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Using wordless picture books to stimulate fictional writing in first-grade students

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Abstract

The use of wordless picture books was a successful strategy as an adult intervention for helping students at different levels in their writing ability to produce a story that followed a logical progression of events; that had a clear beginning, middle and end; and that described a character's experiences to a point of conclusion. This was accomplished with varying degrees of teacher assistance required. The stories from these students showed some similarities, but each student brought some unique element to the writing. The stories were distinguishable, even though the text in each story was inspired by the same set of illustrations. The students who went through this process were pleased with their work and were proud to share their stories with their classmates.

USING WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS TO STIMULATE FICTIONAL

WRITING IN FIRST-GRADE STUDENTS

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Kathryn Nicol Morris

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Students

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

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Alexander is sitting at a table in his classroom, a blank piece of paper before him. It is time for writer's workshop and he has been informed that he can write about anything that he wants. He does not need to be concerned about spelling at this point; the important part is getting his ideas down on paper. Despite the fact that there are many possibilities for topics he could write about, Alexander looks back and forth from his blank sheet to the window, with no ideas coming to mind at all.

Alexander was a first grader who attended a public constructivist school in a low-income neighborhood. This experimental school was in its first year of operation. Every morning, writer's workshop was conducted for approximately 45 minutes. In this setting, the students were allowed to write about what they chose, because the teacher believed the process of writing develops more naturally and quickly if children are allowed to write from their own experiences rather than on a topic imposed upon them. During this time, the students worked independently and were at various stages in the writing process, as they were allowed to work at their own pace. The students had conferences with the teacher about their writing and shared their finished compositions with the class.

The students did a great deal of writing about their classroom activities and their observations within these activities as a way to get them to reflect on what they were doing as well as provide a purpose for writing. They also wrote many personal narratives, but they did not choose to do any fictional writing. In fact, most of the students struggled with doing activities linked to writing fictional stories. For example, a student teacher in the classroom attempted to create a web for a story (Strickland & Morrow, 2000) during a large group lesson by bringing in her favorite teddy bear and asking the students to think of ideas for some adventures that this teddy bear could have, such as places he could go

or things he could do. These students had great difficulty in coming up with any ideas. It was as though they could not think outside of their immediate surroundings.

I was working in this first-grade class as a classroom assistant with a specific focus on literacy. I spoke with the lead teacher about the difficulties these students seemed to have with generating ideas for fictional stories. I was particularly surprised at how much they struggled with the brainstorming web that the student teacher attempted to do with the students. Why couldn't they come up with any ideas? The lead teacher informed me that the students generally did not choose to write fictional stories, but usually wrote personal narratives. She said she was interested in any ideas that would enable them to write in a different genre to stretch their experiences at writing.

I wondered if there was a way to enable these students to produce fictional writing. According to Vygotsky (1934/1987), children have a greater potential for learning through adult assistance that allows them to perform at developmental levels that surpass what they can do independently. This is known as the zone of proximal development and is determined by the "...difference between the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult..." (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 209). In Alexander's case as well as for many of his classmates, the biggest struggle appeared to be getting started with the writing. Anyone who has ever attempted to create a written composition can identify with Alexander. Whether it is a blank piece of paper or a blank computer screen, getting started on a piece of writing is often the hardest part. Even for adults, thinking of the first sentence can be excruciating. How much more is this frustration felt by a first grader whose vocabulary is

limited, who has less experience to draw upon for ideas, and who is just beginning to learn all the conventions of writing?

Writing Practices Used

Teaching the writing process to young writers (Graves, 1983), as was done in Alexander's class, alleviates some of this burden of getting started on a piece of writing. Students are encouraged to write drafts with the understanding that their first attempts are not expected to be perfect. Therefore, a limited repertoire of correctly spelled words or a lack of memorized conventional rules for writing would not be a deterrent for tackling a written composition because the errors will be fixed later. Using the writing process is a way of scaffolding the students' learning (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) as their written work is reread, revised, edited, and rewritten (Graves, 1983). Teachers help students focus on specific aspects of their writing. They teach conventional rules and spelling within the context of the writing rather than through isolated skill lessons and drilling of spelling words. This teaching of conventions within the context of writing helps the teacher to find out more of what the students know about writing and allows the teacher to give individualized instruction in order to aid the students in reaching their maximum potential. Teaching students how to go through the writing process removes some of the anxiety experienced by young writers by ensuring that their writing need not be absolutely correct up front, but it does not address the difficulty of coming up with a topic.

