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# Extending visual language in the first grade classroom

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## Abstract

The myth "children are not able to write unless they can read" has been generally accepted. Yet, the studies of Calkins (1983) and Graves (1983) conclude that ninety percent of all children come to school believing they can write. They have some concept of writing and can write from the first day of school. This ability to write is no accident, for children have been copying the writers in their home environment.

# EXTENDING VISUAL LANGUAGE IN THE FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS


page

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

Purpose of the Study . . . . . 2

Significance of the Study . . . . . 3

Procedures . . . . . 5

Summary . . . . . 5

CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE . . . . . 6

Characteristics of Young Children's Learning Strategies as Related to Writing . . . . . 6

Factors Involved in Young Children's Spelling . . 8

Categorization of Speech Sounds . . . . . 9

Visual Memory . . . . . 21

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING SPELLING IN GRADE ONE . 25

CHAPTER III - A FIRST-GRADE PROGRAM: MAKING LANGUAGE VISIBLE TO FACILITATE YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING . . . . . 30

Visible Language Opportunities . . . . . 30

Spelling Books . . . . . 30

Resources Related to School Experiences . . . 31

Sustaining Centers . . . . . 31

Listening, Viewing, Reading Center . . . . . 32

Author/Illustrator Center . . . . . 32

Bookmaking Center . . . . . 33

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Cont.)

Poetry Center . . . . . 34

Flannelboard Center . . . . . 34

Interesting Objects Box . . . . . 35

Picture Collections . . . . . 35

Costume Box . . . . . 36

Masks Center . . . . . 36

Provisions for Writing Experiences . . . . . 36

Writing Activities . . . . . 40

Journals . . . . . 40

Pen Pals . . . . . 40

Story Composition . . . . . 41

Poetry Composition . . . . . 43

CHAPTER IV - SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS . . . . . 45

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Research Work . . . . . 46

Children's Composition . . . . . 54

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The myth "children are not able to write unless they can read" has been generally accepted. Yet, the studies of Calkins (1983) and Graves (1983) conclude that ninety percent of all children come to school believing they can write. They have some concept of writing and can write from the first day of school. This ability to write is no accident, for children have been copying the writers in their home environment.

In explaining children's early involvement in the process of writing, Graves (1983) says, "The child's marks say 'I am'." Graves believes that schools tear down children's self-confidence in the approaches used to teach writing. Children's need to show what they know is ignored or underestimated because teachers do not understand the writing process and fail to realize children's ability to create meaning through this process. Schools take the control for the process away from children by assigning them topics to write on and place roadblocks in their way by emphasizing spelling, spacing, punctuation, and neatness rather than the content.

Children learn to write just as they learn to talk. Parents are not afraid to let babies talk as best they

can and are delighted with what they can do. This same attitude needs to be taken toward young children's writing activity. Upon coming to school, children need to be encouraged to write. Some children will scribble-write, draw pictures, or possibly combine illustrating and writing, but for most children writing means encoding sounds into words which is commonly referred to as "invented spelling". Young children are able to compose when they know a few consonants.

Once children have begun the stage in their language development that includes writing, visual imagery is recognized by such authorities as Kuhn & Schroeder (1971), Radaker (1963), and Simon & Simon (1973) as a major factor in spelling success. As many researchers have pointed out (e.g., Chomsky and Halle, 1968; Gudschinsky, 1972), letter by letter sound-symbol correspondence for vowel sounds occurs infrequently enough in English to render sounding out strategies ineffective in terms of accuracy. Stressing visual memory or "how the word looks" was the most successful strategy for good spellers.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to develop a first-grade classroom environment that will facilitate the language abilities of young children through the

reading-writing connection. An extensive writing program for first grade that stresses the use of invented spelling to encourage early writing and fosters visual memory through much exposure to written language will be undertaken. In establishing a learning environment which presents much visual language, centers offering quality literature experiences and related expressive activities will be made available to the children. The centers will free the teacher to give more individual attention to each child's needs.

## Significance of the Study

The classroom environment can greatly facilitate children's confidence and willingness to experiment with writing. Through writing-reading activities, children can be provided opportunities to feel the power of their language and to use it to create meaning. Blackburn (1984) states: "Invention in reading and writing means that children take control of their learning right away." Children come to school with a sense of responsibility for their own learning. They do not need to wait for the teacher to present skills and formally teach them.

