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A FOCUS ON WRITING
IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

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RESEARCHER STANCE

Sometimes it is hard to remember back to the beginning of this school year. It seems as though I have been involved in the study of student writing since the beginning of time. It has become so much a part of me that the years have begun to melt together. The focus of my study was the observed and recorded experiences of kindergarten children exposed to daily writing opportunities. I know setting up my classroom is usually an anticipatory experience, but this year I was so excited about my upcoming research project that I know I spent several extra mornings just setting up and checking and rechecking, and then going back for another trip to Wal-Mart for more supplies. My anxiety was great, but I knew even then, before I met this year's students, that the gains would be well worth it.

I have been interested in the development of writing in young children for some time. I began teaching 30 years ago, but my first principal discouraged me from taking any action in this area. "Kindergarten children need time to play," he said. "Just teach them the letters." My career followed a different path at that point, as I moved on to teach older children in a gifted and talented program. After 15 years away from the kindergarten classroom, I returned, and my interest in teaching reading and writing at that level returned as well. I kept feeling as though these highly inquisitive five year olds, who lived to tell and hear stories about the world, would enjoy being able to record and relay some of their own views of the world as they perceived it.

Eleven years ago my family and I moved to a new community, and I accepted a new kindergarten teaching assignment. The following year I was assigned to teach

kindergarten for a half day, and to be a Reading Recovery teacher for the other half. This required a full year of intensive training in Reading Recovery methods. This approach, developed by Marie Clay, a noted psychologist and educator from New Zealand, is used throughout the world for helping the most at-risk first graders develop a repertoire of strategies for learning to read and write. Clay (1993b) explains:

Reading Recovery is based on two assumptions. The first is that a programme for a child having difficulty learning to read should be based on a detailed observation of that child as a reader and writer, with particular attention to what a child can do. The programme will work out of these strengths and not waste time teaching anything already known. The second assumption is that we need to know

-how children who become readers learn to read

-how children who become writers learn to write. (p.7)

As part of my Reading Recovery training, I learned to assess the students using the Observation Survey, a tool that requires extensive observation of how the students interact with text, including letter identification, concepts about print, writing vocabulary, knowledge of hearing sounds in words and sight word vocabulary. This information is then written up in a detailed report, and this report is used to develop a daily, personalized instructional program to be continued until the child reaches at least the middle of his or her class in reading and writing. The child is then permitted to exit from the program, and another child is taken in. Children who do not discontinue are usually seen by specialists to see if a more long-term intervention is warranted.

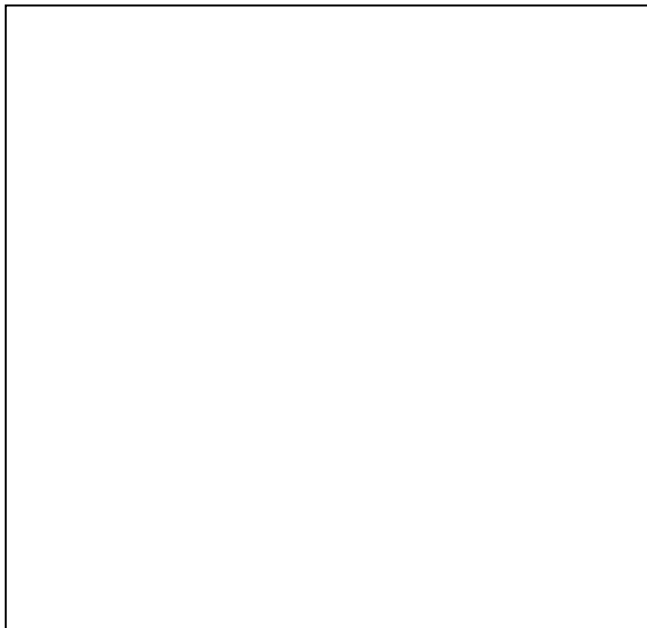
During my training year I worked with a teacher leader connected with the East coast program based at New York University. That Reading Recovery training year was a challenging one, but I became fully convinced that all children could learn to read and write if given appropriate, one on one, and explicit teaching. During this experience I learned just how important writing is to the whole literacy development in young children. Marie Clay's work explores the intertwined development of reading and writing and discusses how supporting one behavior strengthens and develops the other. Clay (1993b) has long put forth the idea of this interrelation. "The child who engages in creative writing is manipulating the units of written language - letters, words, sentence types - and is likely to be gaining some awareness of how these can be combined to convey unspoken messages" (p.2). McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas (2000) contend that interactive writing is a key way to support young children in their writing in school. They define interactive writing as "a dynamic, collaborative literacy event in which children actively compose together, considering appropriate words, phrases, organization of text and layout" (p. xv). This may include selected pieces where teacher instructs, others where the children take over, and times where they share the pen. Perry and Drummond (2002) suggest that one goal of the teacher might be to develop "develop self-regulated learners, that is those who have a high efficacy for learning, attribute outcomes to factors that are under their control (eg. effort and strategy use), and have a repertoire of effective learning and problem-solving strategies that they apply appropriately" (p. 298).

Clay (1993b) states, "A creative writing programme seems to be the necessary complement of a reading programme which stresses sentences and meaning" (p. 2). As a result, half of my Reading Recovery lesson every day was spent on developing writing.

My students and I worked on composition, letter formation, letter sound development, sounds in sequence, and conventions of print. Clay (1993b) suggests that early reading and writing skills of self monitoring for mistakes, self correction of mistakes, one to one match of each word on the page to each utterance by mouth, and the necessity of rereading to confirm meaning and predict (p. 40). I began to clearly see how interdependent reading and writing truly were, and how my most successful students were most often the ones strongest in writing throughout their program. The more of Marie Clay's work I read, and the more I worked with the most at risk first graders, the more I felt that accepting and valuing children's early attempts at writing was key to early writing success. I valued being what Vgotsky (1978) would call a more knowledgeable other who would help students confirm what they know and teach just the next little piece of information to take them just one step farther.

I did my first piece of teacher action research on children's early writing experiences as part of my first graduate level teacher education course. I wanted to see if my kindergarten students would be able to learn and use the "Hearing Sound in Words" technique used in the Reading Recovery program. This employs the use of Elkonian boxes to help support the identification and recording of phonemes. Clay (1993b) suggests "Being able to hear the sounds in the words you want to write is an authentic task ... this task directs the attention of teachers and children to phonemic awareness.." (p. 65). Students practiced stretching a word slowly, and together we pushed pennies into boxes representing each phoneme of the word. After practice of this activity so they understood the task, we began to jointly record any sounds they knew in the boxes drawn below the word. I was glad to see that many of my students could respond to this

technique if supervised by an adult who stretched the word for them and helped them record any phoneme they recognized. These observations took place in the last month of the kindergarten year, a time when all of the sounds and letters had been taught in whole group lessons. The technique of writing in boxes is an efficient manner for teaching students how to record the sounds of an unknown word in the order they are heard. It is a very helpful technique when looking at the technical aspect of writing, and I felt excited that it could be taught with some degree of success at the kindergarten level.



In this example the student would say the word *pig* slowly once or twice. Next they would say *pig* slowly while pushing a penny into a box for each phoneme. Then they would remove the pennies and place them under the boxes. This time, the student would say *p* and write *p* in the first box. If the student was unable to provide that letter, the teacher would write it in the box for the student. After repeating the sounds already recorded, this procedure would continue for each phoneme. Students are encouraged to

record any sounds they recognize. Only those words which are not easily learned as a primary writing vocabulary should be taken to Elkonian boxes.

