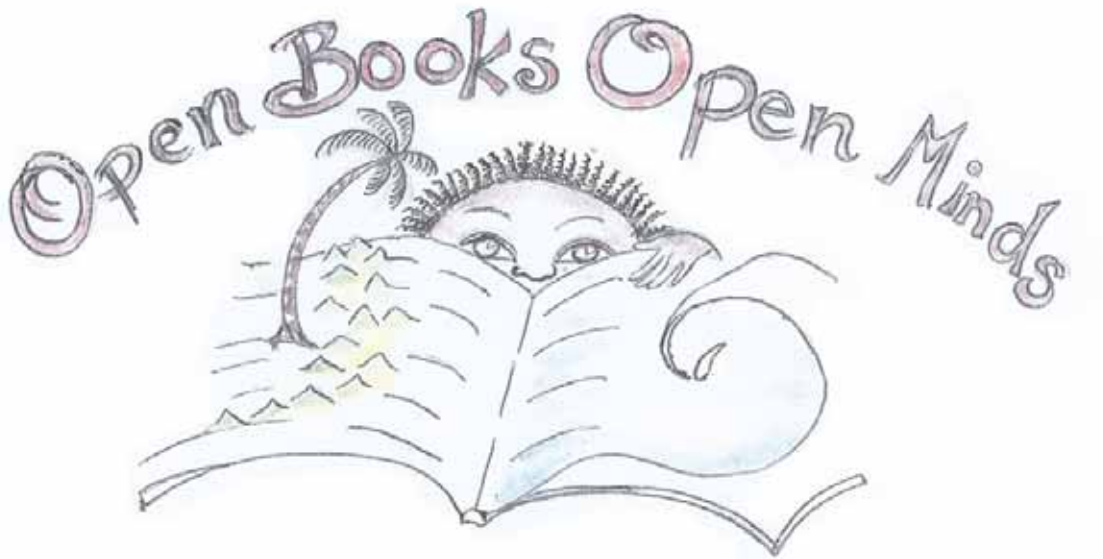
Smiles of My People:

How to Create Libraries in Caribbean Primary Schools that Inspire Young Readers & Poets



Allegra Asplundh-Smith
Peace Corps Volunteer, Dominica
2009-2011

Dedicated to the kids of Delices
who were my first friends in Dominica.

Acknowledgements

h h h

Thank you to the mentors who encouraged and shaped my work in primary schools. I am particularly grateful for the energy and experience of Vanya Eloi, Petra Buffong, Patrick Henderson, Sam Raphael, and Celia Sorhaindo.

To my friend, Anthea Robinson, thank you for many conversations that illuminated life in Delices in important ways. Her talent for design is evident in the illustrations that appear in this book.
To my neighbors, Agnes Joseph and Joan Bowers, thank you for sharing with me the fruits of your gardens, faith, and wisdom.

I am forever grateful to my family and friends back home for lifting my spirits with their steady belief in my work. Thank you to my mom and dad for improving this project with their artistic and editorial gifts. Evan, Malika, and Michelle brought the best of home to Dominica on their visits and sustained me as always with love.

A heartfelt thanks to the teachers and students in Dominica's Southeast whose company I will greatly miss. To Aaliyah, Amanda, Azra, Curris, Chris, Curtis, Dana, Eden, Eron, Felix, Jamie, Melinda, Nashima, Lyndsay, Sherris, & Shian—thank you for filling the libraries with poetry.

Contents

Introduction

Small villages in the Caribbean, whether tucked into rocky coastline or perched high up in Dominica's cloud-capped mountains, usually contain their own primary school. And in every school there is one room designated as a library. Most of the time these places are forgotten, used to store donations and outdated textbooks.

This guide provides interested volunteers and community members a template for re-envisioning the primary school library as a powerful tool, not only in education, but in broader development programs as well.

How can a small library affect people beyond its school and begin to create a culture of readers?

- The first step—cleaning, painting, and organizing the space—builds excitement in the village, fostering community ownership and responsibility.

- Book fairs to sell off texts that are too old or damaged for the school's collection involve parents and get books into the hands of younger children.

- A campaign to fundraise for bright, new library books taps into the international networks of local hotels and businesses. And an energized library program encourages students to borrow books and write creatively about their own lives.

- Once a new book settles onto the shelf, it begins to cast a wide net of influence. As long as kids borrow it and the book survives, it travels into many families, into the hands of parents and of younger siblings. Great children's books help students reach basic literacy standards, yes.

- But these books do more than help build vocabularies. A great book sparks questions and discussions within classrooms and homes. Avid readers make a habit of curiosity. The same qualities of articulation, analysis, creativity, and investigation that make a great reader and writer help build a vibrant citizenry.

This guide is designed to speak to a wide audience. Peace Corps Volunteers, primary school staff, public libraries, hotel owners, and members of writers' guilds can connect through local library initiatives. Especially to the question of how Peace Corps Volunteers can work *together with* community members, this guide offers a range of ideas.

Because like dusty libraries, we volunteers sometimes present a puzzle to our villages—what to do with us? A library project provides goals that are concrete (e.g. new paint) as well as intangible (e.g. building informed citizens), and out of sheer necessity they bring volunteer and community members together in common work.

The following pages are organized in five sections.

- Part I – **Getting Started** outlines initial steps to begin your library project. Suggestions for physical renovation, book organization, and community book fairs are covered there.

- Part II – **Open Books Open Minds** illustrates an example from my own volunteer experience of collaboration with a local eco-resort and fundraising for new books through guest contributions.

- Part III – **Life of the Library** provides guidance for how to create a friendly, organized environment for students, including book borrowing and care.

- Part IV – **Creative Kids** describes a summer poetry camp that introduced young students in Dominica to memorizing and writing poetry. This section includes examples of original poems by Dominican primary school students as well as curricula for teaching poetry and drawing out students' creative talents.

- The last section is an anthology of poems written by students in Dominica as well as curriculum and additional teaching material.

The critic Denis Donoghue writes:

> "The merit of reading a work of literature is that it enables you to gain access to lives other than your own, and it discourages you from thinking that those lives are functions of your own."

The Peace Corps has a similar effect on its volunteers. Cultural literacy awakens us to completely new ways of living and gives us voice to add our own stories to the bouillon.

This guide is designed to be a useful blueprint for rebuilding libraries.

However, I hope it also tells a story of what happens when we build a foundation of literacy through access to exciting books and refine it by asking students to respond to their lives and write poetry from their hearts.

Allegra Asplundh-Smith
Delices, Dominica
April 2011

February 2, 2010

Today I spend a great day at the primary school library in the village of Delices. It begins with reading "What Do You Do With a Tail Like This?" to the kindergarten class. In this book, there are drawings of different animal parts (noses, ears, feet) and the kids try to guess which animal they belong to and how they use it. Sticky feet belong to the gecko and allow it to walk on the ceiling. A long tail lets the monkey swing from trees. An elephant can bathe itself with its trunk. The kids lunge with excitement at the book as I read each question: What do you do with a mouth like this? They shout with glee as we turn the pages to test their guesses. Then we choose which part we would want for ourselves and draw self-portraits: stick figures with big bat ears, sticky feet, and long ant-eating tongues.

Next it is on to Grade 2 where we read a classic story called "Blueberries for Sal," about a small child who goes berry picking with her mother. Every time she drops a berry in her pail--kuplunk!--she takes it back out and pops it in her mouth. On the other side of the mountain, a Momma bear and her baby bear are feasting on berries too, eating as many as they can to prepare for the long winter. Distractedly following their mothers, Sal and the little bear get lost. Sal ends up trailing the mother bear while the baby bear starts following Sal's mother. The students delight in this mix-up, shouting the exclamation, "Papa Bondie!" (Father God!) at all the confusion. After reading the story, I ask them to think of something they do alongside their parents that they enjoy and to draw a picture of it. "I like to tie the cow with my father." "I like to pick flowers with my mom." "I like to watch cricket on television with my dad."

