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Assessing children's emerging literacy through dialogue journals

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Assessing children's emerging literacy through dialogue journals

Abstract

At a workshop on whole language, attended recently by the writer, Andrea Butler, teacher, author and researcher, told of her recent research study of parent expectations. In the study, parents of very young children were given a survey to determine their expectations of their infants' language development. The parents' responses indicated that they all expected their children to learn to speak. Most of the parents believed their children would learn to read though many had reservations. Many of the parents hoped their children would learn to write but had concerns about this aspect of their children's development. This uncertainty associated with children's emerging language abilities reflects a common concern among many educators as well as parents. Learning to read and write is viewed as a complex, difficult process that many children may not succeed in.

Assessing Children's Emerging Literacy Through
Dialogue Journals

A Graduate Project
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

Marynell Mullins Thoma

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Introduction

Rationale of the Project

At a workshop on whole language, attended recently by the writer, Andrea Butler, teacher, author and researcher, told of her recent research study of parent expectations. In the study, parents of very young children were given a survey to determine their expectations of their infants' language development. The parents' responses indicated that they all expected their children to learn to speak. Most of the parents believed their children would learn to read though many had reservations. Many of the parents hoped their children would learn to write but had concerns about this aspect of their children's development. This uncertainty associated with children's emerging language abilities reflects a common concern among many educators as well as parents. Learning to read and write is viewed as a complex, difficult process that many children may not succeed in.

Misconceptions about language have led some educators to form faulty expectations. Some believe that the different aspects of language emerge in a definite sequence--first, listening and then followed by speaking, reading, and writing. Writing instruction in schools beyond letter formation and copying text has not typically occurred until some reading has begun.

Oral language abilities support emerging written literacy, and a commonality exists in the oral and written language processes (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). If the tasks and abilities underlying reading and writing are highly similar to those of oral language, then connecting the different aspects of language instruction expedites literacy (Durkin, 1988; Moffett & Wagner, 1983; Stauffer, 1980). Also, the underlying commonalities of reading and writing can be used to strengthen each other.

One instructional innovation that utilizes the commonality among the different aspects of language is dialogue journals. Dialogue journals are defined for this paper as written dialogues, or letters, that a student and teacher exchange on a regular basis, requiring reading and writing on the part of both parties. These entries consist of a student's response to an experience and a teacher's response to the student's writing. Dialogue journals can be further defined as interactive written discussions between a student and a teacher that involve topics of interest and occur frequently and continuously over an extended period of time (Wollman-Bonilla, 1991).

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to examine the dialogue journal as a means of extending the interaction of individual students with the teacher. This collaboration through writing about reading and other experiences can offer children a means of

engaging in the written language processes as naturally as they engage in the oral language processes and can connect instruction with assessment. From dialoguing with the teacher, children's responses to the school environment can be seen and their instructional needs can be assessed.

Procedures of the Project

The professional literature on the topic will be explored to ascertain how this type of journal can be used most effectively in the classroom. The implementation of dialogue journals into a grade two classroom that offers a print rich environment will be described.

Review of Professional Literature

In preparing to use dialogue journals as a literacy instructional-assessment technique, a teacher must first identify those journaling practices that appear to be effective in the school environment. Therefore, this review of literature will focus on those studies that have identified effective journaling practices.

Bode (1988) examined three methods of teaching language arts--student dialogue journal writing with parents, student dialogue journal writing with teachers, and traditional language arts programs--to determine the contributions journal writing can make to the integration of the reading and writing program. The subjects for this study were 300 first graders from three central

Florida school districts that were similar in achievement levels and language arts curricula. The study involved two experimental groups and one control group. Children in one experimental group wrote in dialogue journals with their parents at home three times a week. Children in the other experimental group wrote three times a week in dialogue journals with their teachers. In both groups, children were encouraged to use invented spelling (When students write, they spell words as best they can, inventing if necessary, but using the words they need when they need them rather than sticking with those they are sure they can spell). The children in the control group received the traditional language arts curriculum. A number of evaluative instruments --Stanford Achievement Test, Metropolitan Achievement Test, Schonell Graded Word Test, and Scheffe' Test--were used to measure these variables: reading achievement (vocabulary, reading comprehension, and study skills), spelling achievement, listening comprehension, written expression, and dictated spelling.

