

# REPRISING JOY IN SEARCH OF A SONG



**Using Pets, Poetry and Photographs**  
*to motivate creative expression*

2009  
Barbara Fisher

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**REPRISING JOY: IN SEARCH OF A SONG**  
*Using Pets, Poetry and Photographs to motivate creative expression*  
Barbara Fisher with Richard Spiegel and A. Thomas Perry

**Introduction**

The youngest child at the Passover dinner asks the question, Why is this night different from all others?

Thomas Perry, Ten Penny Players teaching artist, and my son, in *Poem from the Heart* written for and performed at NYS Council on the Arts 2005 Summer Seminar asked, ‘What Am I?’<sup>1</sup>

*In Search of a Song* asks, ‘Who is the poet?’

Our mentor, the late Rachel Lauer, director until her death of the Straus Thinking and Learning Center at Pace University, wrote that, “Something will have to be done to change the demeaning status of students, the irrelevant curriculum and the social isolation of students within the regular classroom. If we do not change these fundamentals, educability of students will not increase, nor will achievement. We’ll simply spend more years rearranging the same old pieces of a system no one is happy with.”

Note to the readers: From the onset of this report we would like the reader to understand our philosophy and approach to teaching persons that have a disability. Most parents love their special needs child with a fervor equal to what they feel about their other children, siblings, and relatives. However, not all parents of children with a disability are comfortable in their role as parent, provider of therapy, or advocate. They would rather not have their family or child’s name made public. They don’t wish to be in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.tenpennyplayers.org/tom/Site/What\\_Am\\_I.html](http://www.tenpennyplayers.org/tom/Site/What_Am_I.html)

the spotlight, pointed out as different, other than mainstream. In *REPRISING JOY* we note a child's name in celebration of their ability to share a moment through expressive writing or graphic art.

While some of the children with whom we worked are 'special' because they learn differently and are considered persons with a disability others of our students are super bright, gifted even, and also have trouble in the classroom because a busy, overworked teacher can't adapt his or her curriculum fast enough to hold the child's interest.

It has been our practice since we began to publish NYC students in 1978 that in working with and publishing students we do not single out the learners as special or general education. We mention that the child attends x public school and is a second grader who produced a work in response to a classroom challenge. This book, our curriculum developed in part during the 2007-2008 school year, is a celebration of our students' success in creating expressive writing and graphic art. It is in the context of celebrating the learner's art that we mention his or her name.

This curriculum also affords appreciation to the value of animals in helping their human companions articulate feelings through expressive writing, graphic art and performance.

It is our position as artists, teachers, parents, advocates, that all children flourish when afforded individualized education programs and adaptations. We understand that this is not easy and having helped draft many Individualized Education Programs we know that planning, writing and implementing really effective teaching tools take more time to create. Teachers, teaching artists and children can learn from each other when

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using curriculum that challenges them to change and to grow through each school day. It is our hope that this curriculum will provide momentum and will remain fresh and stimulating as users add their own creativity to our ideas and make this material their own.

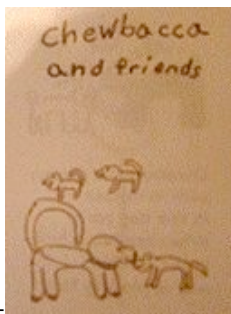
In 2007 I wrote an article ‘Therapy Pup Joins Arts in Ed. Team’ about Chewbacca, our puppy. It was published in the *Arts Abled* newsletter.



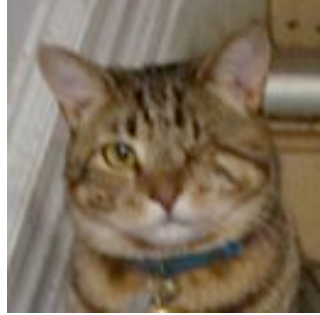
Who knew that showing our students this picture of Chewbacca at the Silver Lake Dog Run



would inspire this drawing of -



by Alyssa?



Or that this face:



would inspire Scott's drawing and poem...?

Or that photographs I took of animals and brought to each of the 66 workshops through the 2007-2008 school year along with our literacy curriculum would so engage the students with whom we worked at PS 53 and PS 25 North Shore Annex on Staten Island, that what we will share in this book, and what we have learned from the 76 Kindergarten – 6th grade learners (all of whom were published in their own chapbooks and many of whom have disabilities) might be a tool to break students' isolation and help them to achieve?

Who would have dreamed that Ten Penny Players use of the arts for 41 years would actively engage the majority of the students with whom we work in creative communities? Who would have thought that by doing our work as a family along with the poet Richard Spiegel who joined us in 1978, and with the partnership of 40 consulting artists that help us to provide workshops in schools, hospitals, social agencies and

prisons; publication and performance opportunities to more than 10,000 students, we would break the isolation of learners who were not the 'general population', provide a relevant living curriculum that has vigor yet engages the curiosity of our students ... and that we'd generally (if not always) have fun while doing it?

Every age group with whom we work and the diverse venues where we've brought our project present different challenges and informed our way of working during 2007-2008. Always mindful of our arts mission to create communities of life long arts involved learners we changed short-range goals, methodology, and our presentation to make and perform art while tap dancing around the challenges each venue presented.

*(How Past Experiences Informed Our Practice)*

When The Waterways Project of Ten Penny Players worked for 20 years at the high schools located in Queens at the Rikers Island jail a major issue was access to students. Despite holding Department of Education identification cards and after receiving clearance from the Department of Correction (DOC), we were not always able to enter the prison to teach. Sometimes there was a prison lockdown during which no one was admitted and no one allowed to leave.

We quickly learned never to plan another activity to take place after a teaching day at Rikers. At that site teachers and teaching artists were as imprisoned and captive to the whims of the Department of Correction as were our students. Sometimes there were security reasons that trumped the entrance of teachers or their exit from the school at the end of the day. Sometimes there was no discernible reason. Just the flexing of muscle

cause DOC had that power.

Attitude from the school administration to the teaching artist working in the jail is not materially different from the treatment given us by some school-based administrators. Having worked in NYC both before and after Mayoral control of the schools, from both within a superintendency that placed us as arts teachers on their Table of Organization and also from my dual perspective as the director of an outside agency and as a parent advocate -- we understand that we are always 'the other' to the establishment. We have as much difficulty gaining classroom access and providing consistent arts experiences to students in community public schools as we ever did when working within a correctional facility.

What makes the most difference in the culture of a school and the lives of students and teachers is not the Mayor or the Chancellor, but the superintendent with whom you are blessed or blighted. One of my favorite superintendents remains Stephen Phillips, an Alternative school educator with an understanding of history, theory and practical applications who went his own creative way, allowing those of us that worked with him to also after considerable thought 'do the right thing' and to take risks. We learned from him that you can always say you're sorry if in doing what you think best for your students you also step on toes or ruffle egos.

As we didn't get calls from irate parents, negative letters to the Board of Education or unsatisfactory annual write ups from supervisors that evaluated our work, our assumption is that we've been on target in approach and affect more times than not.

During the 2007-2008 school year at both sites through the year we would arrive at the schools with our lesson plans to discover that the students weren't available to us ... sometimes a trip had been planned and we hadn't been informed; sometimes the students were pulled out for testing; sometimes the DOE had replaced a regular class day with a newly mandated unit of study, or test prep was needed to prepare the learners for an English Language Arts or Math test. Ten Penny Players had been invited into the schools, had been contracted by NYS Council on the Arts and NYC Department of Cultural Affairs to provide arts services, and we worked from a calendar designed by the schools and agreed to in advance. However, arts programs often are treated like the ingredient in a recipe that's marked optional.

The scheduling problems at one partner site were compounded by the fact that we had been invited into that school 3 years earlier. The project had been designed in concert with the site program director who had retired at the end of the previous school year. An experienced clinician, administrator and visual artist he had been a joy to work with, seamlessly integrated our work into the school's mission and practice and made himself available whenever necessary to plan future projects, to talk about curriculum or help to resolve student problems.

The new school director was slowly easing from his role as clinician at the school to that of administrator. But he was not comfortable working with an outside arts agency. I couldn't reach him by phone. He didn't answer emails and didn't give us meeting time to plan the year.

Through our tenure that year we caught him in the hallway for brief Q&A's but



never had his full attention. And the school principal who worked in another building was even more elusive and provided no direct supervision. We were used to supervisors that came into our classroom periodically to observe what we were doing. That's part of the ordinary routine of being in a school and working as a team. Sometimes the comments they offered after we did a workshop helped us to improve our teaching. As they spent more time with the students than we did their opinions about how the students learned were important. But we got no feedback from these administrators.

This indifference to our presence exacerbated the difficulties we faced while working within a school where all the children had emotional disabilities and yet are expected to keep up with demands of NYC's academic curriculum. They are expected to take and optimally pass the same standardized tests as their chronological peers while grappling with medical protocols that dull their senses, inhibit their ability to think clearly, and in some cases put them to sleep while sitting in class.

I expect that had we not been licensed teachers as well as artists with decades of study and practice working with disabled kids we still would have gone about our business trying to make art with the students despite the difficulties. We would have come up with some sort of product anyway and been grateful for even the most minimal of work or felt that we'd let the students down. Although we're trying to make as beautiful a publication as possible for each student, we are realistic about the end product and understand that the process of creating, editing and revising a piece of expressive writing or art is as important as an end product.

In every classroom whether special ed or general population you sink when

hindered by administrators and disinterested classroom teachers; and can soar when a partnership with the classroom teacher sparks the students' interest.

We heard from a friend whose child attended the school that the site administrator also had difficulty relating to parents. Double whammy for us as both outside arts educators and parent advocates.

Perhaps teaching artists would be taken more seriously if our annual culminating events instead of being publication and performance based were instead standardized uniformly administered tests. Not that I would wish this additional burden on learners, teachers or teaching artists. as we then would be saddled with the pressure also to 'teach to the test' or advocate against such strictures as many of our colleagues, and we most assuredly would.

Not all learners are good test takers. Not all things gained by our students can be tested. What test could adequately codify the joy on a child's face when he or she is handed a pile of tiny colorful books that all contain his or her words and pictures. How do you measure the pleasure a parent feels when sitting in the audience as his or her child recites a poem of his or her own design.

We enjoyed the fact that at PS 53 during open school week parents would lean against the walls or spill over child size chairs while they sat in classrooms watching us teach poetry. At PS 25 parents and foster parents would attend the book parties we gave. We welcomed the enthusiastic visits and comments from the parents of the younger children.

This contrasted with the few parents that attended events we'd mounted at the public library for the high school students. The performances we held in Rikers jail were even more poorly attended. Parents were invited only a few times a year and it wasn't easy for them to gain admittance to the jail.

We have been documenting poetry performances in schools and libraries since the 1980s. Videos of student performances at libraries on Staten Island were cited for excellence and have been used as bridges between programs on Staten Island Community Access stations.

52 of our videos presently can be seen on You Tube.<sup>2</sup> Additional videos of student performances and an animation of Barbara's play JUD are in production. A copy JUD that includes her illustrations is in the Museum of Modern Art's collection of artist books. Examples of student publications and reports by researchers that have evaluated our projects can be accessed at our url<sup>3</sup>.

Our work and that of our colleagues is not mysterious and should not be held out as carrots for use only at schools or in homes endowed with large budgets and peopled by persons with gazillion years of advanced education. This is not to decry access to money or schooling of course, but a reminder that much of what we do is fueled with common sense and our need for adventure and chores that are as interesting and fun for us as for the children and others with whom we relate.

Many of our students have severe learning or emotional problems. Consistency of the learning experience, sufficient time to absorb a concept, and to ruminate on what has

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/tenpennyplayers>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tenpennyplayers.org>

been learned, are critical to their learning and ability to demonstrate this learning competency as they create pieces of expressive writing or graphic art. When we aren't able to give a scheduled workshop and have to do make ups the time lag makes it necessary to reestablish our working relationship with the youngsters, to introduce the lesson again and to nudge the students into understanding the rationale for the lesson, so they are able to create expressive writing and graphic arts images.

Of course we're not always able to do make ups or to have sufficient time to work with the youngsters as the teachers have so much curriculum to get through that we might not be able to add classes to the schedule worked out in advance with the school administrator assigned to be the arts liaison with our project.

Working at Rikers jail and with high school students whose attendance was inconsistent gave us experience with floating registers and honed our ability to create each class as a self-contained unit with clear goals and learning outcomes resolved in that one workshop. It reinforced the improvisational skills we would need when teaching kindergarten age children with minimal literacy and maximum emotive energy. Of course it doesn't hurt that we're actors and a classroom is yet another example of living theater...albeit with learning goals, educational objectives and specific curriculum we need to teach.

Rikers is a short-term facility. A student could be in a classroom for 1 day and then miss a class as he (or she) needed to go to court, attend counseling with a clinician or exit counselor, see a doctor or dentist for medical treatment, or meet with an attorney. Or as it sometimes happened they'd attend one class, write a few poems, draw some

pictures and then vanish in the middle of the night when evicted from the jail to the streets of Queens with bus fare and their personal possessions. They had served their sentence and would be removed from our register of students as suddenly as they had arrived with little or no exit counseling to assure that they had a safe place to move to, a family with whom to stay, a job, a school placement. With such a strange disorienting, dehumanizing system it is no wonder that prison is a revolving door experience for too many young adults.

Not every teacher or artist can function well in such an environment. Each successful teaching experience for the artist; each poem or drawing that evolves from a learning experience for the student in prison is the same small miracle as when we can stimulate and effect learning with our young students with diverse learning needs attending local community schools.

We would publish the incarcerated students' writing or art in an anthology, a poetry broadside or a short limited edition book. After a student's departure from prison a concerned teacher or administrator would send the publication to them if someone knew where they lived or had the name of a relative or other community based agency that had contact with the youth. As the young men and women often were imprisoned using names that weren't really their own and falsified addresses it was often hard or impossible to send them their creative work.

Unfortunately, it has been our experience that the world of the special education learner in NY's public schools is barely more humane than that of the incarcerated student. Despite the best intentions of clinicians and educators there often

are no appropriate placements for children and youths with the 'low incidence' problems and they have to 'make do' with classes that are too large, environments that are too noisy and chaotic, teachers with insufficient tools and/or experience to plan for or to work with hard to reach children with emotional disabilities.

It's not always easy or comfortable for teachers that work in district schools with special education students. The problems parallel those described at the prison school. We sometimes lose or gain a student in a mid or end term change. Or a student stops coming to class for a variety of reasons and then reappears. Or it becomes apparent to the school or child's parent that the placement is not appropriate for the child's learning needs and he or she is disrupting a whole class of learners. And so the youngster is moved to a different class or school and the slim fragments of poetry and art are left behind.

Although it is often regrettable for us to lose a student and destructive to the feeling of community the students have achieved, it's even more problematic for the child with a disability that has arrived weeks into a term, with absolutely no clue as to what's going on in the class.

It's hard for a general education youth to catch up when he or she's missed classes or when learning is for whatever reason disrupted. It's been our experience as educators and parents of a child with a disability that it's virtually impossible for such a child to keep up with the pace of what's happening in the class when he or she has missed the earlier lessons and context of the instruction because of medical appointments or hospitalizations.

And sometimes a lesson is lost because our students with disabilities have memory retention difficulties. These additional problems make it harder for them to keep on track with class assignments when after having missed a workshop they arrive back in the classroom and are confronted with a thin folder of first draft writing and artwork that they have forgotten how to complete.

This problem is not limited of course to special education students. A teacher we know recently told us of the difficulty she has with a general education student who attends an academically rigorous private school. He completed written exercises relative to demonstrating that he understood a math concept that had been taught. He then clearly articulated these concepts when asked questions about what he had done.

However, within a few minutes he could neither apply the math principle when working on another exercise, or discuss the concept with understanding. It was as if he had never had a lesson about the math principle.

While the rest of the class has moved on to another experience, this student is still trying to work out a previous lesson and becoming increasingly frustrated and belligerent.

The multi-tasking teacher that is attempting to teach something new to the group can't always provide the clues or use a teaching style that will help every child understand what is happening at each moment in the classroom. Parents can not be forced to sign the forms that enable evaluation of their child. The student in the wrong class placement because he or she has not been evaluated to document strengths as well as problem areas of learning or who has missed an earlier opportunity for learning

because that student had been pulled out of class to receive counseling, had been ill or in hospital often becomes a problem for everyone in the class as he flounders.

Our classes every year contain the children that would make gains if they were evaluated with sensitivity and then received additional services; children that were evaluated and still weren't receiving what they needed because school budgets had been trimmed and there weren't enough specialists to meet the school system's need; and children with special needs that were thriving in the mainstream without anyone doing anything more special than providing a seat, desk with clear sightlines to the blackboard or increasingly the white smart board, and words of praise when they succeeded in their tasks.

And like a sled team in a blizzard the group keeps mushing onward to prevent being buried by information that must be eaten, digested and stored before the storm of learning is concluded at the end of the school year.

## **Chapter 1**

(2007-2008)

Even the most positive thinkers among us that hoot and stomp the loudest to keep Tinkerbell alive during productions of *Peter Pan* would be hard put to codify what arts and educational methods are the most successful with every class of learners.

The two schools with which we worked are very different. PS 53, housed in its own building, is a community district school in the Bay Terrace neighborhood of Staten Island. Its population of Pre-K–5th graders includes a general population and those with



special needs. The teachers and administrators are only a short hallway walk from each other.

Following an Inclusion model most of the children with learning, physical, or emotional disabilities attend classes with the general population of learners and work from the same curriculum as do the rest of the students. In this model of instruction a special education teacher forms a team teaching partnership with a general education classroom teacher.

Each team is assisted by paraprofessionals who follow their instructions as the teachers adapt methodology to assure that the students understand the work and are comfortable with the curriculum. Very few of the children have disabilities so severe that they need a self-contained setting.

Or rather, if our schools had budgets that allowed class registers to be low enough to enable teachers to provide individualized instruction and adaptations of curriculum as needed, self-contained settings could be avoided. Wishful thinking I expect.