The freedom to write is an important factor in young children's writing development. Language programs

have traditionally placed emphasis on reading. Recent research has shown that writing can contribute to reading and vice versa. Donald Graves (1978) relates:

> Writing can contribute to reading from the first day a child enters school. Writing . . . contributes to reading because writing is the making of reading. When a child writes, he/she has to know the sound-symbol relations inherent to reading. Auditory, visual, and kinesthetic systems are all at work when the child writes, and all contribute to greater skill in reading. As children grow older, writing contributes strongly to reading comprehension. Students who do not write beyond the primary years lose an important tool for reading . . . . Writing more than any other subject can be the means to personal breakthrough in learning. (p. 8)

When young children begin to write, their experimentation does not produce spellings that are entirely accurate. Graves (1983) explains that spelling will develop appropriately if children are allowed to write. Given adequate opportunities to write, their spellings become more correct through experience. (p. 194)

## Procedures

First-grade children in a small town-rural area which could be classified as middle-class will be involved in a writing program to extend language abilities. This program for beginning writers will provide many opportunities to experience visual language to support their spelling so they will be more free to concentrate on the function rather than the form of language.

## Summary

In Chapter One the purpose, significance, and procedures of this study have been described. Chapter Two will review the professional literature and research studies in the areas pertinent to the study. Chapter Three will present a writing program that supports young writers by making language more visible to them. A summary and conclusions will be offered in Chapter Four.

# CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter presents the professional literature and research studies related to young children's spelling. The recent study of children's involvement in the composition process has included experimentation with spelling. The phenomenon of children's invented spelling is a source of amazement and concern to parents and teachers. This review is categorized into three topics: characteristics of young children's learning strategies as related to writing, factors involved in young children's spelling (categorization of speech sounds and visual memory), and the implications for teaching spelling in grade one.

### Characteristics of Young Children's Learning Strategies as Related to Writing

The period of intellectual development between the ages of two to seven years is classified by Piaget as preoperations. Children in this stage function mainly in a conceptual-symbolic mode and use language to represent experiences.

Piaget (1972) gives insight into preoperational children's ability to understand and comprehend their world.

> Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves, and each time we try to teach them something too quickly, we keep them from re-inventing it themselves. (p. 27)

Piaget's studies (1932, 1947, 1948) and more recent ones done by Perret-Clermont (1980) and Doise and Mugny (1981) have demonstrated the importance of social interaction for the construction of knowledge. According to Piaget, children construct knowledge by modifying their previous ideas, rather than by accumulating new pieces received from the outside. The exchange of ideas among peers stimulates such modification. According to Kammii and Randazzo (1985), the teacher's role is to encourage children to exchange points of view critically among themselves and to present ideas to their students as alternatives for consideration. When the teacher remains the central authority figure, children are not free to create their own meaning but must recite in terms of external standards.

Influenced by Piagetian theory, Graves (1978) relates that most beginning writers have a limited concept of time and space. They tend to view writing as an immediate event, not as the generation of a product that will exist beyond the event. The choice

of a topic becomes selective only when children are capable of expanding their temporal and spacial boundaries. This occurs when children begin to realize that they are writing not only for themselves, but for an audience. Young writers often suffer "writer's block," because they are still subject to a limited number of topic choices and are now aware of the need to meet certain expectations regarding writing conventions. As a result, they may delay the initiation of a piece of writing or try to avoid it completely.

Chomsky (1975) relates that Piaget's work gives insight into children's acquisition of literacy and learning. Specifically speaking of learning to spell, she relates the printed word "belongs" to the spontaneous speller far more directly than to children who have experienced it only ready-made. For once a child has invented a personal spelling system, dealing with the conventional system is easily acquired.

Factors Involved in Young Children's Spelling

Long before entering school, children learn the fundamentals of language. They learn from those with whom they come in contact. Young children pay more attention to meaning than the language systems, and in this way they learn how language works. They become

familiar with the rules as they engage in communication (Cazden notes, 1972).

In the past few years young children's experimentation with writing has been observed and studied in an effort to understand the role of writing in language acquisition. Categorization of speech sounds and visual imagery seem to be factors in developing spelling ability.

## Categorization of Speech Sounds

Durking (1966) points out that children who learn to read before beginning school seem to have done the same with written language. These children have had the chance to see written language as representing meanings.

Read (1971) describes and documents the phenomenon of young children inventing their own spellings. He studied twenty children who wrote on their own at home before they entered school. Upon interviewing the parents, Read found that children's spelling ability was voluntary; none of the children were prodded by parents seeking satisfaction vicariously through their children. These parents appreciated the efforts of their children to write but did not specifically

encourage or discourage them from the pursuit of this ability. Read (1970) states:

> In the attitudes and responses of parents to their children's spelling appears the only similarity among these families that may be more than superficially related to the children's accomplishments. All parents believed that their role was to provide opportunities, give help when asked, and to accept and enjoy the results . . . . The materials provided in the homes at various stages ranged from blocks and movable-alphabet toys to blackboards and, of course, paper and pencil. No didactic or elaborate toys and certainly no kits designed to teach writing were in any home; what all the children had was a variety of opportunities, and once they had gotten started, they could be counted on to find unexpected ones--on their walls, for instance . . . . All the parents felt that they had done nothing in particular to cause their children to begin spelling or to teach them how to spell, except for providing

> materials, answering questions, and occasionally asking a further question themselves . . . . A thoughtful response to a child's expressed interest was all I ever observed in these homes. (p. 156)

From Read's detailed analysis of these twenty preschoolers' spelling, the findings show that each child arrived at approximately the same system. This system was built clearly upon children's articulation as well as their ability to hear and break words into speech sounds. Read (1975) says that invented spelling was related to the child's ability to hear and isolate the separate speech sounds that together make words (phonic segmentation) and knowledge of letters and the sounds they represent. After learning the names of the letters of the alphabet, young children that are inventive spellers, begin to spell by using letter blocks, plastic letters, or other movable alphabet toys.

