost), Janet Emig spoke of not “killing off your mothers and fathers,” meaning that we ought not abandon our roots, but learn from them as we strive to refine our teaching today. I’ve pondered Emig’s message many times since that day. I’ve noticed a tendency in education to abandon sound research and proven practice for what’s new, latest, or current. But our roots do define who we are today. In the first edition of this book, I recognized the role my early experiences in literacy, my mother’s part in developing my love of books, and how my experiences as a mother shaped my role in the classroom. I talked about reading Jeannette Veatch and other educators as a college student. All these influences are still there. But other teachers came along in those early years of teaching writing and then reading in daily workshops and they become part of my “mothers and fathers.” The strands of their influence are woven throughout the pages of this book. There are many of these individuals, but four of my earliest teachers stand out. In the order in which I met them they are: Donald Graves, Mary Ellen Giacobbe, Glenda Bissex, and Janet Emig.

Graves’ research is as valid today as when he finished it. His belief in teachers encouraged me as it has countless others. He spoke at a nearby university in the spring of the year I describe at the beginning of this chapter. Everyone was hungry for information from him; the research he spoke of was such a breakthrough and so refreshing. In a breakout session I remember ask-
ing about the role of phonics in this approach and without hesitation he answered that phonics played an important role in children writing and then went on to talk briefly about how young children continually used phonetic sounds as they wrote. Whew! A sigh of relief. Phonics was too important in the school district to abandon it. On another occasion I referred to him as the “expert.” He shook his finger at me and said, “You’re the expert! Don’t forget it.” Graves has always been an advocate for teachers, espousing the expertise of classroom teachers over that of researchers and others outside the classroom. His book, The Energy to Teach, is another example of that commitment.

When I went to New England to study at Northeastern University about this new approach to teaching writing, Mary Ellen Giacobbe was my teacher. In our summer institute, she thoughtfully connected research to classroom practice and invited each teacher to develop his or her own writing workshops. She never provided a prescription, yet she advocated specific suggestions such as:

- Respond to the writer not the writing.
- Be careful with general praise and with praising too much.
- Build on what writers have accomplished rather than on what they haven’t done.
- Look for growth over time.

All commonsense ideas, yet I found them helpful reminders whenever I was tempted to revert to archaic teaching formulas. In that summer institute I found validation of the ways I’d worked with writing in my classroom so far and inspiration to continue. Mary Ellen’s expertise and insights into classroom practice and children echo throughout my teaching today.

In the summers following the Giacobbe institute I returned to New England and participated in “teacher research” (a whole new concept to me) led by Glenda Bissex. The experience of that year showed me how to closely observe and document what I saw children doing in my own classroom. In GYNS AT WRK (1980), Bissex documented her own son’s early reading and writing. The book provided a model of close observation and helped me understand the nature of children’s writing and the importance of letting children show us what they know and can do before we proceed in the classroom. I remember well one particular line from that book: “the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children learn” (199). This cautionary statement caused me to examine my teaching practices in relationship to children, eliminate clutter, and work toward becoming reflective about my practice. And, perhaps most powerful of all, Glenda provided an outstanding model of a teacher who listens and responds.

When I read Janet Emig’s The Web of Meaning (1983), I discovered profound essays that opened my mind to thinking differently about teaching and
learning. When I met her in 1987 at the English Coalition Conference, I soon
learned that she believed in children, teachers, and the principles of a demo-
cratic society, especially for schools. Like the others above, both her work and
her values influenced the teacher I was becoming. I certainly don’t mean this
brief listing to be exclusive, for there are many others. But through their work
and their encouragement, these four people added significantly to my pro-
essional journey.

The first edition of . . . And with a Light Touch chronicled that journey. I
told my story of moving away from programmed instruction to implement-
ing writing and reading workshops, the stories of children learning in those
workshops, and my own process of becoming a learner in my classroom. The
writing helped me recognize how my teaching practices were rooted in my
personal history and my best teaching was always grounded in observing
and responding to individual children. Now, the second edition of . . . And
with a Light Touch retains that story but updates it. In this edition, in addition
to including ways I’ve fine-tuned reading and writing instruction, I share new
stories from the classrooms I’ve been in, including some about kindergarten
classrooms in a new chapter. While the context of these stories is still early
childhood classrooms, I can safely say that the underlying principles are ap-
propriate for other grades—even for working with adults.

That first year with writing and reading workshops, I explored, made mis-
takes, and learned. I believe that the trust I felt from administrators filtered
through to the children. I continually revised and clarified my thinking based
on observations and reflections. The year was one of the best teaching expe-
riences I have ever had. Why? I’ve reflected on this question and always
come up with the same answer. I had only a few basic preconceptions in my
mind about how this writing and reading process classroom would operate:
the children led the way. I listened, observed, and let them direct me in what
and how to teach them next.

When I first began, I anticipated learning a methodology, a set of prac-
tices, a new teaching program. Rather than providing a prescriptive path, my
teachers extended an invitation to claim my professionalism, to teach in the
finest sense of the word. At first, I felt compelled to articulate my teaching
and the children’s learning through educational jargon and as a precise plan
of action. (I found it easy to slip into my own orthodoxies.) After all, fellow
educators understood the language of curriculum and the scope and sequence
of programs, and these terms provided assurance for the big word looming
on the horizon: accountability. Besides, there is a sense of security in knowing
exactly what to teach and when and how. But, I don’t believe that such teach-
ing assures that every child will succeed. I will always remember George
and the butterflies. For me, accountability is being responsible to children.
. . . And with a Light Touch is grounded in this belief.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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