Working in the libraries and responding to stories with Dominican students is joyful and unpredictable. During lunch break, a throng of students gathers outside the bathrooms, shouting about a soucoyant (witch) hiding in one of the girls' toilet stalls. Out of breath, they tell me that a broom is standing straight up in a toilet bowl and a water pipe just turned on without anyone touching it – a soucoyant, for sure. You also get glimpses into the painful parts of kids' lives. A young girl writes a poem about living beside her father's rum shop:

In the shop at night
I see people drink a lot of rum.
They lookin' sad
Their faces get ugly like a tiger.
In the shop at night
I wish my father will never again sell rum

before Christmas come.

Libraries are sanctuaries. Books are hives of new ideas. And students are hungry for both: a place to retreat to and material that satisfies their curiosities about themselves and the world.

I. Getting Started:

Renovating Libraries in Rural Primary Schools in the Caribbean

You don’t have to spend long in a rural Caribbean primary school before the strengths of the place emerge. Dedicated teachers, bright and respectful students, and active Parent Teacher Associations all make most primary schools the main hubs of community life. You usually find that the movers and shakers of a village are involved in the primary school.

But the adoption and transformation of a school library presents a particular challenge in rural areas where access to print is limited. Most people get their news from listening to the radio, not reading a paper. Children learn multiplication tables by chanting them through, one through twelve. And teachers usually lead discussions about stories rather than ask students to write about them. As a result, students tend to be confident speakers, animated storytellers, but more hesitant readers and writers.

You can’t draw students into a library with the promise of higher marks on standardized tests or improvements in silent reading comprehension. The library itself has to be fun. Attractive books displayed on shelves where kids can easily find and reach them. A piece of carpet and some bright cushions. Crayons and paper to illustrate scenes from favorite books. A basket of poems students can choose from and memorize. When I ask students what they like best about the library, they often reply, “Colors, Miss!” By which they mean the warm yellow shade of the walls, the science posters decorating the room, and shiny book covers that catch their attention.

A clean, organized, welcoming library environment is easy for us to imagine, but making it a reality requires a little some cajoling, a little elbow grease and a lot of collaboration and compromise with school staff. As volunteers and newcomers, we do well to include teachers and principals at all stages of planning for a library. Their expertise and experience are balance our green enthusiasm.
How do you start creating a library collection worthy of young Caribbean readers?

In my experience in my home village of Delices, Dominica, the first step was clear: separate the wheat from the chaff. When I arrived, the primary school library contained hundreds and hundreds of volumes. Occasionally teachers used one of the reference books, but students did not touch them. And who could blame them?

- *The Boston Marathon*
- Sixty copies of a single Arthur picture book
- *Introduction to Calculus*
- Dozens of copies of the doorstop "*Making 13 Colonies: 1600-1740 A History of the U.S.*
- A 1950s guide for American housewives entitled *The Home Entertainer*.

I unearthed these titles in the process of sorting through the school's collection. As I hauled box after dusty box of books from the library, my anger flared at the donation dumping of well-meaning people.

What does a primary school of fifty Caribbean children want with forty hardcover editions of *The Golden Knights: The History of the U.S. Army Parachute Team*? At $20 a pop, how many Clifford or Curious George or Dr. Seuss books could that money buy?

Luckily, the Principal at the school was supportive of cleaning out the library and getting rid of most of the collection. Still, my suggestion that we simply discard all of the old books upset people. There is a Creole saying: *Vyé kannawi ka fè bon soup*. An old pot makes a good soup. Don't be quick to throw out old objects. Because they can turn out to be quite handy.

During my time as a volunteer, I learned a lot from this ethos of thrift and inventiveness. My neighbors were constantly thinking of simple solutions: using an old container, a clean piece of cloth, and a well-placed banana leaf to capture and filter rainwater, for example. And some things are certainly useful secondhand. Baby clothes or a cast-iron skillet, for example. But for kids just on the cusp of learning to read, whether they live in the U.S. or Ghana or Tibet, books about obscure history and advanced mathematics aren't going to cut it.

I asked teachers how we should dispose of the old books. They shrugged: same way they handled all the school's trash, burn them. The role of book burner was not a part I had dreamed of playing in the primary school. So after a few small fires, I decided to think of a less controversial way to get the old books out.

The Principal and I settled on a book fair and reading fun day for the village. We planned an afternoon of speakers, performances and a book sale: one book for a dollar. In preparation, older students chose poems to memorize and perform. During the lunch hour, we sat under an almond tree in the schoolyard, perched on its roots, and practiced verses.

For some students, this was their first encounter with poetry, and they took to it easily. “Them things is nice, Miss! Like songs!” I noticed a particular facility with poems in Nashima and Chris, two students whom I was tutoring. Both of them struggled with reading, but loved rolling the sounds of these poems around. The joke of the “po-tree” and the newness of Spanish words delighted these former non-readers, and they constantly asked me for more practice. Nashima perfected her accent and the word “tortillas.” Chris tried not to break into giggles each time he read his poem’s punch line. I began to realize the power of poetry to inject joy into the otherwise

Poetry
Janet Wong

“What you study in school? My grandfather asks.

“Poetry,” I say climbing high to pick a large ripe lemon off the top limb.

“Po-tree,” he says. “It got fruit?”

Books & Me
Pat Mora

We belong
together,
books and me,
like toast and jelly
o queso y tortillas.
Delicious!
¡Delicioso!
Like flowers and
bees,
birds and trees,
books and me.

grueling struggle of learning to read.

In the weeks leading up to the Delices Book Fair and Reading Fun Day, I taped bright fliers to the walls of village shops where people pass through to buy snacks and toiletries. I spoke to as many fathers as I could to encourage them to come and set an example for their sons. The schoolchildren assured me they would come ready to buy: “I’m going to bring $100 so I can buy 100 books!”

… a mother of one of the primary school students asked me when I would be teaching adults to read. My heart sank and expanded at the same time: a kind of moment when the depth of a challenge strikes you at the same time as a rising hope…

We invited a local parliamentary representative, the host of a popular Creole radio show, and a hotel owner—all Dominican men—to speak to the crowd of schoolchildren and their parents that gathered on a Saturday afternoon in October. A bookstore in Roseau donated a box of word puzzles to give away. We printed dozens of riddles on slips of paper for students to keep.

On the outside walls of the Youth Center, we posted quotes like “Wear the old coat, Buy the new book” and “Children are made readers on the laps of their parents.” We taped poems to the back of chairs. People came to sift through the hundreds of books stacked on tables, plucking out one or two to buy.

The radio host remarked that people were buying books “as if it was fish you was getting’!’ He talked about his childhood with dry bread to eat and a book as companion. After listening to their parliamentary representative read an Anansi story, the crowd spilled outside into the late afternoon sun and gratefully inhaled the smell of chicken and chips in the fryer.

Those old books brought in $140 that day. At the book fair, people chatted about the importance of reading stories with young children and the elderly, and what to do about the lack of male role models in school environments. The experience showed me that I could be an effective volunteer in Delices simply by starting conversations within the village about issues we all cared about.

As we were packing up the decorations and stacking chairs, a mother of one of the primary school students asked me when I would be teaching adults to read. My heart sank and expanded at the same time: a kind of moment when the depth of a challenge strikes you at the same time as a rising hope. Now my ambitions for this small library were growing to encompass whole families. I had helped get the idea of a borrowing library off the ground, but still ahead lay the work of renovation and getting new books to fill the bare shelves.