Read was particularly interested in the exactness of phonic acuity and categorization of language that was exhibited by preschool children. He was able to identify consistent patterns in the way preschoolers used the English sound system. He concluded: (1) Children categorize speech sounds in "unexpected but

phonetically justifiable ways." (2) Five-year-old children exhibiting the ability to categorize speech sounds have acquired a tacit system of sound relationships which can be used in learning to read, write and spell. (3) Teachers need to be sensitive to children's categorization of speech sounds because in some ways children are better phoneticians than adults. Children have not been conditioned by the writing system to disregard certain phonetic distinctions in language. For example, chadr is a closer representation of the spoken word than the correct spelling chatter. Therefore, primary grade teachers should not correct or re-write nonstandard, or invented spellings. The invented spellings are many times more consistent with the phonological system than the correct spellings.

Read's study and later studies by Beers (1980), Henderson (1980), Zutell (1978), Paul (1976), and Clay (1975) have established a phonological base which is used to study invented spelling strategies at the various stages of a child's development. These strategies have been documented repeatedly in the writing of phonetic spellers. Chomsky (1979) relates:

> Features that may appear to be idiosyncratic in one child's spelling turn out on inspection

> to be common to all children. English contains some 40 sounds, but the alphabet provides only 26 symbols. The children all cope with this dilemma in much the same way. (p. 44)

Beers and Henderson (1977) in their analysis of first-grade children's strategies focused on tense and lax vowels, morphological markers, and some consonant sounds. This study was replicated twice, each time over a six-month period. In each study they found that changes in spelling strategies used by children occur sequentially and systematically, not haphazardly.

Gentry (1978) found that at different levels of reading achievement children use different spelling strategies. Gentry tells:

> When a child first learns to spell he is inventing. He is searching for a theory to help him understand the relationship between the alphabet and written language . . . . The child's spellings are most likely to be phonetic or prephonetic, representing a simple theory of the relationship between the alphabet and written language. (p. 89)

From his study, Gentry (1978) categorizes invented spelling into four stages: the Deviate Stage, the

Pre-Phonetic Stage, the Phonetic Stage, and the Transitional Stage.

(1) The Deviate Stage is characterized by the random ordering of letters and other symbols known by the child, sometimes interspersed with letter-like marks, for example, b-BpA = monster and =PAHI@ = giant. In this stage, speech can be recorded by means of graphic symbols.

(2) In the Pre-Phonetic Stage, one-, two-, and three-letter representations of discrete words are used. Letters used represent some speech sounds heard in the word, for example, MSR = monster and DG = dog. Children have learned that speech is comprised of discrete words. Recorded speech consists of written words. Specific letters stand for specific speech sounds.

(3) In the Phonetic Stage, spelling includes all sound features of words, as the child hears and articulates them, for example, PPL = people. Every sound feature of a word is represented by a letter or a combination of letters. The written form of a word contains every speech sound recorded in the same sequence in which sounds are articulated when the word is spoken.

(4) In the Transitional Stage, vowels are included in every recorded syllable. Familiar spelling patterns are used, and standard spelling is interspersed with incorrect phonetic spelling, for example, highcked = hiked, tode = toad, and come = come. In this stage, words are spelled in such a way that they may be read easily by oneself and others. Also the child understands that there are various ways to spell many of the same speech sounds. Every word has a conventional spelling that is used in printed materials, and many words are not spelled entirely phonetically.

Spontaneous spelling usually appears around the age of 4 or 5 years but may begin as early as 3. Spontaneous spellers may continue on in this manner for up to a year or more before moving on to reading. Chomsky believes that the experience and facility gained during this period of invented spelling is related to the confidence which the child develops in expressing his/her thoughts and ideas and that it provides an excellent foundation for learning to read. She states that children ought to learn how to read by creating their own spellings for familiar words. Then once they know the letters of the alphabet (sounds in particular, not names), they should be allowed to spend time putting

letters together to make words that they choose. Chomsky asks (1971), "What better way to read for the first time than to try recognizing the very word you have just carefully built on the table in front of you?" (p. 296)

Paul Freire (1970) points out that if the word is to be "born of the creative effort of the learner, it cannot be 'deposited' in his mind." In writing, the message is known to the child, whereas in reading the words are not known ahead of time and must be identified. (p. 208)

