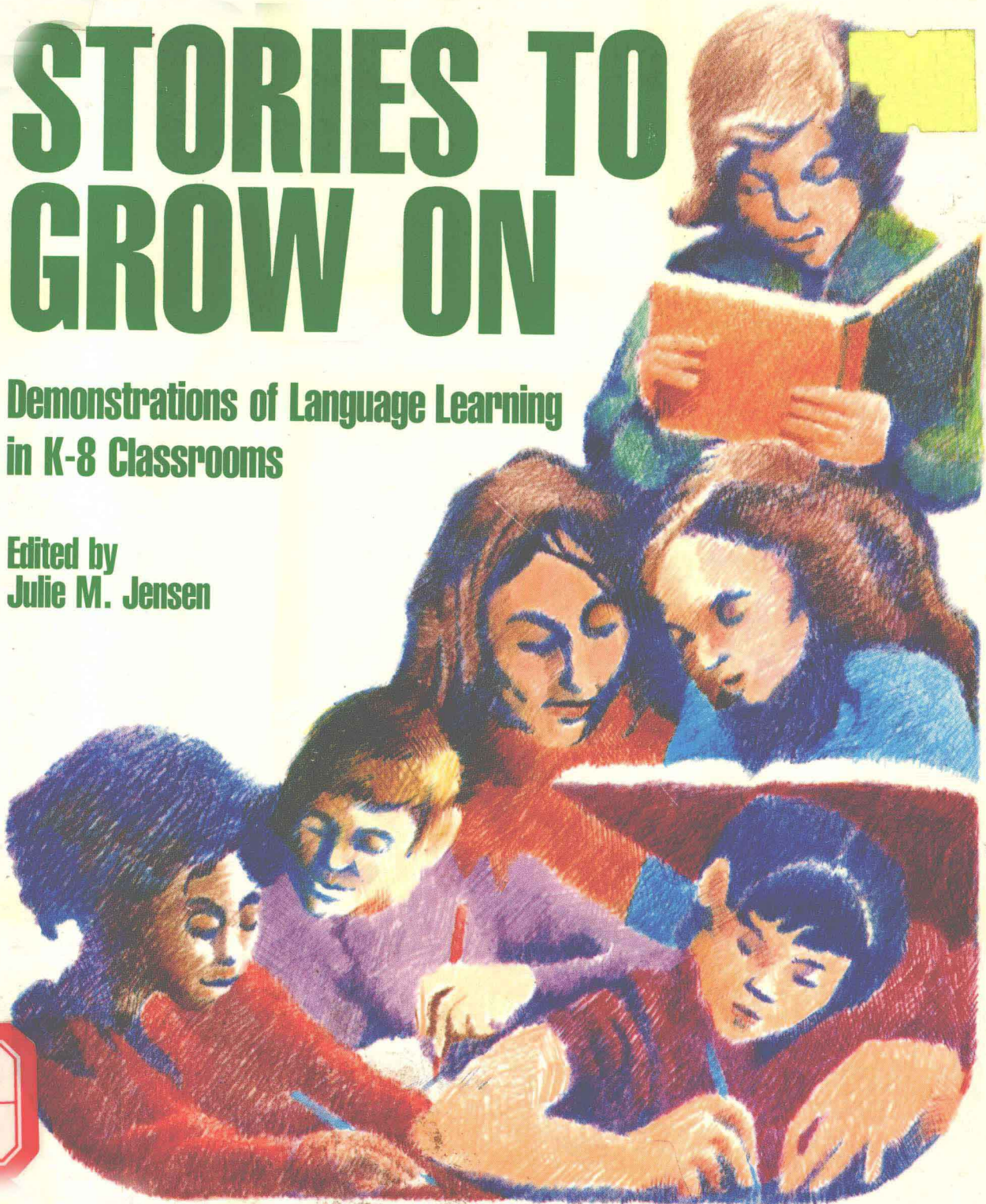


STORIES TO GROW ON

Demonstrations of Language Learning
in K-8 Classrooms

Edited by
Julie M. Jensen



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*Dedicated to our colleagues and friends
who represented secondary schools and colleges at the
Conference of the Coalition of English Associations—
in the spirit of all-level cooperation and understanding.*

Prologue

JOHN C. MAXWELL

The stories in this volume were stimulated in part by an invitational conference held in Maryland in the summer of 1987. The conference was the culmination of four years of cooperation and planning, particularly among leaders of the National Council of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association. NCTE, with 55,000 individual members, and MLA, with 27,000, are major subject-matter associations that seek to influence scholarship and instruction in the English language arts through publications, conferences, and other means. While the membership of MLA consists solely of college and university professors of English and other modern languages, NCTE membership is composed of teachers and specialists from elementary grades through graduate school.

