Thinking About Literacy
Young Children and their Language
Fred Sedgwick’s new book discusses the literacy of children in the infant years. The first part is concerned with talk, the second with writing and the third with reading.

He takes the view that the child is an active learner when he or she arrives in school and that it is the school’s job to build on what the child already knows. Looking at many practical examples of writing, the book examines how a child progresses over a school year.

This volume addresses issues such as

- spelling and other mechanics
- the writing corner
- children talking and writing about moral matters

An optimistic view emerges of the potential of children to surprise us with their use of language, and to transcend the narrow confines of the literacy hour.

**Fred Sedgwick** has many years of experience as a teacher, freelance lecturer and writer. He is the author of *Read my Mind* (Routledge 1997) and is actively involved in all aspects of children’s learning. His next book is *Shakespeare and the Young Writer* (Routledge 1999).
THINKING ABOUT LITERACY

Young children and their language

Fred Sedgwick
In the beginning was the word  

St John 1:1

Only one thing remained secure against all losses—language  

Paul Célan

Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come…  

Wordsworth
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DEDICATORY POEM

To the Children

The Children leave the building
Alex and Katrina
Adam Unbenham and Shazadan
Alison Greengown and Gopal

The Children leave the building

autumn leaf and leaf and leaf
and smell of burning in the air
and scarlet roses and scarlet roses
and the one silver birch left
and Ford and Citroen and Renault
and Opel and Volvo and Vauxhall

The Children leave the building

There is no dance and no drama
no painting no poem no page of sums
no songs to sing no construction to be constructed
and checked and measured and drawn

or drawn and measured and checked
and constructed

There is no debate no instrumental playing

There is no art no science no religion

The Children leave the building
and Simone and Ravinder and Kim Pan
and Syreeta and the other Simone and James
and Gareth and Alan and Margaret and Jane
and Sharif and Surinder and Melanie and Mark

and I sit and play the piano
and I sit and paint

and yawn

Rose and bulb and rose
and bulb and rose and
bulb

and autumn leaves

(Sedgwick 1991)
Introduction

LANGUAGE AND HUMANITY

Literacy hour or literacy life?

‘Why did God call me Joanna?’

(six-year-old girl)

‘Language and humanity’. These are imposing words, I know. They are ‘impressive because of size, bearing, dignity or grandeur’, as the Longman Concise English Dictionary defines ‘imposing’. But the root of ‘impose’ is the Latin word meaning, among other things, to ‘inflict, set over, lay as a burden’ (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). Whether because of their ‘grandeur’ or not, the words impose on you, the reader, in a literal sense. Their abstractness, or their vagueness, one might say, lays a burden on you. Well, I feel the same. Abstractions like ‘language’, ‘humanity’, ‘truth’ or ‘beauty’ force a reaction in which we dismiss, irritated, whatever is being introduced. Language and what? What and humanity? I once heard a teacher dismiss an earlier book of mine with the remark ‘it’s a bit meaning-of-life-for me’. In the same spirit, I prefer poems with concrete nouns in them—dog, lamp-post, beer. With abstract nouns, I suspect someone is trying to slip something past me by sleight of tongue.

But I have two defences to a possible charge of pretentiousness. The first is that learners will speak and write throughout this book, justifying my words, and making it as practical as it is possible for a book about education to be. This book is, like Eliot’s garden, full of leaves that are in turn full of the voices of children. And the children’s speeches and writing are full of important words. A sample:

Why do you get older when it’s your birthday?
Why have people got names?
How do people talk?
How does the sun light up?
How does the river move?
Why are beaches by the sea?
Why are there millions of stones by the beach?

These are five year olds. These and their other questions are discussed on pp. 45–7. These children are slightly older:

How did God come into the world without getting born?
What does God look like?
Is Jesus bald?
How was the first man born when there was no one to have a baby?
How do we know if a man is horrible or not?

