Writing Opportunities to Extend Literacy for At-Risk Children in Grade One

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Recommended Citation

Torrens, Judy K., "Writing Opportunities to Extend Literacy for At-Risk Children in Grade One" (2000). Graduate Research Papers. 1867.
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Abstract
The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of writing on the early literacy learning of students who were performing below grade level in reading. Professional literature supports the theoretical formulation that writing nurtures young children's emerging literacy. For a first-grade classroom, a print-rich environment was created that provided daily opportunities for the students to experiment with writing. The children were able to construct their knowledge of the world through the writing process and to refine their knowledge of written language abilities in purposeful situations. They had many opportunities to connect reading and writing.

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Writing Opportunities to Extend Literacy for
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A Journal Article
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
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February 2000
This Journal Article by: Judy K. Torrens

Entitled: Writing Opportunities to Extend Literacy for At-Risk Children in Grade One

has been approved as meeting the research article requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of writing on the early literacy learning of students who were performing below grade level in reading. Professional literature supports the theoretical formulation that writing nurtures young children's emerging literacy. For a first-grade classroom, a print-rich environment was created that provided daily opportunities for the students to experiment with writing. The children were able to construct their knowledge of the world through the writing process and to refine their knowledge of written language abilities in purposeful situations. They had many opportunities to connect reading and writing.
The concept of literacy is closely related to cultural values, thus varying in importance in people's lives. Currently, some members of American society equate literacy with scores on standardized tests of reading and spelling. Among educators, literacy generally means the ability to function through oral and written language in societal experiences. Brian Cambourne (1988), a noted literacy expert, gives this definition of literacy:

Literacy is a word which describes a whole collection of behaviors, skills, knowledge, processes and attitudes. It has something to do with our ability to use language in our negotiations with the world...literacy manifests itself in sustained reading, writing, talking, listening, thinking, remembering, selecting, organizing, inferencing, and other cognitive behavior. (p. 3).

Literacy is inseparable from living (Calkins, 1991). It is a complex sociopsycholinguistic activity, not a simple cognitive task that is closely related to the home, community, and cultural settings of people's lives (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Literacy emerges early in people's lives. It begins with doing what other family members do already: responding to signs, logos, and labels; sharing books; and scribbling notes (Goodman, 1986).
Young children's main resource for literacy learning is their knowledge of ways to symbolize experience and to communicate through those symbols in speech interaction. The home provides models and experiences for young children's emerging literacy (Morrow, 1989).

Studies of children's emerging literacy growth suggest that schools need to redefine what is basic to becoming literate. From these studies, a theoretical framework needs to be developed as a reference point for developing school curriculum. Morrow (1989) proposes these major points: (1) Literacy is a part of language development, (2) language development is part of symbol development, (3) symbol development is part of the development of social and cultural meanings.

School programs need to build on the knowledge that students bring to school, to emphasize the construction of meaning through activities that require higher order thinking, and to offer extensive opportunities for learners to apply literacy strategies and their underlying abilities in the context of meaningful tasks (Strickland, 1995). Goodman (1986) agrees with Strickland: School literacy programs must build on children's existing learning and capitalize on their intrinsic desire to learn. Children learn to read and write because they need to communicate with others.

The school goals for promoting written language (reading and writing) should reflect how children learn oral language, that is by using it
purposefully in social situations, not by practicing isolated skills. School language programs need to provide situations for meaningful use rather than offering direct, fragmented language instruction (Morrow, 1989).

Educators' current views of effective writing programs for children represent an obvious break with tradition (Cambourne, 1988). Writing to convey meaning as an integral part of an early literacy program for children as young as two generally has not been promoted (Morrow, 1989). Graves (1983) emphasizes that children want to write. The child's marks say, "I am." Before they come to school, children have marked up walls, pavements, and newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens, pencils, and anything else that makes a mark, often to the frustration of adults. Therefore, most children entering school want to continue writing.

For young children, writing begins with the selection of an idea to put in print and the discovery of some strategy for making that thought visible (Dyson, 1981). Young writers use their background of ideas and knowledge of language to compose meaning into text (Butler & Turbill, 1987; Morrow, 1989). As they compose meaning into text through the writing components, children are reading. For example, while drafting or after drafting a written piece, they are reading. In many cases, children as they write read. They are experiencing the overlaps in the written
language tasks, thus their abilities are nurtured more efficiently (Graves, 1994).