From time to time in recent decades, NCTE and MLA have come together in cooperative efforts to review the curriculum and content of instruction in English and the language arts. Each time, the hope has been that by intensive study of the field, we might achieve new insights and provide new directions for teachers and others concerned about this most central subject matter in schools and colleges.

The first major instance of such cooperation occurred in the late 1950s when, in what is now recognized as the Sputnik era, American scholars and teachers became concerned about what some believed was a “falling away from standards” and a denial of the centrality of solid subject matter in the education of children and youth. Such writers as Rudolph Flesch, Arthur Bestor, and Bernard Iddings Bell had written scathing criticisms of the schools earlier in the decade under such titles as *Crisis in Education* (Bell 1949), *Educational Wastelands* (Bestor 1953), and *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch 1955). By and large, these works took issue with what the authors believed were hostile influences on education: permissiveness, flabby scholarship among teachers, and “life adjustment education,” which was falsely ascribed to John Dewey and his disciples.

While most educators were sure that the accounts in these books and the many contemporary articles in the same vein were inaccurate and possibly hysterical, there was enough clamor to inspire the leaders of NCTE and MLA to seek funds to bring teachers and scholars together in a series of meetings in 1958 to identify and discuss a set of some thirty issues in the teaching of English. The so-called Basic Issues Conferences, which stretched over a series of weekend meetings, involved NCTE, MLA, the College English Association, and the American Studies Association. The final report (*The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English*, 1958), which was widely distributed among schools and colleges, took an affirmative stance on academic concerns but was marked more by its discussion of unresolved questions in the profession than by any resolution of issues concerning what should be taught and when and how.

The *Basic Issues* report, and the connections among scholars and teachers it helped to strengthen, also served to set the stage for an academically oriented effort in the early 1960s that culminated in Project English curriculum development activities at a number of colleges and universities, and in several years of English Institutes designed to enhance the subject-matter preparation of experienced elementary and secondary teachers of English and the language arts.

“New English,” as the revised outlook was sometimes called, suggested that another milestone conference was needed, both to examine the trends of the preceding decade and to determine whether new directions were called for. Again, the NCTE and the MLA were the principal organizers, this time of a conference held at Dartmouth College in the summer of 1966. Because the work of scholars and teachers in Great Britain and Canada was thought to have potential significance to American schools, educational leaders from those two countries were also invited to the conference. The four-week meeting of some forty-eight persons, financed by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, was marked

by a collision between the subject-centered advocates of the New English and the child-centered enthusiasts from Great Britain.

Two books emerged from the conference, the most notable and the most influential being *Growth through English* (1967) by John Dixon of England. Through the years, the Dixon book has influenced thousands of teachers and teacher educators. Coincidental with its publication came the Great Society proclaimed by President Johnson, the rallying cry for efforts to help the socially and educationally “disadvantaged” in our society. The effect of Dixon’s book was to reinforce the growing trend to make education personally meaningful and enriching to individuals who were apathetic about schooling. The term “relevance” became a touchstone for efforts to find and use literature that would speak powerfully and intimately to young people. Although it was later alleged by critics of this period that teachers forgot about standards, that “anything went,” and that subject-matter learning was an insufficient objective of instruction in English, many teachers worked hard to make their classrooms as responsive to student interests as they could.

Whatever the cause, the curriculum did open up. In secondary schools, the range of literature used in English classes broadened substantially. Courses like English III (which usually had no definition) gave way to theme-centered semester courses on, for example, film study, the literature of minority groups, or the study of death through literature. This “elective” movement was not universally followed in schools, but it had a substantial influence on curriculum materials used everywhere. Inevitably, there would be a backlash, and it came in the form of “accountability” and “basic skills” instructional objectives urged and even demanded by school boards and state legislatures. The people, it was said, wanted a greater return on their educational dollar, and as the economic base for schools tightened during the 1970s, further claims were made that education, and particularly education in the English language arts, had failed to produce the literate citizenry needed for a modern democracy. Worse yet, it was claimed that educational achievement in this country had fallen to such a low level that we were threatened in the marketplace by European and Third World competitors.