And then, after all this big talk about the serious issues of our times (and all times): ‘How do you make salad cream?’ and ‘Why do aliens have longer half terms than we do?’ and ‘Why is it, when I am sick, there’s always carrots?’ There is more about these children in Chapter 3, as I move away from my task of imposing burdens, towards the more important task of concentrating on the voices of children. It is enough to say here that a girl I was teaching once asked the question ‘When will I die?’ The reader might guess that none of these questions was asked during the literacy hour.

The second defence is this: the imposition of my words (language and humanity) is justified even without those children and their eloquence. Language, like nothing else, encapsulates our humanity and the possibility of our humanity’s survival. Tell me how you feel about your mother or father or brother or sister or wife or husband or son or daughter—but do it without speaking or writing.

You can, of course, draw, dance or act. Indeed, all of the other arts have a more primal claim on our humanity and its responses, and they can be more subtle and powerful in some tasks considered, pre-eminently, language’s tasks. They can persuade and cajole. I have argued their case elsewhere (Sedgwick 1993). But their power stems from the fact that they are, primarily, arts: artificial creations. Although language often constitutes an art, too, and although we make self-conscious things of it, poems, dramas and novels, it is also a root, deep under our primary means of communication, from which our most crude and our most subtle remarks bloom. Those parts of conversations on the telephone and in the office, in the living room and over the dining table stem from something that is, essentially, what makes us human. And then it is there in those poems that we all write, if only in our minds, and if we are brave enough, that are like (if we are unlucky) frail petals and (if we are lucky and chosen and gifted and industrious) like the toughest blooms imaginable.

So art, dance and drama may have come first in time. Once we daubed and carved, moved and acted. But language has always had an underlying function. If we cannot use words we are seriously disabled. Indeed, we need language to talk about the other arts. Imagine dance or drama without talk: if not during them, before them and after them. We need language to order food, to express needs and to love. Because we must use language to express our desires, negotiate our position, formulate our emotions, it is through language that we can understand, or comprehend, our humanity. Through language we communicate in a unique way. In dance or drama, in paint or sculpture, there is an admitted gauzy mist. What do they mean by that? How can we understand this? With language, the same gauze is there—but we behave as if it isn’t. We behave as if a certain clarity is possible, as if words mean exactly what they say, as if my words mean exactly the same to you as they do to me. Just say what you mean, we say. Tell it to my face. Mincing paints, or brushstrokes, or dance steps or the notes on a stave or in a chord might be a creative possibility. Mincing words, though, is to prevaricate.

The human species has been rightly defined as ‘the animal that talks’: other beasts relate with each other in terms of sounds and bodily movements, but their systems are extremely narrow when compared to the complexity of even a human baby’s communication. Indeed, human life is hard to conceive without the benefit of language: try to imagine a wordless school, or wordless love, or wordless politics. The power of naming is still there in the taboos, religious and sexual, associated with certain beings or things. Even more explicitly, religion links language with humanity when St John links the Creator with the Word (logos) in St John 1:1.
Other religious texts show understanding of this humanity-language connection. Whether we are believers or not we face, in talking or writing about language, an issue of primal importance. Adam does something essentially human as he names the creatures that God has provided in the world (Genesis 2:19–20). Adam was given the Arabic script by God. Indra invented speech, and Odin was credited with the invention of the runic alphabet. And, following Adam, Indra and Odin, many humans have felt that the ability to control follows the ability to name. Socrates speaks of the gods as those responsible for naming things properly (Plato: Cratylus). And in modern times it is the moment when the deaf and blind Helen Keller understands that things have names that her behaviour loses much of its wildness and becomes what we call human, as I try to show in this poem, written for children:

**Helen Keller and the Pump**

My hands pulled back  
from the furious shock  
of water’s mute  
splash on forearms, fingers.  
Annie hammered  
WATER twenty times on  
my amazed palm  
and words broke in at last.  
I rush round the  
garden: GROUND, PUMP, GRASS, TREE.  
Name it! Name it!  
She drummed on my palm words  
for a gargling  
snarling blind Eve, to set  
her free, running  
in the garden, naming.  