January 23, 2010

On our way to paint the library at the Jones Beaupierre Primary School in La Plaine, we squeeze into the Principal’s jeep and bump along the road. We move piles of books out of the library, disturbing insects and dust. Wood ants with big appetites had eaten chunks of the bookshelves so they sway as we paint them. We chip away at bits of paper glued to the walls. I sigh with disappointment as the Principal disappears without a word. But an hour later she

reappears and presents us with a full Dominican breakfast: codfish with green banana and salad, washed down with sweet gulps of cocoa tea. I keep smudging my plate with blue paint as I eat. Soon a broomstick is converted into a long paint roller, calypsos start playing on the radio, and we get back to work.

After the initial cleaning and clearing out, and the excitement of the book fair, the library projects gained momentum. Staff came into school on Saturdays to paint the walls a sunny yellow and bookshelves a deep blue color. Next we turned to the job of organizing the library collection.

I decided that grouping the collection by subject rather than reading level will be easier for students to use. The laminating of labels and the sorting of shelves began.

One boy who had little interest in books, started to compose "raps" and recite them to me: "I drink my cacao tea / under the mango tree…" I tried to incorporate more creativity in my work with students who were slow readers. Instead of drilling them with sight words for the umpteenth time, I asked them to dictate to me what they were thinking about lately. I heard about God, the breeze by the petrol station and tangerines.

I realized I was surrounded by oral poets: students who sharply observed their world but shied away from books and writing because they lacked basic literacy skills. I wanted to ease students into writing, but in the meantime, I shifted my focus and praise to the rich content of their stories, rhymes, and ideas.

January 28, 2010

At the Petite Savanne primary school, preparations are underway for the first day of the library's borrowing program. A lisping 6th grade boy struggles to recognize letters but nevertheless chatters on to me at a breakneck pace. I am instantly charmed by his imaginative narration and the excitement that electrifies his whole body.
I can barely understand him but do catch one question: do I have a picture of Obama? Students spend their lunch hour carefully taping up torn bindings in old books and watching me make labels for the different sections: Chapter Books, Dr. Seuss, Geography, Holidays, Dinosaurs, Geography, and so on. Older girls help me re-shelve and organize the collection. We make library cards by gluing the blank sides of two index cards together. On one side, we write the student's name and, spaced out underneath it: Date, Title, Stars. Each week, a student will find her card and fill in the day's date and title of the book she wants to borrow. When she returns the book the following week, she gives it a rating between one and four stars. Students are excited to have their own cards and watch over my shoulder as I write to make sure I don't forget anyone.

At this point, the library became a place worthy of exploration. Students stepped inside the bright walls, wandered between shelves, and read the labels in whispers. I still heard plenty of "Miss, dem books boring! Dem not nice, Miss!" but at least they were in the door. Each

school decided on a library day, so students knew that they returned and borrowed books on the same day each week.
Before I move on, allow me to review a few key lessons I learned during the initial stages of cleaning and renovating the library, as well as organizing staff and schoolchildren to utilize the space.

- 📖 Clear out all old or uninteresting books, and work with staff to determine the best strategy for giving them away or discarding them. You don't want a reputation as a book burner, trust me!

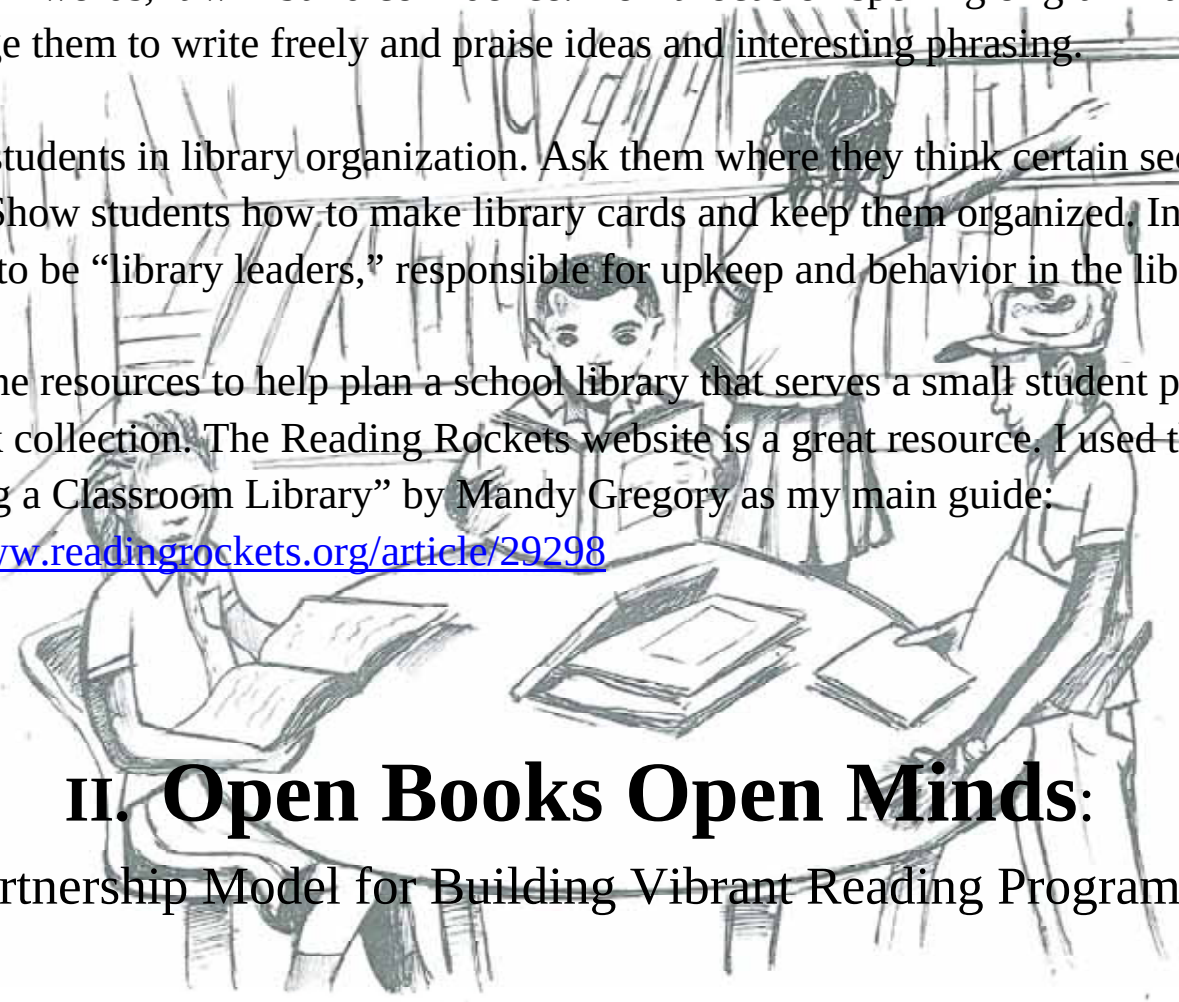
- 📖 A book fair is a good way to disperse old books throughout the community, introduce students to memorizing and performing poetry, and talk to parents about reading at home.

- 📖 Make library painting a community effort—seeing the space transform will build excitement among parents and teachers. Invite a local artist to design and paint a mural on the wall.

- Incorporate poetry into your regular tutoring sessions with struggling students. Learn a short poem together. “Poetry” by Janet Wong, “Books & Me” by Pat Mora or “My People” by Langston Hughes are good ones to start with. If a student has trouble writing, ask him or her to dictate a story or poem to you. When students see you writing down their words, it will build confidence. Don’t focus on spelling or grammar, but encourage them to write freely and praise ideas and interesting phrasing.

- Involve students in library organization. Ask them where they think certain sections belong. Show students how to make library cards and keep them organized. Invite older students to be “library leaders,” responsible for upkeep and behavior in the library.