Children with disabilities attending PS 53 generally are integrated into every school activity. The expectation is that all students will learn the material offered, albeit some youngsters require additional time and modifications in the delivery of the information by the teachers to assure understanding.

School year 2007-08 was the third year of our partnership with PS 53. We'd been using our Picture Book curriculum with the Kindergarten –5th grade Inclusion classes. Each class had a special education teacher paired with a general education instructor and at least one paraprofessional. It was hectic but the class sizes were small, the children were motivated to create books and their parents pleased to see tangible results of

learning each spring at an annual exhibit of the publications and performance reading by the students.

Some teachers and paraprofessionals are comfortable working with visiting artists. Others take the opportunity of a visitor to disengage from the classroom activities. They ignore our presence and bury themselves in paperwork or their computer screen. At every school there always are a handful of folks that are resentful of the break in the rhythm of the work they've established with their students. They make us feel like intruders and are particularly hostile when the lowest achieving students successfully create enough expressive writing and artwork to receive their own publication.

When we'd begun planning for 07/08 in the spring of 06/07 the assistant principal asked us to consider adding two self contained classes of low functioning kindergarten children to our schedule as these youngsters received no arts services. We said yes, although we'd worked more than 20 years with adolescents that attended alternative schools and knew that it would mean a lot of stretching and revamping of curriculum and methods to meet the needs of young children that had minimal literacy or social skills.

As its turned out the fact that we'd spent years home schooling Thomas, writing and illustrating books to keep him interested in learning while he underwent 39 rehabilitative surgeries and years of neurological repatterning in partnership with the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Pennsylvania gave us the skills to deal with children whose problems are far more severe than illiteracy.

A small number of PS 53's students are best served in self-contained settings with a higher ratio of adults to students. The 5-6 year olds we worked with during 2007-08

had minimal alphabet and writing skills. They were easily distracted. In a flash these children could move the volume and affect up the scale from giggles to tantrum. They needed clear objectives reinforced by hands on concrete learning activities.

About these learners in June their teacher wrote, “These children have a variety of disabilities but they have one in common – expressive speech. All of my children have the difficulty speaking their ‘stories’ no less writing them. “

The curriculum we piloted during 2007-08 included use of a digital recorder in every class session. The Edirol machine we bought had been suggested to us by a reporter from radio station WBAI who used it when recording in the field. Small enough to fit into a shirt pocket or purse and light weight, the thin, flat machine has a built in stereophonic microphone that works perfectly when we are taping shy children with light whispery voices. It’s been easy to use and when plugged into a radio speaker, computer, or other recording device has allowed the children to hear their performances in the classroom much to their continued amusement.

Using the digital recorder as part of each class was particularly effective with the kindergarten youngsters when Richard Spiegel, as interviewer, would ask short carefully phrased questions about a specific story we had read or an animal photograph we had shown them. As long as we had clearly defined exercises when approaching them with a task and allowed them to draw pictures rather than use their limited alphabet skills as response, the frustration level (and consequent acting out) was kept within bounds.

Of course at least once in every workshop we also experienced angst when after producing a beautiful drawing a child became agitated and scribbled over the picture with harsh dark crayon renderings that defaced the page.

About the process their teacher wrote: “This September my community school PS 53 embarked on a writing program. The children will learn to write specific life stories and my class was included...The Ten Penny Players helped me so much to achieve these goals. They would bring in pictures about their life, pictures that elicited stories that the children had the challenge of bringing it on paper for themselves. This program reinforced the writing program at school with the modifications they needed.

Richard listened to their stories while he taped them. The children were enthusiastic and appreciative as well as I. Using all their senses these children are and still in the process of successfully completing the writing goals. It takes many teachers, many ways to teach our children. As instructors we never give up. When we see the fruits of their labor it is a cause for celebration.

My children are comfortable speaking stories about their lives, their sharing, their involving each other in their worlds. My goals for the writing program have been met and we could not have done it without the support from the Ten Penny Players. Teaching reading, math have been challenges for me but teaching writing, expressive speech has always been a major roadblock.

I have learned from Barbara, Thomas and Richard. I have enjoyed their methods of teaching, comfortability and patience with my children. So often our children with special needs have been overlooked because we simply believe they can't be taught. However, a unique program like Ten Penny Players has proven to be valuable in the areas where teachers have the most difficulty meeting their IEP goals.”

In the spirit of celebrating the hard won accomplishments of our students this report sets forth the challenges we presented to the students at both schools and their many responses and diverse points of view.

## Chapter 2

As contrast to PS 53 the PS 25 North Shore Annex, part of NYC's District 75, provides "citywide educational, vocational, and behavior support programs for students who are on the autism spectrum, severely emotionally challenged, and/or multiply disabled..." This district includes "56 school organizations, home and hospital instruction, and vision and hearing services at more than 350 sites in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island and Syosset, New York."<sup>4</sup>

Each class with which we worked at PS 25 averaged 8 students. The program was housed on two floors in shared space at the Staten Island Mental Health Society office on Castleton Avenue. The classroom teachers were special education licensed and each partnered with 1-2 paraprofessionals. The class registers were very small. In fact when you factor in our cohort of 3 teaching artists to the mix of adults and student the ratio of adult to child became one to one.

Ten Penny Players co-directors, Richard Spiegel and Barbara Fisher, are professional artists with extensive special education training, experience and NYS teaching and administrative certification. They have taught special needs students in a wide range of sites including those in the most restricted carceral settings and the least restrictive off-sited vocational settings located in community businesses. As adjunct

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<sup>4</sup> From NYC Department of Education website - <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/District75/KeyDocuments/d75directory.htm>

professors of education at Fordham University they also provided special education instruction in the graduate school to educators that needed special education credits.

Ten Penny Players' Teaching Artist, Thomas Perry, himself a bi-racial person with multiple disabilities, has an actor's ability to leapfrog from the character of a stern drill sergeant to stand up comic leaving even the most aggressive acting out children roaring with laughter and amenable to completing an assignment.

This report of the 2007-2008 school year also will be informed by the present 2008-09 school year as we continue to work with many of the PS 53 students and note the changes in their behavior and abilities since being in the classroom with them before the summer vacation.

What we are learning this term will nuance our statements about the discoveries we made while visiting the two schools last year. For example, during 2008-2009 we are continuing to meet with Kindergarten and Kindergarten/first grade self-contained classes at PS 53 and also with many of the children that attended these classes last year who moved on to the next grade. While their literacy skills are somewhat improved a good number of the children still lack self control, have difficulty articulating their ideas and feelings, and evidence poor eye/hand coordination that impacts their ability to write, to make original drawings or to copy or color neatly.

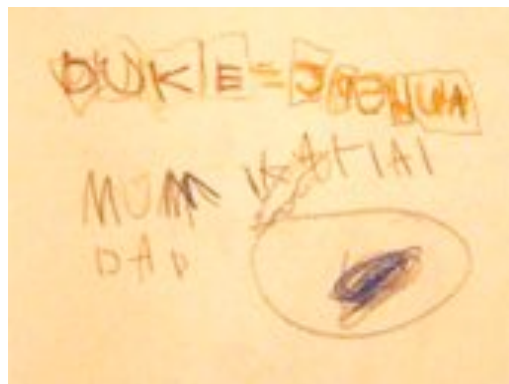
The advantage of having worked at both schools for several years is that we have material from most of the children over that period evidencing change and growth. We are more comfortable using different examples of work from one child to demonstrate understanding than pitting the product of one student against another. As alternative

educators we would rather a portfolio approach to highlight learning than creating competition between and testing learners.

When possible we like to use a child's self-portrait on the first page of his or her book. Many students are nervous about their ability to draw and create a self-portrait. We purchased from an automotive supply store 2-inch mirrors framed in plastic. As we hadn't been able to buy enough of these mirrors to assure that each child would have one to use we also went to the crafts store and bought 3-inch round mirrors and slightly larger balsam wood rounds to which we'd glued the mirrors.

The children were each handed a mirror and unlined white paper. They were instructed to look at their own face and think about what made their face unique. They then spent about 15 minutes using pencils to make their sketches.

While the children are encouraged to draw their faces their ideas of what constitutes a self-portrait are diverse. One kindergarten child last year responded with this drawing when asked to do a self-portrait.



He was still learning how to form each alphabet letter and which letter to use when writing his name. Including his name and also his nickname with the drawing was more important to him than drawing the face.

This fall as we did last year, at our first workshop we start at the now...our hope being that we can build from the students' strengths -- not where we would like him or her to be, but at each child's present functional level.

As contrast to last year's drawing, the same child last month drew this response as a self-portrait:



He explained that since his book's title would be 'All About Me' he of course drew his whole family and included his father, mother, and siblings. He said that the letters above the heads designate the various relatives (e.g. D is Dad; M is Mother; J is himself). In another drawing he wrote his full name clearly, accurately, and with a firm dark pencil line. This exercise using mirrors worked better at PS 53 with the second grade and older children than with the 5 and 6 year olds.

Jillian did this rendering of herself, first drawing her glasses and then erasing them as she continued her running battle against the adult authority



that was forcing her to wear the despised eyeglasses.

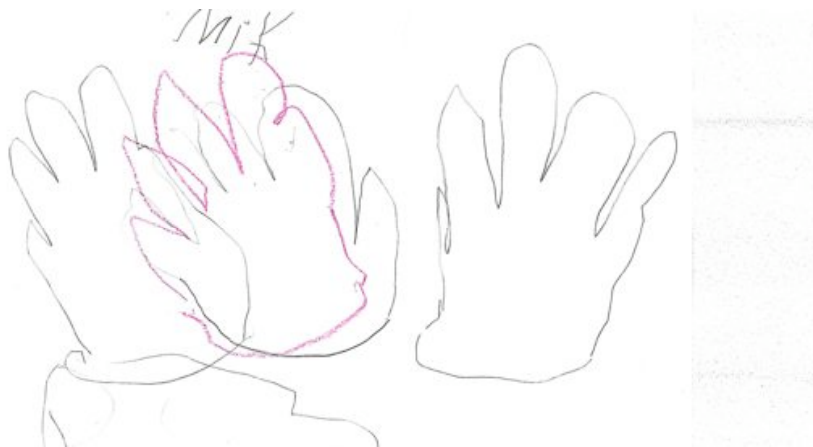


This year she drew this -- and was very definite about portraying her smiling self without glasses. Having been forced also to wear glasses at her age I know exactly how exasperated she must be.



Mikayla was so unhappy with her drawing that she began scribbling over what she'd done. Given how young these children are we wouldn't expect their portraits to be as clear and detailed as those of an older child. But they get so angry with themselves that what sometimes starts as a charming silhouette quickly deteriorates. Often the attempt is abandoned. Mikayla however was determined and continued to draw.

Settling at length on this picture of her hands:



Jillian in her book also used hands as a theme that added insights to her personal story.

About this picture Jillian wrote: “I pray, holding hands. My brother holds my mommy’s hand.”



And for this picture she wrote:

“My daddy holds my hand. My daddy says to me be careful.”



The drawings of the kindergarten children are in contrast to the self-portraits of these second graders –





The pictures of these very young children also contrast with the self portraits of the slightly older students that attended PS 25 who provide greater detail, facial expression and control of their portraits:

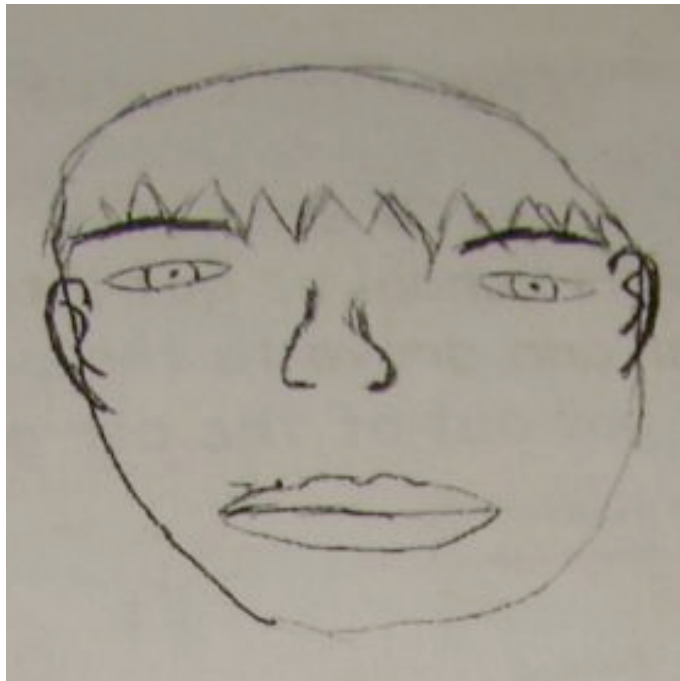


It's also interesting to see how students' portraits vary as they change each year. The following drawings from one student were done in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

2006:



2007:



2008:



We generally document public performances using video and still cameras.

However, when working in classrooms with special ed students because of confidentiality issues we concentrate on capturing images of the students' art or of our teaching artists working with children that are neither identified by name nor 'labeled' as students with disabilities. As in this work our focus is on the inspiration for and process of students making art.

The children are as intrigued by the digital camera's ability to snap a picture that they can access immediately as any adult 'subject' of a photographer. They enjoy being photographed for their covers and because they can see the photograph on the digital screen if they're unhappy with the result we can delete and reshoot.

We start each class with a reading that we hope will elicit conversation and discussion leading to creative writing. We read to the kindergarten children one of Barbara's books, published in 1975, that was created for young children and still provides teachable moments for us. 'Big Harold and Tiny Enid', a picture story about a dog and a cat was written for preschoolers so the language and the pictures worked with our youngest students and complemented a unit of study their teacher was doing about the relative size and shape of objects.

This is the abstract of our lesson plan for the class:

PS 53 11/08/07

Big & Little

Read Big Harold & Tiny Enid

Show them photo of Ch'C & playmate.

Talk about difference of size

Show them other photos of the dog

Discuss and show the drawing that can be made of ovals

Have them make a drawing of a dog with ovals

Name their drawing

Make up a story about the pet playing in the drawing.

The lesson had the serendipitous advantage of depicting a character – Big Harold – a huge floppy eared dog that looked very much like the Newfoundland that our dog Chewbacca plays with at the park. Tiny Enid is a kitten. Her image and activities were based on one of our cats.

The photograph and the drawing from the book provided the first animal model we were able to use as we began teaching our students how to draw a dog and create a story or poem about the animal.

This is Cúchulain. A 200 pound Newfoundland dog, he's brown with green eyes and is a sweet and gentle animal, as is Barbara Fisher's character Big Harold in the story 'Big Harold and Tiny Enid' that we read to the students.



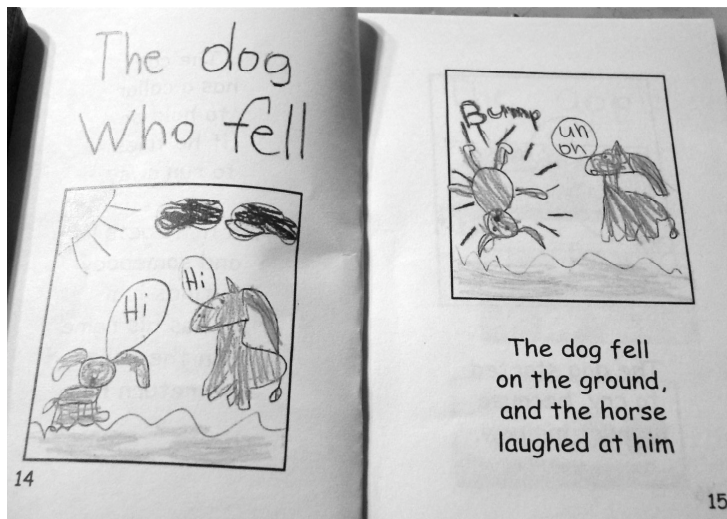
This is a response drawn by Luis after he heard the story and saw the pictures. This drawing was published in his book:



Alyssa, R., a second grader, drew this picture of her dog Gizmo

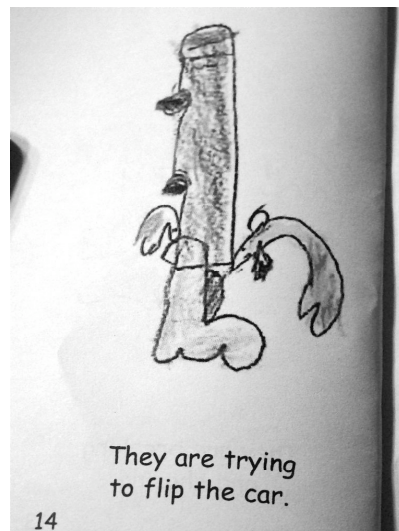
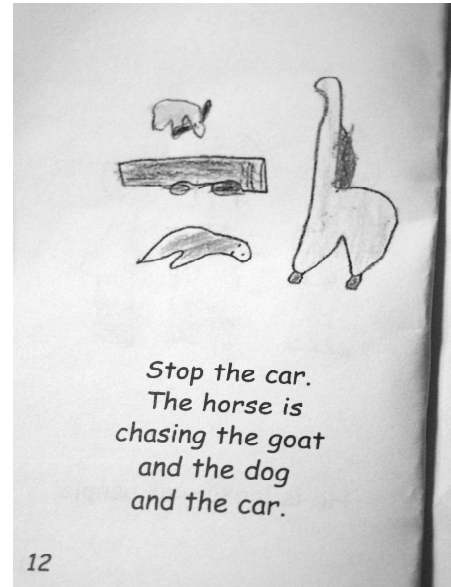
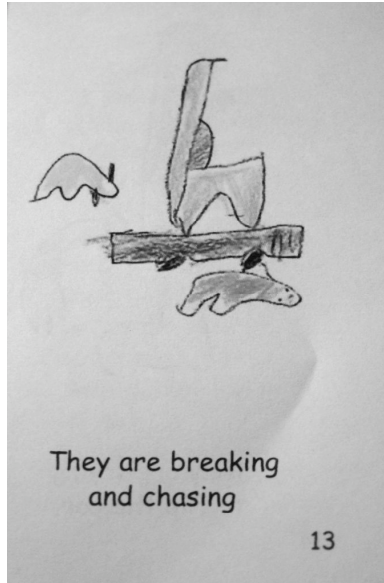


This is part of a story created by another student:





And these are from a third student:



To give equal opportunity for children that had other pets we followed the portraits of dogs with a lesson about cats and birds. Our cat Solo was adopted from North Shore Animal League where the volunteers had given him that name inspired perhaps by the fact of his one eye. With a nod to the Star Wars movie when we followed Solo's adoption with one of a North Shore puppy the following week we named the pup Chewbacca.

