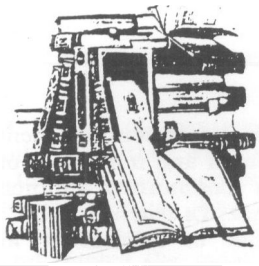


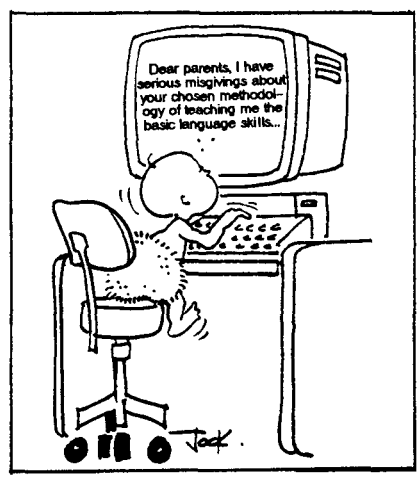
Book Reviews

Kids have all the Write Stuff by Sharon A. Edwards & Robert W. Maloy
New York: Penguin 1992. 300pp. RRP $16.95

Those who can recall the relatively recent TV commercials for the Hoechst company will appreciate the unique way in which young children interpret the symbols of text. Their attempts are endearing and often entertaining, but the extent to which they are taken seriously is arguable. The authors of *Kids have all the write stuff* have recognised the learning potential of children with regard to the development of literacy. In a society that depends greatly on the understanding of print, reading skills are inevitable nurtured.

While reading has always been recognised as an invaluable tool in the learning process from an early age, the art of writing is often considered too complex for young people to master. However, Sharon Edwards and Robert Maloy believe that the value of writing has been underestimated, despite the fact that writing helps develop the skills involved in reading. They suggest that this has much to do with the methods in which writing has traditionally been taught in schools, and moreover the prevailing assumption that young kids are incapable of communicating meaningfully though writing because they have not yet developed conventional skills. Furthermore, the fear of many adults to put pen to paper as a result of the way in which they were taught to write has contributed to apprehension about their role in their own child's writing development. The scribbles and scratches of a young child often do not seem to make sense, yet the encouragement of even these infantine efforts is essential in the view of Edwards and Maloy. The work described in this book is inspiring for various reasons, not least of which is the notion that written communication by young children is legitimate and meaningful, and that the positive reinforcement of early attempts to communicate through writing paves the way for successful future learning.

According to the authors of this book, allowing children access to interesting and absorbing tasks which promote communicative skills should be the concern of parents, educators and adults in general so that the young become active creators rather than passive consumers of information. *Kids have all the Write Stuff* provides a theoretical framework to support some very practical suggestions for encouraging kids to be writers.



Edwards and Maloy recognise that the skills obtained through writing serve to equip children for life in the information age in which they will be required to utilise all forms of communication. Inspiring children to write is not always an easy task, particularly if it is imposed on them outside of the context of their everyday lives. The theories underpinning this work emphasise the need for children to be given the opportunity to write for 'authentic' reasons. It is fairly universally accepted that authors write the most effectively about things that interest them or are important to them. This book applies the same theory to children by suggesting that they too can learn to write about what interests them. The authors lament the fact that school children are rarely given the opportunity to write for authentic reasons. As a result, Edwards and Maloy advocate the theory of 'whole language learning' for it emphasises the notion that kids are natural learners; through the interpretation of signs and symbols, they constantly create meaning for their lives by interacting with the environment.

Extending from their experiences through writing allows children to communicate and reflect on ideas which are **personally meaningful**. Related to this is the notion of Process Writing. This approach is less concerned with the 'mechanics' of traditional writing conventions such as spelling, grammar, form and neatness. Although it is necessary for these to be taught, the reduction of the writing process to a series of formulae, as it is traditionally taught, is highly undesirable. Imposing seeming arcane 'rules' is discouraged in favour of fostering a positive self-image though the enjoyment of writing and the expression of ideas in an individual way.

A focal point of this book is the necessity to enlist the involvement and support of parents in the development of their children's writing skills. This includes establishing a strong link between school and home, so that the opportunity for creativity flows along less disjointed lines. This book contains an abundance of ideas for use in both home and school to encourage young people to write, with the help of parents and teachers.