- Use online resources to help plan a school library that serves a small student population and book collection. The Reading Rockets website is a great resource. I used the article “Creating a Classroom Library” by Mandy Gregory as my main guide: http://www.readingrockets.org/article/29298



II. Open Books Open Minds:

A Partnership Model for Building Vibrant Reading Programs

Now that the school libraries were bright and welcoming, I knew the students were right: they needed a collection of exciting books to keep students engaged. But unlike a book fair and a few small paint jobs, the purchasing and shipping of hundreds of new, hardcover books was going to require some serious fundraising. I was at a loss. Luckily, I found just the right partner.

“Why stop in Delices?” The question seemed to genuinely perplex Sam Raphael, the owner of Jungle Bay Resort, as we sat across from each other at his desk. “Our employees come from the villages of La Plaine and Petite Savanne. We would want to create libraries in those schools also.” What had limited the idea’s reach was me, of course, being only one person living in Delices.

I was so excited by the support of this Dominican businessman, however, and I wasn’t about to tell him to be reasonable, think smaller. My main concern was fundraising for beautiful (expensive) books. This didn’t faze Sam in the least.

Students began borrowing books two and three at a time. At the end of the school year, teachers and principals reported that the program was bringing about changes: higher scores on National Assessment tests, improved writing skills, and students who (voluntarily!) write and learn poetry.

“Our guests will come on board,” he assured me. “Once this thing gets going, we could raise the money within a few weeks. What you need to do is write up a description of the program and make a list of a hundred and fifty books you think these libraries need. We’ll put it up on the hotel website… What are we going to call this program?”

And just like that, *Open Books Open Minds* was born. I quickly grew accustomed to Sam's unwavering confidence in ideas. His attitude was, "Yes, of course that is possible! We will get it done. Oh, you're not afraid of hard work are you?"

I expanded my weekly travels to include schools in the neighboring villages, and benefitted from contact with more teachers, principals, and students.

Sam and the rest of the staff at Jungle Bay ushered me into the exciting world of PR: we wrote press releases, designed a logo, and passed out hundreds of *Open Books Open Minds* bookmarks to guests. Donations started trickling in. Hotel staff contributed portions of their tips through the Jungle Bay Community Fund. My own family and friends responded generously. Within four months, we had raised enough funds to purchase our first installment: 75 new books for each of the three schools.

In March 2010, we celebrated the handing-over of new books with a ceremony at Jungle Bay. Students from the primary schools attended as well as leaders in government and education. We all admired the new books on display: classic children's stories, Caribbean folklore, science, superheroes, poetry and foreign languages.

A collective sense of awe hovered around the books. I hoped they would survive the rough-and-tumble school environment. I wondered if they would accomplish what we'd hoped: entice students to read for pleasure and fuel their curiosity about the world.

I didn't wonder for long. Students began borrowing books two and three at a time. At the end of the school year, teachers and principals reported that the program was bringing about changes: higher scores on National Assessment tests, improved writing skills, and students who (voluntarily!) write and learn poetry.

Meanwhile, the program encouraged visitors to Dominica to connect with local communities. I kept in touch with several Jungle Bay guests who visited the schools, and who continued to ask about the students and send boxes of books.

The project's initial success planted the seeds of an *Open Books Open Minds* NGO that aims to create a chain of beautiful children's libraries in primary schools throughout Dominica. For now, Jungle Bay and Rosalie Bay Resort serve as the program's foundation and community base. Peace Corps Volunteers link the various schools together through daily interaction with staff, development of library curricula, and evaluations of program impact.

Today, *Open Books Open Minds* has evolved into a comprehensive literacy initiative that will unfold in three phases and over approximately three years.

Phase 1 - "Transformation" is a period of relationship building and integration into a particular school. Laying this groundwork is essential to the success of the program. During the initial phase, *Open Books Open Minds* consults with staff about the school's needs, collects current test scores, and assists in library renovation. Libraries often require new paint, installation of carpet, and repairing of shelves. After renovation is complete, the participating school receives its first of two collections: 200 children's books covering an array of subjects.

Phase 2 – “Education” encourages students and teachers to take full ownership of their new library by creating an organizational system and catalogue for the books, teaching students how to properly care for books, and establishing a weekly borrowing program for students of all ages. School communities establish routines around the library. A schedule for cleaning, organizing, and enjoying the space integrates the library into the school day.

Open Books Open Minds offers support to teachers as they develop and implement library activities: including creative writing, drama, and book reports. Once library programs are running smoothly, schools will receive the second installment of 200 more books.

Phase 3 – “Evaluation” takes stock of the condition of the library, teacher and student satisfaction with the program, and student literacy scores. *Open Books Open Minds* is committed to evaluating its impact in schools, so that it can both improve practices and illustrate effects to potential donors. For these reasons, the program asks teachers to report students’ National Assessment scores each year. In addition, *Open Books Open Minds* and its Peace Corps Volunteer coordinators conduct pre- and post- program surveys of student attitudes toward reading. Volunteers also interview primary school students periodically about their experience in the library and how it has affected their skills and enjoyment of reading. Feedback from students is an important guide in making adjustments to the program.

Open Books Open Minds is only in its second full year, and we are still learning how best to create partnerships between schools, volunteers, resorts and visitors. Our common vision keeps us motivated and keeps the work collaborative and rewarding. Here are a few things I’ve learned so far:

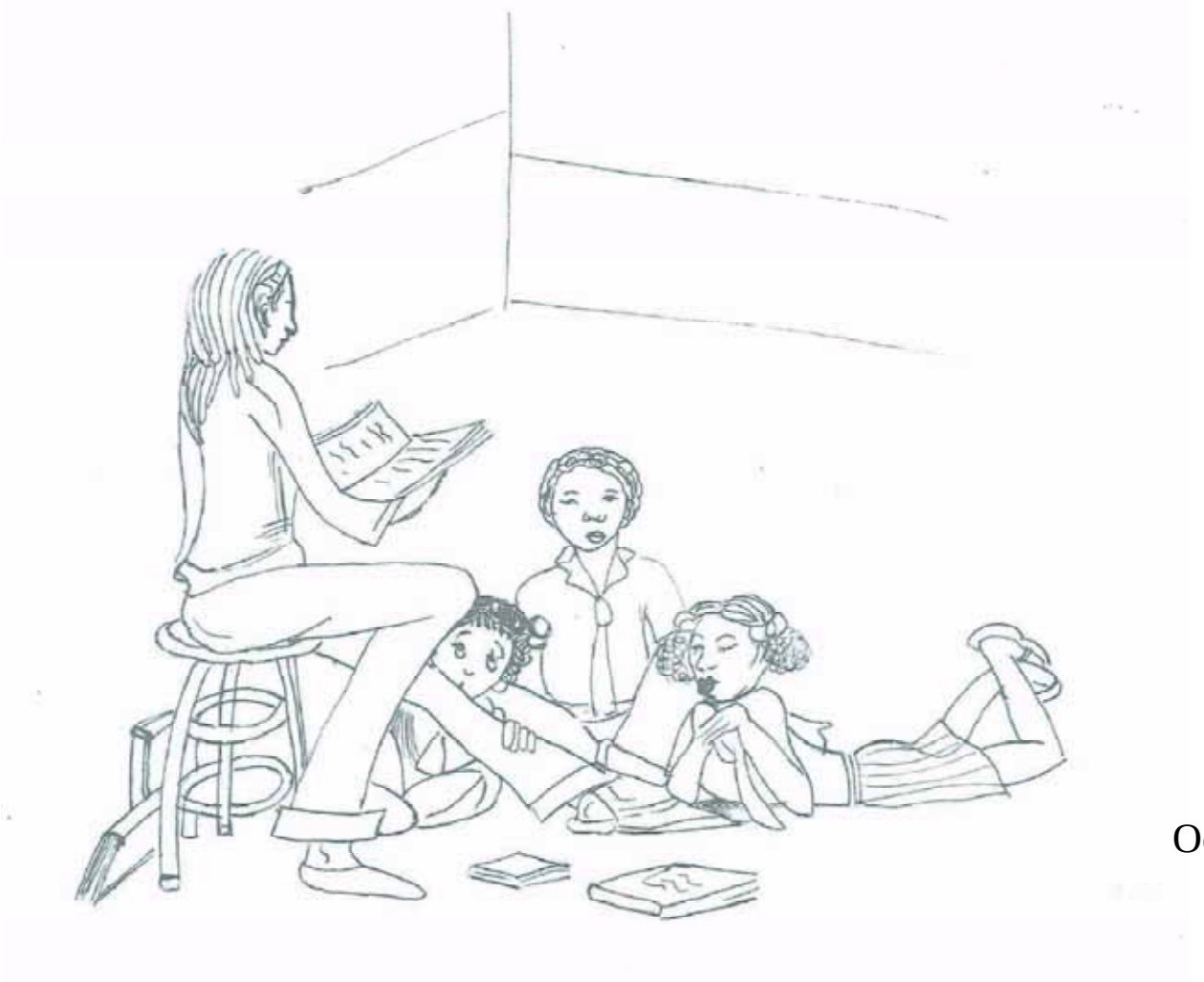
- Think big through partnership. Local resorts and other businesses can open new avenues for fundraising, broaden a project's support network, and encourage you to expand your ideas.