The next year our school district introduced journal writing at the kindergarten level as part of its attempt to meet the New Jersey writing standards. These journals were to be written as part of a large group lesson beginning in January, and expectations included a picture and one consonant to represent something in the picture. The teachers at my school had also decided to teach a few sight words to go along with the initial consonants. Again, all of the instruction of sight words and color words, as well as attempts at writing, was to begin in January.

During this time I created a journal and collected data in a new round of action research. I kept a written account of things the students wrote, of conversations we had about their writing, and records of things I observed as they wrote or drew in the classroom. I followed the experiences of my students in journal writing, as well as some limited independent writing during free time. Only one or two students seemed interested in writing during free time, and my classroom contained no official writing area and possessed no special collection of writing materials. Most of the free writes were “Writing Around the Room,” or copying environmental print such as the days of the week or the weather for the day. Students completed their journals at the tables in a large group and used pencils for writing and regular crayons for coloring. I decided the theme of the journal entry and asked students to draw a picture and write something. I showed the students how to stretch words and record sounds, but I was not able to teach the “Hearing Sounds in Words” technique or to give much individual support to each child. (This technique uses Elkonian boxes and is explained earlier in this paper.) The purpose

of writing in journals was to encourage writing on a more regular basis (once a week), and to get students ready for first grade journals, which would begin in January of the first grade year for most students. My data indicated that most students were positive about writing after this more regular journal use; and the first grade staff, as well as the phonemic awareness teachers, confirmed that the group was eager to try writing immediately in September. The staff also felt that students seemed to have a better sense of how to hear and record sounds in words than they had in years past.

Our school has a phonemic awareness teacher who visits each class for three half hour sessions a week. I had watched this specialist teach phonemic awareness for the past two years, and it seemed as though this instruction was helping both my kindergarten students and the first grade Reading Recovery students. Even though my Reading Recovery students were the most at risk on their grade level, my teacher leader noted that individual testing showed they had markedly higher scores in hearing and recording sounds in words than Reading Recovery students in neighboring school districts. The scores were so much higher that a note of this was made to the national center in Ohio.

Another important segment of this program involved visualization and verbalization, the awareness of details of visual pictures, and the ability to store them mentally for future visualization. This is a crucial piece contributing to the comprehension of oral and written language, the ability to “paint a picture” in your mind. Bell’s research (1998) indicates that comprehension skills improve dramatically if we give children training in “making movies in their heads” (p.15). That is to say, having pictures of sequences of stories linked together in their minds makes children more likely to comprehend the entire story. The Lindemood-Bell Phonemic Awareness program gives students twelve

descriptive words that help young students to record and retrieve images including the words *what, number, color, size, where, shape, perspective, movement, background, mood, sound* and *when*.

My early literature review helped me understand a great deal about the children's early writing development. Parents first play an important role in the development of these skills when they provide an environment rich in print and literacy activities (Lesley Mandel Morrow, as cited in Beeler, 1993, p. 5). Youngsters who scribble or draw repetitive shapes or pictures with scribble are trying to "break the code" and participate in the mysterious activity of writing. Parents can help their children to become better writers. Burrow noted that parents are more apt to refer to their children's early writing as writing, and this, in turn, produces children who are more apt to write (1994). Schultz and Fecho (2000) also named parents as one of the influences that shape children's writing development. Parents help set the oral language skills that children bring to the writing piece. They serve as models for writing and reinforce the children's concept of themselves as writers (Burrows, 1994). Beck (2002) recognized the importance of parental involvement and wrote how she included parents in a fall workshop to discuss development of writing, inventive spelling and what parents can do at home to support different types of writing. McKay and Kendrick (2001) note that children in grade one use writing and reading to maintain and extend ideas about family relationships.

Some children before the age of five have very definite ideas about the written word. Silva and Alves-Martin (2002) noted that Ferreiro's work referred to their levels of invented spelling development. Initially young children have to make the distinction between drawing and writing. They eventually make the connection that certain letters

stand for something. During this stage they will make a word using the same three to five letters, generally using long words for things they consider to be larger in size physically. The same sequence of letters may generate a number of words (Silva & Alves-Martin, 2002) Clay (1993) similarly notes that children use the recurring principle and write a few letters over and over again to generate a long message. This stage occurs before any sense of directionality is in place, and letters may run down the sides of pages. This is also before any phonological system is in place to link letters and sounds.

Ferreiro's work suggests that children refine their number of letters and the sequence of letters to form certain words (Silva & Alves-Martin, 2002). This corresponds to Clay's (1993a) generating principle when children use known letter elements in variable patterns. Her inventory principle occurs when the child invents a system for grouping letters and words. Students may use words they know in an unexplained grouping, often writing known words or letters repeatedly. This creates some sort of an organizational grid in their minds. Many five year olds are functioning in this level at the beginning of kindergarten.

Eventually the child settles into some association of letter and sound. Ferreiro notes that it is here that the child connects oral and written language (Silva & Alves-Martin, 2002). They begin to assign a particular letter to a particular sound. Clay (1993a) notes here that the generating principle may cause children to fill in the middle of the word if they know initial and ending letters. Older children who are fluent use the abbreviation principle, notes Clay. If a child runs out of space he or she may once again deviate from the horizontal writing and switch to another form of vertical placement. Rather than

thinking this is regressive behavior and poor placement, the teacher needs to realize that this occurs in fluent writers.

Encouragement of young children to express themselves in full, descriptive, sentences is thought to create better writers. The development of written language is in some ways a newly explored field, and the idea that we teach about writing the way people speak, rather than always focusing on the mechanics alone is a powerful concept. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that in traditional writing instruction, “instead of being founded on the needs of children as they naturally develop and on their own activity, writing is given to them from without, from the teacher’s hands” (p. 105). This takes away the power of the child’s writing coming from his or her own natural language. We need to be respectful of a child’s natural language, and accepting at a kindergarten level of inaccuracies in grammar, syntax or vocabulary. The whole idea is to allow the children and their stories to be prized, whether they happen to be in a form we consider to be correct or an alternate form more reflective of the child’s current skill level.

Conlon (1995) hoped that stimulating children to talk through the use of dramatized familiar stories would encourage them to write. She encouraged a lengthening of sentences using actual objects (nouns) and supporting development of list of adjectives that would describe the object. Conlon fostered language with an emphasis on explicit teaching of prepositions. Repetitive songs were also used in the curriculum. Strickland and Morrow (1989) noted that, “What they learn from one aspect of the language arts is used to explore and develop the others” (427) At the kindergarten level they encourage a lot of teacher modeling and shared writing experiences. Schultz and Fecho noted that Cazden purports that “one of Vygotsky’s legacies is that language is rarely studied in

isolation but in relation to social, historical, cultural and political processes” (Cazden, as cited in Schultz and Fecho, 2000. p. 59)

The shift from physical play to verbal expression as children grow is another powerful observation by Vygotsky (1978). The dance that exists between play and language, and ultimately leads to written language is another powerful image. “Symbolic representation in play is essentially a particular form of speech at an earlier stage, one which leads directly to written language” (111).

Paley (1993) and Vygotsky(1978) both valued play and story telling as a precursor to more formal written language. They tie the storytelling and the sharing with the total essence of a person. Paley (1993) notes:

If people move away and do not listen we may forever feel disconnected...when a member of the San people of southern Africa is away from the tribe for even a day, he is said to have died. ‘Since I cannot hear the stories told when I am gone’, a man explained to her, ‘ then I have died on that day.’ (59)

There are other aspects of literacy teachers should consider when looking at the student as a whole. Kindergarten students might benefit from an interconnected program of phonemic awareness, writing, literacy exposure through small guided reading groups and lots of immersion in print in their classroom (Beeler, 1993). Manning and Kamii (2000) found that children made more progress when taught reading and writing in a whole language setting. They found this to be so, with less regression and confusion during the summer, as compared with a totally phonics program taught in isolation.

McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas (2000) support four different procedures to stimulate writing- language experience, shared writing, interactive writing and independent writing. Each of these components serves to motivate writing behavior. Language experiences involve adults recording oral language expression. An adult records this so children feel free to use rich oral language to create texts. This also serves as a modeling experience for children. Teachers write down exactly what the children say, and can demonstrate good writing behavior as they go along. Shared writing requires the teacher again to be the scribe, but here the teacher works to develop a text that students can read again later. This usually occurs after shared literature experiences, and as a follow up to a story with repetitive elements. According to McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas (2000), Moira McKenzie developed this process, in which a teacher supports students' ideas, but helps them to use appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure so they can problem solve independently later. Interactive writing enables teacher and student to share the pen at the teacher's discretion, so as to promote student involvement and explicit teaching. Independent writing finds students working alone and using their knowledge of what writing is about. Students generate the topic. The independent writing comes after a mini-lesson and is accompanied by teacher reinforcement as he or she walks about the room. This writing is always shared at the end of a session (McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas, 2000, p.22).

Fresch (2001) noted that individualized instruction is the key to developing writing behaviors. On the kindergarten level her children wrote the journals and the teacher listened. The teacher then "acted as a scribe" and wrote conventional spelling below for the benefit of the parents (Fresch, 2001, p. 503). Core writing vocabulary was noted, as

were shifts in letter production and consonant frameworks. Exposure to phonemic awareness also helped to identify partner letter confusions (matched voiced and unvoiced sounds like *f* and *v*), and punctuation usage was noted. Fresch set up six tables of activities around the classroom to develop some of the stages of writing. Many of the activities were similar to Clay's recommended procedures in her Guidebook to encourage early writers.

I started to think more about the writing that could occur during free time in my classroom, not just structured journal time, and what had to occur in my room physically and attitudinally to encourage genuine, spontaneous writing experiences. Research by Clay (1993b), McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas (2000), Fisher (1998), Nixon and Topping (2001), and Strickland and Morrow (1989) all suggested a variety of writing materials be available to students. This also included a suggestion for desks and chairs at the appropriate height for students. I decided to restructure my room to provide an atmosphere much more conducive to writing. I created a little writing center, with lots of different writing paper and instruments. There was colored paper, lined paper, unlined paper, newsprint, post it notes, envelopes and individual chalkboards. There were fat markers, skinny markers, chalk, pens, pencils and gel pens. Big posters and hand made poem posters went up, as did many more environmental print signs. Alphabet charts were placed at the student's eye level. There were magnetic letters, white boards, dictionaries and stencils. I let the children experiment that fall and just let them "play" at the back table. The more I worked with writing materials, the more I became convinced that this was an area I wanted to explore on a more complex level. We did learn some "chants" to reinforce the color and three or four sight words I was teaching. These were simple

cheers with hand motions that help children spell and “feel” some simple sight words (*see, like, mom, dad, the, it, is, red*) My class still did not start any journals until January, however, and free play writing was virtually unassisted throughout the fall semester.

I continued reading as many new articles as I could find about writing in the early childhood setting . I kept coming across references to an Author’s Chair and about the importance of writing for an audience. A student’s peer group can provide excellent reinforcement for beginning writing behavior. Nixon and Topping (2001) as well as Lucy Calkins and Harste (as cited in Fisher, 1998, p. 91), all see the Author’s Chair as a valuable part of the classroom experience. That was something I knew I would want in my classroom in the fall. During this time a student may share whatever he or she has written or drawn with classmates, and students must give at least one sentence of an oral explanation. This encourages oral language reinforcement and connecting the writing and oral language more definitively for the child. Fellow classmates may make two comments regarding a child’s written piece, and they must each be positive.

Harste sees his Author’s Circle (similar to the Author’s Chair) as “crucial in helping authors develop a sense of audience so essential to becoming a writer who can successfully communicate with others” (Harste, as cited in McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas, 2000, p. 22). Again, getting across the idea that writing has to be for an audience for the purpose of communication helps develop that sense that writing is a process for sharing. Koeller and Mitchell (1996/97) note that “teachers who allow students to share their experiences widen the possibility for ‘literate occasions’, those opportunities to learn about reading and writing in a atmosphere of care and concern for others”(p. 329). They write that Bartolome noted “students who respond to new content in terms of their

own experiences acknowledge their culture, language, history and values” (Bartolome, as cited in Koeller and Mitchell, 1996/97, p. 329).

The more I read, the more I came to realize that this was an important missing piece for motivation in my classroom. Here was also an opportunity for social and academic support for the writer and a chance for each child to be heard as a writing critic. I wanted the children to learn to be supportive of each other as writers, rather than leaving that task to the teacher alone.

I had read some of Vivian Gussin Paley’s work (1999), and I felt that her ideas about learning in the kindergarten classroom necessitated play and tying drama and visual arts into the writing and reading process. Some of the work by Nixon and Topping (2001) included the idea of “home bays”, little areas in the room that would support drama and play. These play areas were designed to look like local community settings, such as restaurants, the Post Office, grocery stores or offices. Environmental print was set up for copying, and paper and appropriate forms (menus, envelopes, ticket order forms) were generated and made available. Areas could change seasonally or with a theme; a play area could become a kitchen or a movie theatre. I thought I would like to do that in my housekeeping area, and perhaps also incorporate and encourage writing as part of imitating life experiences.

One of the main ideas I came away with was that children who write a lot become better writers. Mavrogenes and Bezrucko (1993) are in agreement with this, as is Clay who also claims that children who read a lot become better readers. Lapp, Flood and Goss’s (2000) Writer’s Club was

based on the premise that children develop their authorial voices and expertise by being active members of classroom writing environments in which they are offered ample time and opportunities to write frequently, to write in many genres, to receive supportive writing instruction from their teachers, and to continuously assess themselves and be assessed by their teachers and their community of peers” (Dahl and Farnan, Dyson and Freedman, and Hansen, as cited in Lapp, Flood and Goss, 2000, p.32)

The more children write, even if they are low achievers or at risk students, their quality of writing increases as their production increases. Teachers need to provide a great deal of time for students to explore the writing experience as early as the kindergarten year. Vygotsky even felt, “It would be natural to transfer the teaching of writing to the preschool years” (p. 116). Glasswell, Parr and McNaughton (2003) point out that Stanovich’s research suggests “inequalities in knowledge and skills can act to impede or accelerate further learning, thereby contributing to an ever-increasing gap between high- and low-progress learners (p. 496). This is known as the Matthew effect, or the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (Stanovich, as cited in Glasswell, Parr and McNaughton, 2003, p. 496), and can be affirmed by numerous other researchers (Clay, 1993; Berning, 1999).

I came to suspect that an early exposure to writing activities would help the children see themselves more as writers, and that I would see more composition using natural language, and more children writing during free time and in a variety of settings. I

wanted to introduce the Author's Chair as an integral part of the classroom schedule and put emphasis on positive reinforcement of a fellow student's efforts. I wanted the children to do some self evaluation of their work and to schedule some interviews to ask in what types of settings they would see themselves as writers. The wide variety of writing material seemed to encourage writing at free time, so I wanted to include and even expand upon that component. I also wanted to begin journal writing in October and begin teaching sight words more vigorously at an earlier time in the year. I hoped that including the physical chants I described earlier would help put these words in the students' repertoires earlier in the year.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

My research and data collection plan is based on information on early writing development I have found in my recent study of educational literature over the last three years and a review of Marie Clay's works on this subject. It is designed to gather information and report on the behaviors of my kindergarten students as they are encouraged to write on a daily basis. My data include samples of student journals, picture journals, free choice writing, visualization and verbalization drawing samples, recording of environmental print, Author's Chair feedback, focus group surveys, field notes and student interviews. An appendix also includes sample principal and parental permission letters, interview protocol, and survey discussion questions.