Sowers (1979) believes children can begin to write through invented spelling, before they learn to read. From her study, these are samples of young children's writing. This four-year-old girl wrote for more than a year before she began to read. The text reads, "YUTS A LADE YET FEHEG AD HE KOT FLEPR" (Once a lady went fishing and she caught Flipper). She used primarily letter names, not their sounds. At the time she wrote this, she did not know all the sounds of most letters. She used H to represent the sh since aitch is the closest that she could come to sh in all the letter names. Another child of four years wrote, "2 DADDY I EM SRY THT U R SIC NED LUV DADDY" (To Daddy, I am sorry that you are sick, Ned love Daddy.) It can readily be

seen that each letter she used represented the letters she heard. A five-year-old who read wrote "DEAR MUMOY I HOP YOO OR FEELIG BEDR I AM MKIG THS PRESIM FOOR YOO BI DIANE" (Dear Mommy, I hope you are feeling better. I am making this present for you. Bye, Diane.) This piece shows that she is beginning to move toward more correct spelling. She has consistently added vowels to most all of the words and is able to spell some words correctly or nearly so.

Gentry (1978) relates that children need to be encouraged to create writing naturally and assume an active role in acquiring written language. Children need to manipulate and discover words. Chomsky emphasizes (1971)

> What I propose is that children be permitted to be active participants in teaching themselves to read. In fact, they ought to be directing the process. By reversing the usual order of read first, write later, this can be allowed to happen. (p. 296)

In considering the outcomes of invented spelling on the language development, major concerns are related to how invented spelling is related to reading and how it affects children's acquisition of conventional

spelling. Many educators and parents have been concerned about children being exposed for any length of time to systematic "misspelling." Chomsky writes (1971):

> . . . the transition to conventional spelling presents no difficulty for either reading or writing. If anything, learning to read seems to be considerably facilitated for the spontaneous speller. In many cases, he quite simply teaches himself when he is ready . . . . I think that what helps the child most of all at this point is his heightened activity level. Learning to read, or at first identifying printed words, surely involves forming hypotheses about the relations (direct and indirect) of spelling to pronunciation, changing these hypotheses as new evidence is added, and eventually arriving at a system of interpretation that is in accord with the facts. This construction is an active process, taking the child far beyond the "rules" that can be offered him by the best of patterned, programmed, or linguistic approaches. The more the child is prepared to do for himself, the better off he is. (p. 510)

From his study of spontaneous spelling, Read (1970) stresses that there is no confusion or conflict between the child's invented system and standard forms. The children let go of their own spelling systems and acquired standard spelling whenever the demands were made on them to do so. He found that children in a traditional school adopted standard spelling more rapidly than those in an informal school situation which had little or no particular emphasis placed on spelling. The ease of transition was explained by Read in the following manner:

> (Since) the transition (to standard spelling) was neither difficult or necessarily slow, one conclusion seems justified: if "habit" refers to behavior that is acquired and altered by frequent repetition and constant correction, the early spellings are not habits. Some young spellers wrote hundreds of words before entering school; it seems inconceivable that each word could have required individual correction in first grade without spelling becoming an issue between these children and their teachers and parents. The spontaneous beginning of the children's spelling also

> showed that it was not habit formation in the sense referred to. We can only believe that the children acquired . . . general notions of spelling that allowed them to spell virtually any word and that later altered quite readily, despite the fact that they had been applied many times. (p. 189)

Chomsky also points out that invented spelling did not become a habitual strategy. As learners grow and mature, they are constantly modifying their rules to include their new ideas and experiences.

Sorensen and Kirstetter (1979) relate that as children's awareness of standard spelling grows, their sight words and visual memory of word forms grow, and as a result their spontaneous spellings gradually approach standard forms. The purpose for writing then is also likely to shift as children begin to read and to write for themselves and others. Up to this point, children have been writing for their own purposes and had no need for correct spelling. As children begin writing for an audience, they desire their spelling to be correct. Conclusions from the studies by Read (1970), Chomsky (1975), Clay (1975), Paul (1976), Gentry (1977), Graves (1978), Zutell (1978), Calkins (1979), and Beers

(1980) seem in general agreement that increasing audience awareness and acquiring a sight vocabulary while being encouraged to do much writing lead children to read and spell more easily and to attain an easy transition to correct spelling.

## Visual Memory

Visual memory is a crucial ability in correct spelling. The factors in this process which are visual comparison, visual recall (memory), and visual imagery allow a writer to visualize a previously observed word, object or event. The ability to make visual comparisons leads to the development of visual memory, or visual recall, which is the foundation of visual imagery. Hendrickson (1967), considers mastery of the visualization process important to becoming proficient in spelling. He states:

> As a child learns to visualize he learns to look and observe. He learns to see, listen and know more. He learns to see more in less time. He learns the visual ability of substituting symbols for experiences, and he learns symbol manipulation as a visual activity which, when adequately learned, produces a good writer, good reader, and a good speller.