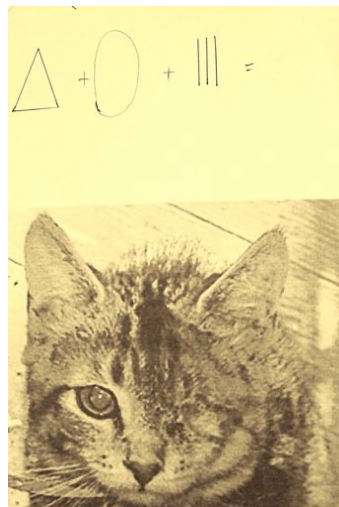
Chewbacca at 10 weeks:

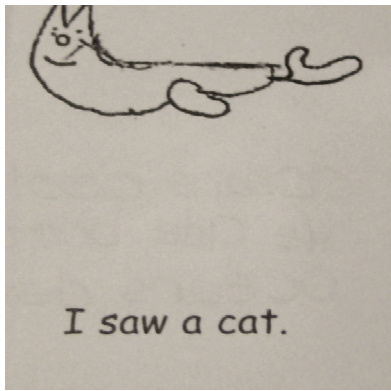


Solo at 10 weeks:

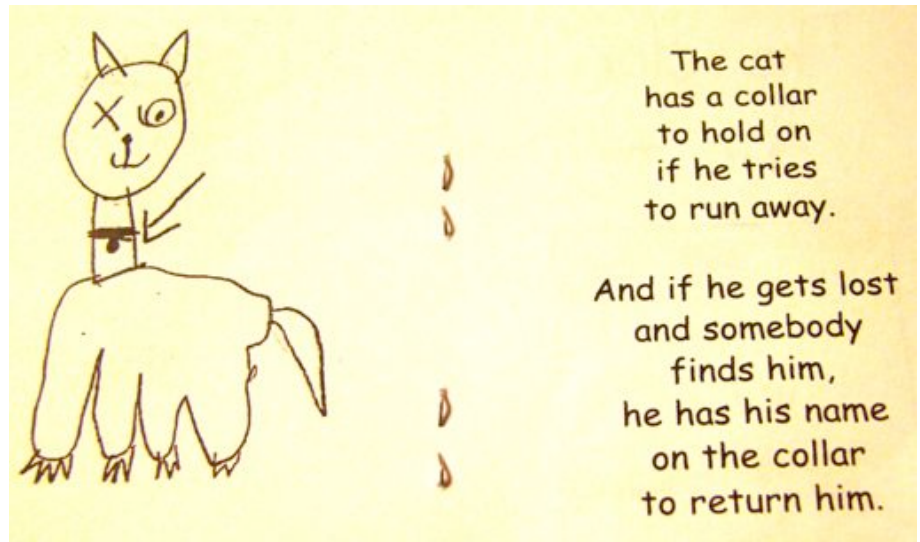


We used a triangle, oval and parallel lines to help the students understand the components of Solo's face:





A second grader from PS 53 was inspired to do this drawing and poem---

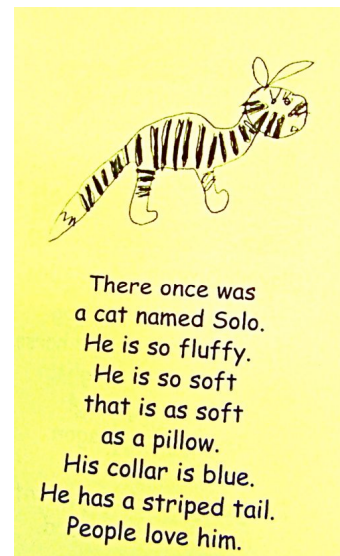
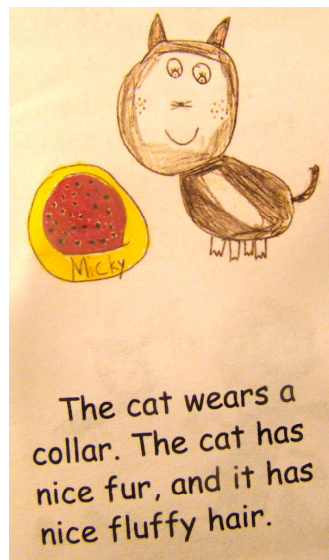


A younger student from PS 25 drew this picture of Solo:





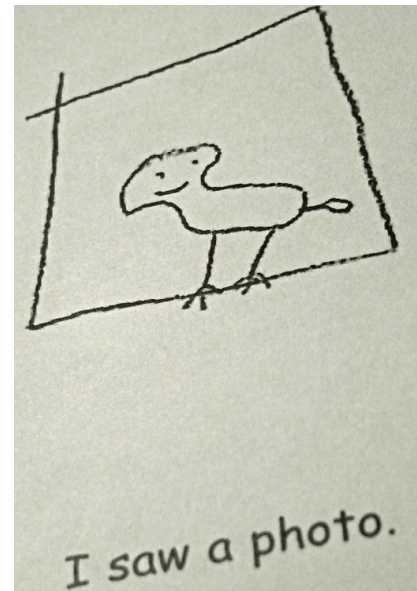
Another 2<sup>nd</sup> grade PS 53 student drew the above drawing and added her own comment. A different 2<sup>nd</sup> grader created the following:



We also showed the classes this photo of Albird, our BlueCrown Amazon Parrot, and similarly used an oval and triangle to spark their ideas and ability to do the drawing.



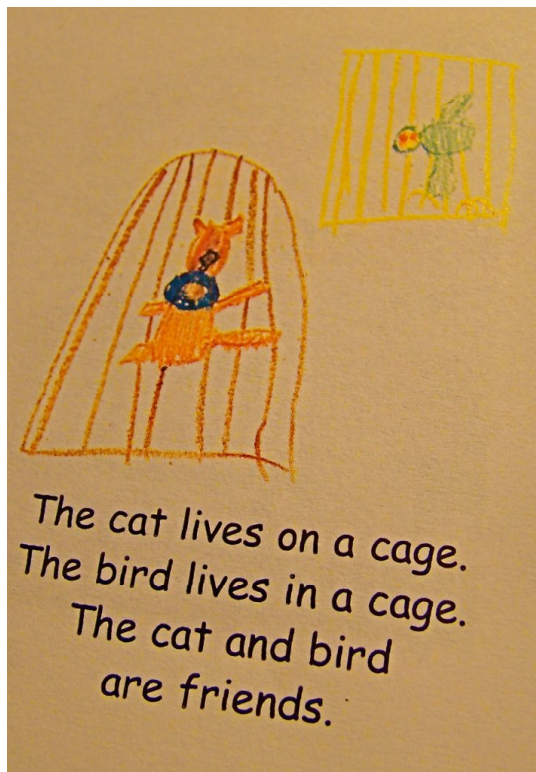
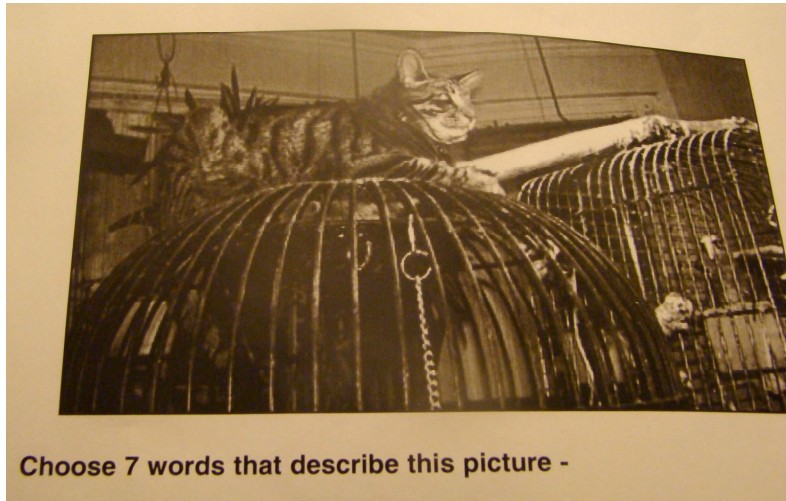
This was the response of a second grader-→



Cora's in second grade as well. This is her drawing.



The students were particularly intrigued by the fact that Solo liked to perch on top of the cage belonging to Albird, who has a formidable beak, and will nip when bothered by a paw dangled enticingly in his cage.





## The Cat

The cat has fur

The cat has stripes

The cat has a tail

That squiggles at night.

One of the children from PS 25 drew her lizard pets:

She also wrote:

They are so cool.

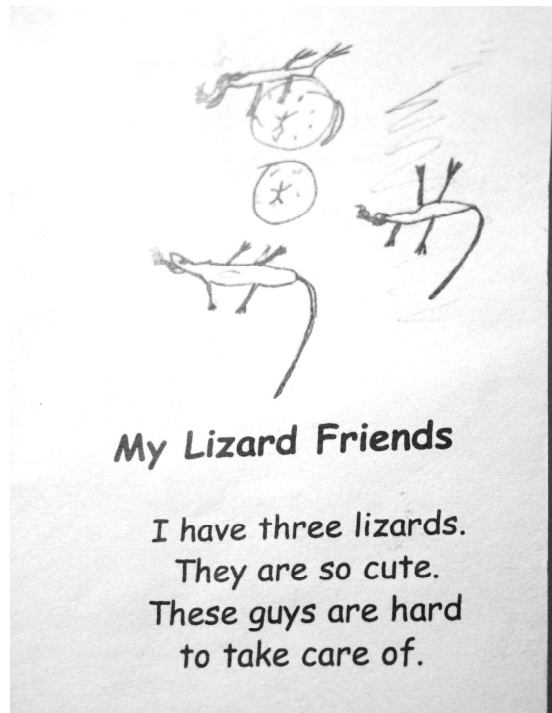
They are jumpy.

They are funny, too.

When you feel the lizard's skin,

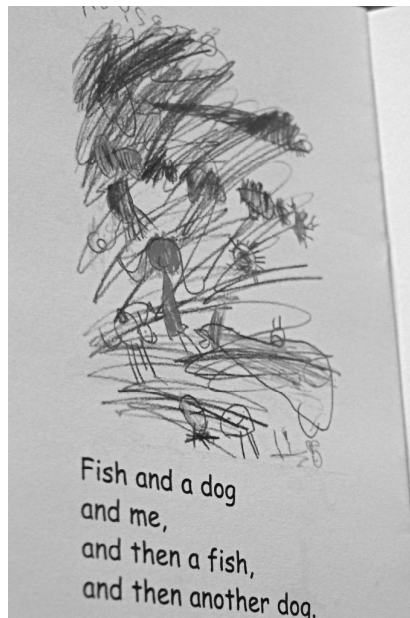
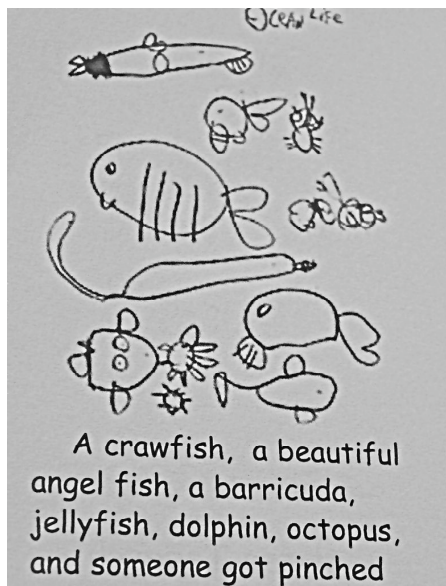
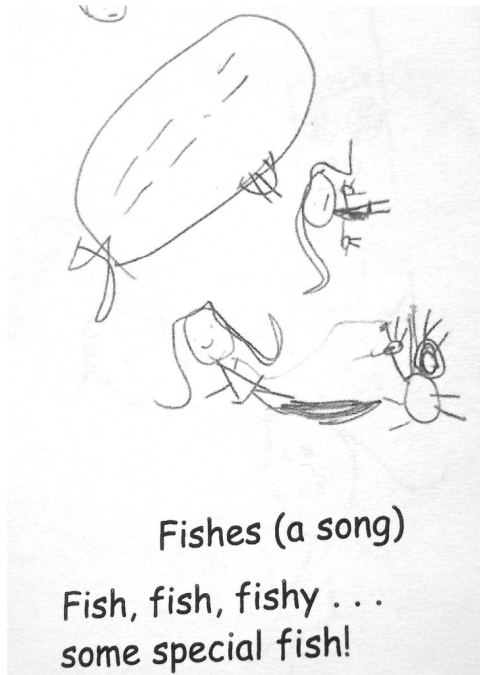
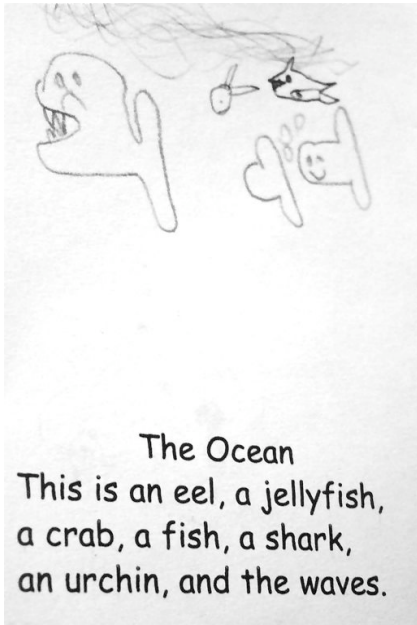
It feels soft as a pillow.

I love my lizards.





A student at PS 53 loves fish and all aquatic creatures. She created this series of drawings and narrative.



We had been working with this child for several years and she habitually uses fish as her primary objects of inspiration and conversation. The fact that she had added a dog to her repertoire was a triumph.



In addition to working from Barbara's animal photographs we used plastic models of animals. Adapting one of Rachel Lauer's critical thinking observation exercises we learned while studying with her we moved the models into different arrangements that sparked student ideas for stories and poems.



# The Farm Disaster



2



One time there were two goats and three cows. They were very friendly. But, one day they had a problem.

3



They had a fight.

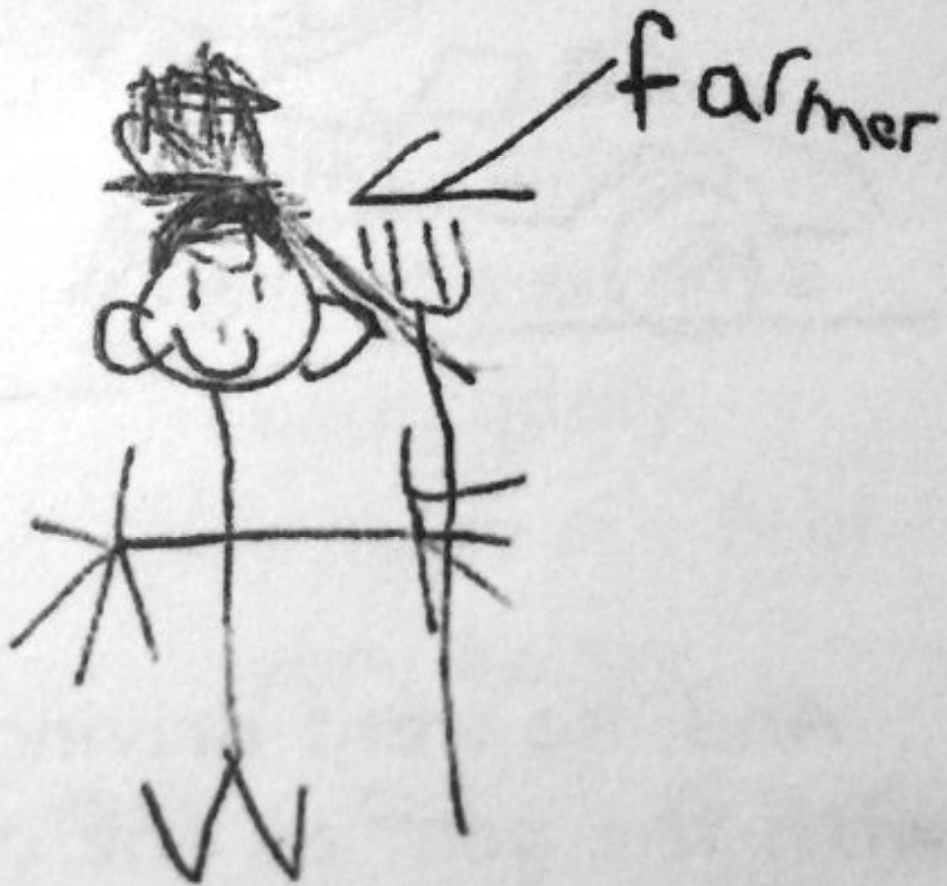
But, it turned out  
o.k.