Writing just for the pleasure of engaging in the process may initially motivate and satisfy beginning writers. Soon they begin to write to be heard and to engage in the reading process; therefore, writing becomes a way of communicating. Shirley M. Haley-James (1982) states that teachers need to offer real listening and reading experiences to keep alive young students' drive to communicate through writing.

Regie Routman (1994) believes teachers need to go even further. She states, "Until we demonstrate and value the craft ourselves, many students will fail to take writing seriously or to see writing as a tool for thinking and learning" (p. 194). She means that teachers play an important role as models of writers.

**Writing to Promote Emerging Literacy**

While studying the effects of writing on emerging literacy, I became aware of how important the opportunity for authentic writing is to young literacy learners. Therefore, I decided to expand my current writing program based on the findings that it would extend opportunities for literacy development for first-grade students.

More than 80% of the twenty-one students entering my first-grade class this school year had oral language abilities at a
3-4-year-old level and reading abilities at a beginning kindergarten level according to kindergarten standardized assessment records. Literacy that each student brought to school needed to be built upon to ensure that learning to listen, read, speak and write was as uncomplicated and barrier-free as possible (Cambourne, 1988).

In my school district, specific learning goals within curriculum areas have been identified by the instructional processes that are to be mastered by students at the end of each school year. The language arts instructional goals involve oral and written language use and understanding. These expressive experiential language arts goals that are developmentally appropriate for young children are to extend their literacy abilities: recall events in a story in sequential order, distinguish between reality and fantasy in analyzing characters in literature, use complete sentences in conversation when necessary for effective communication, and contribute to class language activities (puppets, stories, dramatizations, language experience charts, choral reading, class books, and word banks). The goals are very specific and limited regarding writing abilities: Begin sentences with capital letters; write simple sentences to describe a picture, an object or an event; and write a personal reaction to a story or event using original sentences. A reading goal that implies the
writing of original ideas and events states: Students should compose and share simple experience stories using transitional or invented spelling.

I needed to expand the district's goals if I was to establish a daily classroom atmosphere that offered opportunities for authentic writing for my emerging literacy learners. After examining the writing aspect of my first-grade language arts program in light of the previous review of professional literature on your children's emerging literacy, the overarching goal should be to provide first-grade students with a print-rich environment that encourages them to create meaning through the writing process. This engagement in the writing process promotes literacy that involves children's emerging abilities in all aspects of language (oral—listening and speaking—and written language—reading and writing).

Besides teacher-directed instruction in writing, I extended the children's writing experiences by introducing journal writing and connecting writing to the basal reading instruction. (I was expected to use the basal reading series as a basis of reading instruction.) As often as possible, I offered children opportunities to respond through writing in other areas of the curriculum.
Sustaining Centers

The classroom had many sustaining centers that provided a print-rich learning environment and connected oral and written language. (Sustaining centers structure the classroom providing a secure, predictable learning environment. Their content changes to reflect the theme, concept, and unit study.) Many of the centers provided literature experiences, representative of the different genres, to enhance content and to provide models of written language.

At the Listening/Reading Center, the children were free to choose from picture books, full-length books, student-made books, and story books with accompanying cassette tapes. In selecting the literature works, the range of the students' reading abilities was considered. Teacher-made tapes to accompany most of the books with text provided reading experiences for those with low reading ability. Tapes were also presented to nurture students' literacy because usually first graders' listening ability is well above their reading ability. Some books were supplied for enjoyment while others extended the study of a specific curriculum theme or author-illustrator. As a result, the students could discover models of language and content for their writing. For example, to extend the animal theme in the basal reader series, literature works of different genres and reading levels supplied these concepts: where animals live, how animals
move, how mother animals care for their babies, and animals' lives and experiences.

The Retelling Center promoted the children's spoken as well as written language. They could construct the meaning of stories they had heard or read. This center provided them the opportunities to develop and strengthen their sense of story, comprehension abilities, and expressive abilities as they spoke, wrote, dramatized, and illustrated. During the animal unit, the children made felt animal puppets to retell stories or to develop their own animal story. Animal pictures with action were presented to encourage story composing. Their oral stories could be taped and in some cases transcribed. These transcriptions could be illustrated and made into "big books."