> When he can visualize a word, he can spell it, regardless of how it sounds. (p. 42)

The conclusions of the studies by Hanna, Hanna, Hodges and Rudorf (1966), and Simon & Simon (1973), indicate that a total reliance on a phonemic strategy in spelling a word would be inadequate for writing the English language. The word sign could only be spelled correctly using visual memory. If a child used only a sound-symbol strategy, the word could be produced as cine, sine, syne, or sin.

Simon & Simon (1973), Lesiak et al., (1979) and Cripps (1975) explain that during the production process, or following the child's attempt to spell the word, the child uses visualization strategies to check the word that he/she has just spelled for correctness. These researchers believe this visualization process occurs with the spelling of words which do not follow a strict sound-symbol correspondence such as once, scene, eye, two, and people, homophones such as stationery/stationary, bare/bear, read/red, and words containing silent letters. Spelling these words calls for an entirely different strategy than sound-symbol matching in order to determine the correct selection and production of the required word. Visual memory of words is used to facilitate this process.

Marsh, Friedman, Welch, and Desberg (1980) relate that people are able to produce the correct spelling of words such as debt, lamb, castle, wriggle, and knife because they use stored visual information about such spellings. In their study of spelling strategy development, they illustrate the difference between sound-to-spelling and spelling-to-sound correspondences. They reach this conclusion:

> Sound-to-spelling correspondences are also generally less predictable than the spelling-to-sound correspondences in reading. For example, the rules for pronouncing the letter k are quite predictable (i.e. - /k/ except before n where it is silent). On the other hand, the spelling of the phoneme /K/ is variable and depends on the following vowel. In addition there is no simple way to predict whether or not a word begins with a silent letter k. The correct spelling of words with an initial silent k before n must depend primarily on visual memory. (p. 343)

Cripps (1975) says that sight is our preferred sense and that we use sight to check the correctness

or incorrectness of our spelling. In other words, spelling is a visual and not an auditory skill. Lesiak (1979) points out that the speller must check the graphic form with a recalled visual image, thus reinforcing the idea that spelling is a visual skill rather than an auditory one. Groff (1969) makes the point that there are children, especially those with limited oral English background, such as the deaf, who spell perfectly because of visual memories for the design of words.

Peters & Cripps (1980) state that good spellers look carefully at words, and it is through this process that visual familiarity with letter patterns develops. Good spellers learn the probability and frequency of letters occurring together. Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) say that an awareness of structure and pattern of language is reflected in good spelling. Good spellers use prediction strategies which reflects their knowledge of the rules of frequency and redundancy; on the other hand, poor spellers tend to be more haphazard. They theorize that the difference lies in the exposure to print as well as the amount of reading done by the good spellers. Peters & Cripps (1980) relate that the competent speller knows by sight whether

it looks right, and this decision is dependent on visual reference. They emphasize that spelling is a visual skill in which sight is used to check the correctness of the spelling.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING SPELLING IN GRADE ONE

Writing is a process which starts for each individual before the pencil ever touches the paper. Many kinds of experiences help children learn what the purposes of writing are. Wiseman & Watson (1980) say that if children's preschool lives are empty of experiences with writing, they probably will not be ready to write when they reach school. James states, "Children's informal preschool experiences prepare them for writing" (1982, p. 459). If their background is rich in language experiences, children will be aware of what writing does and will be able to categorize the sounds of their language, assign letters or symbols to them, and use those symbols when they want to write messages.

Children master written language as they use it. They need opportunities and encouragement to explore their ideas and thoughts through their own writing. The teacher can greatly facilitate students' learning by creating an environment that gives them the opportunity

to explore the process of written language. There needs to be a supportive, interactive relationship between the reading and writing processes. Children learn about how to become readers from writing and how to become better writers through reading.

Research has also shown that children need extensive reading and an abundant number of written words available for generating and testing rules to help them spell more correctly. Both Zutell (1975) and Beers & Beers (1977) report that the less children use and know about a given word, the more primitive spelling strategies are used, thus they need ample reading opportunities to make it possible for them to recognize relationships among words. Children must have plenty of opportunities to see words in print in meaningful contexts. Zutell writes:

> Letter sounds alone provide insufficient information about how words are spelled . . . . Reading, vocabulary development and spelling are interrelated and mutually facilitating components of a complete language arts program . . . . Such a program must, of course, be individualized--based on the needs and abilities of each

> child. Children's strategies, which can provide the informed and observing teacher with vital information about what the child already knows about words and consequently which activities would be most effective in helping to expand that knowledge. (p. 848)