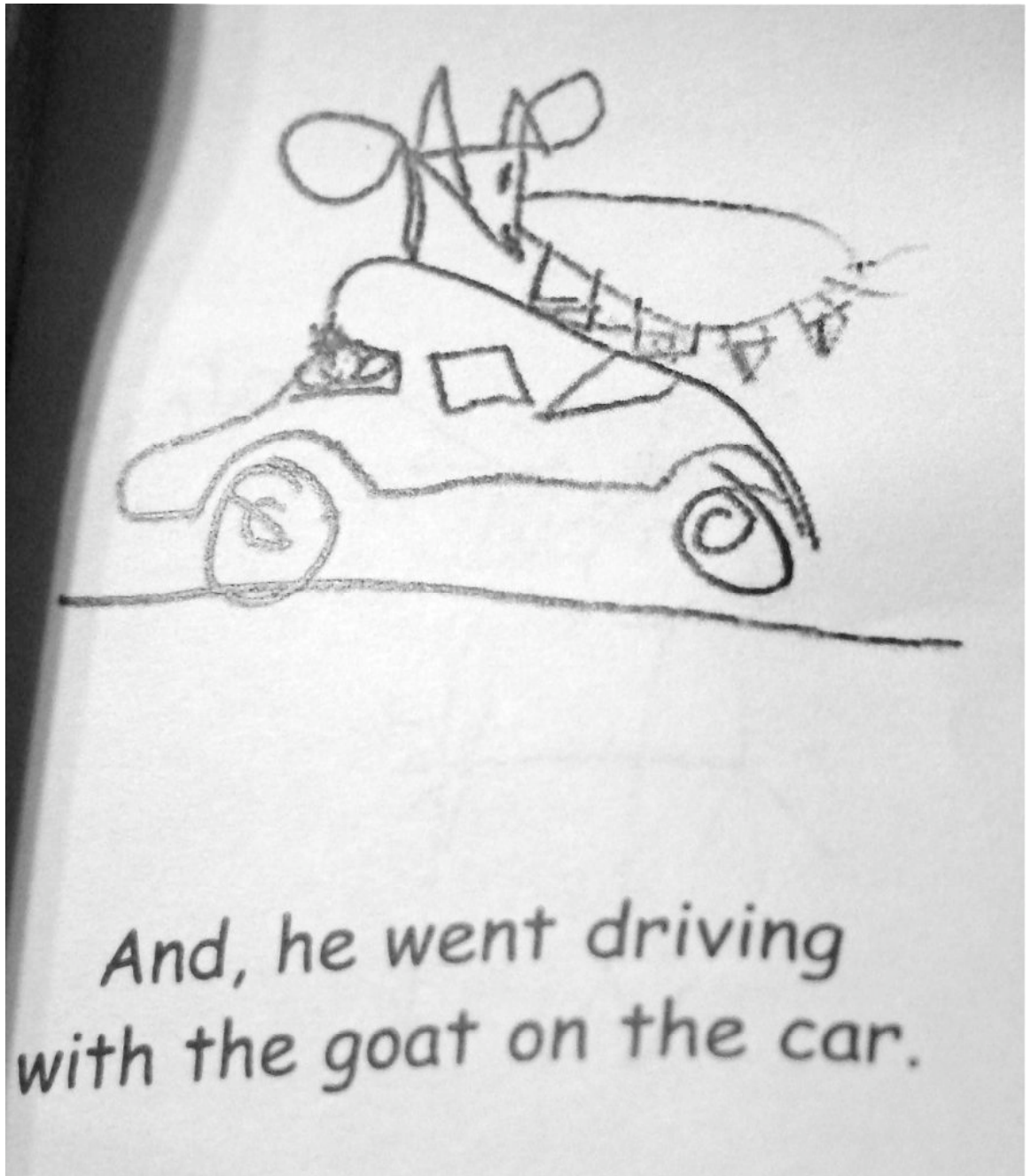
# The Animals and the Car



The goat went on  
top of the car,  
and the cows and  
horses saw it.

Then the farmer came.





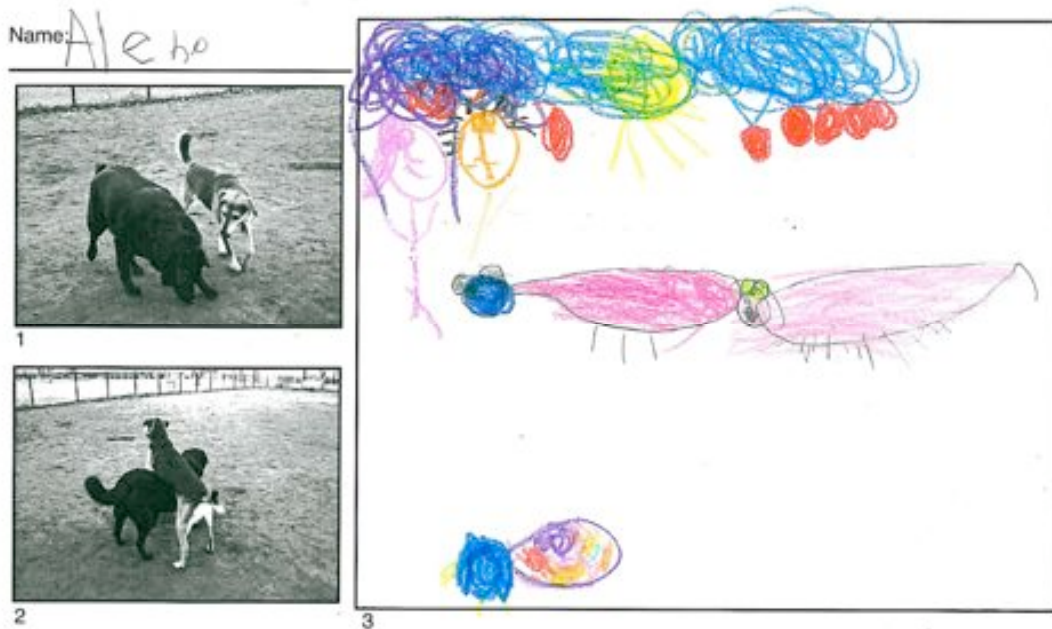


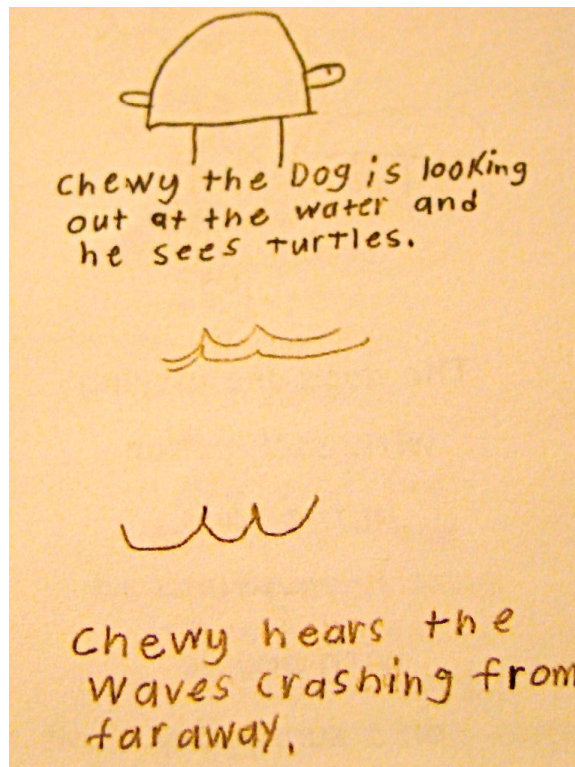
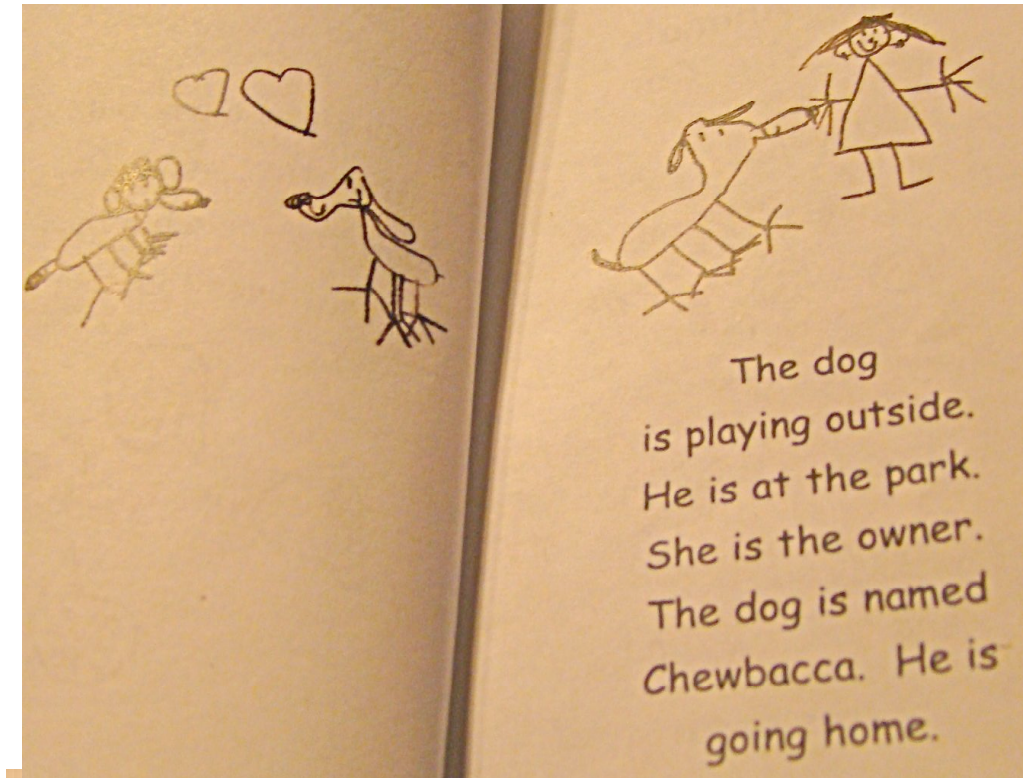
Chewbacca and his friend Wheezer also became characters in many of the children's books.

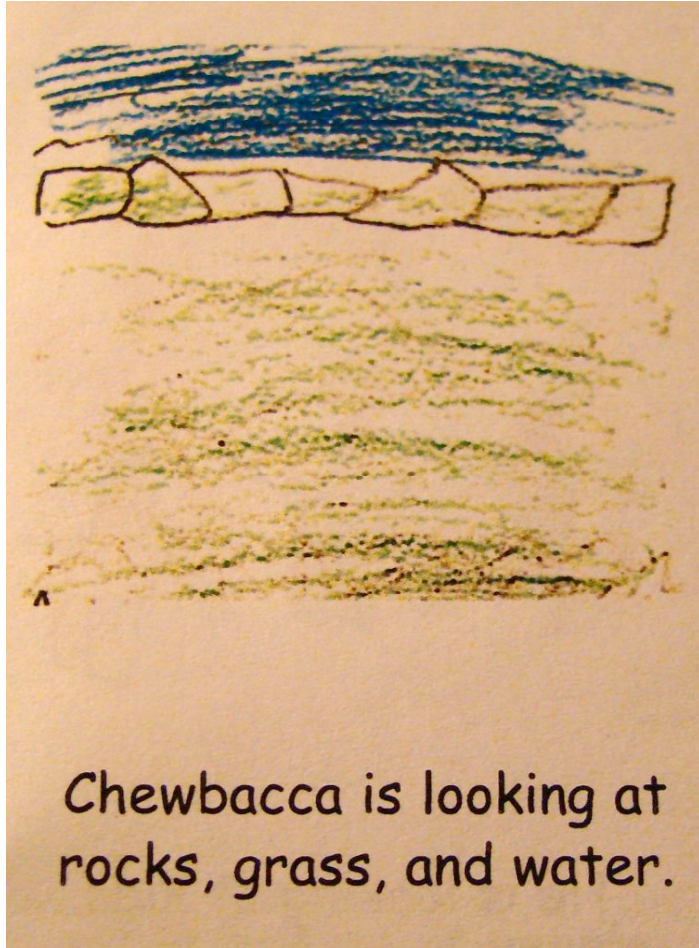




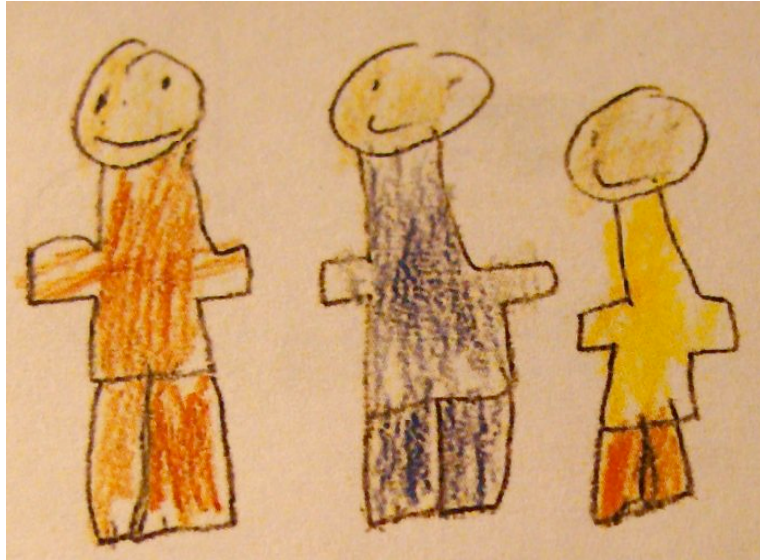
Aleah, a first grader's vision of Wheezer & Chewbacca:



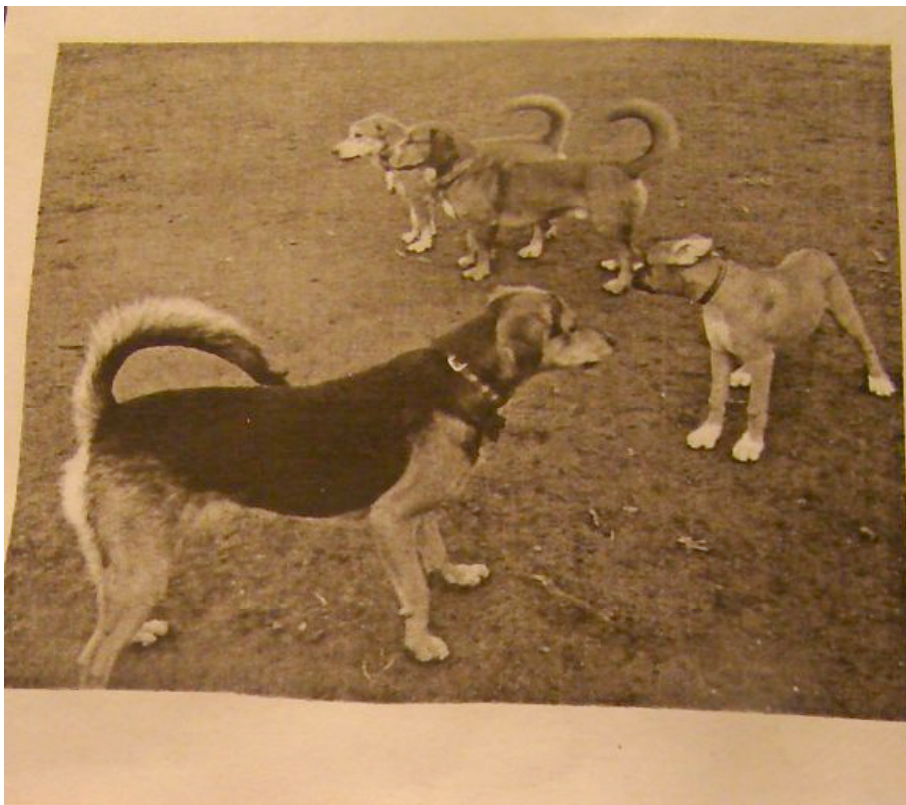




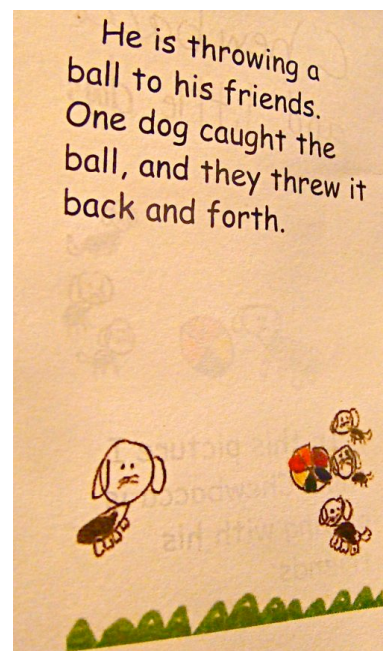
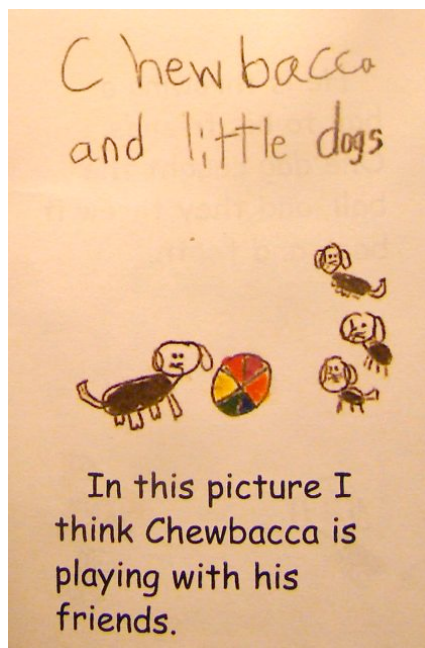
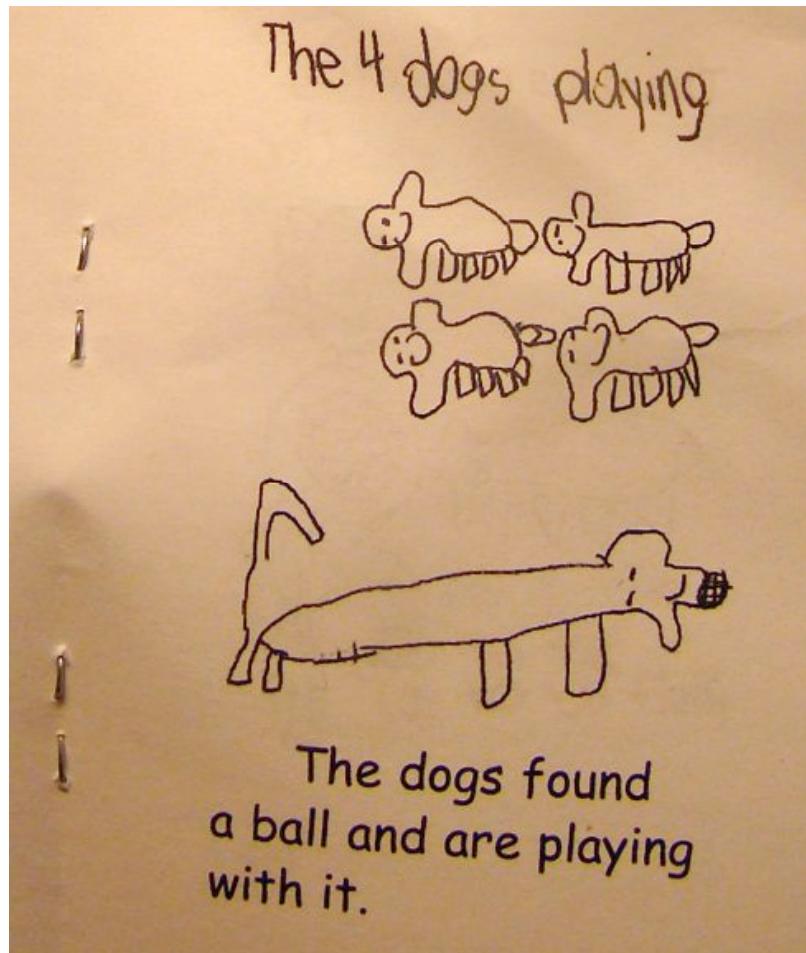
He is looking at kids.