This first-grade classroom conducted writer's workshop (Calkins, 1994), where the students were taught how to engage in the writing process and allowed to choose their writing topics. Although this type of individualized instruction in an active setting is

considered best practice for writing instruction (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000), there is so much else to contend with in the earlier stages of writing development, such as spelling and punctuation, that the open-endedness of this approach can be overwhelming. According to the Work Sampling System (Dichtelmiller, Jablon, Marsden, & Meisels, 2001), which is the assessment tool we were using at our school, the following expectations are cited for first graders.

Uses writing strategies to convey ideas.

First graders benefit from having many opportunities to write throughout the day. They begin to demonstrate understanding of the writing process as they generate ideas, make simple plans, and develop main ideas that are supported with some detail and description. They are beginning to organize their writing in a sequence, including a basic beginning, middle, and end. Examples of first graders using writing strategies include:

- drawing on personal experiences to generate ideas for stories;

- hearing a story read aloud and using it as the basis for writing a story;

- brainstorming with a friend concerning what to write about;

- writing about going to the basketball game, staying focused on the topic, and including some details;

- making a web before writing;

- folding a paper into thirds and drawing a picture in each third to help themselves clarify their ideas for the beginning, middle, and end of the story (p. 59).

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect these first graders to be able to function in this open-ended classroom setting if the above mentioned behaviors are the kinds of behaviors one would expect to see. These first graders, however, sometimes struggled with what to write about for their personal narratives, which were about their own lives. Trying to create a fictional story, which required the students to imagine a scenario beyond their immediate experiences, was very difficult if not impossible for these students. Despite this difficulty, I wanted them to feel comfortable with putting any of their ideas for fictional stories down on paper because each time they go through the writing process, it helps improve their writing ability (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary to address the problem of how to get students to *produce* a story, if they are struggling with how to begin. So what can teachers do to accomplish this goal of getting their students to translate their ideas into written form, while alleviating some of the burden of selecting topics for stories?

Alexander needed a support or springboard for writing topics in order to minimize some of the difficulty of generating ideas for a story. He also needed a strategy that would go beyond using story starters that only give the students "a beginning sentence that children must finish" (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000, p. 171). In the lead teacher's previous work with first graders, such story starters had been found to be frustrating or uninteresting to the students. As I thought about a strategy that could be used, I began to reflect on my experiences working with preschoolers and how they read books.

Where Children's Sense of Story Begins

Imagine watching a three-year-old looking through a picture book. This child has no idea how to read words, but this child can "read" the pictures. According to Soderman, Gregory, and O'Neill (1999), this ability ranges from children labeling pictures with words and sounds to doing what is known as finger-point reading, where children point to the words as they "read" familiar books even though they are not actually reading the words. By doing this, children show an understanding that the words read come from the text and not the pictures in the book. "Children eventually 'read' books based on picture clues and good memories" (Soderman et al., p. 38). I have observed many young children reading stories by focusing on the illustrations in a variety of picture books. "Encouraging young children to tell their own stories and listen to the stories we can tell them and read to them is the most significant contribution we can make to ensuring that they become not just sufficiently literate, but passionately hooked on books and keen to write" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 43). Combining their previous experiences of listening to adults reading stories to them with studying the illustrations in the books, they talk about what is happening by interpreting what they see and emulating how stories sound. Could this ability, which appears several years before children begin learning to write in a conventional way, be the basis for how children's story writing can be enhanced? Could there be a way to draw wonderful story language and creative ideas from young writers that stems from skills that they possess long before they begin to learn how to write?

The Benefits of Picture Books

When children read books by looking at the pictures, they might report what is seen in the illustrations (e.g., "There's a bear and he's reading a book...") or tell a story

about what is seen in the illustrations (e.g., "The bear was reading his favorite book..."). The knowledge that children bring to the reading of a book through its pictures is a reflection of the children's previous experiences with literacy: how a book is held, how to track print in English from left to right and top to bottom, and what language to use in describing the pictures, all of which come from their experiences with oral communication and shared readings of books (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003).