Templeton (1980) recommends that children should be allowed to learn the alphabet. He believes that this small bit of knowledge leads to greater rewards in the children's creation of words. James (1982) believes it is not necessary to reserve writing experiences until children are familiar with the visual forms of letter patterns and spelling generalizations. She relates that "waiting to write until they know how to spell inhibits their learning to write and spell. Children should write as soon as they show that they understand what writing does." (p. 460)

Gentry (1981) discusses the teacher's role as diagnostic in an informal sense concerning early writing:

> The teacher should consider such early attempts diagnostically, looking for evidence of alphabetic knowledge, mastery of left-to-right orientation, and discrimination of letter forms from numbers. (p. 378)

Graves (1983) makes the point that teachers do a grave disservice to their students when they mark up their papers with red ink while correcting them. Seeing their compositions which contain their personal feelings marked up by someone else is very discouraging. Gee (1972); Taylor and Hoedt (1966) relate:

> Children who write frequently and receive no correction on their papers will write more, and at worst will make no more mechanical errors than do those who receive correction on their papers. (p. 215)

The results of the studies by Hillerich (1971) and Nikoloff (1965) indicate that children who do not receive corrections on their papers make even fewer errors in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling than those that did have corrections on their papers.

The emphasis in teaching written composition should be that writing is done to create meaning and relay messages. The focus needs to be on the expression of ideas. Correct spelling is secondary but affords ease in reading and is a courtesy to the audience. Gentry (1981) tells teachers to respond appropriately to young children's writing by deemphasizing standard spelling. Spelling competence evolves naturally as writing

develops spelling consciousness. By being aware of developmental nature of spelling and observing individual children's responses, teachers are able to give the appropriate instruction.

By encouraging invented spelling, teachers help children to take the risks involved in learning to write. Inventive spellers provide themselves with valuable practice in the development of language abilities, thus gaining a sense of control over the printed word. Paul (1976) writes:

> The greatest advantage of the technique seems to be that it gives children the opportunity to write independently long before they are ready for a formal reading or spelling program . . . . Invented spelling gives some children the chance to express themselves without needing to ask for help from anyone. (p. 200)

Graves (1978) contends that basic writing skills in the schools are so segmented and broken down to time elements of handwriting for fifteen minutes per day, language arts for thirty minutes, spelling for ten minutes that children hardly have time to learn to write with ease. Attention needs to be directed to creating meaning through writing.

# CHAPTER III

## A FIRST-GRADE PROGRAM: MAKING LANGUAGE VISIBLE TO FACILITATE YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING

Research studies support the view that the classroom environment can greatly facilitate children's involvement with the processes of language. Creating an environment in which children take the responsibility for their reading and writing experiences gives them the opportunity to learn language through using it. The major emphasis of this program is to extend children's language abilities through writing experiences. Much attention was given to making language visible to the children.

### Visible Language Opportunities

Children in first grade benefit from easy access to visual language so they are more free to create meaning through writing. Then children can attend to the content of their writing.

#### Spelling Books

Each child was given an alphabetized bound book to record words that could not be spelled. During writing activity, the teacher printed words which were needed by individual children in their books. These words were written rather than spelled aloud so the experience

would be visual. As the children's collections of words grew, they served as useful references and models of handwriting. Pictionaries also were available to children.

### Resources Related to School Experiences

Many sources of visual language were provided for use with activities in the different curriculum areas. The teacher encouraged children to make note of words which might be needed in writing activity and the different sources of these words. Frequently words were listed on the chalkboard after discussions. Then if they were needed for an extended time, they were placed on chart paper for display. Words which represented significant experiences in their school life were placed on large cards and displayed on a permanent basis around the top area of the room. This collection was continually being added to. Bulletin boards related to social studies and science displayed words which were important to the subject. Displays were also labeled.

### Sustaining Centers

Several centers were maintained throughout the entire year to support the development of the language activities in the classroom. These centers also offered visible language.

## Listening, Viewing, Reading Center

This center contained a collection of books, tapes (teacher and commercially prepared), and records. Many books had accompanying tapes so the first graders could follow along if they were unable to read. The purpose of the collection was to offer pleasurable literature experiences and also to extend the social studies and science units and other school experiences. Works representing different literary elements such as plot organization and imagery were also presented. Some of the favorite works were:

Swimmy, by Leo Lionni

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendack

The Seeing Stick, by Jane Yolan

Mr. Gumpy's Outing, by John Burningham

Mrs. Beggs and the Wizard, by Mercer Mayer

Once a Mouse, by Marcia Brown

Old Lars, by Erica Magnus

Napping House, by Audrey Wood

## Author/Illustrator Center

As the year progressed, authors/illustrators and their works were presented so children could learn more about the composition process. Biographical sketches and works with accompanying tapes were displayed in the

center. The tapes offered another opportunity for beginning readers to follow along and learn language.

These authors/illustrators were presented:

Marcia Brown

Eric Carle

Ezra Jack Keats

Arnold Lobel

Leo Lionni

Mercer Mayer

Tomie de Paola

Dr. Seuss

Brian Wildsmith

Children frequently sought titles of these authors/ illustrators in the library.

