

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 13

Issue 1 *Reaching the Hard to Reach*

Article 3

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Dekker, Mary (1997) "Reflections on a Snowy Day," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1460>

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Reflections on a Snowy Day

Mary Dekker

On a cold winter morning the children sit in the classroom watching the window, watching as huge snowflakes dance and twirl as they fall to the ground. Mesmerized by the snow and anticipating the upcoming recess they do not focus on today's lessons.

I see them watching the window, whispering to each other about the snow. One can't whisper but shouts, "It's snowing, Ms. Dekker!"

"Yeah, great big flakes," I say, "let's get working so we can go out pretty soon."

The children yell as they charge out the door for recess dressed in snowsuits and gloves, hats and scarves, and boots. They scatter to all points on the playground. Some ascend the huge snow mountain. Some run and slide and purposely fall down. Two boys pick up huge handfuls of snow, throw them in the air and yell, "It's snowing!" Each grabs another handful and gulps it down.

Some kids know the playground equipment is particularly fun on such a winter's day. The cold and snow-covered plastic twirly slides provide for some fast thrills, especially if you're wearing a slippery snowsuit. Kids take turns whipping around the slide and flying airborne for a few feet before they drop. Some young engineer discovers that you fly farther and go faster the more snow that's on the slide. Jobs are quickly assigned. It is understood that after you slide you must fill the slide with snow for the next person.

As we enter the building we are blinded until our eyes adjust. "Hey, I can't see," one boy yells. Kids slide in on the snow that melts on the bottom of their boots. One kid falls, and the next three kids burst out laughing.

Inside the room kids change back into their shoes, line up their wet hats and mittens on the heater, and sit in wet pants and socks until the next recess.

Once again outside, the kids run amok. Some somersault or roll covering every inch of themselves from head to toe with snow.

This time a couple kids start making snowmen. They discover the snow is packy, and they quickly have big balls.

"Wow, look at that!" one kid yells.

"You want to help?" the other says.

"Okay."

Soon there are several engaged in the making of snowmen.

"Hey, we could make Frosty the Snowman!"

"I'll go get some branches for the arms and pinecones for the face," one child volunteers.

Others decide to make animals like rabbits, and horses, and bears. Teams form quickly. Kids opt to be packers or rollers or lifters as these snow creatures are quickly assembled.

Back inside they trudge in a little wetter, and a little heavier this time. They have played hard. They are excited.

They ask, "Are we having a last recess today?"

"You want to go out again?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's really fun out there. We made a big snowfort! I hope the big kids don't destroy it."

"Well, you do get another recess, but we have to do some work first."

The last recess begins as the others. Charge outside. Roll around. Run up a hill. Somersault down. Throw up snow. Eat a big handful. And look around. What this time? The fast slide? King of the Mountain? Making snowmen?

A group of eight children is digging out big ice chunks from the snow mountain with great earnestness. Digging them out and then carrying them over to a special spot. Already the spot has many chunks.

One girl asks, "What in the world are you guys doing?"

"We're digging dinosaur bones!" a boy answers.

"We're famous paleontologists!" a girl adds.

"This is a big dinosaur find!"

"I found the neck!"

"And I've got the skull!"

"Over here is a big leg bone!"

"But why are you putting them in a pile?" the newcomer asks.

"We're taking them to a museum!"

Two boys have decided to dig a tunnel through the mountain. They scoop and scoop and then reach their hands in until their arms disappear. They feel around and look to find out if they can see the other side. Two more boys come by to ask if they can help. Soon the boys have their tunnel. They stand back and gaze at it proudly.

The last whistle has blown. Recess is over for today.

Sensing the finality of the great outdoors, two girls quickly lay down face first in the snow. They come up with rosy-red, dripping faces and smiles.

"You look funny," one says to the other.

"So do you."

"Yeah, and I'm not even cold."

One reluctant student walks slowly, picking up big handfuls of snow as he goes. Some he eats, some he throws gently, and the last two he puts on top of his orange hunting hat. The fluffy snow falls

down gently and rests on his chubby freckled cheeks.

How do we teach the hard to reach? And how do we begin to write about that?

I guess I could have written about the kid who is so angry, or the child who is withdrawn, the girl who cannot focus, or the boy who wants to clown. I could have written about global strategies that work with many students to make the district's curriculum more engaging. Or, I could have written about how particular strategies worked with a particular child. But I was compelled by the phenomena that on the school playground these types of distinctions disappear. Just a Michigan winter day outside and everyone's engaged.

Billy, who is withdrawn in the classroom, leads charge after charge up the snow mountain. Jill who rarely talks inside yells, "Look, Ms. Dekker, I'm going down backwards."

Sue, who is always angry with classmates, offers to put her hat on the snowman's head. And, Joe, a class clown, is in his element as he slips and slides in the snow.

We know that through observation we can discover much about how a child learns. We can use the information that Sue likes to work alone but Joe would rather work with a buddy to provide for these contexts to enhance their learning in the classroom. But we go a step farther when we watch our children outside of the classroom. I found there were powerful lessons to be learned from years of watching how children play. This is what I try to remember.

I want to do more than help my students become literate in all areas of the curriculum. I want to be glad for the recess time where they can be spontaneous, loud, and silly.

I want to recognize how their play is as important to them as the curriculum lessons are to me.

I want to acknowledge that many of their experiences are far more vital to them than what we do in the classroom.

I want to remember that after you have a big experience, like playing in the snow, it's difficult to focus on 3-digit subtraction or adding prefixes and suffixes to base words.

When I am focused enough myself to remember these lessons, I can be patient with the girl who sneaks over to the window to see how much more snow has fallen. And, the boy who has made a snowball out of the snow he has discovered in his boots does not surprise me. I know that no

matter how engaging I can make the classroom I cannot compete with their outside experiences. But I don't have to. When I can recognize what they leave behind when they enter the classroom, I celebrate and validate their experience, and they, in turn, engage to the extent they can.

About the Author

Mary Dekker, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and co-editor of LAJM, teaches third grade at Morrice Elementary School.