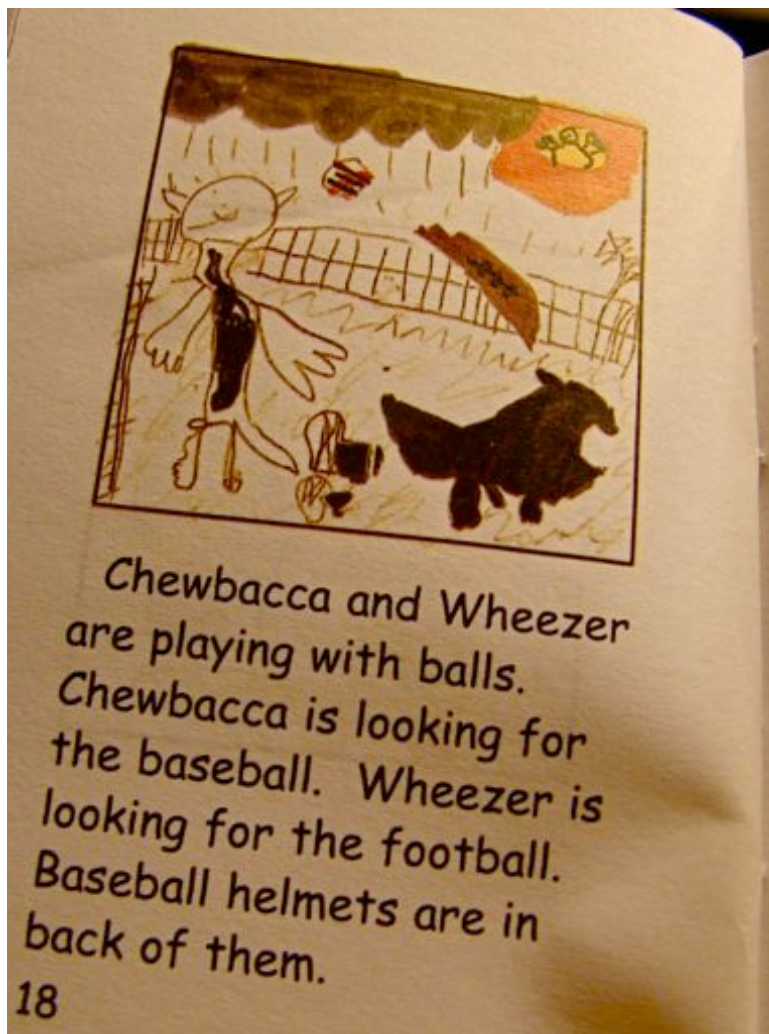
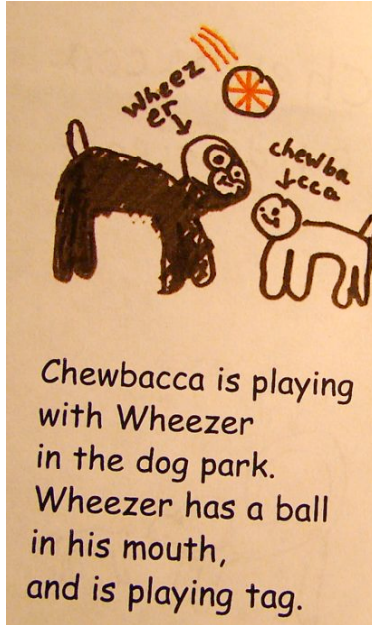


He is looking at people.



Chewie & puppies at the dog run.







Chewbacca and Wheezer  
were running together.  
Then Chewbacca jumped  
on Wheezer.  
Then they walked  
to their owners.

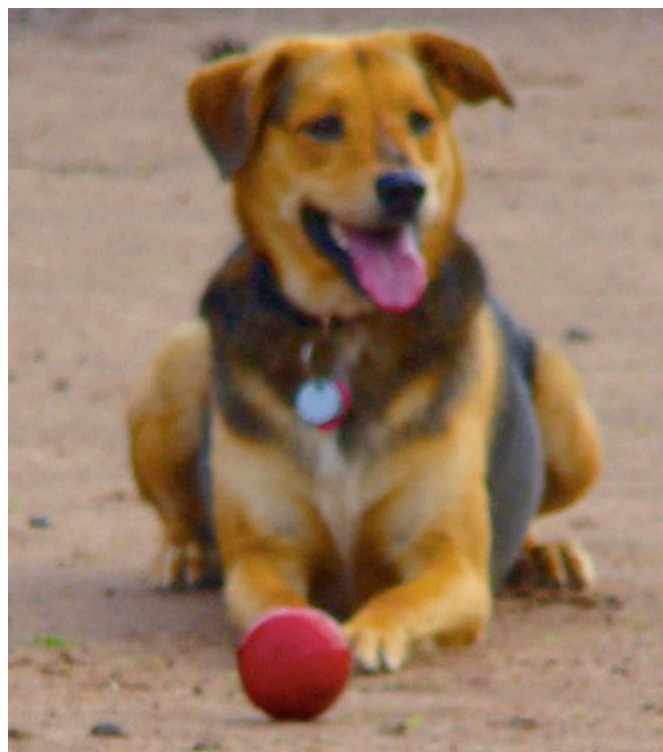


Chewbacca  
nice, cute,  
barking, wrestling, jumping,  
so nice and good  
puppy.





Chewbacca and the puppies



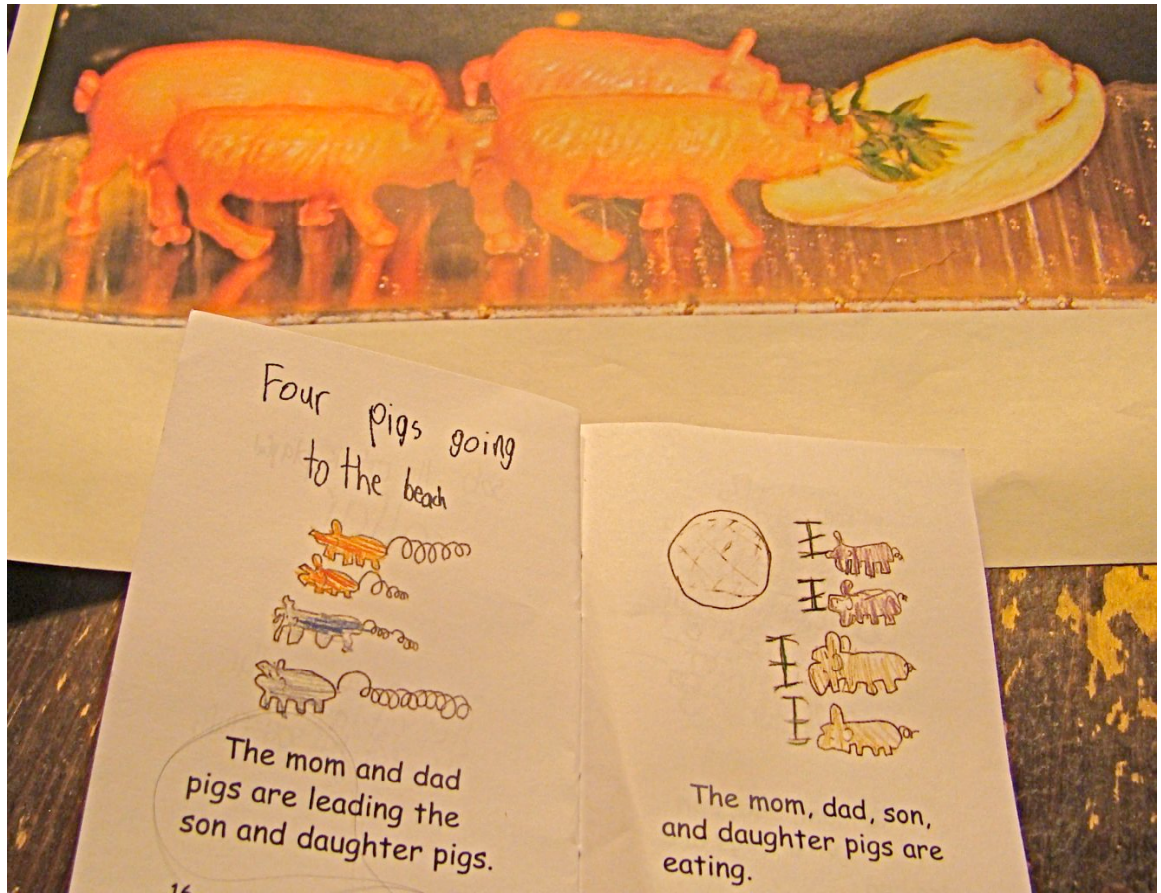
Chewbacca and his favorite red ball.

Through trial and error we had discovered that by providing a drawn template for the students it was easier for them to follow instructions and to sequence their narratives.

The image shows a worksheet template for writing a story. At the top, there is a box labeled "Title of story". Below this, there are three large rectangular boxes arranged horizontally, labeled "1", "2", and "3" at the bottom. At the bottom of the page, there is a line for "Your Name:".

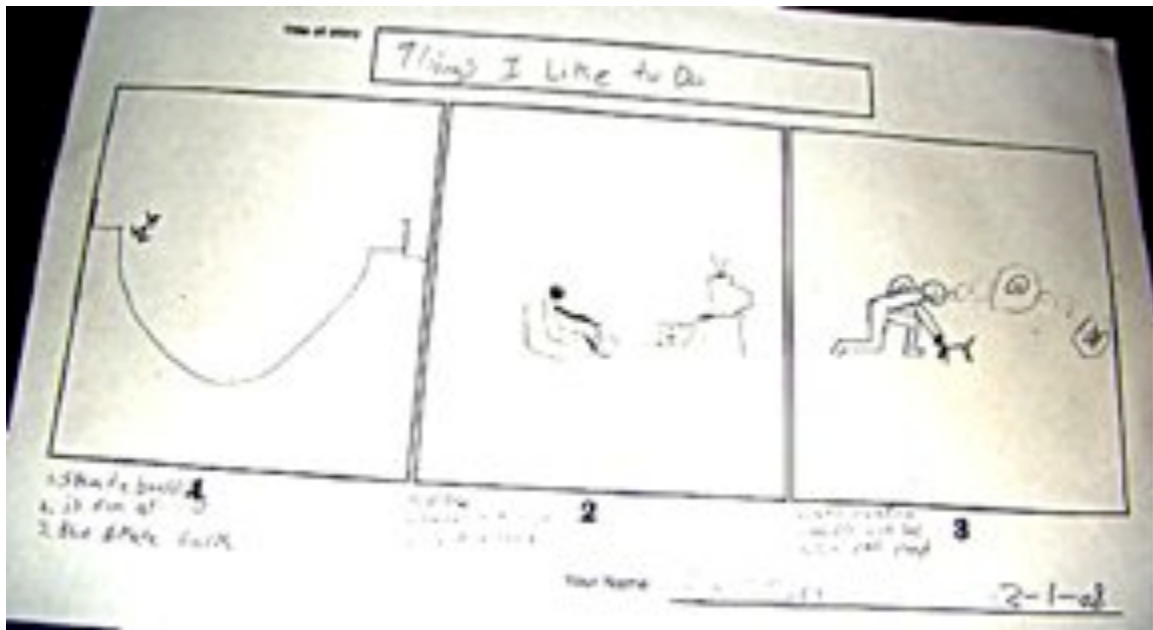
The rectangles enabled the students to create narratives that related to the various themes that were introduced: movement, change, music, dancing, playing and the NYC subways.

The boxes would help them establish simple time lines (eg. Box 1, might be yesterday; Box 2 today; Box 3, tomorrow)



The students looked at the toy pigs eating from greens on the shell.

Using the template that had a photo of the toy pigs in the first box one of the students wrote and illustrated the story in the other two boxes.



The boxes provided focus for this 6<sup>th</sup> grade student to articulate activities and his feelings. He wrote his own captions to describe each box.

#1: Skate boarding is fun at the skate park

#2: Video games are fun and awesome

#3 Cats make me happy and sad but not mad.

Similarly, since the primary theme of the year at both schools built from the idea of encouraging each child to tell his or her own personal story with words and pictures, the inventory of interests they created when we introduced themes of movement, change, music, dancing, playing (by themselves and with their pets), the NYC subways and other forms of transportation helped them to spark their creativity.

Prior to beginning an exercise we would show them photographs that related to the theme of each lesson.

**Movement:**



Chewbacca's jumping up at Richard



Chewbacca's getting ready to catch the ball.

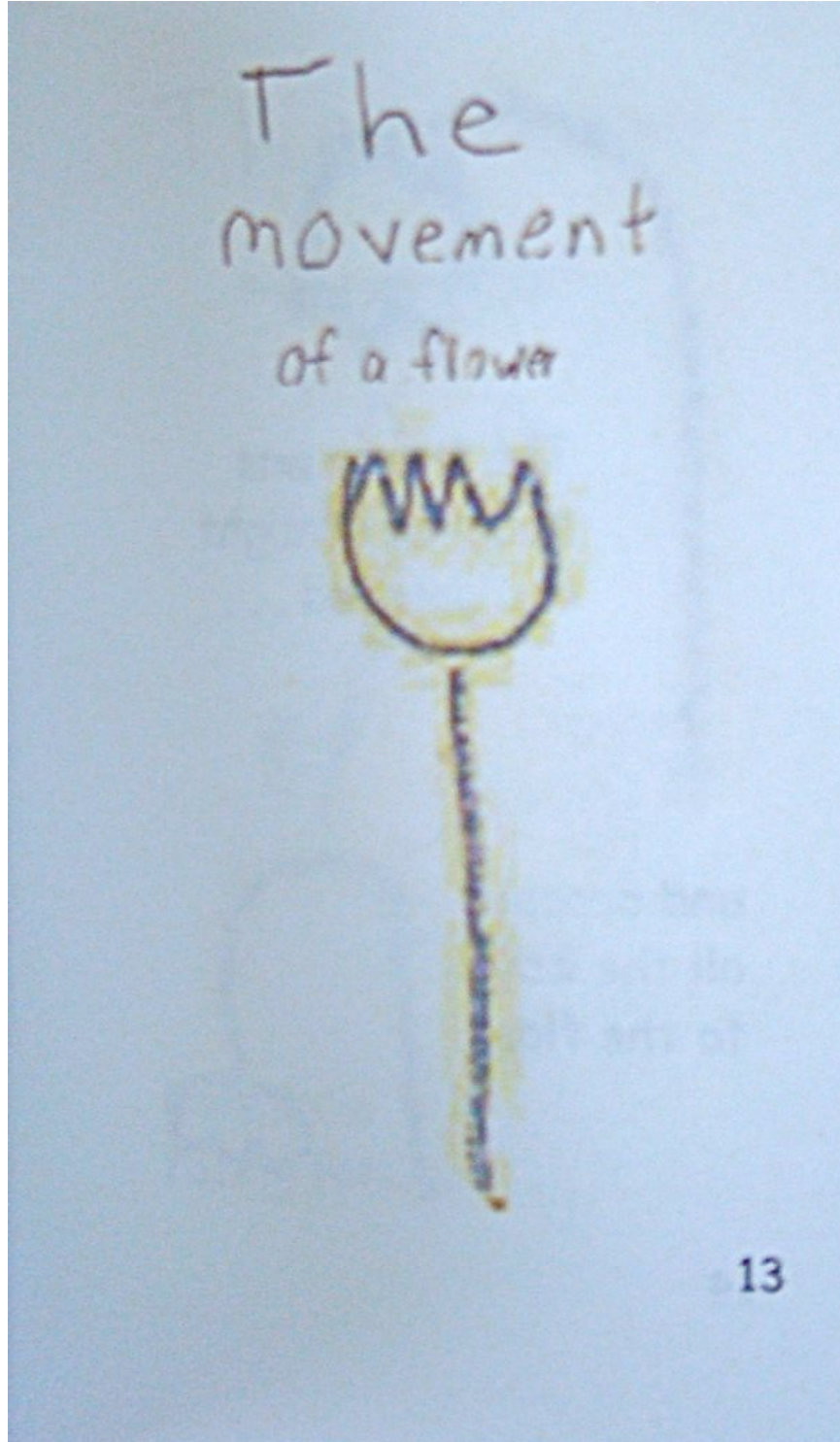


Charlie is running so fast to catch the rolling bottle that his image is blurred.