Bookmaking Center

Books were made for the children to write in. These books were made of picture story paper which has lines and a space at the top for illustrating. Many children started their compositions by drawing the picture and then writing about it. Children on a temporary basis contributed these works to the Reading Center.

## Poetry Center

Poems were printed onto oak tag and displayed on the classroom walls. Sometimes the poems represented timely topics such as a concept of weather, a season, or a holiday; works of a specific poet; or a specific form such as couplets, cinquains, limericks, concrete poems, and "Who, What, When, Where, Why" poems. These works were frequently read aloud by the teacher and the children. They were sources of visual language.

## Flannelboard Center

Retelling a story adds to children's enjoyment and extends their sense of story. Characters and other story elements were constructed from pellon for the children to use in retelling stories on a flannelboard. (Tapes of stories were also available to listen to as the pieces were presented.) Through this experience, children can become aware of words as well as the sequence of ideas, plot organization, and characterization in a story. Examples of stories available for retelling through flannelboard experiences were:

Why Mosquitos Buzz in Peoples Ears, by Verna Aardema

Turtle Tree, by Frank Asch

Once a Mouse, by Marcia Brown

Mr. Gumpy's Outing, by John Burningham

Little Red Hen, by Paul Galdone

One Fine Day, by Nonny Hogrogian

The Most Wonderful Egg in the World, by Helne Heine

Ming Lo Moves the Mountain, by Arnold Lobel

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak

## Interesting Objects Box

Objects that were unique and offered different sensory experiences were collected for the children to examine and were kept on a cart with two shelves. Each week children chose items to feature. These objects were placed upon the top shelf. As the year progressed the children began their own interesting objects boxes which were shared on the cart. The interesting objects box often led to fascinating sharing sessions as well as imaginative thinking and writing. Not only did children enjoy describing the pieces and discussing their uniqueness but sometimes they were motivated to write fanciful stories. The objects were labeled as they became part of the class discussion.

## Picture Collections

Pictures were categorized in a variety of ways to present to the children as the year progressed, such as interesting experiences, animal pictures, sensory pictures, and pictures representing specific colors.

Children frequently chose pictures as the basis of their writing experience, both fanciful and informational. Also they went to the library to find more information about a picture. Some pictures were presented in folders with words closely associated with the topic printed on the other side.

### Costume Box

This center was presented to encourage children to play different parts in a story with the support of costumes and masks. They used costumes to act out stories they read as well as the ones they wrote. This center led some children to discover that they were good storytellers.

### Masks Center

The masks were made from magazine pictures mounted on oak tag or drawn on oak tag and paper bags. Words naming the role or occupation of the people in the pictures were written on the masks.

## Provisions for Writing Experiences

The first graders were encouraged to write from the first day of school and wrote daily. They could write as little or as much as they liked and could illustrate their writing or draw their ideas before writing them. The amount each child wrote varied with

abilities, interest, and background. The children were encouraged to write stories using invented spelling. The burden of perfect spelling was removed, and they were free to create their own meaning. Children as they wrote moved from invented spelling to an awareness of correct letter sequences. Magnetic letters, rubber letters, and letter blocks were also included to encourage those children that did not feel comfortable with handwriting.

Writing opportunities were offered throughout the curriculum areas though twenty minutes was specifically reserved each day for writing. Many first graders spent thirty to forty-five minutes each day writing. Frequently children went to the library looking for information to extend their compositions.

Children were offered the option of dictating their stories to the teacher and a group of fifth grade volunteers or into a tape recorder. These dictating opportunities facilitated the child with a poorly developed fine muscular system or one who had limited language experiences. Even the most able first graders chose from time to time to ask someone else to transcribe their ideas. Then they were freed of handwriting and spelling to explore ideas more extensively.

While children wrote, quiet talking took place among the writers. The children talked over such things as topics to be written about; parts of their stories; mechanics--spelling, punctuation, and capital letters; how a sentence sounded; and if the story made sense. Once this routine was established, the children were usually able to stay on task. Most children resented someone interrupting them and were quite verbal about telling them so.

The opportunity to share their writing was important to the children. Compositions were read aloud to peers and the teacher as the children felt a need to share. Often they shared how they got their idea for a story, or a book they liked that led them to write about a subject. This sharing was influential for further writing activity.

The children enjoyed having the teacher write with them. They were anxious to hear her compositions and responded eagerly with suggestions.

For the most part, the first graders considered the writing process to be linear, not recursive. They were satisfied to write from the beginning to the completion of the story. Redrafting and revising was of little concern to many of them. Each child had a

folder to keep compositions though many compositions were taken home upon completion.

Through teacher-student conferences, children were supported in choosing topics and expanding ideas and were given opportunities to share the outcomes of their involvement in the composition process. Many of the first graders needed assistance in choosing topics and focusing on an aspect of it.