(Sedgwick 1994)

So we can see that language has enormous significance for us all as humans in its role, if not of making us human, at least helping us to articulate and celebrate our humanity, and also in enabling us to face up to its realities.

But when humanity’s reality is tested in ultimate ways language assumes an even greater importance. ‘Only one thing remained secure against all losses—language,’ said the poet Paul Célan in a radio broadcast. As a Jew, he would have understood the importance of language in the context of the horrors of the Holocaust. When the possibility of a jackboot in the face of the innocent potentially is present at every waking or sleeping moment of every day (this was how it felt to at least one survivor of the Holocaust: see Speigelman 1987), only the mind and its words are free. There is no art, no drama, no dance.

**Centrality of language**

The centrality of language is as valid in the smaller contexts of violence as it is in the imaginably larger ones. Here, for example, is a scene all teachers can imagine readily: a line of backs which, when urgently broken up, reveals two sweaty faces, four glowering eyes, glimpsed white knuckles, smells of mud and (later) the watching wonderment of bystanders sloping off, still absorbed (heads over shoulders) in the
suddenly forbidden activity (‘Just what is going on here?’). As teachers, parents, nursery nurses and classroom helpers (i.e., in all cases, as teachers) we have been there. We have all brought in by the wrists or the hands the wrestlers, the boxers, the frantic kickers, still wildly protesting their innocence. Some of us, indeed, have been those wrestlers, those boxers, those frantic kickers.

On the occasion I am describing, the teacher separates them, asking ‘What’s the problem?’ And the children forget, for a moment, the substantive issue of the fight, and ask, brows furrowed: ‘What’s a problem?’ From this conversation in this school, a way of thinking about violence emerged that involved, as Annabelle Dixon, the teacher who told me this story, put it, ‘giving them the language’. Maybe it is not a question of teaching them to think, or giving them language (they have both already), but simply a matter of giving them words like ‘problem’, ‘talk’ and ‘discuss’.

I asked a group of six year olds what are the central words that might show children ways round conflict; words that might show them what it is to be a human that can use words to solve moral problems. I said: ‘You know you shouldn’t fight?…that you should talk about the bad times when fighting seems the thing to do?…well, what words might you find useful, instead of the kicks and punches?’ The teacher nominated three scribes who wrote down, in turns, what the other children offered. This is what they came up with:

Stop everybody lets be friends.
Stop fighting we will be in trouble.
Plese stop fighting someone will badly be heat [hurt].
We will be friends.
i’m sorry.
I’m going to tell the teacher.
Stop the violence
this is the last draw [straw].
lets stop the fight.
can we qites [quits].
that is the end of the fight.
that done it.
I hert myself.
I know a better game than fighting lets be freind
calm don
leave me alone
stop or you will get a black
shace hands and be firends
stop or one of you will be in hospital
we will be firends
lets go and play another game
be calm don’t be rogeh [rough]
this is silly
why are we doing this

We were collecting these comments at 3.00 in the afternoon, and one of the scribes wrote on the back of her sheet ‘I am going home.’ This is a use of language—for the sake of a truthful joke that might detonate only much later, when the joker has gone home—that is largely unrecognised by teachers among school children.
The remarks recorded are of several kinds: things heard from adults, things said in desperation, attempts at negotiation. Also, higher authority is referred to, either as a threat (‘I’ll tell…’) or as a feared sanction. At some points—particularly in the last remark quoted—we see that existential desperation that we all feel at some terrible moments in our lives. These sayings give us a vivid glimpse at times and places on the playground which we usually don’t see, except in our memories, and at the moments when the flashpoints bring us on to the scene as duty teachers.

Language is vatic. It is the poet-prophet of human life. A six-year-old girl writes ‘does God blive in me?’ and is, through the agency of that sentence, able to muse (the pun on the words, ‘amuse/the Muses’ is significant) on an eternal problem. But she has reversed that problem with mind-jarring suddenness, using her language in a way few adults could. Much as a poet like Blake (or, in our own day, Geoffrey Hill) or a prophet like Amos have the roles of tellers of truths that grind against the fashionable contemporary grain, so language, under the disciplines of order and silence, of form and meditation, of shape and emotion, will move us forward; move, in particular, children forward against the contraries without which (Blake again) there is no progression.

