

Journal Writing in the Early Years: A Look at Recent Research and the Journals of Six First Graders.

by

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Introduction

Most research on journal writing in the elementary grades focuses on the benefits for the writers, as well as on common developmental trends of the writers. In addressing linguistic benefits, Lund (1984) states that providing students with the opportunity to engage in written dialogue with themselves is an essential first step in leading them toward a mastery of the entire writing process. Hippel (1985), Simpson (1986), and Kintisch (1986) also support the important role that journal writing plays in developing the acquisition of written communication skills. Farley and Farley (1987) found that a child continued to show improvement in writing performance, without directed structural or mechanical practice. Hippel (1985) and Kintisch (1986) claim early journal writing experiences enhance development in oral language, listening, and reading. In addition, they claim that the use of journals focuses on meaning, illustrating the natural relationship between writing and reading, and allowing the two to be learned simultaneously. Kintisch (1986) also found that in kindergarten, teachers noticed, "many children...learning to read earlier than before journal writing was introduced." (p. 168) Kintisch advises that young children should be given the opportunity to share journal entries with classmates or the teacher as sharing fosters development in describing, questioning, and listening. Sharing encourages children to make connections between their pictures, oral expression, and text. As children discuss topics and share their journal entries with their classmates, a valuable sense of community evolves (Kintisch, 1986; Hippel, 1985). Furthermore, through sharing, children find functional, meaningful reasons for writing, since they have real audiences with which to interact. Sharing of journals, with the teachers allows a teacher to get to know the children better personally (Hippel, 1985; Strackbein & Tillman, 1987; Simpson, 1986). As well, the sharing of journals with teachers allows them to serve as "an individual record of growth in language awareness," for use in evaluation (Strackbein & Tillman, 1987, p. 31). Language arts instruction can be based on these evaluations, although entries need not be marked or graded.

well, increased familiarity with their own stories leads to increased interest in telling and illustrating stories (Kintisch, 1986). Dyson (1988) claims that journal writing provides children with the opportunity to reflect upon, organize, and share experiences by enabling them to talk about current activities, past experiences, and possible future events. She claims that other cognitive benefits can also be derived from journal writing. Students can achieve a greater awareness of self through the medium of their own reflective writing (Lund, 1984). Lund notes that by providing students with a nonthreatening and unrestricted opportunity to engage in written self-expression, teachers allow students to view their own writing as a valuable means of self-discovery. Reflective writing enables children to clarify or comment upon their experiences, which allows for greater self-knowledge and enhances their ability to make sense of their world. Lund points out that Vygotsky, 1926; Bruner, 1975; Moffett, 1983 all support this view of language as a venue of thought development.

Hipple and Kintisch claim positive emotional development can result from journal writing. Children develop positive self-concepts as they learn to see themselves as writers and feel a sense of accomplishment and enthusiasm for writing (Hipple, 1985). As children are encouraged to write in journals from year to year, they see their ideas as being developable (Kintisch, 1986). As well, Hipple (1985) notes that children can deal with strong or troubling emotions through their journal writing. Therefore, journals can serve as an emotional outlet.

Two common developmental trends were noted in the research literature. Hipple (1985) found that kindergarten children's content and language became more sophisticated as the year progressed. Some children's linguistic structure developed from single word descriptors to sentences of varying complexity. Some children used invented phonetic spellings, while others were at the transitional stage. Hipple also observed that the evolution of writing text was not always linear or predictable. A mature writer did not always write a complex text. This is similar to the findings of Manning, Manning, and Hughes (1987), who observed that the journal entries of individual children in grade one were not always at the same developmental level. Kintisch (1986) noted that children used richer vocabulary and wrote more easily and confidently than before journal writing was introduced. She found that there was repetition of form and meaning at the early stages of journal writing. Well, children had a need to use the same language patterns. Kintisch (1986) and Hipple (1985) both found that although topics at the kindergarten level were diverse, most tended to be about real happenings in children's immediate lives. They discovered recurrence of certain themes, and found most entries involved drawings. Kintisch observed

that as writers mature, their topics tend to be less like the real world and more imaginative. This usually occurred in grades two and three. These findings support those of Manning, Manning, and Hughes. Farley and Farley (1987) found that children sometimes change their writing to match the adult models given by means of responses.

