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# Development of writing through journaling with senior educable mentally handicapped

Bonita M. Custer  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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# Development of writing through journaling with senior educable mentally handicapped

## **Abstract**

Recognizing that many senior high school students who are labeled Educable Mentally Handicapped (the term used in Nebraska) have had few opportunities to have fulfilling experiences in school, a rich literature-based language arts program was developed for a class. This group had many opportunities to respond with their ideas and feelings, one of which was journaling.

As the school year progressed, I, as their teacher, found that I was modifying and changing my daily instructional plans because their reading and writing generated ideas and instructional needs. In their journals, they began to write more freely with more skill and creativity. Their journal responses indicated a more accurate assessment of their abilities.

**Development of Writing Through Journaling With  
Senior Educable Mentally Handicapped**

**A Graduate Journal Article**

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**by**

**Bonita M. Custer**

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Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Jeanne McLain Harms  
Director of Research Project

4/26/2000  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Jeanne McLain Harms  
Graduate Faculty Adviser

4/26/00  
Date Approved

Rick Traw

Rick Traw  
Graduate Faculty Reader

4/26/00  
Date Approved

Rick Traw

Rick Traw  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

## Abstract

Recognizing that many senior high school students who are labeled Educable Mentally Handicapped (the term used in Nebraska) have had few opportunities to have fulfilling experiences in school, a rich literature-based language arts program was developed for a class. This group had many opportunities to respond with their ideas and feelings, one of which was journaling.

As the school year progressed, I, as their teacher, found that I was modifying and changing my daily instructional plans because their reading and writing generated ideas and instructional needs. In their journals, they began to write more freely with more skill and creativity. Their journal responses indicated a more accurate assessment of their abilities.

When senior educable mentally handicapped students (SEMH, the term used in Nebraska) reach high school classrooms, they have achieved limited success with reading and writing. These students have had many experiences to affirm their lack of academic success. Therefore, the students need new approaches that challenge them (Phinney, 1998). By developing a program that builds on the students' bank of acquired language abilities and cultural backgrounds, teachers can select topics of interest and thereby energize learners to become better readers and writers (Cambourne, 1998; Hansen, 1998; Graves, 1994). As a result, students can develop thinking-language abilities and can learn to assume more responsibility for their learning (Gaskins, 1998; Rhodes and Shanklin, 1993). This type of learning environment can create a fairer, more accurate assessment of each learner's achievement (Frank, 1994; Traw, 1998).

#### Nurturing SEMH Students' Writing Abilities

This project will focus on nurturing SEMH students' writing abilities through journaling. The process of writing does not occur in isolation but is related to all aspects of the language arts (listening, speaking, and reading) as well as people's background of experiences (Smith, 1994). Writing as all the language arts is a process to create meaning (Graves, 1994).

## Considering the Writing Process and How It Can Be Nurtured

In developing a program for SEMH students, teachers need to recognize that as young children, these students believed they could write and did write (Smith, 1995; Graves, 1994). Now, in presenting a writing program to these adolescents, teachers must reclaim this interest and this confidence. A positive in beginning a writing program is to assume the teacher and the students are co-partners in extending the students' writing abilities. As collaborators, teachers and students can work together to develop their thinking-language abilities (Geller, 1985).

A subtle way for teachers to be closely related to their students' writing activity is to write with them and then to discuss their progress (Cambourne, 1988). As students find success, their pride in creating meaning will energize them to strive to improve their craft (Van Scoy, 1995). The force that is created when writers have opportunities to select topics can propel them to develop their written pieces (Graves, 1983).

All students in the process of becoming writers need support in selecting topics for writing (Graves, 1994). A print-rich learning environment will greatly facilitate the task of finding meaningful topics.

Examples of literature representative of the different genres and appropriate for this age group offer models of language and content that can provide valuable background for writing. Teachers can offer quality literature pieces through reading aloud experiences. Students of all ages and abilities enjoy this experience (Leal, in J. Gambrell & J.F. Almasi, 1996). For students with limited reading abilities but higher thinking-listening abilities, it is possible for them to comprehend through listening much more difficult material. These experiences also create interest in language activities (Durkin, 1978-79).