I have tried to spell out the importance of language in order to contrast it with the fashionable political notions of the literacy hour, and of teaching literacy as if it could be separated from everything else; as if it weren’t a prophet so much as a servant of the powerful in the cash nexus. Language teaches everything. As Rex Walford says in The Times of 17 December 1997

The Government’s announcement…that it is changing the rules of the game for primary schoolchildren to concentrate on literacy and numeracy…unaccountably ignores the creative possibility of using subjects such as geography, history, music and art as vehicles for literacy and numeracy.

I would go further. These other subjects are not just ‘vehicles’ for literacy and numeracy. They are bound up with them as surely as leaves, bark, trunk, roots, and sap are bound together.

Background to this book

This book is not an academic study, because I am not nor ever have been (slightly to my regret) an academic. The first essential part of my background, as far as my work for this book is concerned, was composed of thirty years working with students aged between four and eleven as, by turns, a class teacher, and a headteacher in three schools. Once my courage and my wife assured me I didn’t need a contract any more, the second part began as I became a freelance writer on residential courses, at Arts festivals and similar events, an INSET (in-service training) provider in schools and groups of schools and (mostly) in schools working with children and older students. Much of my time in these jobs has been spent on helping children to read, talk and write with greater fluency and skill, and in thinking about these activities with practising teachers on courses, and with students preparing for the profession.

Looking back on those early years, when I still had a contract, I am appalled and embarrassed by the stupidity of some of what I did with children, and by the disrespect implicit in the ways I taught them. And my present work is as much an attempt at a reparation for some of my errors as much as it is a celebration of some of the successes children achieved alongside me. What were these errors? Here are some examples. I suspect that this list will give away in one paragraph much of the stance of this book:

• teaching as though children’s writing at five or six years could usefully be copywriting under my own
• insisting that children wait in queues for spellings before they carried on with their writing
• assuming that a ‘poem’ could be written in one draft over three-quarters of an hour, even though my own attempts at poems at home were filling waste paper bins with screwed up abortions
• teaching children to read through the most banal of schemes instead of the kinds of materials that sprang naturally from engagements with the lives that the children were leading
• treating young children’s marks—drawings, scribbles, early writing—without the kind of respect that would have made subsequent drawings, scribbles and writing much stronger
• allowing children to be ‘assessed’ by educational psychologists in tiny rooms, officially ‘medical rooms’ or the deputy’s office, but really prison cells, separated from their friends, their classrooms, their families, their teachers, their worlds
• living a professional life as though my emotions and behaviour were in some way detached from those of the children I was teaching.

That will do. I wouldn’t write that list were it not for three facts: first, that all teachers will recognise parts of it in their own practice; second, that some teachers still teach as though spelling and writing are synonymous, and, if they are different, spelling is more important than writing; and third, that some special needs teachers (really, they are pre-Warnock remedial teachers) still withdraw children from classrooms to take them to prison cells for questioning, even though the classroom’s curriculum is now legally enforced. Thus they uncharitably and tactlessly emphasise what they, the child and the rest of the world already know the child can’t do: bark at print. I can’t dance. What would it be like if every day I was taken to a room with an effective and bossy dancer to have my every mistake minutely pointed out and analysed. For ‘dancing’ substitute some activity at which you see yourself as a failure.

Because I am not an academic, my interviews with children have been neither extensive nor systematic, as they are in books I admire, like Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Wells (1986). I am trying instead to show, through case studies of children I know in homes of friends of mine and in schools where there are teachers whom I respect, the power of what children learn through language: speech and writing. I hope that my examples show how much children can change in their use of language—some if it, no doubt, with our help as teachers; but also, much of it, through other agencies more mysterious: their intimate conversations with their friends, for example; their private thoughts; their imagination.

