

Mentorship Among Young Poets in the Voice of the Children Workshop

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Young people are insufficiently recognized for their cultural contributions as writers and their capacity for mentorship. The Voice of the Children Workshop was innovative in many ways. Poet June Jordan and educator Terri Bush co-facilitated this weekly workshop for young Black and Puerto Rican writers that began with junior high school students from Brooklyn and continued for four years from 1967 to 1971. Over that time, the young participants held leadership and editorial roles with the weekly publication they produced, and as they aged, older participants mentored younger participants who joined the workshop.

In this paper, I look specifically at a pair of participants for evidence of mentorship and literary resonance. As an older teen, Vanessa Howard, an original participant in the workshop, singled out a poem by Eric Smith, a much younger poet. Smith's poem is a thematically rich text that engages with ideas of age, autonomy, and authenticity, and appears to have influenced one of Howard's subsequent poems about children. I argue that young people have nuanced understandings of age and agency, and that young writers' agency and authority can be supported by strategic acts of older writers. This example of a young poet promoting the work of an even younger poet suggests the resourcefulness of young poets as mentors and as political agents who can help elevate the status of other young poets.