The results of this study showed that the experimental groups scored significantly higher than the control group. The group that involved children dialoguing with their teachers did not score significantly higher than the child-parent dialoguing group on any variable. It was concluded that dialogue journal writing is an essential approach to beginning literacy. Two

important journaling elements were identified--the use of invented spelling with adults modeling conventional spelling and writing with an adult.

Bintz and Dillard (1990) also explored the use of writing journals in a first grade classroom. They, too, believe that children develop oral and written language proficiency through engaging in the language processes within the natural functions of language, or experiences that are meaningful to children. They were concerned, however, that once children were in school they are required to practice traditional decontextualized reading and writing tasks. These tasks are unfamiliar, confusing, and frustrating to children because they do not build on children's prior knowledge. They believe this situation can be avoided by creating classroom environments that support and extend the natural language learning proficiencies children bring with them to school.

The strategy Bintz and Dillard (1990) researched was written responses to literature in dialogue journals. They explored two questions in their inquiry: (1) What functions do students engage in when responding to literature experiences? (2) What patterns of student response to literature occur over time? The subjects of this study were 25 heterogeneously-grouped first graders in a suburban school district near a large midwestern city. All data were collected by the

teacher/researcher during the second semester of one school year. Assessment methods included teacher observation, field notes, a collection of writing samples from journals, and audio and video recordings of teacher-student interactions.

At the beginning of the study, students received journal booklets made of primary-lined paper with wallpaper covers. A letter from the teacher invited the children to write to the teacher about any book they were reading at the time. It explained that the teacher would read each entry and write back. In this way, they could continue to write to each other about books for the remainder of the year. After this introduction, dialogue journal writing occurred on the average of once every two weeks for approximately 30 minutes.

To answer the first of their questions in the study, the researchers categorized every sentence in each dialogue journal entry according to its function in the entry. They concluded that students spent over 90% of their time using four response functions: reporting, responding, reacting/commenting, and evaluation. In answer to their second question concerning the patterns of student response to literature that developed over time, the researchers identified three stages. Early in the study, the students spent most of their time simply naming, labeling, and identifying specific aspects of books. As the semester progressed, student responses began to reflect attention

to such elements as placing characters within action scenes. By the end of the semester, student response progressed to making predictions about story lines and sharing recommendations to peers about specific books.

Bintz and Dillard (1990) concluded that writing in dialogue journals about self-selected pieces of literature provides readers with experiences that engage them in the functions of language. From these experiences, students can begin to understand that reading and writing are interrelated social engagements rather than isolated, individual processes. The researchers concluded that effective journaling elements were self-selected text, real-life purposes for reading and writing, and teacher/student interaction.

Dekker (1991) studied also the nature of student responses to literature experiences as revealed in journal writing. The subjects in this study were a second grade classroom and a second/third grade combination classroom. In their journals, the students were to respond to what they liked about their self-selected literature experiences. The teacher introduced journal writing by modeling an entry. The student responses fell into three main categories: retelling, simple evaluation (responses that indicated the student liked or disliked a book but did not provide any textual information), and elaborated evaluation (a positive response to a literature work that provided one or more

incidents from the text). The researcher concluded from her observations that dialogue journaling about reading experiences is more effective when children write about books they have selected on a daily basis and when this function is modeled by the teacher.

Researchers concluded that children can learn to read and write as naturally as they can learn to speak if given an appropriate print environment. One means of nurturing children's written language is through dialogue journals, an activity that integrates reading and writing. Journaling strategies that have been identified as most effective are self-selected topics, daily writing experiences with teacher response, use of invented spelling with adults modeling conventional spelling, modeling of writing by the teacher, and teacher-student interaction. From the findings of these studies, the use of dialogue journals will be extended from an instructional technique to an assessment tool.

Implementing Dialogue Journals to Assess Literacy Development

The purpose of the project was to explore the use of dialogue journals as a means of an instructional-assessment technique for nurturing written literacy. The nine-week project was designed for a second grade self-contained classroom in a rural midwest school. The 19 students in the classroom were from

middle to low income families. Five students were randomly selected by the researcher to study for this project. In accordance with school policy, fictitious names are used to protect their identity.

The project began on the first day of school in August, 1994. The teacher adopted those journaling methods shown from the review of research to be most effective: self-selected topics, modeling of writing by the teacher, daily writing with teacher response, use of invented spelling by students with adults modeling conventional spelling, and teacher-student interaction. The teacher gave each student a dialogue journal to keep in his/her desk for writing daily entries. The students were also given a personal word book to record words they could not spell that were needed in their writing. The students were told they would be reading books that they had chosen and then writing about what they had read.