A note about thinking, talking and writing

The connections between thinking, which is private, and talking and writing, which are mostly public, need exploration. Some of us speak to ourselves, or write down our thoughts for our private consumption, and then find they’ve been overheard or read inadvertently. Part of our embarrassment stems from the fact that what we’ve said or written may be intensely private. But it also stems from the fact that, normally, both talking and writing are, to a greater or lesser extent, public. To have used them for private material is to be caught out. Talking and writing are, to take the matter further, different from each other. I can talk more quickly about these matters than I can possibly write about them, partly because I am conscious that my writing must have a greater form than my talking. The mechanical skills associated with writing, whether handwriting or typing, distract me from the content of my thought. Also, and more positively, in shaping my written words into whatever form I choose, or whatever emerges, I am changing my thoughts.

And the great advantage of writing over both thinking and talking is that I can go back to it and reflect on it as many times as I want. It is a common-place that we can’t take back something once it is said: our stupidities and tactlessnesses are in the public domain from the moment they’re uttered, and we can just
hope people forget about them. On the other hand, I have read and reread the pages of this book many times; I have revised on the screen as I wrote; I have printed many drafts, and scribbled all over them until they are unusable, and, in the light of my own revised thinking, and, occasionally, in the light of the suggestions of friends with similar passions about language and children to my own, I have revised again and again.

Some of the learning I referred to above is what we want children to learn. That is, after all, what schools are supposed to exist for. Much of that learning, though—more than we might like or guess—is what we’d rather they not learn. For example, at almost every official moment of the school day, children learn about their lack of autonomy in the school. They are lined up to come in before lessons and after every break. They are dragooned in their dress. Often, they read what we as teachers tell them to read, rather than what they want to read. These sentences describe to me, as I reread them now, the situation one might expect in prison or, if that goes too far, the army.

When we look at the language that politicians, inspectors and advisers have used to discuss education and manipulate schools since the late 1980s, we note that seeing children as learners is less fashionable than it was once. Instead, children are seen as attaining or not; as progressing or not; as being ‘on task’ or ‘off task’; as succeeding in, or failing, tests. The unobservable mental and affective processes going on inside the child’s mind are of less concern than the apparatus of checklist and test, of league table. And one result of this is that we as teachers have learned, to a greater or lesser extent (depending, I suppose, on our vigilance) that watching our children is less important than watching our backs.

I want to suggest, in contrast, that it is in listening to and reading the words of children that we are doing our real job. We are then ourselves learners, and learners of what was always our professional concern: how children grow in an understanding of themselves, their world, and their relationship to that world. Some of this is what we want to learn. Some of it will delight us, some surprise us, or some even dismay us. Unfortunately, some of what we learn, we will deny, because it doesn’t suit our current prejudices.

One prejudice is that children learn essentially and mostly from us as teachers. I will be writing later (pp. 29–34) about teachers who see the children they teach as having ‘nil on entry’. But children, like Adam and Eve in their garden, are learners from the moment of their beginnings, years before their parents think of finding the right school for them. This is now so widely accepted, at least in theory (in practice we treat children still as blank pages) that it is quite difficult to sense what an odd idea it would have been to our parents and grandparents and (even, of course, more, the generations stretching back before them). They would have seen the young child surviving in order to learn; as preparing to live a life, rather than actually living it. The baby in the cradle was insignificant for generations. But, as Wells (1986:33) says, ‘it has become clear from research over recent decades that the newborn baby is not as helpless as used to be supposed’.

Wordsworth, like the other Romantics (especially Rousseau and Coleridge) knew about the importance of childhood. The child is, in Wordsworth’s words, ‘father of the Man’ and comes into the world ‘trailing clouds of glory’. In some classrooms children are seen as ignoramuses who know nothing compared with us. Blank pages, empty pots, naughty humans, we write on them, fill them or correct them. On the other hand, if we take Wordsworth’s poem (‘Ode: Intimations of Mortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’) seriously, we will treat children as knowing more than we do because, unless we are close to death, they know more than we do. They are closer to Heaven.