At the Word Center, students found support for their spelling by using the magnetic letters, felt letters with felt boards, block letters, and word lists developed from discussions of reoccurring concepts (seasons, holiday, and weather), children's experiences, and the themes and units across the curriculum. Sets of word cards could be matched with pictures. For the family theme in the basal reader, this center provided classification of concepts on charts and word cards. Children could find family words (e.g., mother, father, sister, brother...), or they could find words that mean the same thing (e.g., mom-mother-mommy-mama) to write. The students
could match classmates' names from the class list with family photographs. Then, they could write about the family members in the photographs and share their writing with the class. The students expressed great delight that others took time to write about their family.

Providing Opportunities for Writing

Children need to be engaged in a writing environment that moves them from playing with writing to communicating through writing. Such a transition occurs when children learn how to write by being engaged in purposeful writing situations, therefore enabling them to develop their knowledge about written language.

Support for Writing Experiences

The Writing Center, another sustaining center, offered materials and equipment for writing. Materials for publishing were supplied, such as paper, pencils, markers, oak tag, wallpaper, stapler, paper punch, glue, yarn, and magazines. Alpha Smarts (small table-top computers) for typing were available for writing. Directions for bookmaking were presented.

Each student was given a writing journal the first week of school. They could choose what they wanted to write in it. Their entries were an important informal assessment for the teacher because they represented their level of written literacy. At the beginning of the year, many children drew pictures rather than wrote any kind of visual symbols in their
journals. Some wrote the alphabet letters and numerals; others began writing their classmates' names, the words of the week, or label words that were found around the room. As the year continued, they began working together in pairs and small groups, talking about their writing, helping each other spell, and sometimes writing the same ideas, words, and word patterns.

Journal writing was scheduled for 10 minutes immediately following lunch and recess as a transition back into the classroom. It was one of their favorite times of the day. If this schedule was disrupted with a special activity or unexpected event, they bargained with the teacher for another time to write in their journal.

During the first six weeks of school, the teacher observed many stages of writing in their journals. Some children continued to use picture writing; some were using scribble writing. Other students were using random letter writing all over the page or moving left to right across the page line after line to fill the page. Several children were beginning to use invented spelling. The levels of word awareness varied from writing beginning consonant letters to consonants together without vowels. Two students were doing conventional spelling of words and writing simple sentences.
Teacher-Directed Writing Experiences

At the beginning of the school year, I began instructional writing activities by reading aloud as I wrote on chart paper or the chalkboard. I would then ask the class to read with me what I had just written. They were encouraged to ask me questions about the text I had written. The children were then given opportunities to write independently practicing writing strategies they had observed. This writing took many forms during the course of a week, such as writing sentences to describe a photograph taken of a class activity, a response to a basal reading story, or reactions to an art print; describing a science experiment through writing and illustrating; and drawing pictures of the favorite part of a story and supplying sentences to describe it. Class books were created with each child participating by writing one page. These books were developed: rhyming, pattern, alphabet, number and theme books.

Classroom instruction progressed as the students and I collaborated on stories. After a class trip, we talked about our experiences and then wrote a group story to share with another class. This shared writing demonstrated to the students what can happen when ideas for writing are created and then expanded. I guided the students' writing by asking questions. The class was learning about writing by observing and participating in this literacy event.
I introduced the components of the writing process (finding topics, drafting, redrafting, and publishing) to my class during the writers workshop period in October. I gave each child a four-pocket folder with their name on it. I explained that this folder was to house their writing during the year. The writing folder was made by stapling two recycled pocket folders together. We talked about how they could use the folder. In the first pocket of the folder, they could keep an ongoing list of ideas for writing. I guided them to label it "Topics." During this introduction, we discussed examples of topics for writing. As the year progressed, the teacher reminded the class of writing topics that were emerging from their school program. Also, during conferences, she made suggestions to individual children of topics that had potential for writing. Each child was given a sheet of paper to write down some topic ideas for the pocket. They were so excited they wanted to begin writing immediately. I showed the class the basket labeled "Writing Folders" and its location in the room. The folders would be kept there when they were not using them.