In responding to children's manuscripts, the teacher attempted to allow children to own their work. General comments were made; specific ones were offered in response to children's questions. The teacher spent much time with small groups of children instructing them in constructive ways to respond to others' work in peer conferences.

As children gained experience in sharing their compositions aloud, they became more aware of how language sounds and requested assistance with mechanics. Their writing was the basis of instruction on punctuation, capitalization and other writing skills.

Stories copied into picture storybooks and illustrated were considered publishing. These stories proved to be very popular with the first graders. They read their own and others over and over. They shared

them with other grades, interested adults such as the principal, secretary, librarians, and other teachers, as well as their families. Publishing their work stimulated them to write more and put more thought and effort into each story.

## Writing Activities

Throughout the school year, many activities were available to the first graders.

### Journals

No topics were assigned so children were able to create meaning for themselves from their experiences. The content of the journals ranged from picture stories to personal narrations, fanciful stories and reports. Personal narration pieces, which are about one's own experiences from a first-person point of view, were frequent vehicles for expression in the journals. The first graders called their fanciful compositions "Once upon a time" stories and in many cases began with that lead in.

### Pen Pals

The first graders were adopted by a seventh grade language arts class. These middle-school students answered the letters and picture cards sent to them by the first graders. They were also the Santas who

answered the children's letters at Christmas. By the time the first and seventh graders met in February, they had exchanged letters several times. After meeting the older students they included more questions, jokes, and art work in their letters. The first grade letters grew longer and more detailed.

## Story Composition

The children were encouraged to create the topics for their fanciful stories. The structure of stories was explored through group story composition which was led by the teacher. Stories read aloud by the teacher were used as patterns and springboards for expressive activity. Examples were Charlotte Zolotow's Someday and Crockett Johnson's Harold and the Purple Crayon. Many of the literature experiences and related activities found in Literature and Expressive Activity (1985), by Jeanne McLain Harms, were presented to the class.

Centers with literature experiences and suggested expressive activities also offered possibilities for story composition. Several of the centers offered in the Harms' reference were used.

Examples of other centers which were developed were:

Title: Carousel Experiences

Literature Experience

View Carousel, by Donald Crews.

Expressive Activity

1. Make a list of carousel words.
2. Tell or write about your experiences on a carousel.

Title: Rain

Literature Experience

View Peter Spier's Rain.

Expressive Activity

1. What words does this book make you think of? Make a list to share with the class.
2. Write a story about what you like to do in the rain.
3. Draw a picture of yourself doing something fun in the rain or after the rain.
4. Draw a picture of something special you could see when it rains.
5. Use the fingerpaints to make your own rainbow. How else could you make a beautiful rainbow? Share your idea with your teacher.

Title: An Animal Riddle

Literature Experience

Read Joanne Ryder's Snail's Spell.

Expressive Activity

1. Choose an animal to pantomime.
2. Write or tell clues about the animal.

Title: Animals and Colors

Literature Experience

Read Brown Bear, Brown Bear, by Bill Martin.

Expressive Activity

1. Write your own book like Brown Bear, Brown Bear but use the animals you want in your book with the colors you pick.
2. Share your book with a special friend. Would you like to share your book with the class at sharing time?

## Poetry Composition

Poetry was often composed as a natural outgrowth of the teacher reading poems aloud and experiences in the Poetry Center. One of the most popular forms of poems was concrete poetry. Coming up with new and unique ideas for concrete poems was exciting to them. The volumes Poems Make Pictures, Pictures Make Poems, by Giose Rimanelli and Paul Pimsleur, and Concrete Is Not Always Hard, by Barbara Pilon, served as the basis for the first graders becoming interested in concrete poetry. The words on cards circling the room which

were representative of important experiences during the school year were frequently chosen as topics for poems.

As in stories composition, poems sometimes were patterned such as from "Rules," from Karla Kuskin's Dogs and Dragons, Trees and Dreams. One first grade girl used the structure of Lilian Moore's poem "Spider" (Something new begins) to create a poem.

Spider's
weaving

Spider's
building

another trap.

spin
the long sticky thread
spin around
spin from corner
to corner:

Spider
weaving
her
deadly house.

Isn't she
quiet
as a
mouse?

Ask fly.

# CHAPTER IV

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the study was to provide as much visible language as possible related to a group of first graders' experiences. Visual language was made available in many ways to facilitate ease in writing and to extend knowledge of the correct spellings of words. As a result of the attention given to writing and words, children moved rapidly from using invented spelling to relying on visual memory, or recalling how words looked. Because of the many visual aids for writing, children wrote a great deal, learned to spell many words, and also improved their handwriting ability.

An important element in this writing program was the emphasis placed on creating meaning, not correct form. The visual aids for spelling made the expression of ideas and feelings easier for the beginning writers.

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