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“I’m not an author, I’m a human being.”: **Journal writing** **in a kindergarten classroom**

As I (refers to Jennifer) sat staring at the third six-week kindergarten checklist, I could feel my level of anxiety rising. The kindergarten writing expectations for that grading period rose from “writing a recognizable first name” to “listing words.” My heart was beating rapidly as I noticed that by the end of the year, the children were expected to write readable sentences, too. This high criterion had me doubting my students’ progress. A majority of the students were at a very low developmental writing stage. Occasionally, we practiced writing in journals. Most children would scribble down a picture and then tell me about it. After they told me about the picture, I would write down their description. This low level performance triggered my interest in the stages of writing. I decided to begin a daily journal writing program in hopes that my children would progress naturally through the developmental stages of writing.

RELATED LITERATURE

Traditionally, many teachers believe that students could not learn to write until they have a complete understanding of the letters and sounds of the alphabet. However, current literature on early literacy development suggests that there is a strong

relationship between early writing experiences and learning to read (Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Clay, 1993; International Reading Association [IRA]/National Association for Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998; Morrow, 1997). As Morrow (1997) points out, “... by experimenting with writing, children construct and refine the kind of knowledge about written language that makes reading possible” (p. 259). “Many of the operations needed in early reading are practiced in another form in early writing” (Clay, 1993, p. 28). In recent years, early writing activities have been advocated as developmentally appropriate teaching practices in the early childhood curriculum (IRA/NAEYC, 1998; Bouas, *et al.*, 1997; Clay, 1993; Diffily, 1995; Norris, Reichard, & Mokhtari, 1997).

Throughout the literature, I noted several conditions that were mentioned as being crucial to fostering early writing development. These include (a) teacher modeling, (b) routine scheduling, (c) conferencing, and (d) allowing children to write about subjects that are familiar to them (Bouas *et al.*, 1997; Green, 1997). A brief description of each of these conditions follows.

Teacher modeling. Researchers suggest that students learn best from imitation. For example, Hertz and Heydenberk (1997) imply that teacher

modeling is very important when teaching writing. They suggest that mini-lessons are the perfect opportunity to teach about the different forms of writing as well as brainstorming topics.

Routine scheduling. Having a set routine fosters security in the classroom. This helps the students to become confident writers. "A consistently scheduled writing time helps children expect it, value it, and look forward to it" (Bouas *et al.*, 1997, p. 5). In addition, a writing period allows for teacher modeling, journaling and conferencing.

Conferencing. Conferencing with students in small groups and with individuals can provide essential support for writing. Students also benefit from sharing with each other in small peer conferencing groups.

Self-selected writing. Most importantly, students should be allowed to self-select writing topics. Children will be more interested in writing if they are allowed to write about their own experiences and knowledge of their world (Green, 1997).

PURPOSE

Because of the demanding writing expectations at my kindergarten campus, I decided to begin my own writing program. This writing program also served as the focus of an action research project I conducted as part of a graduate program for beginning teachers (see Resta, 1996). My study was based on the following question: How will journal writing affect a kindergarten classroom?

A series of sub-questions resulted from this main question. They are as follows:

- ◆ How diverse will the stages of writing appear in my classroom?
- ◆ Will students view themselves as good writers?
- ◆ How do parents feel about their child's writing ability?

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This action research project was conducted in my classroom at Carver Kindergarten in Lockhart, Texas. Carver Kindergarten is a Title I school with an enrollment of 450 students. There were twenty-one students in my kindergarten class. The project was implemented throughout a seven-week period during the spring semester.

Each journal-writing session began with a mini-lesson. During this lesson, a child would volunteer a sentence to write. For example, Devante provided the sentence, "I rode to California on my bicycle in my bikini." The entire class would re-

peat the sentence four times so that they could remember the sentence. Next, I would write the sentence on a large sheet of paper with the help of the students. They sounded out and spelled the words to me. They also told me where to put spaces and how to punctuate the sentence. If the children spelled something incorrectly, we would talk about the way that kindergartners write words and the way the same words are written in books. After writing the sentence, we would read it, and conclude the mini-lesson by illustrating the sentence. The students called out details as I frantically drew. Sometimes we brainstormed writing ideas as a class. Telling the children what to write about was something I avoided.

After the mini-lesson, the children returned to their tables and made their own journal entry for the day. Journals included the date, a picture, and a sentence or short paragraph. The children were encouraged to talk with their tablemates during this time. Conferencing helped the children to come up with ideas and learn from each other.

Each day, I would sit at a different table to observe the children at work, helping them upon request. Again, I was careful not to tell the children what to write or how to spell. I would simply help them to sound out words and give encouragement.

DATA COLLECTION

During this study data was collected in multiple ways. These included student journals, an emergent writing developmental continuum, student interviews, and parent surveys.

The "Emergent Writing Developmental Continuum," from **Practical Aspects of Authentic Assessment: Putting the Pieces Together** by Hill and Ruptic (1994), is divided into five developmental writing stages. These include preconventional, emergent, developing, beginning, and expanding. Throughout the study, all of the children's daily journal entries were read, analyzed using criteria from the developmental continuum, and coded according to the stages of writing. Individual student progress was recorded on a class list. Each week I totaled the number of students within each category on the developmental continuum.