The 'Writing Box' is one which can be adapted to suit a variety of situations. The idea was premised on the recognition that young people are attracted to materials of all different kinds, and that by making such materials readily available to children, they will be more inspired to write. Maloy and Edwards tested the Writing Box on a number of young children who responded extremely well to this kind of stimulus. The boxes can be designed to incorporate all kinds of writing implements, different kinds of paper, staplers, glue, erasers – virtually whatever comes to mind and whatever a child particularly likes. the

element of choice is also an important feature of the Writing Box. The authors compare this to commercial materials available to children which by comparison are prescriptive and inhibitive for experimentation, risk-taking and revision. The Process Writing approach (mentioned above) emphasises revising and editing, as well as the publishing aspect. The Writing Box facilitates all of these elements of the process.

Apart from the Writing Box, there are numerous other ideas including playing with language through story telling, rhymes, riddles and poetry and expressing the imagination through the writing of diaries, stories and newspapers. Inventing words is also advocated as a way of introducing conventions of language. The book also recognises the increasing role of 'writing machines' in the lives of young people and the benefits for language learning that can be derived from an 'open-ended' approach to computers. The authors are discerning about commercial software when they propose an 'electronic writing box': the bulk of children's software emphasises rote, or drill activities. They also promote computer games as beneficial in the learning process. However they do expose the adverse nature of those computer games which portray violence and perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes. They also point out the importance of equity in the classroom for girls who are commonly denied access to (or discouraged from using) computers.

Nevertheless, some of the theory that is espoused by the authors in terms of learning and computers seems contradictory, particularly in relation to some quotations taken from other sources. Their interpretation of these quotations is somewhat confusing: for example, they provide information which indicates that computer learning requires movement along a pathway from which 'Y' cannot be known without first having discovered 'X'. According to the authors, this contra-indicates 'logical' and 'sequential' patterns of learning while it may be said that it rather emphasises these. Also pertaining to the use of computers in learning is a quotation from Sherry Turkle, who suggests that it is often the electronic medium itself that has the most significant effect on the child (rather than the content of the program). This is somewhat ambiguous: in his critique *The Technological Society* (1964), the French social theorist Jacques Ellul discusses the domination of **technique** as detrimental to the development of human beings. The quotation could therefore be construed as highlighting a negative aspect of computer learning, while it seems that it was included for another reason: to emphasise the potential of the electronic media to enhance the development of literacy in young people.

An issue which the authors recognise as a potential problem that can arise from the application of the approach they promulgate in this publication is that of countering negative and stereotypical ideas. Allowing children free rein in their writing (and reading) activities, in their exploration of the world around them exposes them to themes of violence and discrimination. Edwards and Maloy deal sensitively with this matter by encouraging 'writing against the grain'. Their methods of reinforcing this include modelling appropriate behaviour and values and challenging negative assumptions through discussion and 'bias-free books.

Kids have all the Write Stuff is an inspiring book and easy to read. It is most suitable for parents and teachers of young children and is resplendent with practical ideas aimed at motivating young children to write. The book sees the role of parents in the development of children's writing as fundamental. For school-age children, the promotion of the link between school and home activities places greater responsibility on parents to participate in the literacy development of their children. The encouragement of writing skills in preschool children depends even more heavily on parental involvement. The implications for children of parents who are able to spend only limited time with them are not made clear, although the strategies involved are various enough to be adapted to suit specific time constraints. Similarly, the material for the Writing Box do not have to be expensive so parents and teachers with limited resources need not feel that such an exercise is beyond their means.

This is an exciting book that makes a worthwhile contribution to the study of the development of children's writing skills. The concepts on which it is based are dynamic and important for both parents and educators alike. It is concisely written and attractively presented. Overall *Kids have the Write Stuff* is a publication deserving of commendation.

Reviewer:
***Jane Owen** BA Dip.Ed.*

Our voluntary homeless : strategies for change by Sue Green.

Children's Welfare Association of Victoria. Funded by the Ian Potter Foundaton. 1993

Our Voluntary Homeless is a report of research conducted during a three year period connected with the implementation of the Victorian Children's and Young Person's Act 1989. The research set out to examine the workings of the child welfare system as it pertains to young people who are at risk of becoming homeless or at risk because of homelessness. Its point of departure is the Carney Report, the extensive review of child welfare legislation and practice conducted in 1984. The author asserts that the principles put forward in that report are enduring and provide underpinning for the Act and have been demonstrated as appropriate to lead services to effective short and long term outcomes. Briefly stated the principles are: that young people in crisis should have voluntary access to services rather than be made the subject of a protective court order; that services should seek to strengthen rather than disrupt family ties; that services should be responsive and flexible in form to