Angie and Ch'Culan

**Student Responses Relative to Movement:**









Me Moving

The pictures that I  
drew are me

Still



Dancing



and

Turning my head  
Left







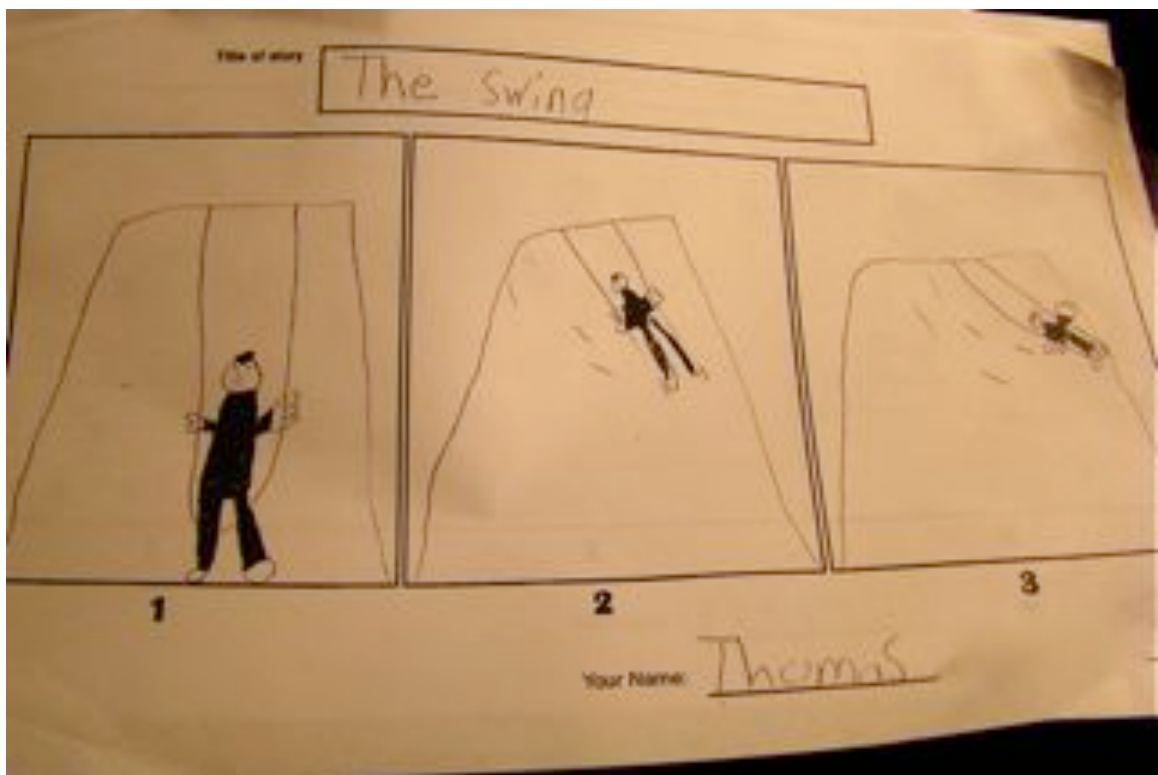
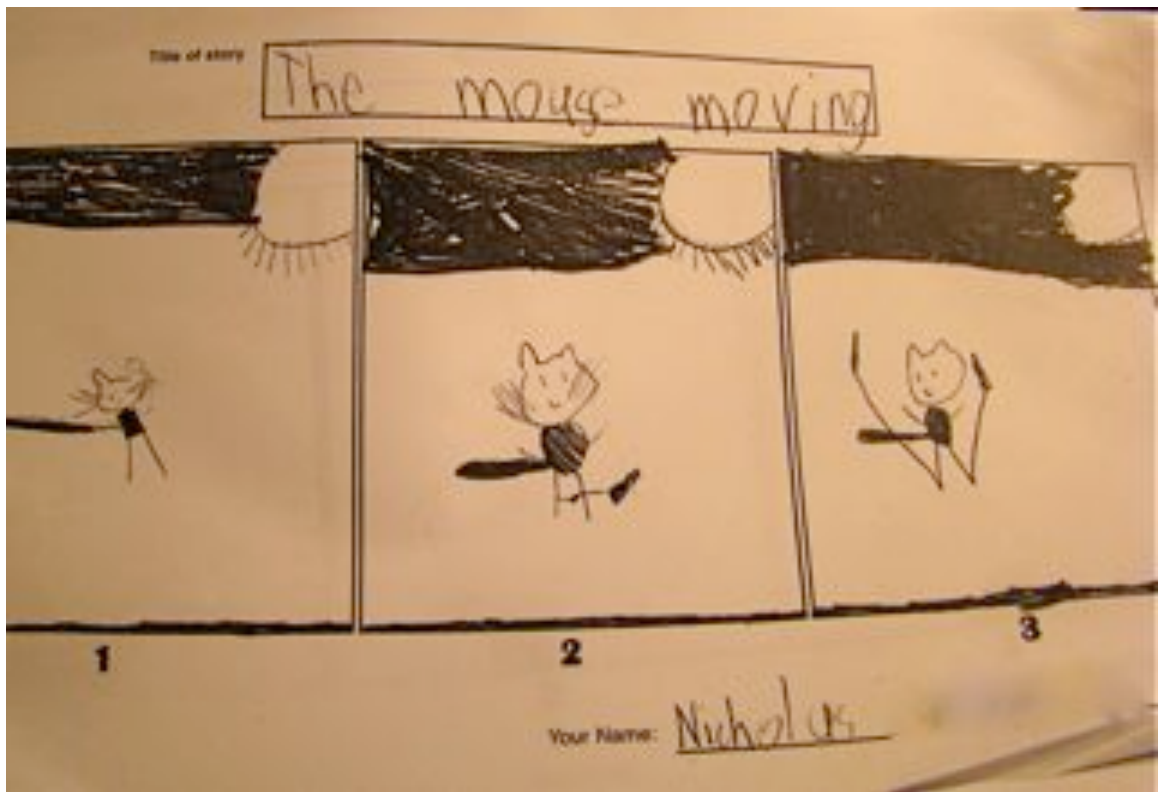


# The Swing









**Change:**



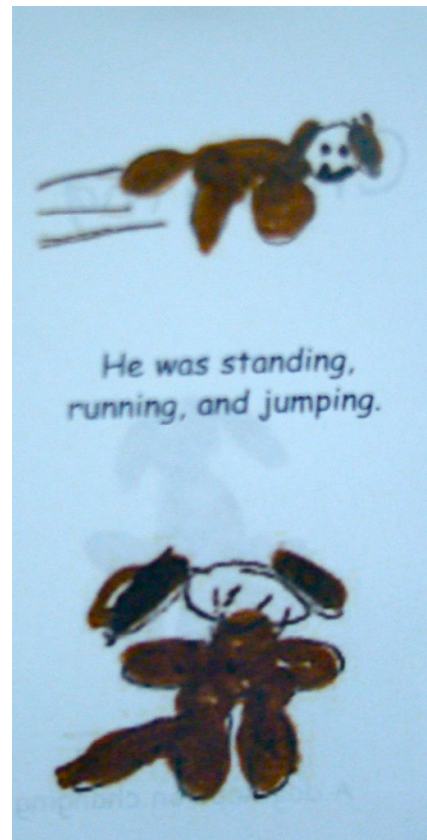
Maya and Chewbacca in discussion at Silver Lake Park.



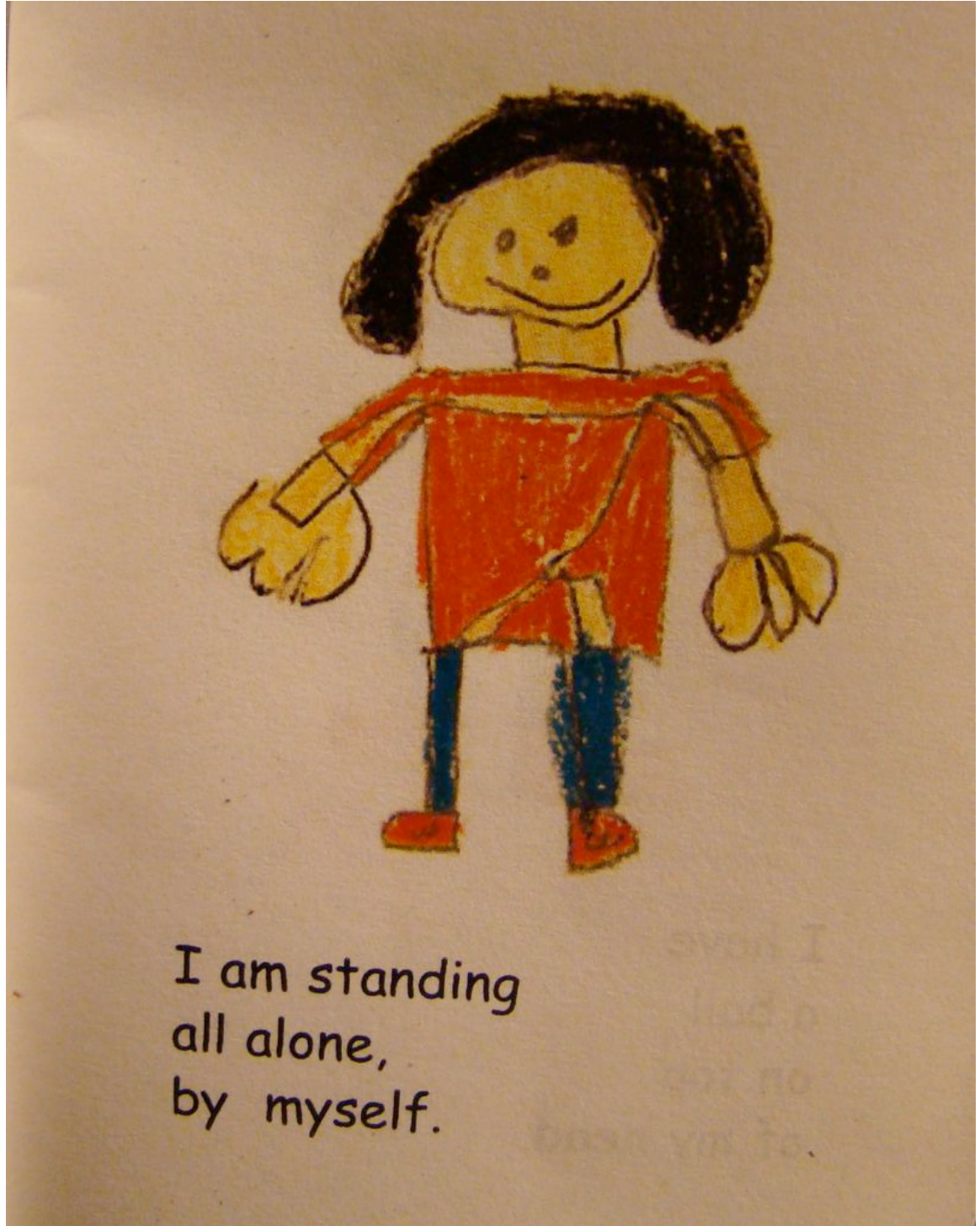
Is Chewbacca still talking or is he yawning?



Looks like the talking's over and he's just leaning on his friend.



**Here's an example of change by a second grade student—**





I have  
a ball  
on top  
of my head.



I have  
the ball  
on my arm.

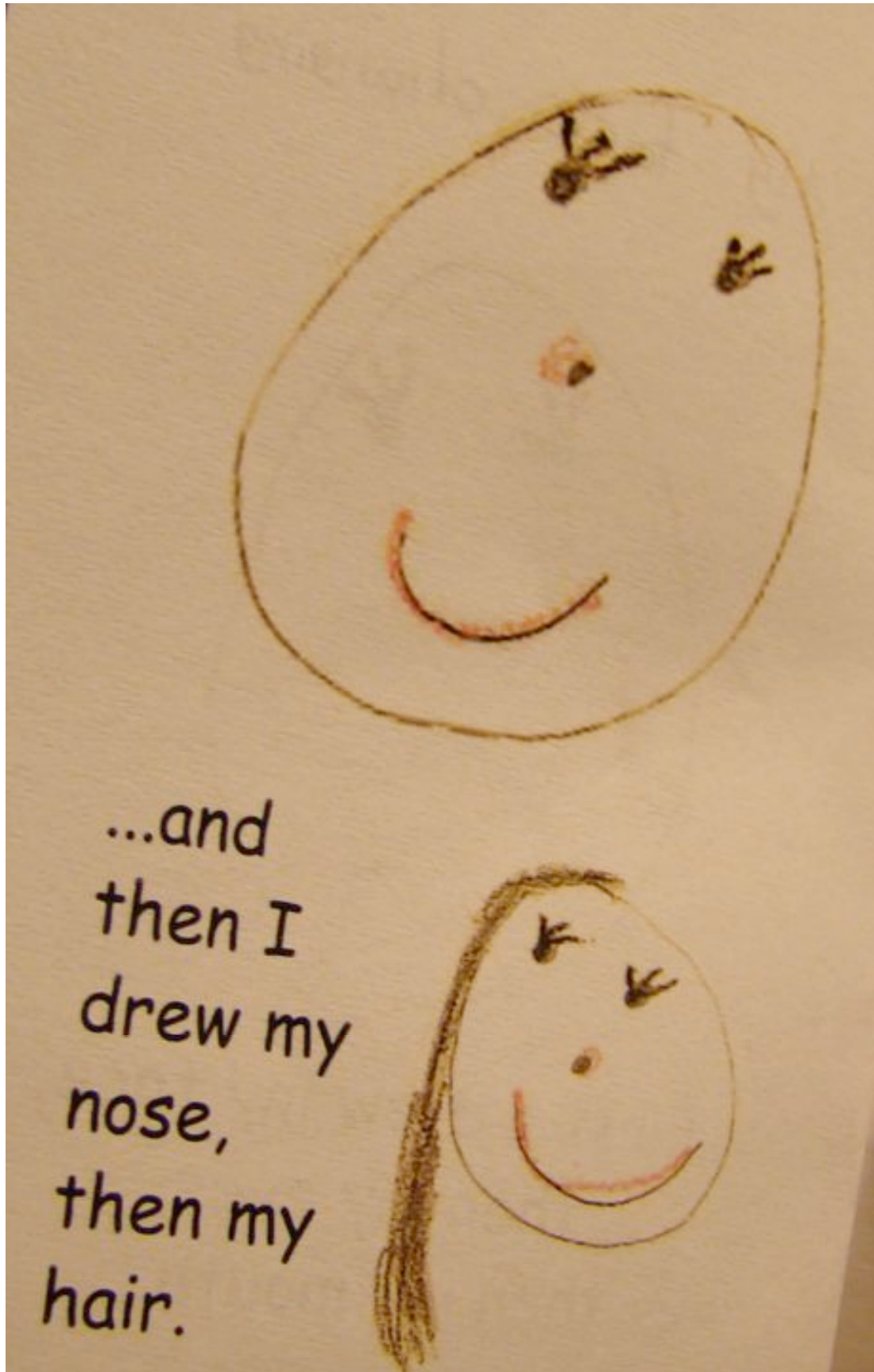


**A personal expression of change:**

My face changing



First I drew my face,  
then my eyes,  
then my mouth...



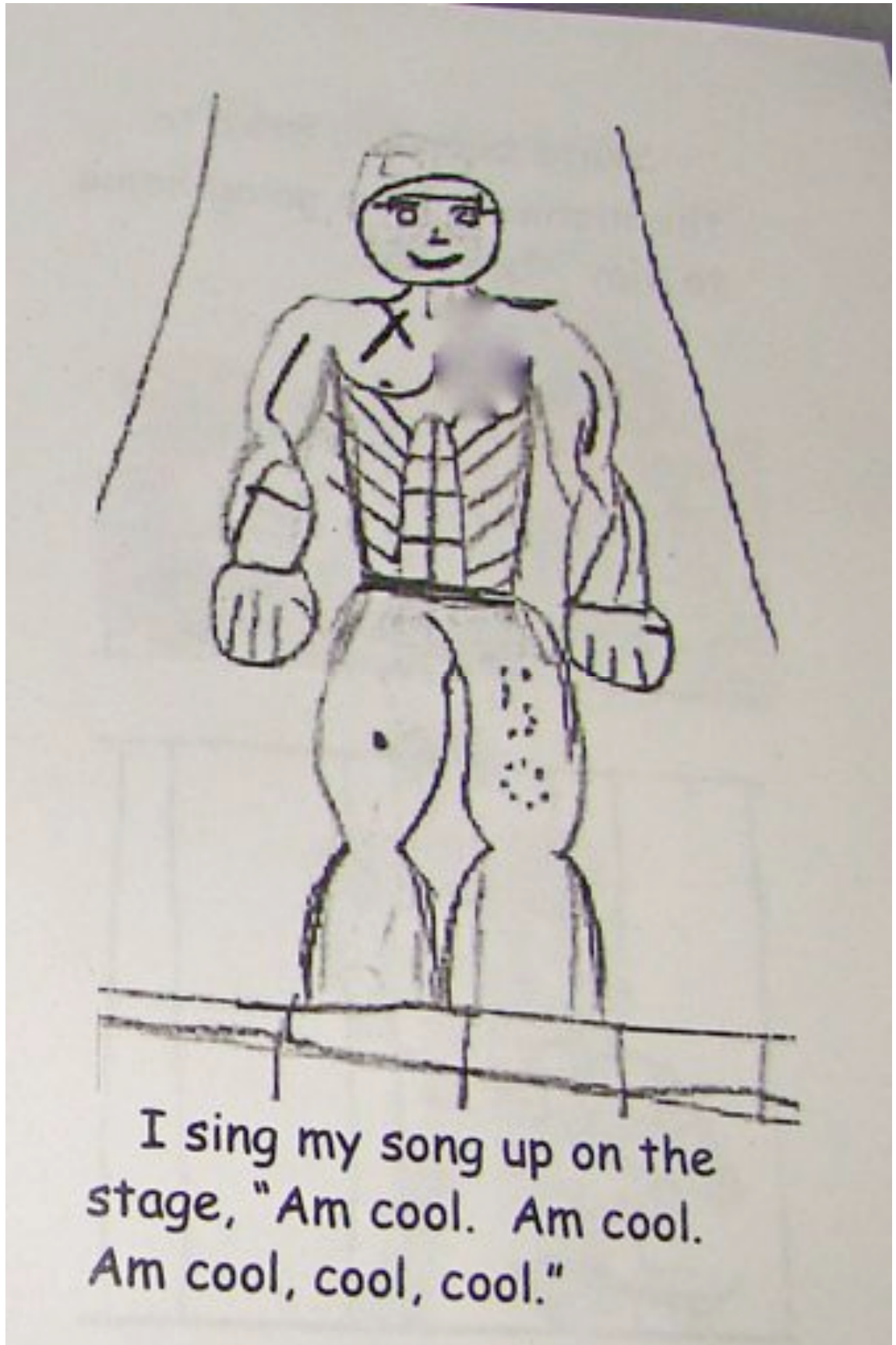
## Music



Percussion artist Ron McBee and student performing at NYS Council  
on the Arts Empire State Partnership Summer Seminar



Dogs are walking  
in Staten Island Park.  
The doggies have  
headphones on  
their heads so they  
can hear music and  
they can dance  
with their feet.