- Take time to develop a wide-ranging collection of books for the library. Ask family, friends, and teachers for suggestions. Capture young boys with superheroes. Early chapter books are another important category.

- Celebrate program accomplishments. Invite leaders in the community so they can spread the word about the initiative. Including students in the handing-over of new books reinforces their importance and builds responsibility.

III. Life of the Library:

How to Cultivate Enthusiasm & Respect in School Libraries



October 4th

No ride means I arrive at the Petite Savanne school red-faced and arms glistening with sweat. A chorus of greetings: one girl assures me that she read her book each day over and over. A boy tells me he finished his chapter book and then started it again. Worried eyes and soft voices confess books forgotten at home. Grade 2 and 3 recite the poem "My People" so beautifully, and we snap and sway to "Things" by Eloise Greenfield. Words and images tumble from a grade 6 boy: "Space, Miss! Like a giant sponge. Huge galaxy. I wish I could go out there, discover new planets, aliens…"

October 7th

I meet a library in total disarray. New books teeter in random piles on chairs. Students streak through the room and shout at each other as corn curls and other snacks scatter on the floor. The Principal shakes her head in disappointment at students not caring for the books. Not enough teacher supervision, she says. I sigh. A rag smelling of bleach, a "natural" broom made from banana leaf fibers – we get to work fixing up the place.

Working in primary schools can make your head spin. You go from feeling effective—inspiring even—one day to helpless and overwhelmed the next.

For me, certain days in the library were utter chaos. No matter what tack I took, kids bounced off the walls, told me the books were no good, and I usually ended up giving myself a headache from shouting over the din. On days like that, I simply herded classes in and out of the library as fast as I could, letting them borrow books and then sending them back to their teacher.

Like many Peace Corps Volunteers, I find the role of disciplinarian uncomfortable even if it is unavoidable. I picked my battles. When students approached me to tattle on so-and-so for shoving them, I usually responded with some exasperated version of "work it out amongst yourselves." But I did care about rules that helped set a tone of respect in the library. I wanted to ensure that the books lasted in fairly good condition, and students were my best allies in this endeavor.

From the program's start, we set out to cultivate respect and reverence for books among students. As I repaired old books in the libraries, students watched and helped me clean the covers and tape flimsy bindings. I noticed that they began to handle the books with care and remind each other (usually by shouting) that there is no food allowed in the library! This is an important point, because some Dominicans ask, why invest so much to buy expensive books for students who don't appreciate them, who will just ruin them?

In my mind, we all need mentors whose behavior we can model. In villages where most information is shared orally, students may not see many people modeling the behavior of reading. But they learn that behavior each time a teacher picks up a story to read to her class. Likewise, young students need someone to teach them how to care for and handle a book. This is just reality and shouldn't be a justification for denying students beautiful books!

I contacted a librarian at the national library, Roseau Public Library, and asked if she was willing to make the trip out and speak to students about book care. Mrs. Davina Jones and

a colleague happily made the journey from Roseau to lead sessions on how to keep books in good condition, as well as research strategies for the older students.

“What shouldn’t you do with a book?” they asked a group of young students.
“Eat it!” came the immediate response from a kindergarten child.

The students whom I’ve worked with in rural primary schools take excellent care of the books, once someone has shown them how to do it. Students enjoy the responsibility of filling out their library card, borrowing books, and returning them on time. Usually, when they fail to return a book, it’s because a parent has swiped it!

One afternoon in the Delices primary school library, two second-grade girls studied a stack of books in the “Award Winners” category. They pressed their fingers on a Caldecott sticker and observed, “That one got money.” They checked the cover of the book underneath for a coin-like sticker. “That one don’t got money.” And that is how the Newbury and Caldecott winners in the library were sorted and declared “money.” Of course, children’s books do carry currency, but not in award stickers. When you read *The Legend of Strega Nona* to an appreciative lunchtime crowd and the students’ eyes dance as they chant along with the magical Strega, "Bubble Bubble pasta pot, make me some pasta nice and hot, I’m hungry and its time to sup, boil me some pasta to fill me up!"—that’s as good as gold. There is no better insurance for the long life of a book or the constant use of a library than great stories that students return to again and again.

Here are thirty titles and series, both new and classic, that kids love:

Babymouse by Jennifer Holm

The Boxcar Children by Gertrude Warner

Blueberries for Sal by Christian Ahrens

Brave Irene by William Steig

Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney

Flat Stanley by Jeff Brown

Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown

Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss

Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss

How the Grinch Stole Christmas by Dr. Seuss

The Hello, Goodbye Window by Norton Juster

I Stink! by Kate McMullen

If You Give a Mouse a Cookie by Laura Joffe Numeroff

In the Night Kitchen by Maurice Sendak

I Spy books by Jean Marzollo

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis

Little Bear (An I Can Read Book) by Maurice Sendak

The Legend of Strega Nona by Tomie dePaolo

The Magic School Bus series by Joanna Cole

Magic Tree House series by Mary Pope Osborne

Nancy Drew series by Carolyn Keene

The Napping House by Audrey Wood

The Ralph Mouse Collection by Beverly Cleary

The Ramona Collection by Beverly Cleary

Cars and Trucks and Things That Go by Richard Scarry

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown

Shrek by William Steig

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig

Wayside School by Adam McCauley

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

Here are some distilled lessons I learned about keeping libraries organized and friendly to students:

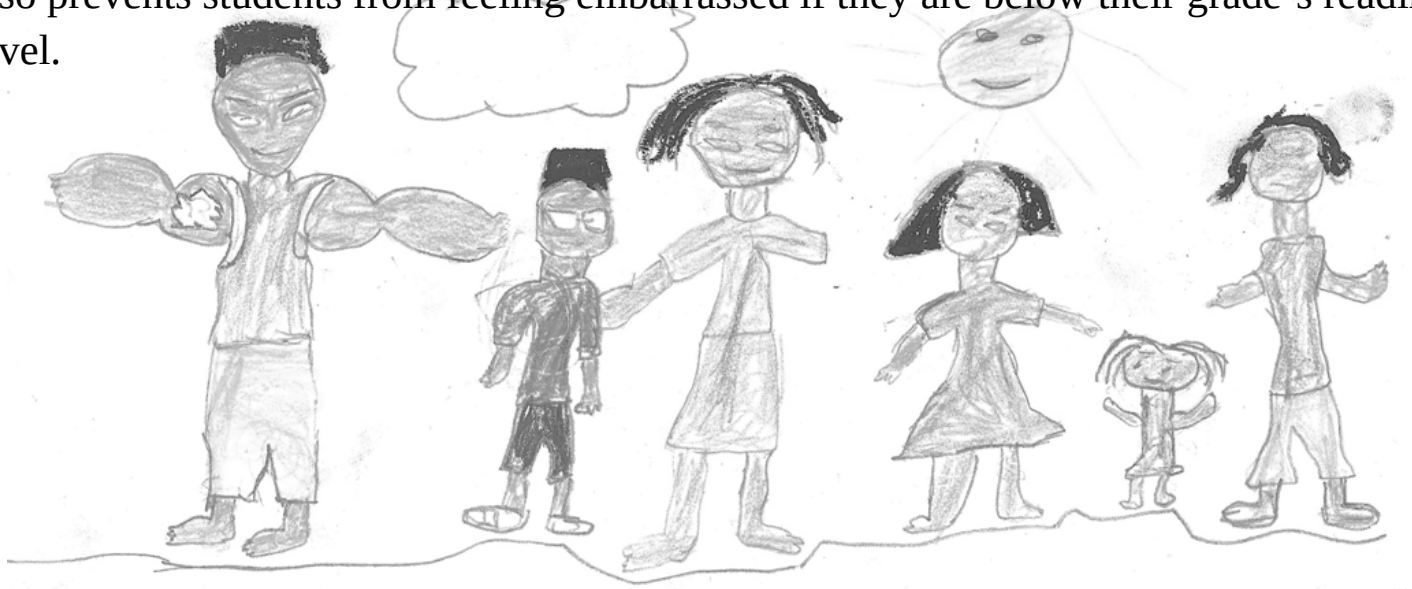
- 📖 Gather a team of teachers and librarians to devise strategies to teach respect toward books and good behavior in the library. This might include a group of older students act as “library leaders” who generate guidelines and remind younger students to keep the space tidy. You may also help students plan how they will keep books in good condition when they bring them home.

- 📖 Ask for help from local experts. Get in touch with a large public library and share your program with them. Ask librarians to visit the primary schools and share what they do with students. They can address different educational needs of students.

- 📖 Enjoy the library yourself and read aloud to students as often as you can. Choral poetry recitation is another activity that creates a lively environment, one that students will want to preserve.

- 📖 Lead by example. If students see adults whom they respect such as teachers, principals, and volunteers handling books with care, repairing torn pages, and keeping the shelves tidy, they will follow suit.

- Consider an organizational system for the books that is intuitive for students. Rather than grouping all books by reading level, consider shelving the collection by category. If students know that all superhero books go in one place (marked with a label), it will be easier for them to return their book and find a similar one that will interest them. This also prevents students from feeling embarrassed if they are below their grade's reading level.



IV. Creative Kids:

Reading and Writing Poems with Caribbean Students

July 19, 2010

Scenes from summer poetry camp: A little boy in the village of La Plaine speaks softly about the recent drowning of his two cousins, carried out to sea by one treacherous Atlantic wave. "He don't come back, nuh." "Fish ate pieces of him." I don't know what comfort I can give him, but I suggest that he try to put his thoughts down on paper. Under a tree in the schoolyard, he sits bent over his notebook, intently writing.

Later in the morning, I ask the students to draw maps of their hearts. This activity is a warm-up to writing poetry; students reflect on what they care deeply about. I ask them to sit for a moment and think about memories, people, and places that have stayed in their hearts over the years. "Miss, I can't draw!" I assure them that artistic skill isn't necessary, and that they should fill the entire page with their maps. What begins to materialize on papers are hearts like honeycombs, different compartments for each object or memory. Felix gives "catching crayfish" its own room in his map. Sherris' heart contains a warren of rooms for family, foods she likes, friends, books, and rivers. Another student draws tears over a tragic lineage of dead pets. Rene devotes a large section of his map to illustrate his dream of owning a house someday and helping his mother with money. He fills the rest of the page with a red-colored sea for his drowned cousins. One boy draws a woman with long blonde hair and a friendly expression. She is wearing long robes that touch the ground. Seeing that he has written "Jessie" beside the woman, I asked who Jessie is, thinking maybe she's a character from television or a movie. "That's Jesus!" he squeals with indignation.

Next we study Langston Hughes' poem, "April Rain Song." I leave out certain words and ask students to fill in the blanks. I steer kids away from predictable responses like "let the rain wet you" and encourage them to try and surprise me.

April Rain Song
Langston Hughes

Let the rain _____ you.
Let the rain beat upon your head with _____ _____ drops.
Let the rain _____ you a _____.

The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
The rain makes running pools in the gutter.

April Rain Song
Langston Hughes

Let the rain kiss you.
Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.

The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
The rain makes running pools in the gutter.
The rain plays a little sleep song on our roof at night—

And I love the rain.

The rain ___ ___ ____ ____
____ on our roof at night—

And I love the rain.

A precocious boy named Curris rises swiftly to the challenge: "The rain makes jet planes crash from space on our roof at night!" That image opens the floodgates and soon poetry is rolling off their tongues: "Let the rain fill you," "Let the rain beat upon your head with strong, holy drops."

After we rewrite the poem with new words, I show them Hughes' whole poem.

A bit of a letdown for some students who insist that their versions are better than the original. I agree, and ask them what they like about Hughes' words.

Students immediately respond to the lines about rain as a lullaby, playing "a little sleep song." They know the sounds since many of them sleep under galvanized steel roofs that amplify the pat-pat-pat of falling showers. We talk about repetition in the poem, how it resembles a song. The students are beginning to see rain differently, recalling different times it kissed or beat them.

"Poetry refreshes the world," Wallace Stevens writes.

It is happening now as these children, so familiar with rain, are thinking of it in new ways and with fresh language.

The idea to run a summer poetry camp for kids in the Southeast was planted by Celia Sorhaindo, a local writer, who approached me at the Open Books Open Minds book presentation ceremony. "How are you going to keep all of this going over the summer?" she asked about the book borrowing. Yes, I could travel between villages on different days and keep the libraries open to students. More than that, summer offered the time to do creative

work—writing and drawing—that always seemed squeezed during the typical school day. Celia wanted to invite kids from the Southeast to the Nature Island Literary Festival in August, a national event in Roseau that draws writers from all over the Caribbean. Remembering how much kids in Delices loved learning poems for the Reading Fun Day, I suggested a poetry camp.
Hopefully, by the end of the summer, students would be able to write something to present at the festival. Celia agreed to help me with planning and to visit the camp to talk about her job writing for magazines. I was so excited at the thought of kids from the Southeast performing their own poetry at a national literary festival in Roseau, I did not dwell on the fact that I hadn't the faintest idea how to teach kids about poetry.

My purpose, of course, wasn't to train a squadron of young bards, but to use poetry to release students' authentic voices. To free them from constant censorship for correct spelling. To spark a love and curiosity for words. To shift their focus from memorization to creativity and authorship. Should be easy, I told myself. But the truth was, I didn't know where to start until I stumbled upon the work of American poet and educator, Georgia Heard. Her books, *Awakening the Heart* and *For Good of the Earth and Sun*, served both as manuals and inspiration for me as I set out to develop a curriculum around kids and poetry. I am deeply grateful to her for sharing lists of poems and letting me borrow many of her ideas for this resource. I held tightly onto each of her teaching suggestions like buoys that kept me above water despite my lack of experience.

Heard writes, "One of the most important life lessons that writing and reading poetry can teach our students is to help them reach into their well of feelings—their emotional lives—like no other form of writing can." I hoped poetry would help the kids I worked with in

Dominica sift through their rich inner lives too. When I read her words, “Many people don’t believe children have their own ideas, their own lives to express. After awhile, children begin to believe this is true,” I remembered hearing people say that Caribbean children just plain lack creativity. With the help of Heard’s work and wisdom, I had found the tools I needed to break that idea apart.