I initially submitted an application for my study to Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) last spring. This board reviewed the application to ensure the study was to be conducted in an ethical manner that guaranteed safety and

confidentiality of the children. The application was approved in September. I then submitted a final letter of permission to my principal, along with a sample parent consent form. Samples of these letters are found in Appendix A and B. When the HSIRB board and my building principal approved my plan, I began my formal data collection.

What follows is an account of the type of data I collected, as well as samples of instruments I used for my study. Since this is an action research project, I used methods that allowed me to gather primarily qualitative information. These methods are the type suggested by other qualitative researchers, including Margot Ely (1997), Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001), Wolcott (2001), and Cole and Knowles (2000).

Field Notes

According to Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001), “field notes are direct observations of what is being said and done as well as impressions or hunches of the observer” (p. 140). These authors suggest field notes may include running records, time intervals, specified events, critical incidents and anecdotal records. I planned to include all of these types of data in my field notes. I collected all of my field notes in my field log. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) note, “Writing helps us to consider, reconsider, plan, re-plan, make order, check with ourselves and others and to tell the story of the research in precisely the ways we feel do justice to it”(p.15). My field notes include detailed descriptions of participant observations, samples of student work, the ways in which I conducted interviews and the questions I asked, surveys and journal samples. As MacLean and Mohr (1999) suggest, participant observations are records of my observations and experiences in my class as I recorded my students’ experiences and found I was both teacher and learner at the same time (106).

At least three times a week I recorded the children's conversations with each other when writing, as well as conversations that took place during the Author's Chair sharing time. These are written as my participant observations. I later spent time writing these conversations in greater detail, adding my own observer comments (personal comments) in parenthesis. MacLean and Mohr (1999) note, "Observations are not complete, however, without reflection...record as many of your immediate impressions, reactions and thought as you can...reread and fill in more of the details (28). I found this particularly helpful because, "When we reshape meaning through the writing, it helps us to clarify our understanding" (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1997). Rereading and jotting down additional thoughts helped me to add bits of things that I had forgotten or include new reflections on what had occurred in class. It helped me to see patterns in my students' writing behaviors, or in what they were doing in class. I was able to record the names of the children who participated in some type of writing experience during free time and who offered something they had done at the end of the day.

Several reflective memos, as well as analytic memos are also included. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) noted:

Analytic memos can be thought of as conversations with oneself about what has occurred in the research process, what has been learned, the insights this provides and the leads these suggest for future action. (80)

These analytic memos helped me to see more clearly what information had been gathered, and sometimes confirmed where I needed to go next.

Writing analytic memos help us to examine from various vantage points the objects, articulations, event and people within our research studies. Analytic memos, then, become vehicles through which we shape the lived experience. (30)

Reflective memos allow us to follow the “cycle of reflective practice” that Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) describe. We can “continue the cycle of acting, observing and reflecting, which ultimately takes us to other questions and new cycles” (41). The reflective memo allows us to put our thoughts about our teaching in writing, raises new questions, and gives us the opportunity to think about where our teaching needs to go next.

Student Work

Journals - I encouraged my students to write in journals (Clay, 1993b) and picture journals (McCarrier, Pinnell & Fountas, 2000). Clay talks about the importance of “getting the child to compose and write his own stories. It is about constructing words from their parts. This is not a matter of copying words and stories: it concerns

- going from ideas
- to spoken words
- to printed messages
- and rereading those messages”.(28)

Further on, Clay shares:

the writing down of the child’s orally composed messages can be shared by the teacher and child in interaction from the early learning stage. The learner is expected to write all that he can independently, but the teacher writes more at the beginning and the

child takes over more and more of the task until little teacher help is required. (28)

It is in this manner that a kindergarten journal is formed. A picture journal invites the child to draw a picture for his or her story and encourages the teacher to take on the responsibility for writing the story. The children started to write in their journals in October. I accepted and encouraged both pictures and writing from my students right from the beginning.

The students made journal entries about every ten days. Initially I provided a writing/drawing prompt, but as the semester progressed, students provided possible themes or sentence starters that tied into the themes they were studying. Each student was asked to write something (or part of something) and to draw a picture about his or her story. Teacher support was available if the student requested it. This support ranged from writing words for children, to when necessary dotting words on the page for children to trace, to helping students say a word slowly so they might record it themselves.

Free Choice Activities - The children also wrote during the free choice portion of their day. These independently chosen writing activities, which were created by the children themselves, were original stories, pictures and/or copied text. Strickland and Morrow (1998) suggest teachers provide a wide variety of writing materials for the students to use as they wished and then to provide support for students who asked for technical support in their writing. I took samples of the work students produced during this free choice time. Strickland and Morrow (1998) encourage one on one teacher support in the writing activity of the child's choice, and that in conjunction with this,

constant teacher modeling occur at the large group level. The focus here is the constant availability of the teacher, the wide variety of writing materials available to the child at all times, and the acceptance of invented spelling. Strickland and Morrow(1998) also note the importance of a time to share with others.

Author's Chair - Children shared their work at the end of the day. Bobbi Fisher (1991) suggests:

children share their writing, paintings, constructions made at the art area, or ask the class to move to the block area to see a building they have made. Sometimes they share what they liked during choice time, or acknowledge something positive they notice their classmates have done. (p.123)

This work was selected by the students themselves, offered as stories they wanted to share with their friends. After student sharing, other classmates or the teacher would give positive support to the student. Fisher suggests, “three or four children ask questions or tell what they notice about the piece”(p. 92). She feels that “starting with the phrase, ‘I notice’ helps the audience focus on the author as writer; and helps the author focus on the audience as reader” (92). Harste (as cited in McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas, 2000, p.22) sees his Author’s Circle (similar to the Author’s Chair and introduced earlier in this paper) as helping develop a sense of audience, which is necessary for writers when developing good communication skills. My data collection provides samples of work students shared, as well as examples of the type of feedback students gave each other.

Write Around the Room - Some students felt more comfortable copying environmental print around the room. They would lean on cafeteria trays on the floor and copy signs or posters that they found interesting. These were also shared with classmates during Author's Chair, and positive feedback was given for their efforts. This is a common practice in kindergarten rooms today and was confirmed as a positive writing experience in a print rich environment by Beeler (1993) . I included samples of the children's work in my data.

Visualization and Verbalization samples - I have included two class samples drawn by students of visualization and verbalization pictures as directed by the Phonemic Awareness teacher. These pictures are used to record students' comprehension and visualization of pictorial concepts, which later translate into comprehension of written material. In the first part of the year, six words were introduced by the Phonemic Awareness teacher to promote comprehension. These words include *what, number, size, color, shape and where*. These words were first coined by Bell (1998). Students discussed a picture with the Phonemic Awareness teacher; and I re-discussed the picture the next day. Students were to draw this picture from memory. Two samples, one from October and one from December, are included in this data.

Interviews

I also conducted an interview in early October and another in December, to allow the students to describe how they felt about themselves and their classmates as writers and if they saw writing as a shared experience in which they could help others and be helped, in turn, by them. Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) note that "formal interviews have set,

standard questions that are asked of all interviewees ...the interviewer does not give his or her opinion, does not interpret or modify the question, but is attentive and shows interest in responses that help the student to feel comfortable” (p. 152). This interview was conducted with a random sampling of students in my class (10 in each). They were selected to reflect an array of students at differing skill levels, as well as students that chose to spend different amounts of time engaged in writing during free time. Other students did not seem to be interested in the interviews; I often spend time talking in small groups or individually with students in my class. The students and I sat in a quiet corner of the room so I might talk with them concerning their experiences as writers. See Appendix C for sample interview protocol.