In the early 1980s, various prestigious groups, as well as the federal government, initiated studies of our educational system to determine what was wrong and what needed to be done. The first of these, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), proclaimed a crisis in American education and proposed that schools and teachers needed to provide more “rigor” in the education of children and youth. Like subsequent reports it called for “standards,” “subject-matter competence,” more homework, the end of “social promotion” and a variety of other reforms designed to “toughen” the schools.

This, in brief, was the context that prompted a new effort by NCTE and MLA to call, once again, for a summit conference of leaders in the field to assess the state of English language arts teaching and attempt to provide direction for the profession in the 1990s and beyond. Leaders of NCTE and MLA had been meeting informally and occasionally in the late 1970s and early 1980s, more or less to keep in touch. Sometime in 1984, the idea for a new “Dartmouth” conference to examine the English language arts curriculum and its teaching emerged. Phyllis Franklin of the MLA prepared a proposal for a meeting to set plans for a conference to study English and its teaching, which was submitted to the Rockefeller and Exxon Education Foundations. The leaders of a new group, the Coalition of English Associations, met in August 1984 to determine the broad objectives of such a conference and discuss how it might proceed for the benefit of the profession.

By this time the Coalition consisted of not only NCTE and MLA but also the Association of Departments of English, the College English Association, and the College Language Association, as well as an NCTE constituent organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Subsequently, the Coalition would involve two more NCTE constituent groups: the Conference on English Education (teacher educators, for the most part) and the Conference of Secondary School English Department Chairs.

Through the efforts of Phyllis Franklin, initial funding for the conference was promised by late 1986, and plans were set for a three-week meeting in the summer of 1987 at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Ultimately, the foundations and agencies that supported the conference included the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Exxon Education Foundation.

What was remarkable and different about the 1987 meeting was first, the substantial cadre of elementary teachers and language arts specialists who attended, in contrast with the almost total absence of such professionals at the 1958 and 1966 conferences. Second was the presence of a large cadre of practicing teachers in the elementary and secondary schools. Nearly a third of the participants in 1987 were “from the firing line,” as some of them were inclined to say. In the previous conferences—and in the bodies preparing the reform reports of the 1980s in general—classroom teachers had almost never participated in appreciable numbers.

The second notable phenomenon at the 1987 meeting was the profound influence exerted on the secondary school and college groups by the cadre of elementary school teachers and college specialists in the language arts. This Elementary Section, to call it that, was a body of

fifteen individuals who met each day and quickly developed a clear vision of the kind of schooling needed for children today and tomorrow. For part of each day at the conference, these fifteen also worked with groups of secondary and college teachers and thus had a major effect on the flow of thinking about education at those levels. High school and college teachers were greatly interested in the views of the elementary teachers and specialists. By the midpoint of the conference, a number of the collegians articulated their own, perhaps subordinated, perception that students learn best when they are involved in shaping the goals, the contexts, and the methods of their own instruction. Considerable time was spent in secondary and college groups pondering the appropriateness of learner-centered, integrated, and interactive models of instruction at all levels of education.

The final chapters in the story of the Coalition Conference are yet to come. This book is but one chapter. Two others are also being written, and they will embody their authors' perceptions of the 1987 conference and conclusions about teaching and learning in the language arts. Those who have written this part of the story were among the prime movers at the conference, and their thoughts will also be manifest in the other books. To a degree, the story of the English Coalition Conference is the story of the teachers and specialists whose words and ideas appear in the pages that follow.

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Introduction

JULIE M. JENSEN

The value of stories for enriching the lives of children is limitless. But just as children can be transformed through the power of story, so too can teachers. Stories are a source of pleasure and insight, capable of lifting teachers, like anyone else, from their individual experiences into the world of the storyteller. Through stories, teachers can gain new perspectives on their own environments and the people who inhabit them. They can see how others live and how they respond to important questions in their lives; they can recognize themselves in stories—their beliefs and attitudes, hopes and fears. Stories can launch a quest for self-discovery. The reader of a tale, faced with its puzzlements and problems, comes to ask, Where do I stand? What would I do? How could I do better? *Stories to Grow On* invites teachers to make connections with the lives of its authors and to join them in a long, continuing story of professional growth.