The Creative Kids camp began to take shape as teachers suggested students to invite, and I collected permission slips from parents.
During the first week of camp, I asked, “Where does poetry hide?” and shared with the kids this quote by Naomi Shihab Nye:

…poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceiling the moment
before we wake up…

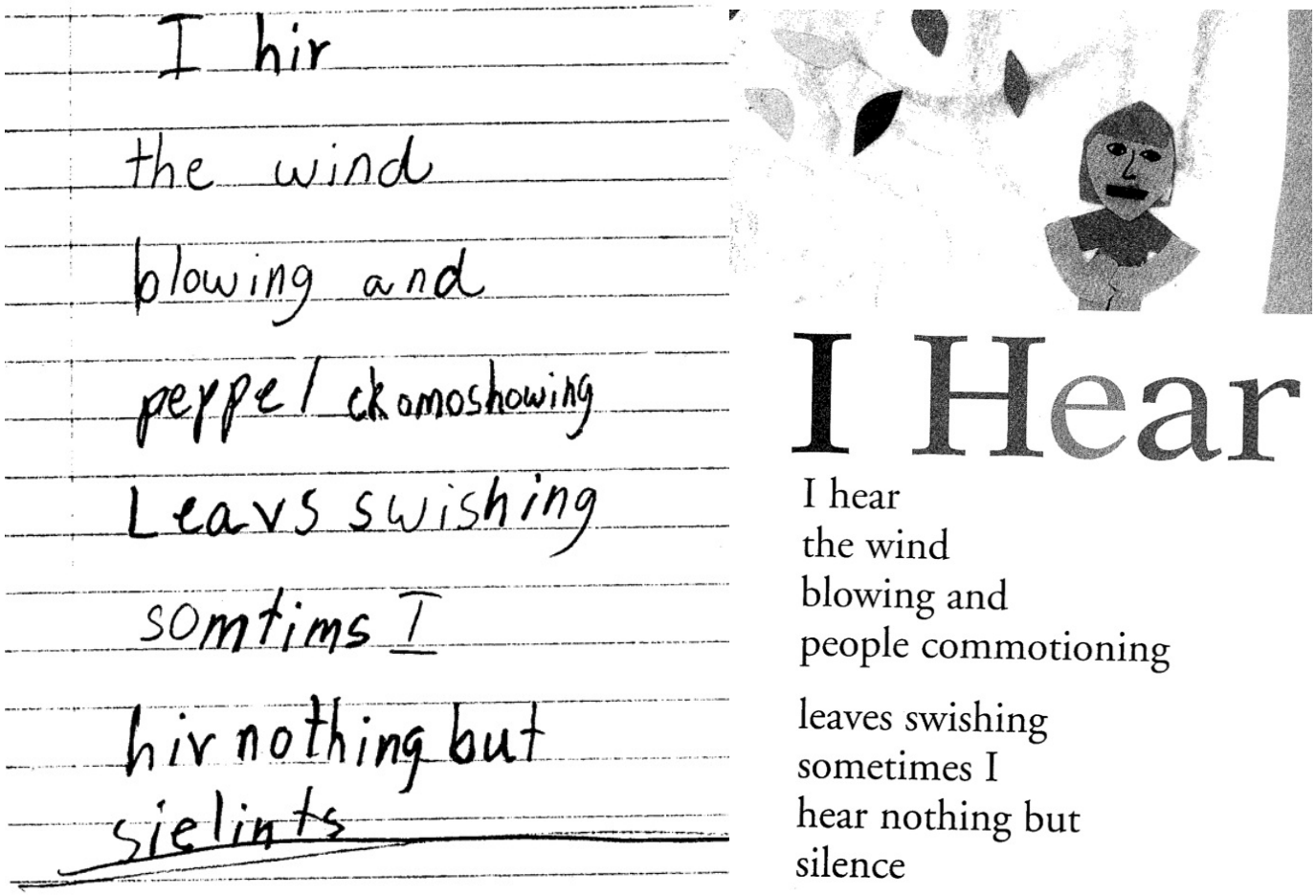
They responded with bewildered stares. And silence. Poetry, they seemed to be thinking, was rhyming words found in old books. So we talked more about what they already knew: poems were sometimes funny; they rhymed; poetry was difficult to write.

Realizing that a lot of kids didn’t have any background on the subject, I used Heard’s explanation to describe what I meant by “poetic:” words that make a picture in your mind, say something in an unexpected way, give a strong feeling, or bring up a memory from your own

mind. I told them not to worry about spelling or saying things in proper English when they wrote poems.

We looked at a few examples of poems written by kids their age (see Appendix). This allowed them to see that poems begin scrawled messily on a page, not typed neatly in a book. I used student example poems from Regie Routman's *Kids' Poems* series published by Scholastic. These free verse poems about bossy older sisters, chores, and favorite holidays warmed up students to writing about their own lives.

Freed from the constraints of rhyme, students began to write about a rich variety of topics. Sherris described a jellyfish as "soft and shocking." Kurt wrote a great poem about a trip to get a cavity filled, describing the dentist's drill spinning like a tornado. Without having to learn the terms, students peppered their poems with simile, alliteration and metaphor.



I hir
the wind
blowing and
peppel ckamoshowing
Leavs swishing
somtims I
hir nothing but
sielints

I Hear

I hear
the wind
blowing and
people commotioning

leaves swishing
sometimes I
hear nothing but
silence

— GABRIEL MACK

From *Kids' Poems: Teaching Third & Fourth Graders to Love Writing Poetry* by Regie Routman

Here are examples of first poems written by students in the “Creative Kids” summer camp.

Car
by Felix, Grade 2

Red cars
Yellow and black
Moves fast and the
car is big.
It passed by water
It drive on water
It goes in road
and sometime I make the car
go in my house.
And the car make
wwwwmmm.

There is a lot to praise in this poem. I love the surprise at the end: the reader realizes it’s a toy car that can go inside Felix’s house. The details about the car’s journey going past water (I imagine the river or ocean), driving on water, and the sound “wwwwmmm” all put us into the writer’s point of view.

When she began, Jhanai wanted to write a poem about her mom. She described her as pretty and nice. I asked her to think of her mom as a pie, with many different slices.

“Sometimes it’s difficult to write about something so big. Maybe you can choose a smaller piece of your mom to write about.”

Jhanai immediately settled on shoes. Again, she wrote they were pretty and shiny. I asked her to compare them to different things, to think about the sound they make. When she described the heels to me, Jhanai used the Kwéyòl word for skinny, *meg*, and I encouraged her to keep it in the poem.

Often in teaching poetry, I needed to encourage kids again and again to keep their spoken language—descriptions, sounds, phrasing—intact in their poems.

Beautiful Shoes
Jhanai, Grade 3

My
Mother likes beautiful shoes
black
as shiny as gold
the heel
meg like a cylinder
When you walk, it make
"*po po po po*."

My Sister
Briana, Grade 4

My sister is as pretty as a beautiful pink flower.
Nice like a yellow sun.
Kind because she always gives me food.
She watches TV when she's out of work.
She drives a jeep to Roseau.
My sister likes to play rounders with me.

The voice of an admiring younger sister who hones in the details of her older sibling's life is the beating heart of this poem.

After students wrote first drafts, we did some initial editing.

"Cracking Open Words" was an enormously helpful activity at this point. The idea is to break open tired words like "nice" or "pretty" and find the images inside them. I explained to students that great poems give your reader a picture in her mind. So instead of "It was a nice day," try to help the reader *see* the day by including colors, sounds, tastes, etc. Then I asked them to crack open the sentences below by closing their eyes and seeing what images appeared to them. "Now repaint the sentences using your own images and words."

EXAMPLE: It was a nice day. = The bright sun peeked over Morne Paix Bouche and cut diamonds across the blue sea.

