Some years ago, I became one of the volunteers who went into local elementary schools as part of our district’s “writers in the schools” program. The idea was not to read my own works, but to help kids become enthusiastic about and comfortable with writing stories and poems of their own. And so it was I found myself in front of a third-grade class, where I was to do weekly one-hour sessions for eight weeks.

The regular teacher sat nervously in the back, game but obviously worried about the chaos I might bring to her well-ordered classroom. Just what I was up against quickly became clear, as I told the kids to get out pencil and paper. “Whoosh!” almost simultaneously the twenty-eight desk tops went up, the paper came out, and “Bang!” the desktops came down in unison. The students looked at me expectantly and were amazingly quiet—even stiff. Fortunately, many of the exercises I came with were “icebreakers,” designed to free kids from ordinary expectations and loosen up their imaginations.

Over the weeks an amazing transformation took place, both in the class as a whole and in the standing of some individual students. The class did become noisier the longer I was there, but this was the sound of enthusiasm, and the kids were rarely unruly. One of the star writers was a scruffy-looking student, the classic kid “from the wrong side of the tracks” who lived in a trailer court near the edge of town. He had not succeeded at much of anything in his school career to date, but his poems and the drawings he made to accompany them captured images and feelings that struck one as remarkably true and perceptive, especially for a boy so young. Every week he couldn't wait to show me his latest work, and I watched his confidence growing as he read his poems to the class. His picture of the “mootercycle” (as he spelled it) I rode to school ended up gracing the cover of the class’s collection of writings.

Meanwhile, it was much tougher going for the girl who was the usual star student. Her work was filled with clichés, and it was clear she was not comfortable working from her feelings and imagination. It was also clear that she felt her position at the top of the class was being threatened and that she had rivals from unexpected quarters. She knew she was not “getting” this poetry business, and by the third week she came up to me nearly in tears and asked if I could just tell her “what to write.” Fortunately, after several more weeks she began to get the hang of writing creatively and was even, I think, beginning to enjoy exploring this different aspect of school work.

These two students epitomize for me just a few of the reasons the arts belong in the core curriculum. For the boy, and many other kids like him, the arts offer ways to take advantage of different “intelligences” and talents that allow them to succeed in the classroom as they never have before—and even become enthusiastic about school. And for the girl, there was not only the chance to explore new facets of herself and new modes of expression, but perhaps it also allowed her to see other students in a new light, and to appreciate what each of us brings to school, to work, and to the family.