One way to exercise this knowledge of books, as well as to support language development, is with wordless picture books. In their joint position statement, NAEYC and IRA (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000) recommend using wordless picture books to allow children to dictate their versions of the stories according to the pictures. Using wordless picture books is a way to draw upon children's knowledge of story language and structure; they translate their ability to tell stories from looking at picture books into a written story that is unique in its interpretations of the book. In addition, they provide a scaffold for topic selection, for including a beginning, middle, and end in order to have proper story structure (Dichtelmiller, Jablon, Marsden, & Meisels, 2001), and for basic story elements within their writing such as characters, setting, problem, and resolution (Buss & Karnowski, 2000). Therefore, I decided to try using wordless picture books as a stimulus and scaffold for writing with these first graders during writing time.

The Process

I attempted using wordless picture books (WPBs hereafter) to stimulate ideas for writing with five of these first-grade students. I wanted to determine if this method would be effective for encouraging reluctant writers to not only get their thoughts down on paper, but also to find out if the books would help them write fiction. In addition, I

believed that using a WPB would naturally bring out the necessary story elements and structure since these were already present in the books (Lindauer, 1988). It was simply a matter of the children putting the words to the pages. I was also interested to see if this strategy would be effective not only for the students who struggled with writing, but also for the students who were already considered good writers by their teacher. Therefore, the students selected for this action research were chosen based on previous writing samples in order to show a range of ability represented in this class.

I began by taking an initial writing sample using four simple books that were from a series and very similar in nature (O'Mara-Horwitz, 1997). The words on the pages were covered up and each student was allowed to choose one of the four books to use for this writing sample. Once their selection was made, they were simply instructed to write a story by looking at the illustrations in the book. This was done in order to determine what they could do without help and to look for patterns in their writing.

Next, I brought in a variety of WPBs that I picked up from the library and introduced them to the students during writer's workshop. I did a picture walk (Tompkins, 1998) with the students through one WPB to tap into their ability to talk about the illustrations and get some ideas flowing about the story possibilities in this particular book. I asked a lot of questions about the illustrations, such as "What do you think is happening now?" or "Look at his face. How do you think he is feeling? What is he thinking?" to help the students think more deeply about the details in the pictures and draw out as many different ideas as possible. Once we had gone through this process together several times, I allowed the students to choose different WPBs and look through them on their own or with a partner.

After about a week and a half of exploring, discussing, and telling stories from the pictures in these books, I found that these WPBs brought out many observations and ideas from the students in their discussions of the books. I quickly realized, however, that these books were far too long for a first grader to use for writing. They would have become discouraged with the task of writing enough text to complete one of those books. As I continued my search for more WPBs, I was unable to find any that were 4-6 pages that depicted much of a story. I did not want to give up on the use of WPBs as a writing stimulus, however, because of the rich language, detailed observations, and creative interpretations that came from the discussions of these books.

I decided to introduce something new that I created specifically for them to use to write. It was a simple, five-page book that I made on my computer using a basic paint program. I created the illustrations in a very specific format: a simple and short story without any text that had a clear beginning, middle, and end as well as a character, setting, problem, and resolution. The students would no longer have the option to choose which WPB they would use, however, but using my book gave me the opportunity to explore another question. Since there is diversity in children's interpretations of stories from picture books (Heath, 1983), would stories written by different children from the same WPB vary or would the stories be similar?

When I brought in my WPB, I introduced it in the same manner as the other WPB, except now I was working with the students individually. We did a picture walk through the book so that each student could get a sense of the story from the illustrations. Then I had them tell me the story orally. When the students were ready to begin writing, I asked questions as needed to help them make some decisions about their story, such as

"Do you want to give the character a name?" or "How do you want to begin your story?" We went through page by page together as the students each wrote a first draft of the text.