Options for literature experiences and related expressive activities can also support language knowledge and ideas for writing. Students of all ages appreciate owning their experiences. These choices can be presented through learning centers. For example, a bookmaking center with models and materials can encourage students to write for an audience (Harms & Lettow, 1998). This publication can be shared with many audiences – teachers, peers, and family members. Such sharing needs to be guided by the teacher so that the student writers have positive feedback from the audience (Beardsley & Marecek-Zeman, 1987).

Reading is connected to writing (Calkins, 1983). As writers engage in the components of the writing process (selecting topics, drafting,



redrafting, revising, and publishing), they are reading (Graves, 1983).

When writers progress in writing pieces that are relevant to them, their curiosity may entice the authors to read further for more information to expand their writing (Smith, 1981).

As individual students develop distinctive learning styles, various approaches need to be implemented for writing instruction (Cairney in J. Gambrell & J.F. Almasi, 1996). Students who learn more easily through a hands-on approach may find puppets or drawing a picture leading naturally to a writing experience. Students who dance can be encouraged to put rhythm into poetry writing (Booth & Moore, 1998). Students who create sound effects in the classroom perhaps can be encouraged to use that talent experience to write a drama with sound effects. Experiences with the arts as drama, movies, concerts, art exhibits, and dance concerts within the school and in the community are positive exposures to developing writers (Cambourne, 1988). Experiences involving the senses and the various components of the literature-based environment are necessary for writers to realize that their ideas have importance to audiences (Yeager, 1999).

### Journaling To Relate Instruction and Assessment

Instruction that is closely related to assessment can promote students' writing abilities. Mentally challenged students need many experiences

to support them in progressing with their writing and raising their morale (Bratcher, 1994). Several types of qualitative assessment can be used to describe the students' progress. Interest inventories supply direction to the teacher for discovering the students' interests and learning styles of students (Glasser, 1965). The inventories can also become a quick-study to determine if students have missed the opportunity to engage in meaningful writing activities (Sloan, 1991). Checklists can also keep teachers abreast of student progress. Students can be involved in recording their progress and instructional needs on checklists (Walker in J. Gambrell & J. F. Almasi, 1996). Teachers find journaling a fairer, visible assessment tool for themselves, the student, the parents, and the public (Traw, 1998).

### The Value of Journaling

Journaling is writing ideas and emotions in the form of entries on a regular basis, usually in commercially-bound booklets. To make journaling a meaningful experience, students need to be free to select the topics for their entries. The importance of journaling has gained considerable attention (Graves, 1998; Traw, 1998). Teachers are discovering that by developing relevant topics with students, the class members can respond in their journals to common interests and goals

and then share their entries with others. Journaling can allow students to move within the security of their interests and those of their peer group. As students develop interests through exposure to print-rich experiences, they can continue to gain increased confidence to explore different topics and to relate these explorations through journaling. While writing in a non-threatening environment, students can develop the confidence to question themselves (and others) and to develop different genres of writing.

Journaling can demonstrate the growth of students over time. Through observation, conferences, and journal entries, a teacher can gain a truer understanding of each student's growth.

#### Implementation of Journaling with SEMH Students

The SEMH classroom used for this study consisted of twelve to fifteen high school students. When the school moved from 40-minute classes each day to 90-minutes every other day, I was able to expand the language arts program and focus more on process rather than skills. The reading program was connected to the students' interests and writing. The reading workbooks, extra phonics books, and commercially-prepared spelling books were eliminated. To foster the students' interests, the bi-weekly magazines for students were kept. Their interest inventories were reviewed frequently. Occasionally,

they were asked for an interest update.

For read aloud experiences, which were an effective way to extend interests and suggest topics for reading, discussing, and writing, I searched for books and magazine articles to expand the topics recorded in their journals. The students used these resources along with two old sets of encyclopedias to pursue their interests. Soon the students were leading the way in suggesting topics for study. By providing opportunities for response through discussion and journal entries, I was guided to present new topics. When I tapped into the students' interests, they frequently went beyond my expectations for their involvement in the class study.

