

black asphalt

Visits to the heart of education

by Tom Hunter

One boy didn't join the group when the others did. He sat back under the window against the wall as the teacher predicted he would. She didn't tell me why, just that I shouldn't worry or do anything about it. She's been teaching kindergarten a long time and her confidence goes well with her gray hair.

I started singing before the children were settled in a clump on the floor in front of me. The teacher went to sit with the boy under the window. I couldn't hear what she said, but the boy shook his head as she gently touched his arm, left him there against the wall, and returned to join the clump. It looked familiar, like a ritual they both knew well, something they relied on to make interaction easier or maybe even possible. He didn't look defiant, and as far as I could tell, she offered no threat or reward to get him to come closer to the singing.

The first song grew from repetitive phrases and gaps in the lyrics for children to fill with their suggestions. "Come on and clap, clap, clap, clap," and then they wanted to sing "stomp" instead of "clap," and then "wiggle."

The singing got better and the suggestions livelier. "Come on and jump," "come on and sing," and then someone added "with your mouth way wide open, like this." It was so much fun and so impossible to form the words when we kept our mouths open as wide as we could, we had to repeat that verse three times.

The second song also left room for kids' ideas — "a lot of trees start from seeds so small." What else grows? What could we put in place of "trees"? Again, the singing and the suggestions got more confident as we went, and toward the end of this song, I noticed the boy wasn't against the wall any more. He was halfway to the group, inching along on his butt so slowly that I had to watch closely to see his progress.

He hadn't quite made it to the back of the group by the time we started the third song. It was about rainbows and again I made room in the song for the kids' ideas. What color do you want to sing about? Can you think of something outside with that color? We had yellow flowers, a white cloud, a red car, and by now the boy was on his knees looking

at me over the last row of children. He had joined the group on his own as if the combination of questions and talking and singing had reeled him in. Someone wanted to sing about a brown dog, and then a purple house. That's when the boy raised his hand. "What color do you want?" I asked him. "Black," and he spit it out like he was throwing something at me. "What's black outside?" I asked. "Asphalt," and if the word had actually been what he said, it would have hurt.

As I sang "the asphalt outside my window is as black as black can be," it occurred to me that in all the hundreds of times I've sung the song, not once had anyone suggested black asphalt. I don't know why it's never come up. It just never has, even with so much black asphalt on inner city school playgrounds.

I stopped singing and told them I had never sung about black asphalt before. It was a brand new idea to me. The

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whole group was staring at me, totally quiet. It's amazing how still a group of kindergarten kids is when they're thinking as hard as they can. It was a complicated moment. Black asphalt, a unique idea, my interrupting to tell them so, whatever the boy's relationship was with the rest of the class, him joining the group on his own, the interaction and singing of the group — several streams fed the moment and each made that moment bigger and more still than it would have been if any one of them had been missing.

In the middle of all that, the boy stood up. It was like he was emerging from the stillness rather than interrupting it. He folded his arms and with a big smile, he said, "That's me, I'm the one." Even as a visitor, I knew right away something important had happened. I immediately glanced back at the teacher and saw big tears as if his words had flicked a switch somewhere in her. I started to ask what the tears were about and she stopped me. "I'll tell you later," she said.

We sang probably five more songs and that boy stayed there kneeling behind the other children. He sang, too, and had more good ideas. I was still curious about the teacher's tears so after school I found her in the kindergarten room. "That boy is the best bully I've ever had," she said. "In 23 years of teaching, he's far and away the best." She told me how he often walks across the

classroom to make a child cry or runs across the playground to pick on another child. She said she knows where and how he lives and the chaos breaks her heart.

Then she quietly reviewed what had happened during the singing — the boy against the wall "where he usually is," slowly joining the group "and on his own, too," more children making suggestions for the songs, such energetic singing, then his suggestion and all of us singing what he said. She was remembering details the way people do when they want to hold onto a moment a little longer, as if remembering might help her hold the boy, too. "And you celebrated his idea," she said. "That's what got me. You didn't say anything about how he said it. You just celebrated what he said. I haven't figured out how to celebrate that boy in this classroom and until I do, he's going to have trouble and so am I."

She had gotten a glimpse of something beyond helping a boy behave appropriately, and 'celebrate' was her word for it — not just getting along with him or co-existing, but celebrating. She had glimpsed how interactive singing can lead to that kind of celebration, even in the most chaotic and hard-bitten of people. No one had planned it. It was not an outcome hoped for from a lesson plan. It had emerged instead from a structured experience of asking questions and singing the answers. It

had emerged from listening to the children, and from the complicated stillness listening often creates.

Her tears seemed exactly the right response. I couldn't help thinking ahead and wondering if that boy will ever achieve 'a grade level.' Maybe he and others who bring such chaos with them will pull the test scores down. But one thing seemed very clear from my time in that classroom: for now, he is in exactly the right place. He has a teacher who will cry for him, and if anything is going to help him learn what the school wants him to, it's the relationship she's working hard to create.

Neither of us spoke for a long time. I was grateful for the chance to linger with what had happened, partly to remember it and partly because I've come to love the look teachers get when their relationship with a child takes them so far from the curriculum they can't see requirements any more. All they see is the child.

Finally, she spoke again. "What a moment for him," she said. True enough, I thought, and what a moment for her too.

Information on songs mentioned:

Come On and Sing, ©1995, Tom Hunter
Seeds, ©1985, Tom Hunter
Rainbow Round Me, ©1982, Ruth Pelham