On succeeding days, the other components were introduced and related pockets were labeled. Selections that the children were working on or had completed were placed in the "Drafting" pocket. I explained that when it was time to stop writing each day, they might not be finished so they could put their papers in the drafting pocket of their folders.
The component of redrafting was introduced by my modeling involvement in the component. First, I read aloud the piece I had worked on the day before from a chart sheet. Second, we discussed how we could make our writing better: spelling words correctly, capitalizing the first letter of sentences, punctuating the end of sentences, putting spaces between words, and creating margins. Third, these form elements were pointed out in my story on the chart page. The pockets of the folders for redrafting were labeled. Fourth, they reviewed their stories and made some changes.

As they began to conference with each other in pairs about their writing, I began having small group conferences to work on specific conventions. Also, they presented their stories during sharing time. The emphasis was on the information or the story they had to share; they needed an audience to do so. Because they began to place value on their writing, they wanted to know if they were expressing themselves clearly. An audience could give feedback by asking questions and making suggestions. We had ongoing discussions on how to give constructive responses.

The fourth pocket in the folder was labeled “Publish.” As a group, we discussed what it meant to publish and why authors wanted to publish what they wrote. These ideas were generated: You like your story, you
want somebody else to read your story, and you want to construct a book and give it to someone. The group found it amazing that they were authors. This idea generated much energy to engage in the components of writing and encouraged them to select a story to make into a book.

We talked about some of the formats that could be used for their books. One student suggested cutting pictures out of magazines instead of drawing their illustrations. Another student came up with the idea to use the Alpha Smart computers to write their stories. I demonstrated how to make paper covers for their books, using oaktag, paper or wallpaper and glue. The children were excited about designing their own book covers to house their stories. They came up with several ideas about what would be placed on the cover of the book: the title, the author’s name, the illustrator’s name, and a picture that tells about the story.

As time passed, the class needed reminders about writing being a process not a product. Having the opportunities to publish their writing and share their book with others created new enthusiasm for writing. Within two weeks, most of the students had a story rewritten that could be published.

**Writing Experiences within the Basal Reading Series**

This component involved literature experiences, vocabulary and comprehension strategies, creative and critical thinking activities, phonetic
skills, oral reading, curriculum connections, and responsive as well as independent writing. The range of writing opportunities in terms of difficulty enabled all children to experience success. During independent writing, children selected from a list of activities, such as write about a story you have read, read about trucks and then write a story alone or with a friend, write a story and make it into a puppet show, and write a story about bears and read it on the tape recorder. Functional writing opportunities were also offered. For example, students wrote thank-you notes to visitors and helpers in the classroom, made a list of things they saw on a nature walk, and wrote a letter to the language teacher when she was absent, motivational notes, and reminders to class members.

Specific centers related to the basal themes were developed to extend specific language abilities. Literature experiences of different genres were presented in the centers to expand experiences and introduce new concepts. Related expressive activities accompanied the literature experiences presented in the centers. In discussion periods, the students shared their center activity, such as retelling stories or reading the stories they have written. They developed charts of vocabulary encountered in their listening/reading experiences. These vocabulary lists were references for writing topics and correct spelling.
Conclusions

Numerous opportunities in a print-rich learning environment were presented to my first-grade students so they could make reading-writing connections. Sustaining centers provided a secure, predictable learning environment in which students could actively engage in literacy-rich experiences. The centers gave children options for literature experiences and related expressive activities. Oral language experiences supported the teacher’s introduction of the children to the components of the writing process. Labeled pockets of writing folders for each child helped them to focus on the components. Journal writing conducted each day not only gave the students writing experiences but offered a source of writing topics. As the year progressed, these journals were valuable assessment sources. Related expressive activity that included writing was extended in the themes of the basal reader series.

The strategies implemented in my classroom increased writing opportunities and impacted positively the emerging literacy of the first-grade students. When the children had the opportunities to express themselves, they gained confidence in their ability to think and engage in the oral and written language process. As a result they were empowered to become literate people. The writing in their folders and journals as well as my observations of their responses supported this conclusion. Their
metalinguistic knowledge became apparent as the children talked about their writing. They became risk-takers, willing to try different kinds of writing.

This class was a typical group of first-grade students in terms of their range of achievement. The prognosis of limited achievement for many of them at the beginning of the school year changed as they began to see themselves as literate individuals. At the end of the school year, the class average on the first-grade Reading/Language Arts Benchmark Test was 70%. In May, the range of reading levels of 60% of the class was at first grade fifth month to third grade first month, according to Reading Naturally assessment data; 90% of the class could read 80-100 of the first 100 Word Wall Words.
References