We have tried to create elaborated instances of “goodness” in teaching, each one intended to be a stepping-stone for growth. Our stories stand in stark contrast to the familiar fact-and-figure laden rhetoric intended to establish pathology in education. The power of the stories teachers can

tell lies in their richness of detail. Stories provide nuance, they embed ideas and practices in familiar contexts, they account for the importance of affect, they clarify relationships, they communicate in everyday language to diverse audiences, they persuade people to think about complicated issues, they are holistic and comprehensive statements, they are hopeful, empathetic, and confidence-building. By viewing teachers as primary informants, as reflective and wise practitioners, by identifying teachers with vision and using their stories as a vehicle for knowing and changing, we can compose a picture of good teaching. Where else but in teachers' tales will we find the specifics of school life, specifics that will allow the identification of general patterns?

Stories are, at long last, coming into their own as a text—a data base—for researchers. While it has not been fashionable to value the “wisdom of practice” as a source of knowledge about teaching, even those researchers who do not consider the elementary classroom their home are beginning to ask good teachers what they believe, understand, and know how to do that enables them to teach well. Best of all, the line between teacher and researcher is growing less visible. The documented observations and conclusions of those who have daily contact with children in classrooms are making substantial contributions to the professional literature. The result may be that detailed portrayals of expertise in teaching will be less rare. Lee Shulman is one who has been conducting “wisdom of practice” studies. The descriptions of excellent teaching he has been gathering will become the basis for principles of good practice, which in turn will yield guidelines for educational improvement. Pointing out the extensive but unarticulated knowledge of practitioners, Shulman wrote in the February 1987 *Harvard Educational Review*, “A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature and codifying its principles, precedents, and parables.”

The story of the Conference of the Coalition of English Associations is a graphic example of both the practical and theoretical wisdom of elementary classroom teachers. Their presence was critical to the success of the conference. Among their contributions was an ability to support their views with concrete examples of sound practices and school realities. Time and time again they helped others understand why and how to put students first—before a textbook, a test, a favored literary work, a trusted teaching method. They patiently and persistently demonstrated how knowledge about children's language and learning forms the foundation for decisions about goals, curriculum, and methods. For them, it was not good enough to talk about schooling in the abstract; they illustrated their

stance with specific pictures and stories of effective language arts classrooms. Near the close of the conference seven prominent English educators were asked, "What influence do you think elementary teachers have had on this conference?" Their responses are an indication of the spirit of this book:

[You influenced us] by both talking about and exemplifying the special combination of emotional and cognitive engagement that we have all ended up trying to express.

—Wayne Booth

A profound one! The emphasis on "teaching children," "student-centered learning," "the construction of meaning," etc. . . . helped to move me beyond my normal ways of thinking.

—Robert Denham

A strong injection of child-centered approaches.

—Peter Elbow

A humanizing effect. Elementary teachers have always focused upon the learner as inquirer; they are unifiers and synthesizers.

—Janet Emig

They changed the views of many, especially college people, about what it means to teach a child. They provided access to the notions about learning and individually designed programs of learning. They established the emphasis on interaction.

—Richard Lloyd-Jones

The strong elementary presence here has confirmed the intellectually rigorous demands made on elementary teachers and it has led the way in allowing us not only to talk about but to experience literature.

—Andrea Lunsford

A profound influence. The concepts of language arts, interactive learning, and student-centered teaching have dominated the conference.