I also conducted a more informal interview with three children in November. These students were selected to reflect three different levels in literacy skills. “The aim of the informal interview ...is to understand the perspective of the student (or parent, etc.). The interviewer poses a question related to the research interest, then uses responses as a lead for the next question” (Arhar, Holly and Kasten, p.152). My goal here was to learn a bit more about what in my classroom technique or set up made writing inviting for my students.

I also administered a survey in December in which students recorded their feelings about writing by circling a picture to represent how they felt. The pictures ranged from cupid with a heart, to a question mark, to a stop sign. This survey involved more of their attitude towards themselves as writers in the world inside and outside of the classroom, both as fellow students and as family members. This survey is included in

Appendix D, and results can be found in my narrative. This was administered in a large group setting with four students at each table.

Focus Groups - Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) note:

a focus group interview is a group discussion addressing a particular topic or issue...The advantages of a group interview over the individual interview is that it encourages elaboration, it aids in recall and it is stimulating to have multiple respondents interact. (p. 158)

I have included descriptions of large group discussions held with my class. These were conducted during large group opening time once every two weeks. I wanted to ask the children what they like best about writing this week. Did they like journal topics, or time with friends, or home bays or something new at the writing center? I asked what they found difficult to do, and if they had time to help a friend with something they found difficult, I wanted to know what they liked to write about when writing with a friend.

Trustworthiness

I introduced my study to parents with a letter. My original plan was to do this on Back to School night, but that night was scheduled in mid- October this year, considerably later than I had anticipated. I sent out a letter describing my writing program in my class and how the classroom would support my desire to create a positive writing environment. I wrote about the history of my work with writing and explained that I was at the final stage of gathering data for my formal paper. The letter also detailed the types of writing activities that would go on each year, whether or not I was involved in research. I also included interview and survey procedures, and wrote of my plans for anonymity when collecting and reporting data. I included my data storage plans. I

informed my parents of the need for their consent in writing, and that they could withdraw their children from the study at any time without penalty. I offered an opportunity for private conferences. No parents requested conferences, and a total of 28 out of 35 consent forms from both classes were returned.

I then introduced the idea of writing and researching to my students. I noted that my study would include journals, samples of their work (for my teacher), notes from the Author's Chair and discussions, all part of our regular classroom activities. We discussed how I wanted to keep a close eye on the progress they would make in writing so that I would be the best teacher I could be and to help them learn to be excellent readers and writers. I talked about going to school myself to learn to be an even better teacher, and about writing down their ideas for my teacher, so that teachers all over could learn about what my students had to say about writing. I also talked about how I wanted them to share their ideas about being a writer and what kind of activities they liked to do. I said I would write these things down so I could use some of the ideas to help me teach writing to my class every year. I also let them know that they did not have to share their ideas about writing if they did not want to. They or their parents could let me know if they did not want to share their feelings or ideas at any time. I said it would be okay to "pass." They each had their own writing folder if they wanted to store their work.

The whole process was later re-discussed during Back to School Night, and I also suggested to parents that they listen for any possible negative comments concerning experiences at school or with writing. I again reviewed the elements of the study, how the children were to participate and how carefully data would be collected to ensure

anonymity and sensitivity to students. As early as two weeks into the study I received positive phone calls of support from parents.

All data were coded and pseudonyms were used in the discussion of the data; data and the key to the pseudonyms were kept in my home in a locked cabinet. Names on student work were covered with white tape to protect anonymity. Students did not use their names at interview introductions and all surveys were coded with numbers that were transferred to the pseudonyms.

The field log entries attempt to capture many of the writing activities that have occurred in my class so far this year. I tried to write short notes as the actual conversations occurred and then wrote down more complete accounts at my home that same evening. I think my students thought I had little memory of my own; I continually jotted down little bits of information and dialogue as they occurred. I seemed to walk around the room with my clipboard and a pad of post it notes to write down words or letters if students needed support.

I tried to ensure trustworthiness throughout my study and when drawing any conclusions about the data I collected. In order to ensure this trustworthiness, I tried to triangulate my data sources. Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) explain:

We build triangulation into our studies by using multiple sources of data, multiple methods, even multiple theories to develop diverse perspectives. If ... these perspectives converge, we are encouraged to believe that the findings of a study are credible and trustworthy. (p. 207)

I tried to check and recheck my students' feelings about the study and what I perceived their attitudes about writing to be. This is sometimes referred to as a participant check to help maintain trustworthiness. I tried to collect a variety of writing samples from a number of children in both classes. I asked the children if they thought writing was an important thing to do, and if there was a way I could help them more. I shared my data with my teacher support group, and referred many times to Wolcott (2001), MacLean and Mohr (1999), Cole and Knowles (2000), and Ahar, Holly and Kasten (2001) for suggestions on reliable ways to collect data. My professor continued to read my work and make suggestions for re-working pieces I had submitted. My study lasted for three months to help me ensure credibility.

THE LONG JOURNEY

I started expressing my enthusiasm for writing and my belief in my children as writers from day one. The first day of school is always one of calming little nerves, starting to set up routines and showcasing the room. I teach in a small town in Northwestern New Jersey that has experienced severe growing pains over the last ten years. We are overcrowded, and yet the school maintains as much of a family school atmosphere as possible. Parents remain a welcome voice and presence in our school. My school consists of mostly white, upper middle class families, many of whom have arrived in the community recently due to corporate moves. I have 19 children in my morning class, and 16 in my afternoon class.

My morning class has an aide, and she helped me to get everyone seated in a circle on our very first day. I noticed immediately that one little boy, Hal, was having a very difficult time attending to what I was saying. My aide, Nicole, sat next to him. This, however, did not seem to calm him at all. I introduced the calendar, weather, pledge, and assigned jobs for the week. The first thing I asked of them was to tell me what they think we will do in school. In the morning, Lauren said she would learn to read, and Ryan said he already knew how to read. Chad said he would learn about letters; Thomas said he would like to build. Rick and Ned, almost inseparable from day one, said they would like to learn to make buildings and play with the marbles. After almost everyone offered something; I told them that we would have lots of fun together, and that we would spend time listening, learning, looking and writing. I told them I believe they all have stories in their heads, and that every day they will have the chance to write a story for me. I also

mentioned that anyone who writes would get a sticker and have the opportunity to share his or her story with the children in class. Haleigh said she didn't know how to write, but I mentioned that pictures are writing, and that each of them could write a story by drawing me a picture. I wanted my students' writing to come from their own selves, not as a dictation from my mouth and mind. Vygotsky (1978) suggests a problem when, "Instead of being founded on the needs of children as they naturally develop and on their own activity, writing is given to them from without, from the teacher's hands" (p. 105). This takes away the power of the child's writing coming from his or her own natural language.

Later, during snack time, I walked around the room and talked about the different centers, the bathroom, and how to use the sink for washing hands. I dallied at the writing center, showing off the different types of paper, the markers, (wide and skinny, neon and classic), the colored pencils, the erasers, the post-it notes and how they stuck, and the wonderful stencils, some coming from my own childhood.

I made this special place seem as glamorous and inviting as a magic show, and indeed, I knew I would see some magical things produced there this year. Dewey notes, "It is his (the teacher's) business to arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences" (p. 27). Most of all, I hoped my children would take on a love of writing and come to know that I really valued their ideas and the stories they produced.

Over the years, I had watched so many Reading Recovery students shut down by January of first grade, and I hoped that by helping children feel capable and valued as

writers in kindergarten, we might help these students to take risks and become stronger readers and writers. I repeated the same procedure in the afternoon session, where Celine told me she could not write. Lori said she could write her brother's name, and even the words *mom* and *dad*. I assured all of the children that drawing a picture is writing, and that I would give them all time to create their own stories.