We had a lot of fun. =

The flowers were beautiful and colorful. =

She was a good person. =

"Spinning Metaphors and Similes" helps kids think outside the box and re-imagine ordinary things. Students try to think of as many unusual comparisons as they can. I did this exercise with a group of students at the Nature Island Literary Festival. One of my favorite student responses was "A pineapple is like a sweet tasting yellow blowfish that puffs up." Here are some other examples:

Love is like:	A pineapple is like:	My mother/father is like:
a flowing river that carries you away	*the ray of a golden sun*	*a soft pillow lap*
	slices of yellow smiles	*a tall frame of a door*

One day, lacking any other venue, I held poetry camp in my kitchen. I grabbed a few green guavas ripening on top of my fridge and passed them around to the small group of students. We imagined what else a guava could be: a moss-covered rock, a dinosaur egg, a moon. This spinning led Curtis to write a poem about the origin of green headlights: "While the car was driving, the guava / was falling. It broke / the light and became it."

Next we moved on to an exercise called “What We Say Is Poetry.” This activity encourages kids to find the seeds of poems in everyday language and phrases. I asked students to pretend they were spies: “Keep a list of expressions that surprise you or describe something in a new or beautiful way.” Every time they sat at their kitchen table, played in the schoolyard, or rode a bus, I told them to listen for interesting things they overheard.

A couple students intuitively understood this idea and offered up poetic seeds: Overheard on a crowded bus: “Girl, your bone prickin’ me!” A mother’s instruction: “Children are meant to pray and obey.” A weekend chore: “Sherris, go and wash the windows; Sherris, GO and wash the windows!” This activity opened a discussion of repetition, and how using one word or phrase gives a poem power. Dana and Aaliyah, both eight, wrote poems after choosing a line they wanted to repeat. Aaliyah is a confident writer and scrawled hers down on paper. Dana wanted to dictate her poem to me; she spoke it fluently, and it came out of her mind fully formed.

In the Shop
Dana, Grade 3

In the shop at night
I hear my friend curse.
It makin’ my heart beat
hard.

In the shop at night
I smell drugs—Red Cap,
Soca,
and I feel so so afraid.

In the shop at night
I see people drink a lot of
rum.
They lookin’ sad.
Their faces ugly like a tiger.

Dana’s poem, like many written by students that summer, brought to mind Robert Frost’s thoughts on the origins of poetry: “It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness.” Dana was a student who was very

hesitant to put pencil to paper: “Miss, how ‘night’ spellin?” But when I sat down beside her and asked her to tell me her poem, images and words flowed from her with only a little encouragement. This experience made me wonder how many insights into students’ lives we miss out on because of impatience or insistence that students write everything down before it’s worthy of our attention.

Exploring poetry with students reminded me that making art at any age demands patience and pays great rewards.

In her “Beauty Poem,” Aaliyah describes the sensation of being lost in nature (“I felt like the water in the barrel, / cold and pure”) and called back by her mother to family life. Picking cherries, hunting crabs, burning grass—these are the subjects of poetry written by Dominican kids.

Pablo Neruda advises young poets, “You not only have to open the window but come through the windows and live with rivers and animals and beasts…to discover things, to be the sea, to be in the mountains, and approach every living thing.” Students from rural villages throughout the Caribbean have a distinct advantage here. Not only does nature provide dramatic settings for their poems, as in Eden’s “Crab Hunt,” but students’ familiarity with wild things also opens up a treasure trove of metaphor and simile with which to articulate their internal lives. In Curris’ poem, “Children Making Fun of Me,” a volley of name-calling overwhelms him. He writes, “I am grass bending down. / I want to go home / where it’s warm like the sun.”

My favorite aspect of poetry camp was learning a poem by Langston Hughes, “My People,” with students and seeing the poems it inspired them to write. Reciting the poem together became our ritual at the beginning and end of each camp session. The poem proved to be a rich template for students’ creativity. “My People” doesn’t rhyme, but it’s repetition and rhythm made it easy for students to learn quickly.

Learning poems by heart isn’t common practice in schools nowadays, but I discovered students get a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment from committing short poems to memory. For teachers, poetry recitation provides a good opportunity to help students with public speaking: pronunciation, clarity, volume, and speaking with emotion. As time went on, students began to read “Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people” with an emphasis on “souls,” drawing out the word in a soulful way and dropping their voices for effect.

I introduced the poem to students by reading it aloud a few times. I asked students to close their eyes for the second reading to help them see the images. After reading, I paused to let the words sink in. I reminded myself not to overwhelm the students with too many questions.

After a minute, I asked, “How does the poem make you feel?” “What pictures do you see in your mind?” “Does the poem remind you of anything in your own life?” Students identified a sadness in the poem. It made them see images of the night sky, their own family members, and a glowing sun. Students also made up interpretive movements to go along with the words:

My People
Langston Hughes

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also are the souls of my people.

Arms circle above heads, as though
reaching toward the night sky,
hands touch faces,

Hands open and close like flashing stars,
fingertips softly pass over closed eyes,

Hands form a circle and rise like the sun,
hands touch heart for souls

Students' "My People" poems sing with familial love and work. Zanna, age 8, spoke verses of her mysterious poem to me: "The eyes of my people are bright like a full moon. / Their faces are round like a new chick egg / in a nest / on a tree. / The souls of my people are clean / like a house top."

I was amazed as student after student wrote beautiful poems about the daily rhythms of their people: sharing ground provisions with neighbors, cleaning the yard, washing plates. Like

Hughes' poem, their writing contained a current of melancholy; they did not shy away from pain. Curtis ends his poem, "Painful also is the slaughter of the animals. / Painful, also, are the stories of my people."

Aaliyah writes, "Crushed, also, are the bananas. / Crushed, also, are the hearts of my people." Students did not sound despairing as they read aloud these lines, but rather matter-of fact, as though simply stating the truth of what they see around them.

My People
Devanne, Grade 2

Love each other when we
bathe in rivers.

Hardworking when we wash clothes
and put
cheese, baloney and butter in bread
for me.

Funny when we make jokes about
shocking,
falling down on water.

In students' lives, enveloping love mixes with deep sadness and wells of disappointment.

I watched these poems emerge with awe. They confirmed what I suspected all along: these students all had poems tucked away, beautiful scenes strung together into portraits of life. They are honest: admiring the efforts

of their parents and not blind to their struggles. And because these children are no strangers to work, their writing travels between the worlds of carefree play and responsibility.

Inspired by Langston Hughes, these young poets mined their natural environment and struck upon original comparisons. Curris writes, “The cow horns are sharp, so the ears of my people.”

The tools of poetry and the skills of observation it nurtures help students becomes stronger writers and communicators. In one of our weekly “extra lessons,” I asked Aaliyah to write me a letter. She was participating in the poetry camp at the time, so I reminded her to use all the different senses in her description of her day.

She wrote:

Dear Miss Aly,

This morning I work for my uncle. He is very good and I love him. My best part of my day is when I work. My work was: mop, wash clothes, wash the dishes and the plates. The smell I took was the smell of roast potato and fried bakes.
The taste was nice—delicious pancakes. And the sounds I heard was transports passing by my house. And music in my neighborhood. And people walking and talking. My worst part of my day was when a dog was running behind me.

As I watched students write poetry, I remembered one of my earliest conversations after moving to Delices. A young boy named Chris had befriended me. Barack Obama had recently

assumed the presidency. I asked Chris, did he like Obama? What did he think of him? His eyes sparkled, “Plenty private transport, Miss!” I marveled at this Caribbean boy who, while commentators in the U.S. dwelled on the obvious significance of Obama’s election, was most amazed by the President’s motorcade. I tucked this story away as a reminder that when we ask students about their internal lives, opinions and dreams, they answer in unique voices.

The kids of Dominica invited me into their many-roomed hearts, painful memories, and daily lives filled with love. I will always be grateful. I hope that, through writing poetry, they begin to realize their great talent and go after ambitious futures for themselves and their beautiful island.