—Robert Scholes

Because this book is not only a collection of stories about the good works of individual teachers but also the story of how these teachers worked together at a significant conference, a word about process is in order. Phyllis Franklin, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association, reflected on the conference in the Fall 1987 *MLA Newsletter*. She emphasized that schools should provide a special place—and a critical opportunity—for children to learn; that the ideal classroom is a rich and supportive environment for learners actively engaged in reading, writing, speaking, and listening; that the teacher's task is to create situations and provide materials that encourage inquiry, practice in the use of language, and interaction; and that teachers must also serve as model learners and users of language. As the person most responsible for the success of the conference, Phyllis Franklin is evidence that the best in an English language arts teacher is also the best in a conference coordinator. We had that special place to learn—The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. We had a critical opportunity for learning—three uninterrupted weeks in July 1987 “to develop a new national consensus on the teaching of English in American schools and colleges and to make recommendations about future directions for instruction at all levels of education.” Our environment was rich in natural beauty, and we had the constant support of sixty bright, committed, and congenial learners. We were so actively involved in listening, speaking, reading, and writing that local duplicating machines could not bear the strain. And situations were created that encouraged our inquiry and constant interaction. For an unrivaled learning experience we thank Phyllis, a committee of representatives from the eight English Associations composing the Coalition, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Exxon, Mellon, and Rockefeller Foundations.

Stories to Grow On enlarges the work of the fifteen conferees representing language arts teaching at the elementary school level, most of them elementary classroom teachers. It is a way to sustain a point of view on which we were united—that kindergarten through grade eight classrooms can have environments that are in harmony with what we understand about how children learn language. Our book has two parts. In Part 1, William Teale presents the final conference report of the elementary group, which was composed of the eleven authors represented here, plus Rosalinda Barrera, Rudine Sims Bishop, Vera Milz, and Faith Schullstrom. In a lengthy postscript, Teale looks back to a milestone conference held during the 1960s, both for perspective and for direction. Part 2 tells a series of eight stories that collectively illuminate our shared conference experience. In the margins of these chapters, major points

from the conference report are highlighted as they are illustrated in the stories.

In the opening story, Carol Avery tells about the first day of school in her first-grade classroom. From that day forward, children listen to and talk about books, and they read and write in book-filled surroundings. "The books represent a curriculum with children's literature at its foundation and the needs of children at its heart."

C. Jane Hydrick describes how her second graders use computers in their study of Native Americans. Because computers help them to manage information, the children are better able to control the content and purpose of their learning. This story profiles lively, independent, challenged, curious, and confident learners.

Susan Stires tells a story about primary-grade learning disabled students who demonstrate their ability to write and to evaluate their writing. Like the other teachers in this book, Stires is an active learner along with her students.

Fred Burton's third- and fourth-grade classroom is the setting for his observations of how children borrow from and improvise on their literary experiences when they write.

The collaborative relationship Donna Carrara establishes with her fourth graders continues as the students move through the grades. She is a supportive partner in learning who describes the sources of her support.

Mary Kitagawa's story is set in her half Mexican American, half Native American sixth-grade classroom. Through varied and personally interesting experiences, students talk, read, and write their way to a better understanding of their own and other cultures.

Diane Orchard tells how her sixth-grade students listen, speak, read, and write in order to learn and share information about their state's history. Using primary sources, the students raise questions and find answers. Their learning is interdisciplinary, personal, involving, and enjoyable.

Mary Krogness is a teacher with a challenge, and a philosophical commitment to match. Her story about a middle school classroom is stirring, upsetting, suspenseful, hopeful, and humane. It reveals a quest for student engagement and an ability to look for small victories. Talk is central in this classroom: "Talk is, after all, the heart of the matter; it is also a matter of the heart."

In a brief prologue, John Maxwell, Executive Director of the National Council of Teachers of English, conference organizer, and member of the elementary group, places the conference in a historical context dating to the late 1950s. In doing so he tells a story of interorganizational coop-

eration on behalf of English language arts teaching and learning. Finally, in an epilogue, I suggest that stories to grow on can be rooted not only in our experiences as teachers but in recollections of our own best teachers.

Our work at the Conference exemplified a humane, learner-centered, inquiring, risk-taking, and highly interactive process. Yet our product, comprising Part I of this book, will be recognized by good teachers as sensible, obvious, and familiar. Little that we thought or said or wrote is remarkable for its novelty. What is remarkable is the scant attention to principles we stand by in vast numbers of today's elementary school classrooms. For that reason, we do not depend on a report to have power over practice. This is a book about the power of story, and its centerpiece is eight stories by teachers, for teachers. In these *Stories to Grow On* are our hopes for language learners.

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THE CONFERENCE REPORT

part I

... the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: To reach the port... we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table