The emphasis of the language arts program was on creating meaning so their ideas and interests expressed in their journal entries took priority over written form elements. As I read their journals, I recorded needed instruction in form on checklists and then taught these elements in mini-lessons to a small group or during a conference with a single student. When I saw that they used an element in their writing correctly, I noted it on their checklists.

The spelling lists were composed of words spelled incorrectly in their responses to the student magazines and in their journal entries. From these individual spelling lists, the students wrote the words in

sentences to not only reinforce their correct spellings but also to point out their meanings in context and their functions in sentences. Relating the study of spelling to their individual spelling needs in writing caused the students to be more aware of correct spelling. As the year progressed, a student asked me how to spell a word; another student with a twinkle in his eye chimed, "Careful, it'll show up on our spelling lists."

When I introduced journaling, I explained that they would be reflecting on the activities of each period and writing about something from that session that was of interest or importance to them. The students were given bound notebooks in which to write their journal entries. At the end of the first session, I reviewed with them possible topics for journal entries. I wrote an entry in my notebook and shared it with them. Each day I read their entries and tried to include a written response. With their permission, I read their entries or asked them to read them that showed insight into their learning, response to the class activity, or their relationships with their peers and the teacher or that were well developed. Because of the learning needs of these students, most of them needed support in doing meaningful journaling. At first, they lacked confidence in their ability to interpret their learning program and to reflect on their responses to class activity

as significant. Surprisingly, many of them began to expand the ideas included in their entries and wrote several sentences.

Examples of the students' journal entries that are responses to classroom activities are presented in the next pages.

### Responses to a Read Aloud Experience

One of the first journaling attempts was based on Thunder Cake, by Patricia Polacco (New York: Philomel, 1990). First, I read aloud the book to the students, and then, I discussed the book with them, focusing on the characters, then on the interrelationship of the characters and the theme:

dynamic character ---> action ---> resolve (theme).

After the discussion, the students enjoyed sampling my Thunder Cake. I suggested that they write about their fears in their journals. The samples of the journal entries represent the range of their responses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Responses to a Read Aloud Experience

I am very scared of thunder, storms and every thing else. All I have to do is count numbers and stuff like that I guess, I hate being scared at the time, I can feel the fear in my body some time.

I am afraid of anything

Responses to an Issue

The topic of Big Foot was presented in the student magazine. Before reading the article and viewing several videos on the subject, I asked them, "What do you know about Big Foot?" The journal entry (see figure 2) was offered by a male student who was an athlete and student manager of a team.

Figure 2

Responses to the Topic of Big Foot

Some people in this world have a big foot. Some of these people big foot. People in the NBA have big foot. Some people in this school. Some people in this class have big foot.

The students read on the topic from several sources. As the group's knowledge was extended, they contributed to the web on the topics. In figure 3, the journal entry reflects the facts the students were learning about the topic. This student was particularly interested in informational reading.

Figure 3

Summary of Study of Big Foot

Bigfoot or Big Fake

He or she would weigh anywhere from 600 to 900 pounds! Is Bigfoot — or a family of Bigfoots creatures — real? Most scientists don't think so. Before they believe a big story, they say, they've got to see big proof.

so they don't say Bigfoot doesn't exist. Instead, they say, so far, nothing proves that bigfoot exist;



The topic created an opportunity to discuss the sides of an issue; in this case, is Big foot real or people's fantasy? This topic was of great interest to the students and stimulated a lively debate.

### Responses to Holidays

These students during the holidays seemed more alert and enthused about holiday-related activities in the classroom. During the Christmas season, the students read a simplified version of Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol and viewed two movie adaptations of the story. The example journal entry, shown in figure 4 reflects this activity. Frequently, the students related their family activities and traditions to the class sessions. Such is the case of the students' entry in figure 4.

Figure 4

### Response to the Christmas Carol

No I don't really know anybody like Scrooge, I can say one person, My uncle is just like him. He doesn't celebrate holiday, He just like him? He real mean! He real nice to his kid though, Don't ask him for money because he want give you none.

For Valentine's Day, a student's lyrical entry showed much creativity (see figure 5).