Once the first draft of the story was complete, I had them reread their stories orally. They circled any words for which they were unsure of the spelling and then we went through the piece together. As we fixed any spelling or mechanical errors, we also focused on the content. As the students reread their writing, I wanted them to notice the errors we were fixing together and also to listen to how it sounded when read aloud. Did the sentences make sense? By listening to the flow of their writing as it was reread, this enabled the students to make judgments about the quality of their writing. For example, do the words on this page tell enough about what is happening so the reader will understand? (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). The students crossed out misspelled words and filled in the correct spellings, inserted new sentences or portions of sentences where they felt it was needed, and reread their stories again. Once this part of the writing process was completed, they were ready to do their second draft. They recopied their stories, incorporating all of the changes, in order to see their improvements written in a more polished fashion. This also provided another opportunity to make any further revisions as they were rewriting. In addition, this would also help me in typing their stories so that I would be sure not to make any mistakes.

Their final copies were typed and turned into book format. I took their second draft and typed the stories page by page. I made additional copies of my illustrations and then involved the students in the final steps of the creative process. This was done so they would feel ownership over the finished product they were going to receive. I had them decide which illustration they would use for the cover page, which colors they wanted for

the pages in their books, and I had them design the end pages. For the end pages, I gave the students a choice of either telling me what they wanted and designing it on my computer for them, or using art work that they created. I then took their specifications and assembled the books for them with the text and illustrations mounted on the color of construction paper they requested. The pages were laminated and bound together. Each student ended up receiving the published version of his or her story with his or her name on the cover of the book as the author and my name as illustrator. The students read their books to the class as a culmination of this process.

The Effectiveness of this Strategy

Alexander

As was previously mentioned, Alexander was a student who seemed to struggle with how to get started on his writing. He was easily distracted from his work and would often joke around with his classmates rather than attend to the task at hand. He was below-average in writing and his compositions were usually very short, writing as little as possible. His initial writing sample before the intervention was much like what I described earlier of how some three-year-olds read books. Just as some three-year-olds read books by reporting exactly what they see in the pictures, Alexander wrote the words for the little book he chose by reporting exactly what he saw in the pictures.

When discussing the WPB, he made a few observations but was more likely to make jokes or be distracted, even in a small group setting. Once we began working one-on-one, I saw some definite changes. Although it was still a bit of a struggle, he managed to stay on task more than when any of his classmates were around. His initial attempt at writing the words for my WPB was very similar to his writing sample. He wrote one

sentence for each page that was more of a statement of fact rather than showing any creativity. A similar pattern was recounted in Shirley Brice Heath's <u>Ways With Words</u> (1983) where a teacher used a series of photographs depicting the events of a race car in an attempt to focus "...lessons on questions, inferencing strategies, and the kinds of accounts of the race and crash different writers or story-tellers would produce" (p. 293). In some cases, the students would "...tell it straight, giving the facts as they happened" (p. 293). This style of writing also may have come partially from Alexander's experiences of writing about his activities in his class (i.e., this is what happened).

I had to do quite a bit of prompting with Alexander to get him to go back through his writing and change it. I asked a lot of questions to stimulate his thinking about what he had written. Although he seemed a little reluctant at times to do any additional writing, he did make many revisions to his original work and he did this of his own accord. I encouraged him to make revisions but I did not force him to do so nor did I tell him how to change it. I simply asked questions to help him draw his own conclusions about what might sound better or make an idea clearer in his writing.

We continued this process through the entire piece while fixing his spelling and mechanical errors. By the time he was finished revising his first draft, he had written twice as much. This was a huge accomplishment for Alexander, considering that he usually did not show a great deal of interest in writing. When he reread his work, it was obvious that he was very proud of himself as he smiled and even commented that it "sounds a lot better now." After he finished copying his second draft from his revised first draft, I had him compare the two. He smiled as he looked at how much more he had

written and he definitely liked his new version of the story much better than the first. But the most rewarding part of this process was hearing him say, "That wasn't so hard."

When he received his final copy of his writing in book form, his face beamed. He loved seeing his name on the cover as the author and was very excited to see how his artwork was used for the end pages. He immediately opened the book and looked at each page, reading the words that he had written. Several of his classmates gathered around to look at his book over his shoulder. He was pleased to let his friends look on as he read. That morning, he had the opportunity to read his book to the class. His classmates gave him some positive feedback and he just smiled.