Thus the child is born with an impulse to make sense of the world and his or her experience of it. With that impulse in place, pulsing like a fontanelle from the beginning, learning becomes active more rapidly than is generally considered. Its growth has, indeed, largely outstripped our understanding of it, and our practice as teachers needs to improve in order to begin to understand it, and its serious implications for our practice. I have written with my wife (Sedgwick and Sedgwick 1996) about this growth, and demonstrated
its pace and breadth: young babies survive, move, communicate and love. The gap between these two views of the child: the blank paper, or the active learner, is a constant thread in this book. Where I present examples of children learning where they appear to have got something wrong, or to have missed the point, I assume that some aspect of their thinking as active learners has subverted whatever they were asked to do.

Communication (inspired, to a large extent, of course, by love) concerns me most here. ‘Babies’, Wilkinson (1989) writes, ‘are “conversationalists” before ever they can use language. They don’t just make noises which other people interpret. They listen to other people, and respond to them, and make signals to which they expect responses.’ Wilkinson has a vivid word-picture of a baby, sitting in her high chair, making ‘a long impassioned speech in no recognisable language, banging a clenched fist, like a dictator at a rally after a coup d’etat’. As adults, we have always been, and still are, unwilling to conceptualise in ordinary life as learning that which we cannot see and understand entirely on our own terms. In other words, in the instance of Wilkinson’s dictator-baby, we do not recognise readily how deep, how fast and how powerful the transformations, both intellectual and affective, are that are going on inside the child.

Children are active, not passive, in their need to tell us things, and to understand things that we tell them. Children are ‘predisposed’ (Wells 1986) to learn language, because they have patterns in their brains (as Chomsky saw it) that help them to make sentences. Evidence for this are those occasions when children make irregular verbs regular. They never hear an adult say ‘I goed to the game’, but children say it as they hypothesise what they should say to communicate something, because they are playing with a grammar (essentially, Chomsky says, subject+predicate) from the moment of their birth. See, for an introduction to this, Chomsky’s (1972) essay ‘Language and the mind’. Thus, the notion that children are, in terms of language, merely (I choose my adverb with care) a matter of imitating the talk of adults around them sells children and their learning powers absurdly short.

Throughout this book communication does not necessarily concern other people. Language is also about communicating with ourselves. Consider meditation. Consider the lists we make when we are in dispute with someone we love, or the notes we make to prepare ourselves for some important meeting, or the everlasting dialogues we have with ourselves about quite ordinary things. A reading of Ulysses by James Joyce will make this point clear. Here the hero, Leopold Bloom, reflects, late in the evening on his day, as most of us do, on what has occurred. This is a day when he’s received a letter, had a public bath, listened to singing in a pub, had a row in another pub—all apart from adventures clear from the extract:

Call to the hospital to see. Hope she’s over. Long day I’ve had. Martha, the bath, funeral, house of keys, museum with those goddesses, Daedalus’ song. Then that bawler in Barney Kiernan’s. Got my own back there. Drunken ranters. What I said about God made him wince. Mistake to hit back? Or? No.

Early talk is (like Ulysses) a rediscovery of language. As the adult communicates with the child, and meets the child’s hunger for communication, that adult acts as a teacher to an apprentice who is, from the beginning, aching to learn. There is a conviction that accompanies this: children should be treated as human beings who have related to, and understood, much of the world already. We usually pass on the nod the idea that children are experienced learners, but we frequently behave, like our ancestors, as though children were in fact blank slates; empty vessels. Two quotations from, respectively, a special needs teacher and an educational psychologist make this point: ‘This child [a five-year-old] hasn’t started yet.’ ‘We must stop him [a six-year-old] writing until he can form his letters properly.’

This book is, partly, an attack on the thinking behind remarks like these, which is concerned with control rather than respecting children and setting them free as active learners. On such thinking is built a deficit
model that conceptualises children as lacking something. I prefer a model that sees children as human beings already advanced in their abilities and learning.