Lisa's Vignette Begins

I would like to introduce you here to Lisa, and to share snippets of her journey through my class with you interspersed throughout this document. I hope her words and ideas, and the feelings she shared with me about her love of writing will give you some insight into what I saw happening in many children in my class.

My name is Lisa and I love to write. In fact, I love to write, to sing, to draw, and to do just about everything. I help my mommy take care of other kids. I also take care of my sister. My daddy works at night. He comes from Peru. I saw Peru on the Internet. I saw mountains and Indians. My far away grandma lives in Peru and I have never seen her. But I know she lives in a mountain in Peru.

The next day I re-explained the room and elaborated a bit on the routines. Sure enough, six morning children wanted to write after snack time. They all had seats at the back table, and they all proceeded to draw or use the stencils for pictures. Hal stood near the table and watched, but he did not sit down at a chair. He would dart his head near another child's head at times, but he never got up the courage to sit at a seat despite my prodding. The session lasted ten minutes, and I rang the clean up bell. I heard several groans, and some voices pleading, "Can I just finish my picture?" I gave them a few

minutes for clean up, but I also wanted to allow time for this first and most important sharing of the year.

Lauren, Nathaniel, Raleigh, Yeliz, Chad, and Richard had stories to share. Each one had drawn a picture; and I asked them to go and write their names if they could, because I had no idea who did this beautiful work. Each wrote his or her name and quickly returned to the circle. All of these children already knew how to write their name fluently, and I wondered if the children who were brave enough to write first did so because of this prior exposure to print.

I sat in the soon to be named Author's Chair, and the children sat on the floor at my feet. This chair has a history of its own. It came from my parents' bedroom in Queens, New York, a rose-colored wing back chair from the 1940's. It was the very same chair that my parents used to read me stories at night, the one my mother and father cuddled me in as I learned to love books. I think it retains a bit of that magic today. I finally gave up on the tattered upholstery two years ago, when my morning class gave me a slip-cover for it with their names embroidered on it. It is still the favorite chair for my read alouds every day, and the chair my students sit in with a blanket when they don't feel well, and the one my students and guest readers use for reading to the whole class.

Lauren drew both a bunny and her family, and then named the objects. She pointed out Mommy, Daddy, sister Sarah and said, "Here are three little sweet baby bunnies in a nest. They are hiding in the forest." Nathaniel drew some buildings in New York City. He mentioned, "I went to New York and saw these buildings with my dad. They were as tall as the sky and had lots of glass in the front." I said how I appreciated how tall the buildings were in his story. I also noticed they had so many windows. Yeliz

just held her picture with no comment, as did Richard. Chad drew himself and Nathaniel together and said they were buddies. I asked if they had ever met before, and Chad said “No, but I like Nathaniel because he talked to me.” I asked what made them buddies; Chad said he just liked Nathaniel. Nathaniel seemed like the affable, best friend to all type of little boy. His wide grin never stopped at all during the first day of school. Haleigh drew some more pink bunnies and a heart. I asked her the question that was to become one of the most repeated phrases in our class, “What would you expect to see at the beginning of _____? (bunnies, in this case) She said bunnies started with B, so I had her write a B. Nicole, the aide, and I praised everyone’s efforts, and they all got stickers.

I made sure I kept referring to their writings and their stories, and that everyone had good stories to tell. I assured them that writers were very special, and that everyone here was already a writer. I felt the more I kept saying this, the more writers I would see during the children’s free time. I spent as much time as I could getting to know my students, to learn what kinds of things they had experienced, and what they already knew that could help them to create and write stories, and to share them with others. I feel it is my responsibility as their teacher to know my children well enough, along with their experiences, to be able to judge how I can best deliver one of Dewey’s (1938) educative experiences:

In this direction he must...be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning (39).

My afternoon class had eight initial writers out of sixteen children. This was amazing, since this writing activity was totally self-selected during free choice time. Maddie, Erika, Hope, Lars, Larry, Lori, Susan, and Lisa drew stories. Maddie, Lori, and Susan all know each other from Sunday School, and they sat together and drew their families. Lisa drew hearts and flowers, as did Erika. Lars and Larry used the stencils to trace clowns. Hope drew some fragile looking figures with long, threadlike fingers. At Author's Chair time Maddie decided not to share. Lori and Susan named their family members; Lars and Larry showed their clowns and named them Hercules and Chuck. Hope did say something like Mommy, but seemed to have articulation difficulties. I praised all of their efforts and gave out stickers. I did not ask the children from either class to leave their work, noting that I wanted them to share their prized pictures with their families.

Each day I had to go over the procedure for closing down the writing center. It seemed difficult for my students to remember to put away the unused papers, close the markers and move their finished work to the big story chair. Most often there would be a scattering of writing materials on both writing tables, and I lost at least two whole boxes of markers in the first two weeks. It was a retraining process for me, too. I needed to be diligent about checking marker caps at the end of the day. I even installed an automatic pencil sharpener to facilitate sharpening colored and skinny regular pencils.

I spent time each day the first two weeks repeating the process of sharing at the end of the day, hoping to establish a feeling of trust and acceptance. At first I spent a great deal of time modeling the sharing time for writing and the responses that students might want to give to others. I modeled using things I had written, stories, pictures,

poems, signs and letters to others. We talked about the kinds of things to share, what writing is, including the ideas of picture writing and pre-syllabic writing. I worried if in fact the number of children choosing to write now would continue and show changes over time.

I was concerned whether I was asking too much of some children early in the year and I would never want to do anything that would frustrate any of my students. I guess the opportunity to participate in a number of activities during free time eliminated the pressure for any child to have to sit at the writing area and write. I hoped that the other play areas, the “home bays” described by Nixon and Topping (2001), similar to the ones I had set up might eventually help to develop an interest in writing for the real world, including lists, signs, or posters. Vygotsky suggested (1978), “Symbolic representation in play is essentially a particular form of speech at an earlier stage, one which leads directly to written language” (p. 111). I knew Paley’s (1999) work supported play and dramatic story telling as ways to support all children in the development of language and social skills. I worried that kindergarteners are so easily distracted, and so ready to go on to something else; would their interest in writing continue? I felt down deep that the answer was to continue to allow time for sharing and lots of stickers.

I just love coming to school. Mommy and I pick out a dress for me to wear. I only wear dresses, you know. I like pink the best. My mommy showed me how to draw a heart. Now I can make a heart, draw a heart and even spell heart h-e-a-r-t. Mrs. Benson taped up my sign for the door of our class. It says love, love, and love and has lots of pink and blue hearts all over it. It’s six pages long!

I also modeled the kinds of things I wanted them to say during Author's Chair to be supportive to fellow writers. These included: I like the way you ____; I felt the same way when I ____; I decided to draw my picture like this, but I really like yours too, because ____; I once had the same things happen and I wrote about ____; and just simply, "Good Job!" My responses to the children's work were simple at first, because I wanted to reinforce the involvement by students' listening and looking at the writer to develop the concept of audience. I felt as though good modeling of writing and explicit teaching, as well as the environment I helped to set up were so important. Dewey (1938) suggested the importance of it all:

...What is done by the educator and the way in which it is done, not only the words spoken, but the tone of voice in which they are spoken. It includes equipment, books, apparatus, toys, games played. It includes the materials with which an individual interacts, and most important of all, the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged. (p. 45)

I hoped the variety of settings and materials, as well as the encouragement and support I provided specific to each child at that moment helped to give my students what they need. Each day I tried to teach something new about writing or concepts about print in general and positively support the students' work. I circulated during times when the children wrote, cheerfully encouraging and teaching that which was specific to that child at that moment. I often assessed larger, whole class areas in need of support and taught a mini-lesson the next day to address those needs. I hoped my whole classroom and the atmosphere I tried to create would support respect and interest in the entire writing process.