Bethany

Bethany was very similar to Alexander. She was also a below-average student in writing and she, much like Alexander, used many work-avoidance strategies. She would drop her pencil, and then begin talking about the fact that she dropped her pencil, which would lead her to talk about something else that she thought of and succeeded in taking her mind off her writing. She needed many reminders to redirect her attention back to her work, and writing clearly was work. Her writing sample was almost identical to Alexander's, including short sentences containing factual statements of what was in the pictures. Her story, written with adult guidance from the WPB, was short but it contained all the elements needed for a good story: a clear beginning, middle, and end; and a character with a name, setting, problem, and resolution.

Lisa

Lisa was very different from Alexander and Bethany. In writing, her spelling and mechanics were typical for her age and the time of year, but the content she wrote was on

another level. The lead teacher once made a comment about Lisa when we were discussing these students and said that she was unlike any first grader she had ever seen when it came to the content of her writing. She could take the perspective of others, could use highly descriptive language, and could give names to her characters that reflected their characteristics (e.g., she gave the name "Coalbeak" to a character in one story because "its beak was as black as coal").

Her mother is a university professor and spent large amounts of time with Lisa, helping her learn how to express herself creatively through music, art, writing, and so on. Both of Lisa's parents read to her extensively and supported her literacy development in a variety of ways. Lisa was the exception in her class in socio-economic status and level of education of her parents. Based on these facts, it was not surprising to me when she inserted dialogue in her initial writing sample and wrote 1½ pages. She wrote 1½ pages for my WPB, again inserted dialogue, named her character without prompting, and used words like "suddenly" and "crept" in her story. She even wrote the words "scary monster" with squiggly lines to illustrate the emotion in those words. She was much more like the other students in the scenario described earlier from Ways With Words (Heath, 1983). Instead of giving a very factual description of what was happening, she added details and created suspense, as did the other students discussed in the example in Heath's book. Overall, she responded positively to the task and exhibited creativity in her writing, which was not the case initially when she was required to use story starters in her second grade classroom in another school.

Alison and Geoffrey

Alison and Geoffrey fell somewhere in between Lisa and Alexander in their writing skills. They both approached the initial writing sample with more enthusiasm than Bethany or Alexander, but their writing was not as detailed as Lisa's. Both of these students also incorporated a more factual approach to describing the pages in the book they chose for the writing sample. Unlike Alexander and Bethany, however, they included more story language, such as ending the story with "Good dy frid." ("Goodbye, friend."), or linking the events together with words like "then," rather than writing disjointed sentences that did not flow together. They each wrote approximately one page and both of these students added details to their stories during the revision process without having to rephrase their original words very much. No dialogue was included in either of their stories, but they did have all the necessary story elements.

Conclusions

The use of a WPB was a successful strategy as an adult intervention for helping these five students at different levels in their writing ability to produce a story that followed a logical progression of events; that had a clear beginning, middle and end; and that described a character's experiences to a point of conclusion. This was accomplished with varying degrees of teacher assistance required. The stories from these five students showed some similarities, but each student brought some unique element to the writing. The stories were distinguishable, even though the text in each story was inspired by the same set of illustrations. The five students who went through this process were pleased with their work and were proud to share their stories with their classmates.

But what would happen after this intervention? It still remained to be seen if these students would pursue fictional writing on their own after having some exposure to a strategy that was successful for them. In the case of Alexander, did he require one-on-one assistance and a very structured format to produce fictional writing, or could he draw from these experiences to find a way to pursue this style of writing on his own? As it turned out, the students generally did not pursue fictional writing independently after this intervention. Perhaps writing fiction for these first graders, with the exception of Lisa, fell within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1934/1987), meaning they could do it with adult assistance and some form of scaffold, but they could not do it independently. This does not mean that providing opportunities for fictional writing would be inappropriate for first graders, because they were able to accomplish the task with some assistance. Had the intervention been more extensive, maybe they would have pursued this genre in their writing more than what occurred here.

One thought mentioned by the lead teacher at the end of the school year raised another question about the developmental appropriateness of fictional writing for first graders. She stated, "It seems to me that writing fiction may be developmentally inappropriate for many first graders because in order to write fiction, they have to be able to take another person's perspective." Because writing fiction requires imagining another time and place or someone else's adventure, perspective-taking may well affect young children's ability to write fiction. I hope to pursue this question in future research.

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