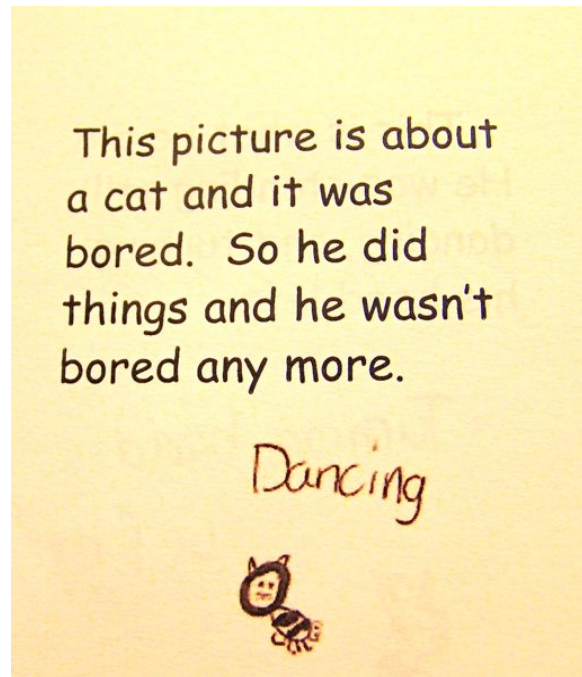
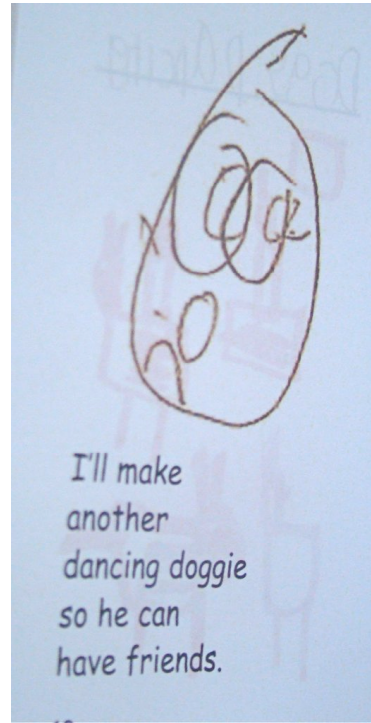


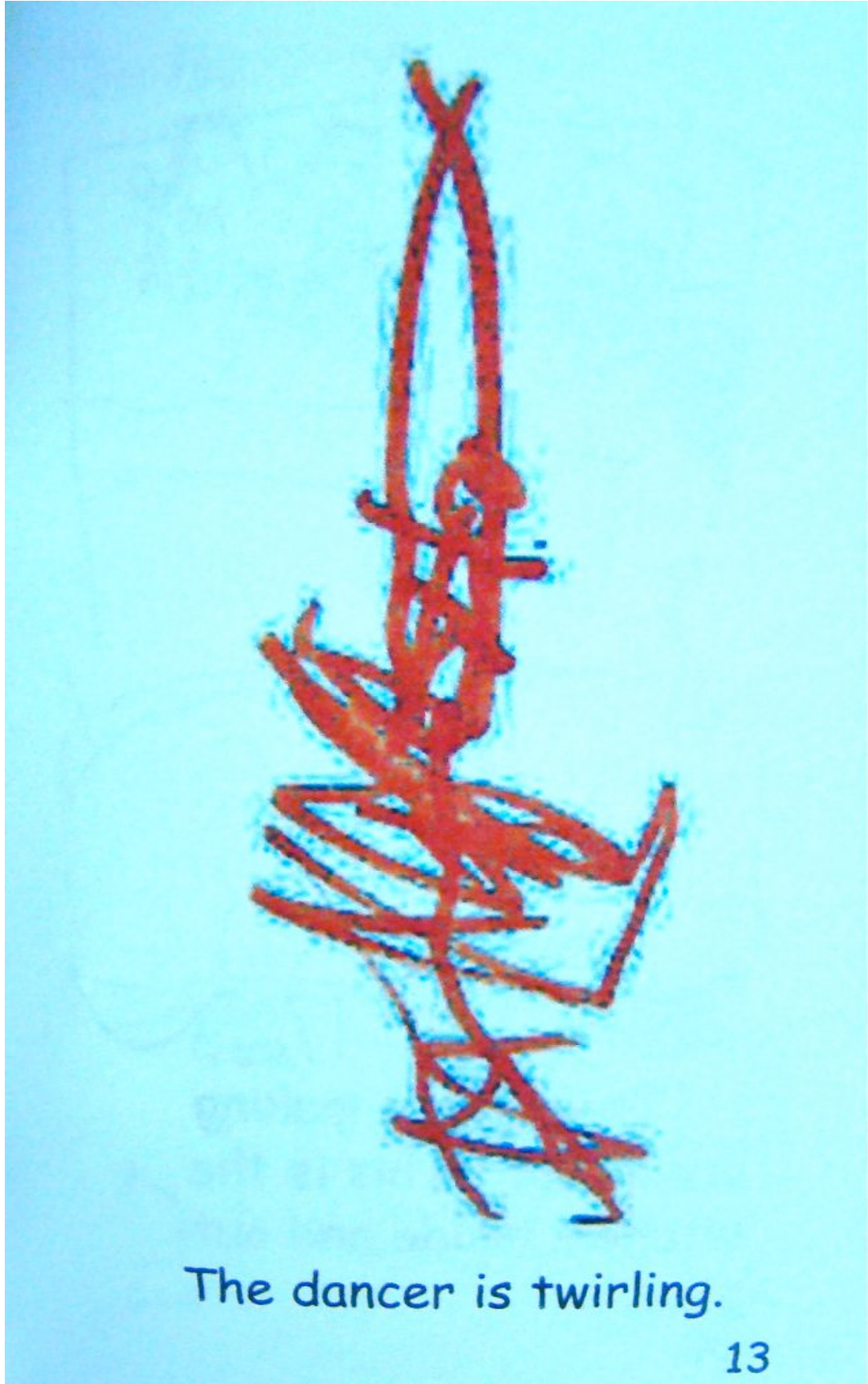
I sing my song up on the stage, "Am cool. Am cool. Am cool, cool, cool."

**Dancing:**



Buddy and Andy at Silver Lake Dog Run



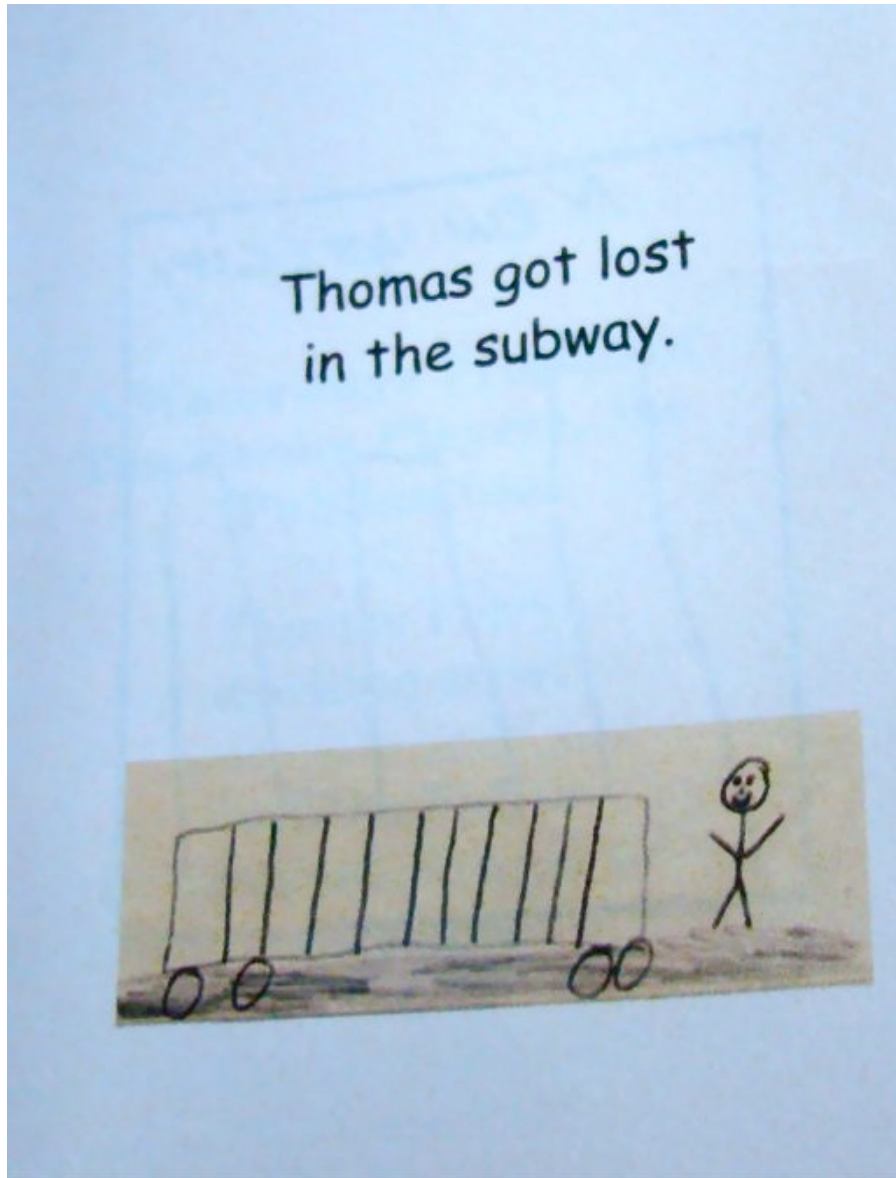


The dancer is twirling.

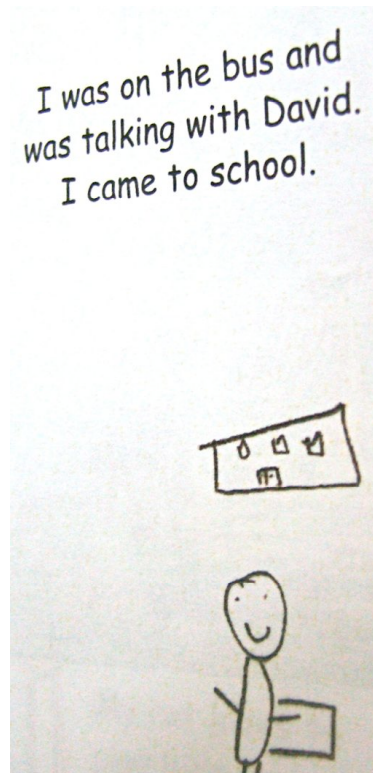


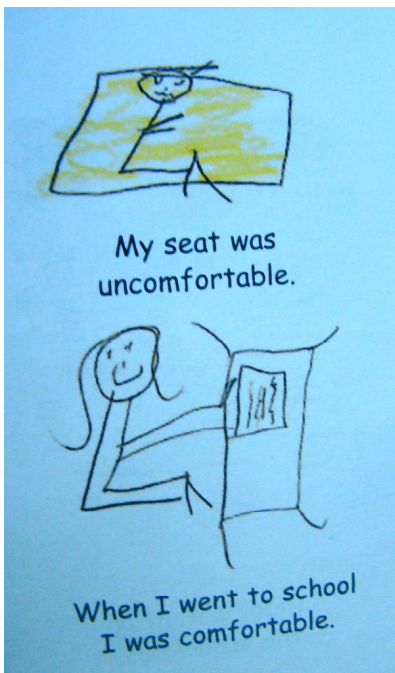
## NYC Trains & Other Modes of Transportation

Thomas has always loved traveling on the NYC subways. He told the students at PS 25 about running away from home when he was 7 and taking his first subway ride alone from Manhattan to Brooklyn. After listening to Thomas one young student wrote:



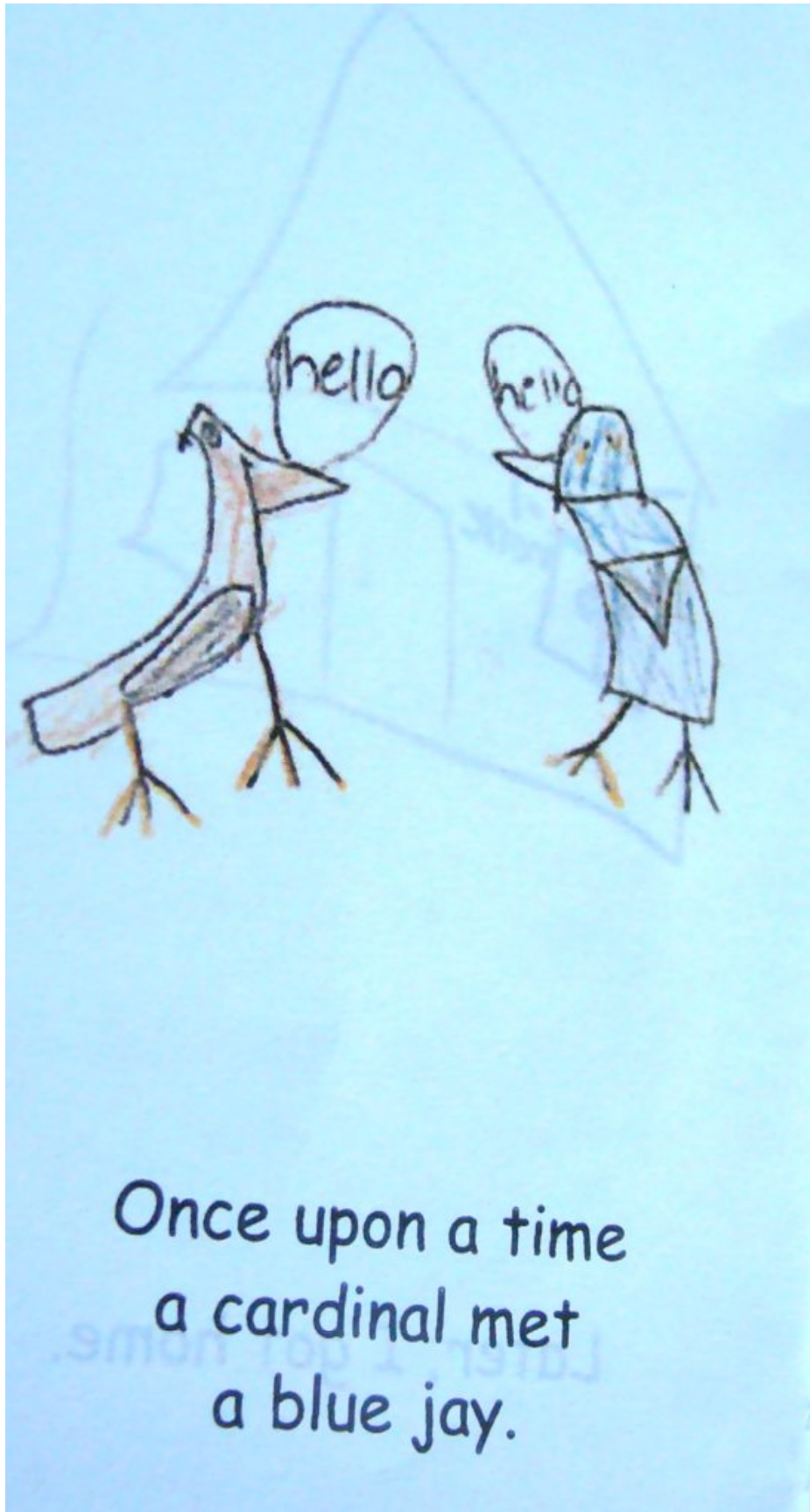
They next responded with stories and illustrations about their own experiences and tales about riding rains, buses, and cars.