I wrote a song for my class. It's the ABC song. I ran out of time because I spent so much time taping the papers together.-I only got to G- They(the kids) know the rest, I'm sure. At sharing time we clipped it on the easel and I got to hold the pointer and show how we sing the song. My friends said they liked singing the song I made for them. My heart was so happy on that day. I gave Mrs. Benson a big hug.

The number of writers did continue to grow in the afternoon class, but initially dwindled in the morning, despite my best efforts. The students in my morning class turned to building with blocks and Legos and seemed to prefer the social aspect of building with a friend to writing. The afternoon class seemed to consider writing a social thing. The girls sat with the girls, the boys with the boys.

Now I was ready to discuss my research project with the students and to start to collect data more formally. I used sharing time (Author's Chair) as a time to let my students know about the project. I told them I was going to school to learn to be an even better teacher. I said I was learning about children as writers. I asked if I could borrow some of their work at the end of the day to show my teacher. I said I would take a picture of their work and return it to them as quickly as possible.

My morning class did not ask many questions, perhaps because many of them did not seem to be interested in writing at this point. My afternoon class had a million questions. Rina thought it was silly that I was in school, as did Nora and Rhiannen. Celine wanted to know where I went to school; and Lars and Larry, fast friends already, wanted to know if I had work and free play time. Vinnie said we should all share our work with my teacher, and the students all shook their heads in agreement. I was excited

to see the consensus at such an early stage. I think letting go of that piece of paper of their precious work can be hard for most kindergarteners. I had no Xerox machine in class, so I often had to keep the stories for a few days until I had a chance to copy them.

During the first weeks of data collection I was already appreciative of the opportunities I had to notice and reflect upon the students' stories. Some patterns emerged early on. Many of the children were already drawing family members and things from nature in almost every piece of work paralleling some of Vivian Paley's findings (2000) about children and their stories. Her recollections are filled with little bunnies and puppies and forests and little boys and girls, the same topics addressed by my own students.

My afternoon boys eagerly made up elaborate stories about aliens and vehicles and kidnappings, and there was always a hero coming in to save the day. The most interesting thing I noticed was that the story was always developed collaboratively, with the two boys conferring about details and adding elaborations. They tended to put little effort into the picture, since it seemed as though the fun part was the oral story development itself.

Cupcakes And Nick

Three week into the research I was excited to see the use of writing developing in some of the "home bays" suggested by Nixon and Topping (2001). I had turned the housekeeping area into a restaurant of sorts. Some of my afternoon boys decided that it was fun to play restaurant and chef.

One of the little boys in my afternoon class, Nick, had been having a difficult time putting anything down on paper during the school day. I watched to see if he has some

sort of a field ground difficulty, and he certainly had a hard time making his fingers do what he wanted them to do. Writing, coloring, and cutting seemed so challenging to him. He almost seemed to avoid them, or avoid trying to do them independently. His first words were always, “Can you help me do this?” He had never chosen to play at the writing center or to do any writing independently. I even had him tested for color blindness because he seemed to have trouble picking out specific colors in a basket of crayons.

Nick, along with Lars and Vinnie, pretended to run an Italian restaurant, and I suggested they might want to create a menu for their restaurant. Nick seemed excited about making a menu as he ran and got a piece of tag board. Only then did he ask what a menu was. I explained, and he offered that he would cook cupcakes and hotdogs at his restaurant. I asked him to draw those two items, which he did. I then asked what letter he would expect to see at the beginning of cupcake. He did not know, so I suggested he ask Vinnie or Lars. Vinnie supplied the answer, and Lars drew the C. They beamed when I praised their efforts at the menu, and Vinnie said this was fun. I suggested they keep their menu near the restaurant in case they wanted to play with it the next day, or add some other dishes in the future. Lars gave me a big smile and said he would like to eat at this restaurant for real. Here again was a collaborative effort among the boys in this class. I felt good that I was able to draw the writing into the play, and that three of them could share this positive experience and help one another. I know Nick enjoyed this and felt good about himself.



He was the first one at sharing time to put up his hand and tell about the restaurant and the menu, an incredible jump for Nick. He finally felt as though he had something to share with his peers. He was beaming, and best of all, he asked for a question from the group about his work. Not only did he describe his work and receive many compliments, but he was also willing to risk a question from the group, demonstrating incredible growth for Nick, facilitated by help from other classmates. As Dewey (1938) said, “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (20). Here was such a real life experience for Nick.

While I continued to be pleased with the progress of Nick and most of his afternoon classmates, my morning class continued to frustrate me, both with their lack of willingness to write stories and with the lack of time to devote to free time writing. This class took up so much more time with the routines of the day, a longer snack time, more requests for bathroom that broke up circle and story time, and resulted in a much slower pace for finishing work. I became quite frustrated, but at last I had a breakthrough when I realized that I was putting my own agenda too heavily upon my students. I noticed that while students were building with blocks, they were developing complex stories about the block structures and the communities they were in. I offered to help them make a sign that would tell others about their work, and I offered to take a picture of their structure. They told me a story about their building, and we came up with a sign that we wrote together. I had missed many such stories, I’m afraid, because of my own agenda.

This was a tremendous breakthrough about three weeks into my study, and I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off of my shoulders. Here I was saying I agreed with a Deweyian perspective of the importance of play in learning, or a Vygotskian perspective of the crucial importance of play, but I was neglecting what was happening in my own classroom right under my nose. I needed to rethink my focus as I helped Chris and Chad write about the Great Wall of China.

The perfect time of the day to share all of these wonderful stories and signs was during Author's Chair. Sharing time at the Author's Chair had become one of the most powerful experiences in my class. Children who normally did not volunteer to offer any information during structured lesson time, or some who were somewhat weak academically, still jumped at the chance to participate either by sharing work or offering praise. I spent the first two weeks subtly guiding how the Author's Chair would work. I modeled my own work every other day, and I modeled how the children might support their friends with positive feedback every day. It was here that I also tried to elicit some form of writing - either a letter to be added, or a sight word, or a link from one known word to another. For example, I might say, "I noticed you have a dog in your picture. Your name begins like dog. What letter would you expect to see at the beginning of dog?" Our Author's Chair at the end of the day encouraged respect for fellow writers, as well as the concept of writing for an audience. This writing for an audience reflects real life experience and connects that string between kindergarten and life beyond being five. Most of our writing in life is for a specific audience, and the realization that we write to share is an important one.

One month into the process of Author's Chair most of my children seemed to grasp the idea that they could offer praise or ask a supportive question. This questioning idea also tied nicely into show and tell on a daily basis. Children could use the Author's Chair to showcase work from free play time, block building combined with written work, or work brought from home to share. On the pages that follow, I've attempted to share the children's interaction during the Author's Chair time in a play that I've titled "The Author's Chair."

Play: "The Author's Chair"

SCENE ONE

HAL is seated in the Author's Chair with his story. The teacher sits next to HAL on a chair, and the rest of the children are seated on the floor, facing HAL.

HAL: *(holding his picture)* This is my picture. This is Harry Potter and Dennis, my friend.

MRS. BENSON: I like the way you drew Dennis with a smile. I see you wrote all of your beautiful letters again. What do these letters say?

HAL: Happy Halloween.

DENNIS: I see two boys with swords and cloaks. I like them.

MRS BENSON: I noticed the jack o'lantern and the people with swords. This one has glasses. Is he someone special?

HAL: Harry Potter and me.

NATHANIEL: I like the way you made Harry Potter with glasses. I want to be Harry Potter for Halloween.