The first three weeks of the project were primarily directed by the teacher. The first hour of the day was set aside for the reading/writing project. The students were instructed to pick out their own reading material and read silently for twenty to thirty minutes. The teacher also read silently at this time. At the end of the reading time, the teacher modeled from her reading an example of journal writing. Then, the students were given time to write in their journals. The elements modeled by

the teacher in her written responses were: writing about the characters in the story, retelling the story in one's own words, using elements of story structure to tell about the story (setting, characters, theme, plot episodes, and resolution), summarizing the story, reacting to the story, and using the author's or illustrator's idea or theme to create one's own story.

At the end of each day, students were asked to hand in their journals so the teacher could read and react to their writing. Students were encouraged to write freely--using inventive spelling and experimenting with literary elements (e.g., pattern of three in folk tales and rhyming text) and different genres (e.g., fantasy and poetry). From their errors in spelling and other usage elements, such as punctuation and sentence structure, the teacher developed spelling lists for individual study, topics for conferences, and mini-lessons for individuals and groups.

The next six weeks of the project featured a similar format. During a one-hour block of time, the students selected reading material, read silently, and then wrote about what they had read in their journals. The amount of teacher direction and modeling was reduced considerably; however, the teacher was still engaged in reading and writing during this time.

At the end of each week, time was set aside for student-teacher conferences for the five students. These conferences gave students an opportunity to discuss with the teacher their written responses to their reading and then to set goals for further reading and writing. During the conferences, the teacher used the checklist presented below to assess the responses of the five students in the project and to record comments and concerns.

RESPONSES TO LITERATURE

- ___ Student demonstrates knowledge of story structure (e.g., setting, characters, theme, plot episodes, resolution).
- ___ Student retells the story accurately.
- ___ Student summarizes the plots or makes generalizations.
- ___ Student provides detailed description of characters.
- ___ Student connects with the text in a personal, individualistic reaction.

NOTES:

At the end of the nine-week period, the teacher summarized each student's written responses based on the data from the checklists and the students' journal entries. Examples of writing and a written progress report were placed in the children's portfolios. These exhibits provided a record of each

student's progress for parent/teacher conferences and will be left in the portfolios for next year's teacher.

All of the students in the study made progress in responding to reading experiences through writing. At the beginning of the study, four of the students, Adam, Elisa, Brandon, and Kayla, displayed similar language abilities. They began second grade with a working knowledge of sentence structure (e.g., naming part, action part, and punctuation and capitalization rules for sentences) and had a vast knowledge of conventional spelling. They all came from print-rich homes, were confident about expressing their ideas, and were comfortable with risk-taking. At the end of the nine-week period, their progress was much the same.

They began the period of study by writing simple evaluative responses. For example, early in the study Brandon wrote:

Today I read red tag it was a fish story I read 46 pages there was a whole buch of scary animals.

As the writing project continued and the teacher modeled a variety of responses, the entries by these four students became more elaborate as demonstrated in Adam's writing. His responses reflect their language progress. For example, their early responses to literature were similar to the one Adam wrote in September:

I read about some pets That were on sall and some people came on long and They all wanted a dirrfrent pet so They started to the dad came and settled the fight and They went home.

Then, in late September, after the teacher had modeled several examples of responding to the text, Adam wrote:

I read about the ugly ducking. The duck was very ugly. His brothers and sisters picked on him. So he ran away but a frog came by and made him King. Of the geese. It reminded me of when people called me ugly.

The teacher also modeled retelling a story. In October, the teacher read Pumpkin, Pumpkin, by Jeanne Titherington, to the class. Story language (e.g., words like "sprout," "plant," "pulp" and phrases such as "and grew, and grew, and grew") was recalled by the students and written on the board by the teacher. The students were instructed to write the story in their own words as if they were telling it to someone who had never heard it before. Adam wrote:

This story is about a boy named jamie. and he wanted to plant a pumpkin so he planted six pumpkin seeds. And grew a pumpkin. And it got bigger and bigger and bigger and soon it was ready to pick. He put it in a wagon and took it in The house. And carved it. And They put it in a window and lit it, but Jamie saved

six pumpkin seeds for next year. Next year he got a better pumpkin

In this retelling, Adam demonstrated his knowledge of story structure (setting, characters, theme, plot episodes, resolution), his ability to relate story sequence and details, and to use his life experiences to create a new ending to this story.