**A different type of bus ride:**

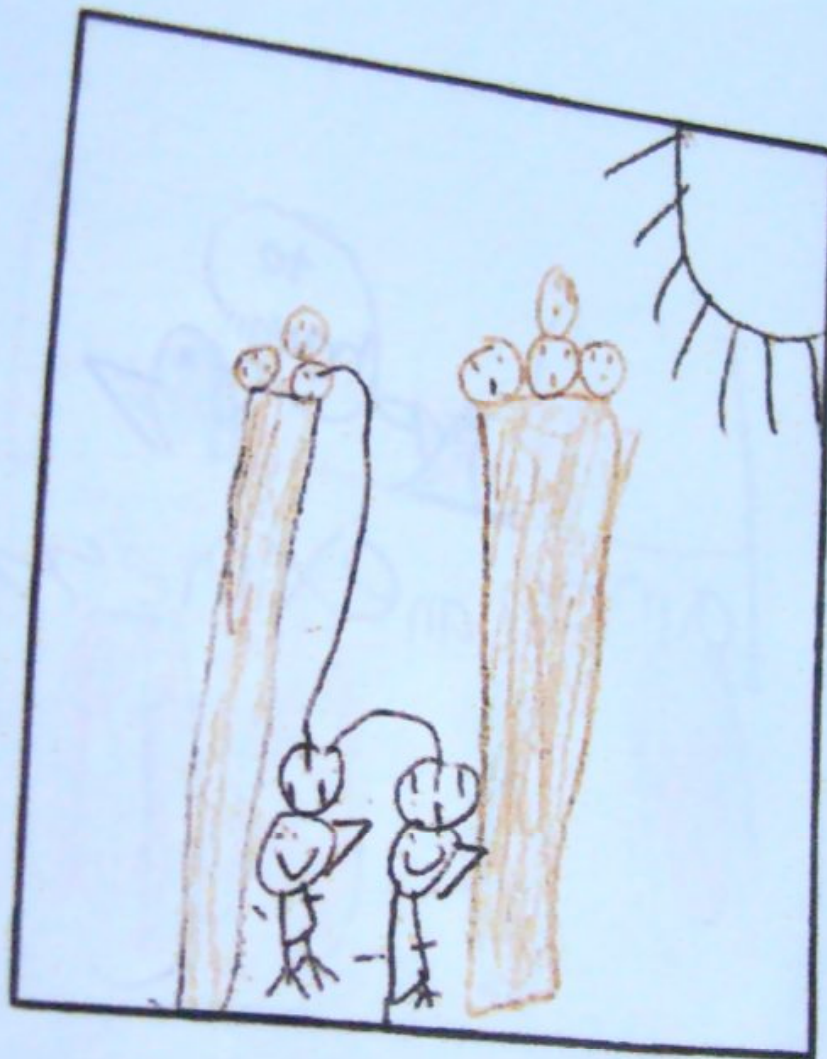




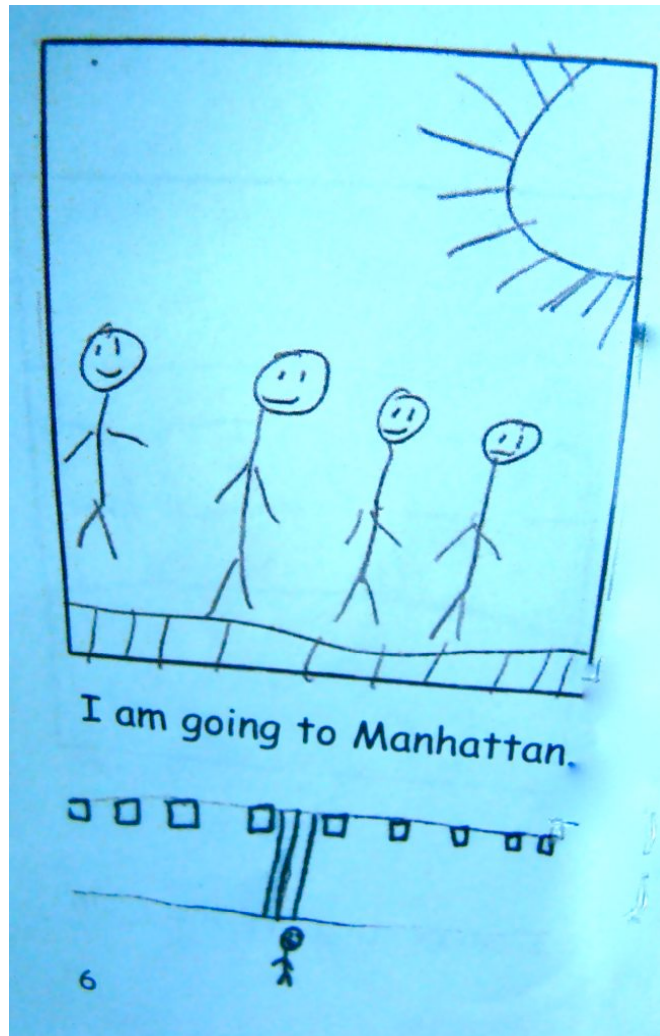
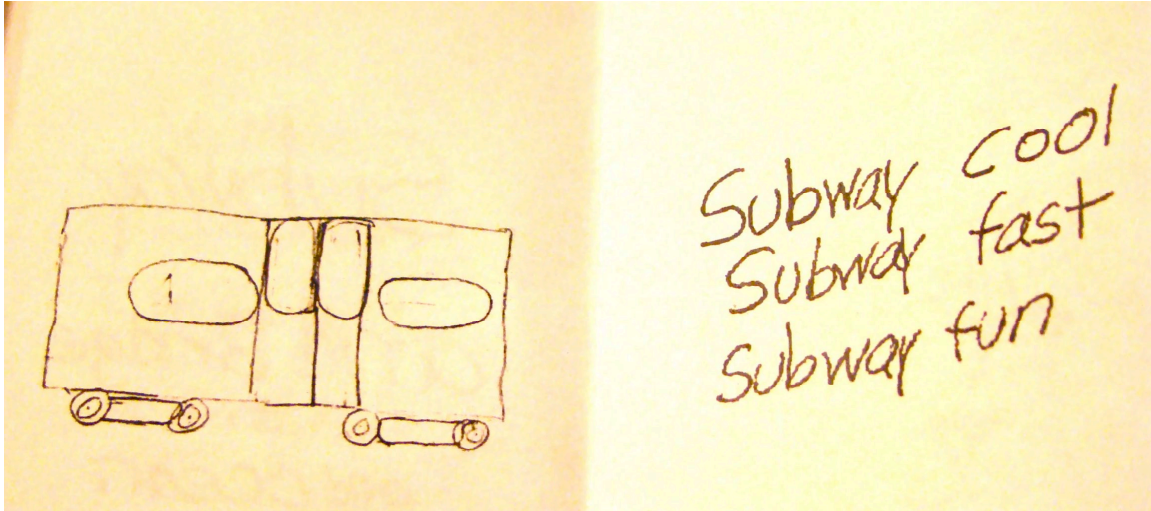
Once upon a time  
a cardinal met  
a blue jay.



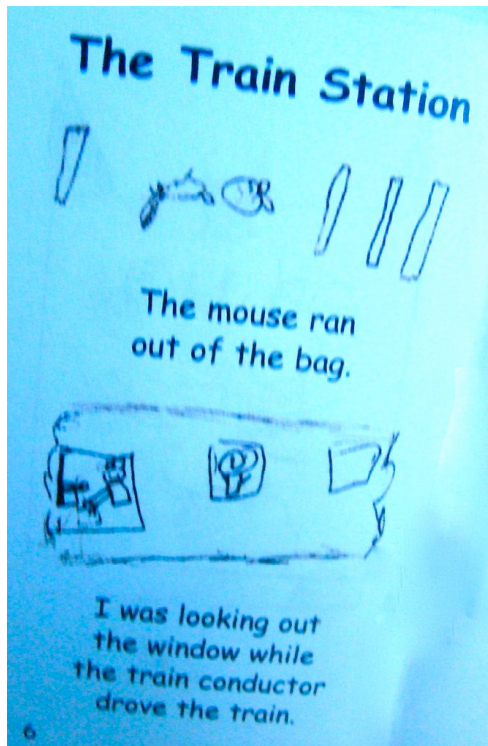
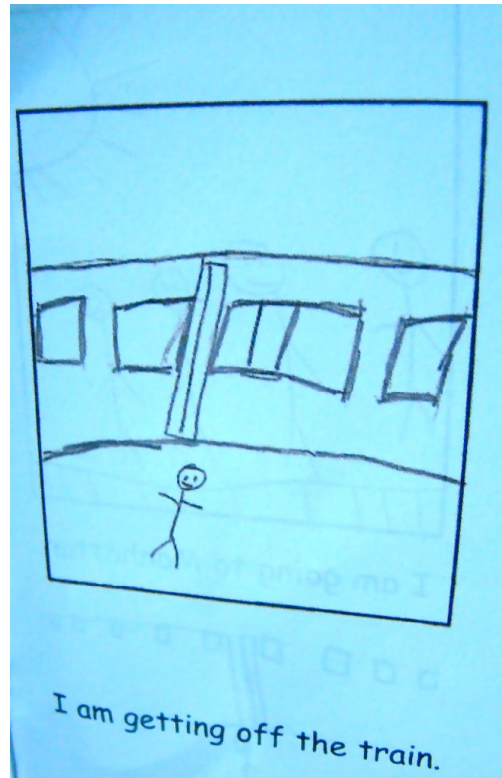
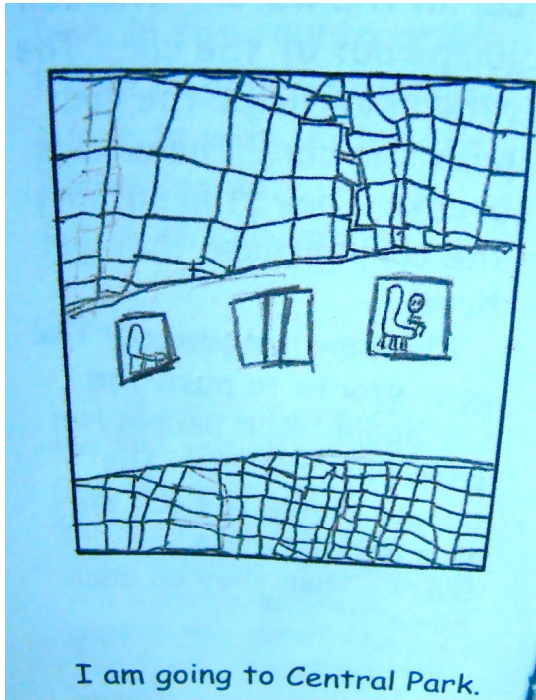
They made a travel plan  
to go to Hawaii.  
They went there  
on an express bus.



When they got there  
they sat under  
a coconut tree.  
A coconut fell on  
their heads, and  
they yelled, "OW!"







From a first grade student:



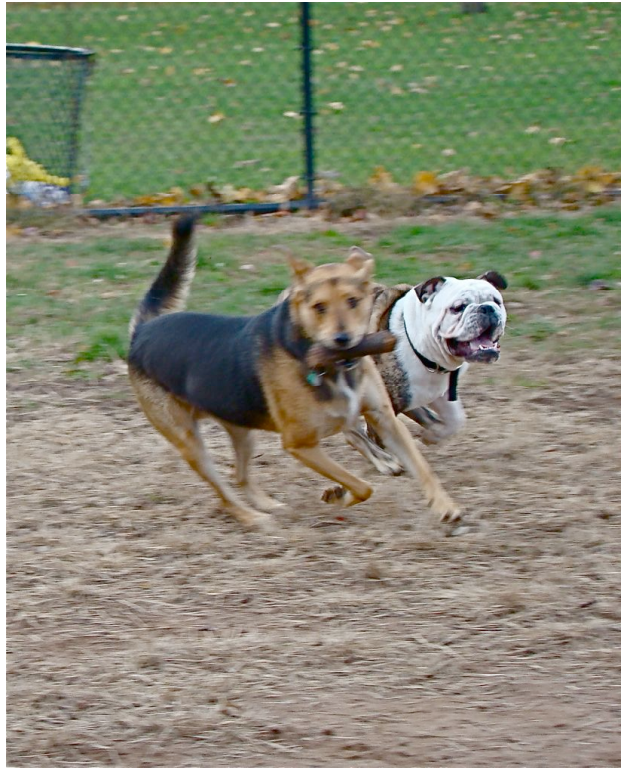


I am looking  
out the window.



I am getting out  
of the car.

**Playing:**



**Chewbacca and Charlie racing with a stick.**

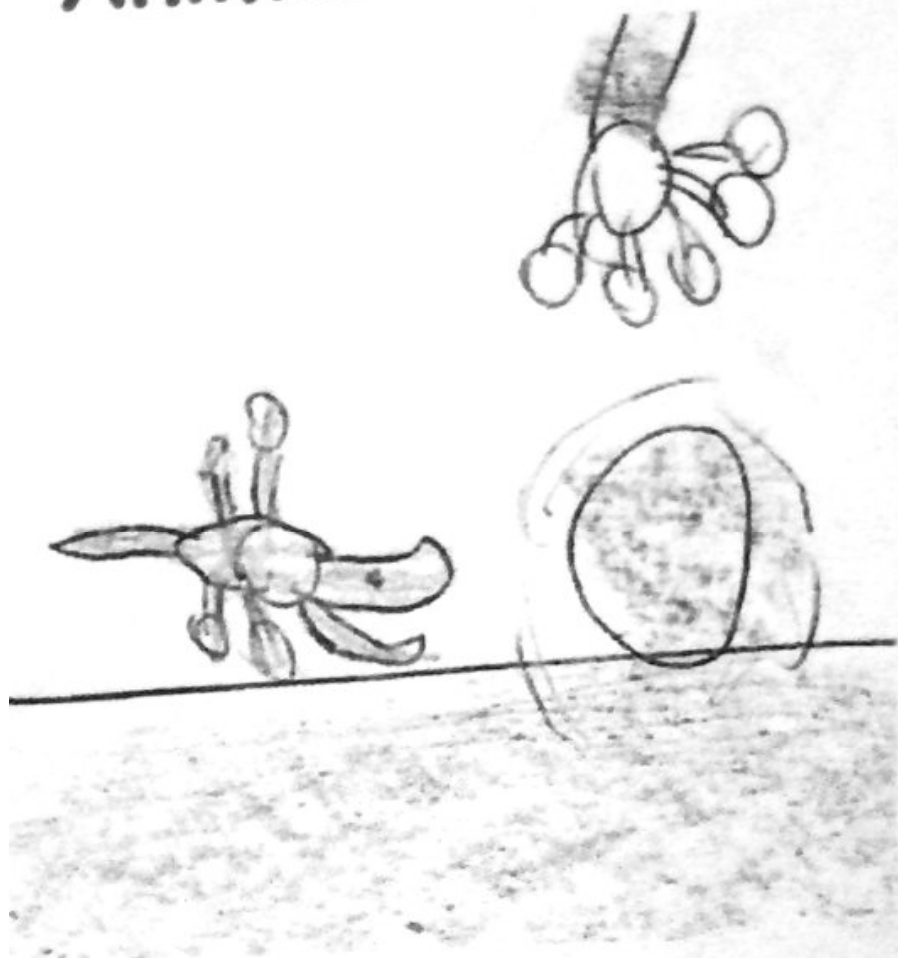


**Getting ready to race again?**

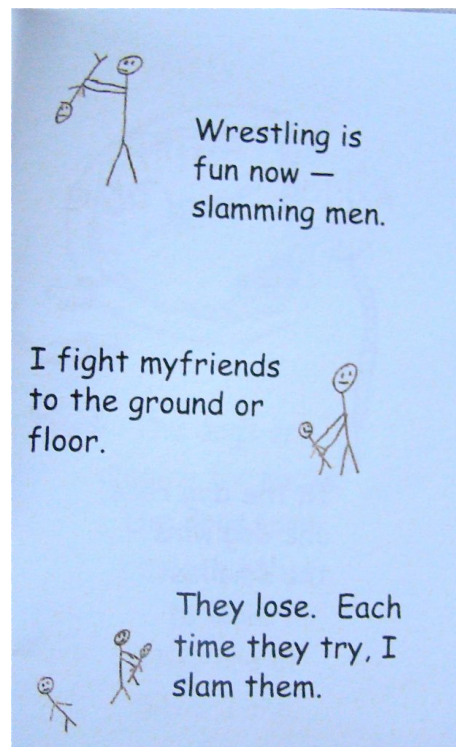


**Chewbacca rolling a tennis ball.**

# Animal's Games

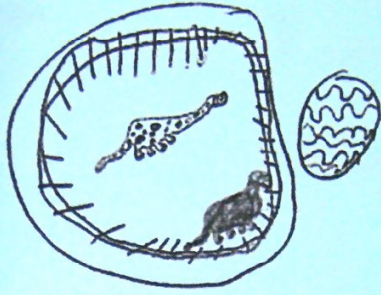


My animal loves to  
play with a ball.  
I drop it in,  
And it rolls  
And he chases it.



**Charlie and Bailey**





The dogs are  
digging for rocks.  
The dogs jump  
on each other  
to look.  
They are at  
Silver Lake.





## Conclusion

I was born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Bronx county NYC neighborhood of lower middleclass adult children of European immigrants where I lived there were no preschool programs. I might be wrong, but I don't believe the term 'nursery school' had yet been coined much less popularized and made available to working families in the early 1940s. Our country was in the middle of a major war and there were more important things to be taken care of than teaching toddlers how to read. The rich of course could afford their own version of preschool education by employing nannies, and large families often were lucky enough to have grandparents in residence that provided the first alphabet information to young learners. Mine was not such a family.

Public School Kindergarten started when a child was 6. I was born in December, still 5 when school started after Labor Day, and so I missed Kindergarten and had my first formal schooling in first grade in a September hot classroom where I was handed a few sheets of colored construction paper, a flat wooden stick, tablespoon amount of thick white paste stuck to a piece of slick paper (to this day I remember the smell) and told to make a picture. Okayyyyyy...

So when someone asks me what methodology do you use when teaching a class I'm apt to respond that I sink or swim after listening to and watching my students and using my wits and the savvy learned by surviving daily commutes to school on NYC subways in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, where I smiled a lot, said good morning politely, never accepted candy or engaged strangers in further conversation, and always buried myself in a book.

Reading body language, the way Chewbacca expertly does when approaching and entering the dog run, has taught me more about how to approach a lesson with our students than the hundreds of hours I've spent in classes taught by the experts supposed to be schooling people in the art of teaching. Most of our students would rather be anywhere else than stuck in a classroom for what seems to be his or her whole life. Engaging a group at the beginning of the class by reading age appropriate poetry and stories, showing them photographs of pets and then talking with them about what they've heard and seen sets a tone and atmosphere leading to their willingness to respond with their own drawings and stories.

Yes, the concept of standards based education is laudable. However, too often it seems to have led to the kind of testing that exploits a child's weaknesses rather than providing information about what a youngster has learned and what he or she is able to do. When we worked with the Alternative schools I found that the Applied Learning Standard we used was the most telling and gave profound information about a youngster's ability to process directions, demonstrate conceptual understanding and skills.

So over the 2007-2008 school year at PS 25 and PS 53, we showed youngsters photographs of animals at play or playful conflict, read to them or had them read to us and to each other, talked some, listened a lot, and then asked them to make pictures, write or tell us stories or poems. And even the slowest, most emotionally damaged came through with work that to us is evidence of comprehension, learning and creativity.