**Structure of the book**

The three-fold division in this book is, like most divisions in educational books, for convenience only; as Bearne (1995) points out, ‘fragmentation of language impoverishes [and] narrows… Separating reading from writing can lead not only to frustration and concern about the nature and validity of assessments but, most importantly, to the danger of fragmenting children’s language.’ We have to bear in mind these dangers, and to cross-reference all three modes of language in all three sections. To fragment is also to control, to divide and rule, and the child set free in learning ranges over the convenient grid we as teachers impose on experience.

In Chapter 1 in Part I, I describe a three-year-old boy talking with his mother and myself. In Chapter 2 I present a case study of children talking in an infant classroom. Chapter 3 draws together children talking about various serious moral issues, including death. There is an interlude about children compiling and writing their own books. Part II is concerned with children writing. Chapter 4 is about writing generally. Chapters 5 and 6 comprise two studies, one of the writing corner, and the other of children writing letters. Chapter 7 is about children writing lists, and Chapter 8 is about spelling and related issues. Part III is about reading. Chapter 9 reflects on children facing print, and chapter 10 is about the politics of reading. Chapter 11 is about children and adults remembering how they learned to read. The book ends with a Postscript about the National Curriculum and an OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) report on a school that figures throughout the book, Tacolneston in Norfolk.

**Introducing Tacolneston First School**

Throughout this book is threaded a document from an admirable first school in Norfolk. I had better explain why I admire this school so much, because that explanation will give away much about the stance of this book.

This small school (there are some thirty-odd children) is in the middle of a village about eight miles from Norwich. On my two-day visit there, in the summer of 1997, the walls were covered with material that stopped me at almost every point as I walked around: you simply wanted to look and read, and then examine further. Among many other things there were vivid paintings by the children, showing a confidence and assurance as well as a technical skill not to be found in all schools. The children had recently visited the nearby seaside town of Sheringham, and the paintings had an extra vigour because of that recent and powerful first-hand stimulus. Later, I saw this poem on a wall (Illustration 1):

I went to the sea and I found
a large pirate sword which made
me shiver.
I went to the sea and I found a scary shipwreck
which creaked
and groaned.
I went to the sea and I found a
dark cave
that constantly dripped
and the torchlight made the shapes
of sleeping bats
bats hanging from
the ceiling
like leather rags.
I went to the sea and I found a
fish bone
that moved.
It came right up to me.

This poem repays some examination. It is successful, it seems to me, for four reasons. The first is that it has a clear structure, presumably given to the writer by the teacher: the repetition of ‘I went to the sea and I found…’ is the little cell that she has put a class of children in, aiming to stimulate the freeing of their imaginations. All art, as Leonardo said, needs a prison in order to be set free: mere writing about our feelings is usually formless and uninviting to the reader. Also it risks a kind of solipsism: writing that suggests to the reader that the writer and his or her obsessions are the only things that count. Second, there is a ghostly presence behind this poem: e e cummings’ ‘maggie and milly and molly and may’ (collected in, among other places, Heaney and Hughes 1982). Poems that are written by children with close recent and intense experience poetry are certain to be stronger than poems written (as so many are) outside the context of established poetry. Without such experience, how are children to either respond to the establishment’s values, or react against them?

Third, the child has brought to the poem a lively experience of reading: this is obvious when we read ‘the torchlight made the shapes of sleeping bats/hanging from/the ceiling/like leather rags’. In these lines is vivid evidence of having read metaphors; of having seen bats, or looked at pictures of them; of a partly-intuitive, partly-taught grasp of what cadence can do in a poem, associated with line endings. The experience this writer has brought to this poem is connected to the last reason for this poem’s power: it was written in a school where words, visual images, first-hand experience and the responses of children to their environment were all constantly respected and celebrated; where, it must be said, such child-like responses were deemed infinitely more interesting than the managerial and administrative trivia demanded by the current bureaucratic structure.

Letters were important in this school. Authors like Anthony Browne had responded to letters from the children, and there were signed drawings from artists who had worked with them. After my visit, I received twenty letters. One said (Illustration 2):

Dear Fred
love your powing I hope
you come again
you have macke my
writing even better.
Love from Jenna
age 6