Figure 5

When i looked IN 2 you're  
 EYES I KNEW IT WAS TRUE  
 JUST AS YOU STANDING THERE  
IN you're T-SHIRT & JEANS.  
 AND looking AS FINE AS CAN BE.  
 MY WHOLE BODY JUST MELTED  
 2 the ground.  
I KNEW IT WAS TRUE  
I ♡ U SO TILL THE day i die.

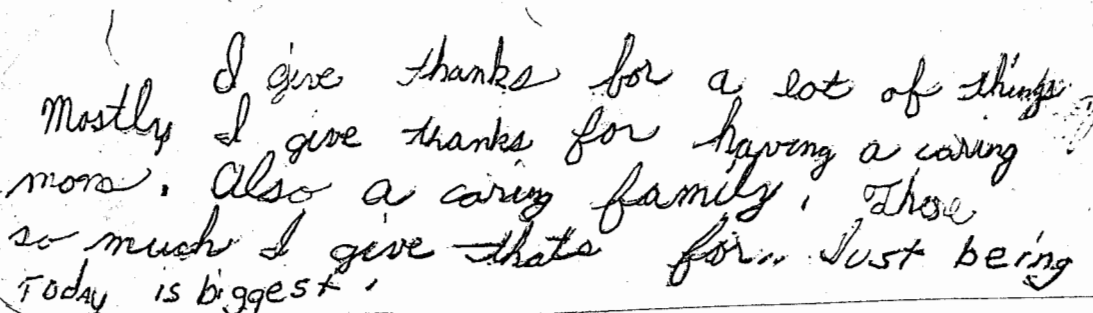
By this time in the school year, several of the students' mounting confidence allowed them to take risks in their writing. Many times their written responses indicated much more ability than the results from the standardized tests.

### Sharing Emotions

The students frequently shared their dreams and emotions, which in many instances reflected their frustrations, in their journal entries. An example of sharing personal thoughts in a journal entry is found in figure 6. This student was in regular classrooms until his brain injuries in an automobile accident left him mentally challenged and placed in a SEMH room.

Figure 6

### An Emotional Response



Mostly I give thanks for a lot of things  
 mostly I give thanks for having a caring  
 mom. Also a caring family. Those  
 so much I give thanks for. Just being  
 Today is biggest.

When I read such positive attitudes from my special needs students, I feel that every "today is my biggest" as I offer these students a literature-rich learning environment.

### Responses to an Indepth Study of a Topic

At the end of the year, the topic of the Rainforest was studied through the reading of many sources and the viewing of a video and much discussion. From this extensive study, a play was developed and

performed. The journal entries reflect many perspectives and show that these students who were reticent at the beginning of the school year to share their ideas had become risk-takers. Examples of journal entries made during the study of this topic are presented in figure 7.

Figure 7

Responses to the Rainforest Study

Travel guide

I walk the people inside the forest.  
 I tells the persons do not talk loud.  
 I let the persons touch the animals. I o  
 guide the animals. The people's here  
 The bird humming.

My name is zip, I like  
 to swing to tree and  
 tree, And play orther animal.  
 I Like play with monkey and  
 orther Squirrel.

The butterflys flya round.  
 The butterflys, tree, grass, animals.  
 The butterflys? are concerned.  
 The butterfly are cerned about the  
 earth  
 The butterfly are worried man cutt-  
 ing down tree I won't The butterfly  
 are cerned the birds eat them

### Summary

Students in senior high school who are labeled Educable Mentally Handicapped have had many opportunities to failure. Many have had few fulfilling experiences in school and have had little or no opportunities to truly express their ideas and feelings.

To provide opportunities for them to express themselves through writing, thus extending their thinking-language abilities, I developed a rich literature-based language arts program with student journaling as one avenue of response to their reading experience. These journals provided a written dialogue between each student and me. From the journals, my instructional program became more and more flexible, adapting to the students' concerns and interests. My plan book began to show more and more Wite-Outs.

As the year progressed, I began to sense that the students were developing confidence in writing. They began to accept my lessons on writing form. The students became excited about reading because it extended their ideas for writing. As a result of this literature-based language arts program, they became active writers, thus extending their thinking-language abilities.

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