In summary, the claim that student-centered journal writing provides children with the opportunity to engage in meaningful, functional writing that facilitates language development and greater self-awareness, is reinforced by the above research.

Procedure of this Study

In this study the journals of six first grade children were read in order to examine what the children chose to put in their journals; to note any developmental trends in their writing; to note the nature of teacher responses.

The children in this study wrote daily in their journals during a twenty minute period. The teacher told the writers that they could write anything they wanted, and write only if they wanted to. The contents of the journals between September and February were studied carefully. The observations were compared with the above research findings regarding journal writing, and in particular, with those in the Manning, Manning and Hughes studies.

Findings

With respect to content, all of the children wrote significantly more about themselves and others, as opposed to fantasy and/or isolated concepts.

All the children wrote from the beginning of the year but some students did lose interest in journal writing over the observational time period.

All the children wrote daily, although the teacher told us that all children were not required to write daily. (It was discovered from interviews that the children were required to write in their journals daily.)

No peer sharing occurred - this may have been due to the fact that the teacher had never thought of encouraging this.

Copying text from classroom charts or books rarely occurred in this study (one child, once). It was impossible to interpret whether or not the children's writings were retellings of stories read or heard previously.

Half of the children in the study included scribbles, letters, and pictures only, in their entries at the beginning of the year.

dren continued to consistently include drawings.

lings strongly support the idea that children's writing is not always the same developmental level. It was observed that on some days dren wrote, while on other days, they only drew pictures. The dren also reverted from invented spelling to dictation, throughout observation period.

dings as Compared to the Research Literature

reviewed research noted several common developmental trends in dren's journal writing throughout a school year.

se trends were as follows:

ntent and language became more sophisticated over the year.
ll six children demonstrated this trend. However, within these six, the degree of growth varied considerably.

he evolution of text was not always linear or predictable.

ll six children reverted back to drawing only pictures and labelling isolated concepts, even after they demonstrated ability to write more complex sentences.

ost entries involved drawings.

ll six children drew pictures from the beginning of the year. They continued to do this throughout the year, although occasionally a child would write text only.

Children's writing progressed from labelling (single word), to sentences of varying complexity.

Five out of the six children did progress from single word form to sentences. One child, Ann, began the year writing sentences. She did label isolated concepts using the sentence frame ("This is a ...").

here was a progression in spelling development.

ll six children progressed in spelling development. However, not ll of them began at the same stage, or progressed in the same manner or degree. At the beginning of the year, four children wanted the teacher to either write their words in their journals or in the board for them to copy. During the interview, the teacher indicated that one child, Alex, insisted on this because he wanted "correct spelling" in his journal. The other three children required the teacher's assistance because they felt unable to write words on their own.

One child, Kent, did not seem to progress as much as the others in spelling development. He continued to rely on the teacher to write his sentences for him to copy, throughout the observational period. Interestingly, it was observed that only one entry (in late January) consisted of his own invented spelling - "I LiK stoME DAS" (I like stormy days). Unfortunately, there was not teacher feedback in his journal in response to this significant step forward.

Ann began the year using pre-phonetic spellings, one letter, one word correspondence (e.g., i G T B i H S" I am going to build a tree house) and also used invented phonetic spellings only.

Alex's first two journal entries were dictated and the teacher added personal, positive comments. For the third entry Alex used initial and final consonants without any vowels on his invented spelling (e.g., "I Wt FRA BC RD" I went for a bike ride). This attempt at invented spelling was not encouraged or supported by the teacher (the writers observed no response whatsoever on the page). Of course, it is possible that the teacher provided some positive verbal feedback, or perhaps she was unable to translate the message. It is significant that the next fifteen entries were all teacher dictated (copied from the board). It wasn't until the end of October that Alex began to try invented spelling, again with no response.