To gain insight into the children's own writing views, I conducted a student interview. The interview format was adapted from Diffily (1995) and was given at the beginning and the end of the study. While the original interview asked questions about reading and writing, my research fo-

cused primarily on the writing portion (see Sample A).

Sample A.
Children's Writing Interview
(PRE- and POST-)

- ◆ Do you know what an author is?
- ◆ What does an author do?
- ◆ Are you an author?
- ◆ Can you write?
- ◆ What is your writing like at school?
- ◆ What is your writing like at home?

In the post-interview, I also asked "Do you think your writing has changed from the beginning of the year? How?" Through these interview questions, I hoped to determine growth in children's confidence as writers.

The same interview form was adapted into a parent survey. Again, I focused on the writing portion of the survey (see Sample B).

Sample B.
Parent Survey
(PRE- and POST-)

- ◆ Does your child know what an author is?
- ◆ Does your child view him[her]self as an author?
- ◆ Does your child write at home?
- ◆ What is your child's writing like at home?
- ◆ Does your child read his[her] writing to you?

In the post-interview, I also asked "How has your child's writing changed from the beginning of this study?"

The parent survey was sent out at the beginning of my research and at the end. Through this survey, I hoped to determine the parents' views about their children's writing development.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The children's developmental writing progress was recorded on the developmental continuum and tracked weekly. As expected, seventy-one per cent (71%) of students were at the preconventional and emergent stages during the first week of the study. This percentage dropped dramatically to twenty-one per cent (21%) during the last week. Most importantly, the number of students in the beginning stage nearly tripled by the end of the project.

In comparing the responses of the pre- and post-student interviews, increases in positive or correct responses appeared in each category. The greatest change in responses was the children's knowledge of what an author is. This response increased twenty per cent (20%). The second largest change was in positive responses to whether they viewed themselves as authors. Other encouraging results of the post-writing interview showed that all of the students (100%) believed they could write as opposed to ninety-five per cent (95%) in the pre-interview. When asked the question, "Do you think your writing has changed from the beginning of the year?" eighty-five per cent (85%) of the children indicated that their writing had improved.

As a result of comparing the pre- and post-parent surveys, the greatest improvement was a thirty per cent (30%) increase in positive responses to the question, "What is your child's writing like at home?" On the other hand, decreases in positive answers were noted in each of the following questions: "Does your child write at home?" and "Does your child read their writing to you?" In the post-survey, eighty-two per cent (82%) of parents indicated a positive change in their child's writing at the end of the study.

Results of the analysis of the data indicated that students did progress through the developmental writing stages during the time of this study. Interestingly, however, I noted that the number of students within the stages of writing fluctuated each week. I believe this could be the result of individual progress rates as well as teacher proximity. For instance, I noticed that children tended to write at a higher developmental stage when I was sitting at their table. When I was not at the table, those children would revert to earlier stages. For example, one child reached the expanding stage during the sixth week but reverted to the beginning stage during the seventh week. This variation seems to be consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) "scaffolding." In other words, when I was present at the table I was able to provide more support to enhance these children's writing.

Results of the children's interview indicated that the children did know what an author was by the end of the study. However, most of them did not consider themselves to be authors, although all of them believed that they were writers. In fact, most of them even indicated that they were good writers. It is possible that the children did not view themselves as authors because I usually introduced a published book by pointing out who the author

was. Perhaps, these children did not make the connection between being a writer and a published author. One child, when asked if he was an author, answered, "No, I'm a human being." (He was making a connection with the children's book character Arthur by Marc Brown). In the future, I will make it part of my program to encourage the children to view themselves as authors.

When looking over the parent interviews, I was pleased to see that most parents realized that their children knew what an author was at the end of the study. They also indicated that their children did not view themselves as authors. There was a considerable decrease in the amount of writing that was observed at home. Parents also indicated that the children were not sharing as much of their writing with them. They did take into consideration the fact that it was the end of the year and baseball season, too. One parent indicated on the survey that his[her] child would rather be outdoor playing than indoor writing. On the other hand, I was pleased to see that an overwhelming majority of parents believed that their children's writing had improved since the beginning of the study. One parent wrote, "It is a lot better to read it and she's able to put words together when writing." Another parent responded, "I noticed a big difference. She used to write some letters backwards, or didn't know how to punctuate."

CONCLUSION

Overall, I believe that journaling helped the students in my class to develop naturally as writers. By incorporating the various conditions I found in the literature into my journal writing program, I provided students with the necessary framework to grow as writers. These conditions included the following: teacher modeling, routine scheduling, conferencing, and self-selected writing.

Moreover, the journals made it easy for me to assess their writing development and to focus on children that needed more attention in this area. In addition, the students were able to see themselves grow as writers by flipping through their journals. Cathy said it best when looking through her journal, "I used to scribble. Now I've grown up and I write pretty good."

Based on the positive outcomes of this study, I plan to begin the journal writing activities during the first semester of the academic year. My hope is that by starting earlier in the year, my students will progress even farther in their writing development by the end of the year.

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