After reading several Halloween stories, Adam wrote a scary story of his own The Haunted House.

Once there was a house. That was haunted. There was a ghost in that house. A girl stepped into the house. The door squeaked open. She heard all different kinds of sounds. There was a Whoooooooooooo. She jumped out of her pants. Her hair got stuck in a trap. She lost her shoe. She ran into the front door. She ran out of the house. She ran down the street. In to her house.

In November, Adam demonstrated his ability to read for information. He wrote:

Today I read about what it is like in the earth. A sourtin kind rock that is tan it is called a sand stone. And There is one called limestone.

In December, Adam responded to a book he had read called Trouble With Trolls, by Jan Brett. He wrote:

To day I read about a girl that had trouble with trolls. Every time a troll comes. She gives something away. Soon she was at the top of the Mountain. All of the trolls were up there. They wanted the dog but she had a plan. She said I can fly. She needed all of her stuff. She flew in the air and when she looked back she heard them saying dog dog. I would like to see one of the trolls.

This latest response to literature shows Adam's development in the areas of retelling, using story structure, summarizing, and relating in a personal way to the text.

Using samples of Adam's writing and the checklists, the teacher documented his progress. Comparing his early writing to later pieces, it is apparent Adam has become a much more proficient writer (blending his personal experiences with the events in the story) and his responses are richer and more varied. Elisa's, Brandon's, and Kayla's responses showed a similar pattern of development.

Evan, on the other hand, began the project at an earlier stage of literacy. The pages of his journal were blank the first two weeks of the project except for a few words after each date. During conferences with the teacher, Evan expressed his dislike for reading and writing. He explained that reading and writing were only for school, and they were hard work. As the project

continued, the teacher assisted Evan in locating books he might be interested in reading. If the reading level was too difficult, they read the books together. Then, Evan began to write in his journal. By the third week of the study, Evan wrote:

The Milkman

I like the Milkman because they are funner.

From Evan's responses, the teacher was able to assess his instructional needs. Mini-lessons on sentence writing, capitalization, and punctuation were presented.

In October, when the students wrote a retelling of Pumpkin, Pumpkin, Evan wrote in his journal:

he planted the seed and it grew. They grew
a spot and grew and grew and grew and grew picked
it and carved it and he put it in the wendo.

During the month of October, the teacher read many Halloween stories with Evan. Evan demonstrated his enthusiasm by writing his own scary story:

Frankenstein is play Nintendo then Frankenstein look
out the window. he see a home out side the HAUNTED
HOUSE. Then Frankenstein shut off the Nintendo in
the House.

He read his story to the teacher and with her help constructed an ending for the story:

He went to haunt the house and met one of his friends THE GHOST. They decided to haunt their own house. They had fun all night long scaring people.

The last two weeks of the project, Evan's responses were more elaborate, and he displayed his increasing knowledge of grammar and usage. After reading Best Friends, by Steven Kellogg, he responded:

I think Kathy and Louise have a terrific friendship. Kathy and Louise played on the same team, they pushed theyre desk together, they share the chocolate milk. I rile like this store.

In this entry, Evan demonstrates his ability to summarize the plot, make generalizations about the story, and retell parts of the story accurately. Even more important, he connects with the text with a personal reaction.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was threefold: to explore current research to discover the most effective elements of literature-based dialogue journal writing, to use those elements in a classroom instructional project, and to determine if the student responses to literature could be used to assess their emerging literacy. At the conclusion of the nine-week project, the teacher found that she could assess children's progress and their instructional needs in reading and writing through their

responses in their dialogue journals and the teacher's checklists and notes. At the beginning of the project, the five children selected for the study chose simple, familiar topics to read and write about. Their written responses were simple and repetitive. As the project progressed, their writing began to reflect the teacher's modeling, their interactions with the teacher in the conferences, and the elements found in their self-selected reading experiences. At the end of the project, their written reactions to their reading were much more complete and complex. The students were more willing to take risks and experiment in their writing. Even Evan, a very reluctant reader and writer, became an enthusiastic participant.

Teachers are continually seeking better ways to assess and communicate children's learning. This study demonstrates that the dialogue journal used in a print-rich second grade classroom is an effective method of assessing students' emerging literacy.

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