Linda used invented spelling in her second entry. She was given direct positive feedback for this effort ("Your writing is super, Linda!) Following this, Linda continued to use invented spellings and dictated and copied sentences, interchangeably.

Carol started the year with dictating and only used her own invented spelling on the twenty-fifth entry. She received a positive response ("I like your writing, Carol") but continued to rely on copying from the board. In January, she began to use more invented spelling and by February was using it in all of her entries.

It was observed that Cathy had a difficult time forming the letters themselves. Her journal entries began with scribbles and it was obvious from her copied entries that she had difficulty printing and copying. It was not until January that Cathy began to do any invented spelling.

• Children change their writing to match adult models.

The teacher in this grade one class rarely responded in writing to the children's entries. However, when she did, none of the children modelled her ideas, sentence structures, or spellings.

students matured, the content became more imaginative.

Four of the six children included imaginative content in their writing, toward the latter part of the observation period. However, the proportion of imaginative to realistic content was still very low.

Conclusion and Summary

Correspondence with the literature, journal writing appears to be a worthwhile activity for young children. However, due to several reasons, some of the children's interest levels in journal writing waned during the observation period. Firstly, the children were obligated to write every day, whether they felt they had something to communicate or not. The children indicated that they had to write about personal happenings. Therefore, they did not feel free to write imaginative stories, or copy texts. Being able to include a variety of types of writing may have helped to keep their interest. In several children's journals the teacher made comments such as "Linda, I want to see you writing at least one page in your journal about things that are actually happening in your life. For example: An outing that your family took or what you did last night," and "Alex, in your journal can you write about things happening to you?" The writers feel that such comments stifle their creativity, as well as devaluing the children's ideas.

Teacher rarely responded in writing to the children's entries; often a check mark was given. A lack of response or an impersonal response (check mark, stamp etc.) is neither encouraging nor motivating and may in fact give the impression that their entries are not very important. In some cases, when writing accompanied a drawing, the teacher commented only on the drawing (underneath a picture of a hand: "That's a Daim: 'Response: I like your colorful picture, Ann.'") This type of response often did not congratulate the child on significant progress in writing. As well, by the teacher not responding regularly, few written models of spellings, sentence structures, punctuation and ideas were made available to the children. This lack of response, and the fact that sharing of journals was not suggested or encouraged, perhaps contributed to the student's feeling that there was no real audience for writing. Perhaps this led to the deterioration of interest level.

I feel that although it is commendable that this teacher incorporates journal writing daily into her language arts program, it would help to motivate the students if the teacher also at times wrote in her journal. Following are some suggestions for teachers wishing to implement journal writing in their classrooms.

1. Have a regular, scheduled time, preferably daily. This indicates its importance.
2. Respond to the writing by dialogue journaling with as many entries as possible. This is especially important for young children. It is motivating to the child and the child can model the teacher's conventional written language examples.
3. Keep the process non-threatening. Evaluate for your own use only. Don't mark errors in red pen! Don't comment on mechanics or be judgmental of content. ("...teachers need to be patient and flexible, to be willing to follow a child's lead in his or her writing. Too much pushing or prompting makes the resultant entry too much the teacher's, too little the child's." (Hipple, 1985, p. 260)
4. Accept drawings as a form of written communication for young children.
5. Occasionally have the child dictate ideas (Kintisch, 1986).
6. Teach by example. A personal, professional journal can be a useful aid to teaching. ("...show the way by keeping a journal ourselves." (Simpson, 1986, p. 33)
7. Date the journal entries daily. (Children can easily stamp each entry themselves). This is important in order to keep an accurate record of amount written each session as well as growth over time.
8. Content should be determined by the individual children. Allow and encourage both realistic and imaginative content.

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