HALEIGH : I noticed you wrote a lot of letters. You made them nicely.

TERESA: I noticed you used lots of colors. I like that.

NED: I liked the Harry Potter movie, too. I even wear glasses like him.

(Hal just smiles and holds his picture very securely in front of him. This is his time to shine.)

MRS BENSON: Is there anything else you would like to share, Hal?

(Hal just shakes his head and hands me his picture.)

SCENE TWO

RICK AND THOMAS are standing next to a block construction they have designed. The class is seated on the floor surrounding the construction.

RICK: This is our building. It's a hospital for superheroes.

THOMAS: Yeah, and they got hurt. Nobody's supposed to touch them so they can rest and get better.

NED: How did they get hurt?

THOMAS: They was helping people and they got hurt.

RICK: They rescued a family that was in a burning building. They got fire on them, but the family was okay.

MRS BENSON: *(pointing to sign)* What does your sign say?

RICK: It says No and Off. You're supposed to stay off the building because it's a hospital. The superheroes are getting better.

THOMAS: They're going to be here to get better, and they need to be quiet.

TERESA: I think they will be better.

YELIZ: I noticed the way you made your letters. The sign is nice. It tells us not to touch them.

CHRIS: I think we will stay away. Can we leave the hospital up until tomorrow?

MRS BENSON: I'm sure the afternoon class would love to see your hospital and your sign. I will let them know what your sign says when they come in.

SCENE THREE

Lisa is seated in the Author's Chair, holding her picture. The teacher is seated beside on another chair, and the rest of the class is seated in front of Lisa, ready to hear her story.

LISA: Here is a picture of the ocean and some flying fish.

LORI: I like the way you cut out the fish and glued them on.

LISA: I did it because Mrs. Benson's book was like that. The person cut out the pictures and glued them on. I thought I would try it, too.

CELINE: That's so cool. I wish I had tried that today.

MRS BENSON: Well, there's always tomorrow. Lisa, I really liked the way you used that new art technique we saw in *Fall is Here*. Boys and girls, do you think it made the fish just jump out at you from the page?

LARS: I think they could really be flying fish, Lisa

VINNIE: Yeah, the fish are flying all around the class.

I think I would have put springs behind them.

MRS BENSON: Well, some pop up books do have little strips of paper that actually make the figures pop out. They are folded like this (*Teacher makes an accordian fold with paper*).

RHIANNEN: I think I would like to make a story about a shark that tries to eat the fish tomorrow. Maybe I will make the shark jump out off the page like that. Can you help me do that?

MRS BENSON: Of course I will. What did you think of Lori's story she has written?

NICK: I like the Flying Fish. I saw flying pelicans at the shore, but never flying fish. Can fish really fly?

MRS BENSON: Tomorrow I will bring in pictures of fish that seem to fly over the water. Lisa, I think we all really loved your story.

In the first Scene, Hal had written his string of letters again. Most of them began with upper and lower case matches. He was in the process of being referred to Child Study Team for expressive language difficulties. He did not talk a great deal, but he loved to share his pictures during Author's Chair. It was the only time he interacted or even acknowledged classmates during the whole day. Hal allowed us to peek into his world and make contact, even if only for a brief moment.

In Scene Two, Rick and Thomas showed everyone their big block building. They wanted a sign to keep people from knocking down their building. They drew a picture that looked like a person lying down on a bed and another person beside the bed. They wrote NO and FFO (off backwards or right to left). The Author's Chair allowed

them to convey a whole story using a sign with just two words. They had described the characters and the plot. The audience had tied themselves into the story enough to want to keep the hospital around for the next day. This sharing time enabled the whole class to be involved in their story and support their efforts, making this a powerful experience.

In Scene Three, Lisa drew two fish in the ocean with some hearts on their sides. There was also a setting sun in the background that touched the ocean. She wrote FiFiSSA for flying fishes in the ocean. The following day I was able to introduce a nice science lesson about fish, and to bring in books that had pop out pictures and share the techniques the illustrators used in these books. Here were two meaningful lessons that came out of one child's story that she shared. The number of "teachable moments" in my class seemed to have increased tenfold over the last few months, and most of them seemed to occur as a direct result of our Author's Chair time.

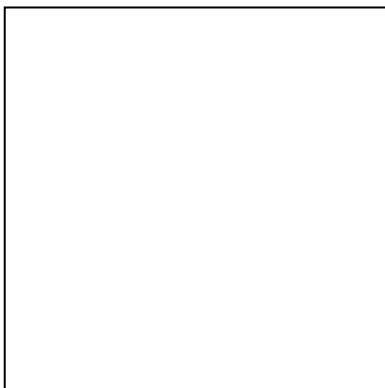
My desire to have my students write brought with it the responsibility of giving them the tools they would need for that job. I knew of a technique that I had used in Reading Recovery that had worked for the most at risk first graders, and I decided to try teaching it to my kindergarten students. Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words is a specific technique developed by Clay (1993b) to give students a way of recording the sounds in sequence of an unknown word. From the very first day of school I tried to get students to be aware of a way they could use what they knew to write a word. I showed my children how to stretch a word like a rubber band, saying each sound slowly. I modeled how I would say the word slowly, record a sound if I could, and then do the same for the next sound. My whole goal was to create some sense of independence for students when they were writing, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) theory that, "what a

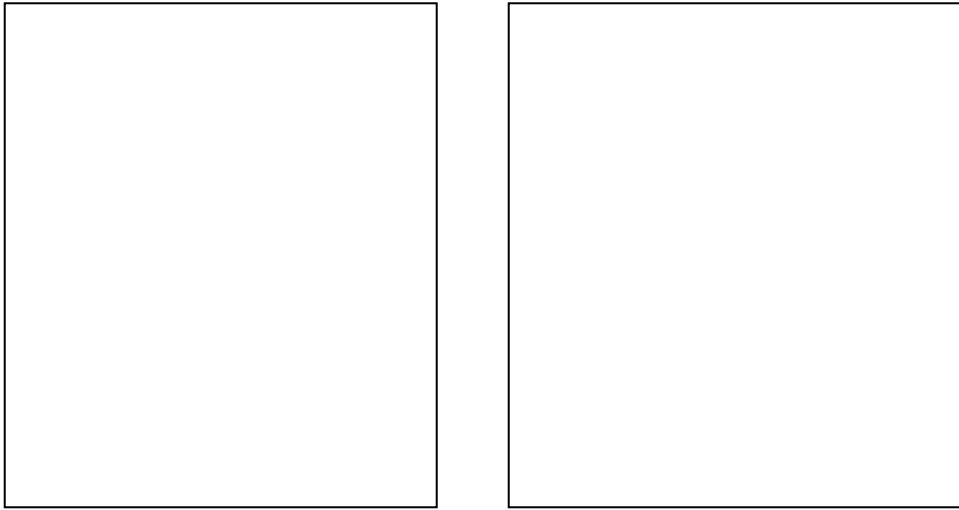
child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87) We practiced as a group, and I practiced with each child individually. I used the technique during our free writing time; I also used it during journal writing and during any time the children wrote. I used it during Author’s Chair time if the child had not written anything on their picture. Most of the time I began with “What would you expect to see at the beginning of ___”, but then graduated to “What would you expect to see next?” I modeled, and modeled and modeled and supported and supported and supported. I had used this technique for years in Reading Recovery, and I was bound and determined to have a class full of kindergarteners who knew how to begin to record what they had written.

Phonemic Awareness

The phonemic awareness teacher introduced the first six descriptive words (*what, number, where, shape, color and size*) early in September, and I posted the words on our blackboard. I encouraged the use of these words daily during Author’s Chair and show and tell time. I noticed my students gave much richer descriptions of their written stories and show and tell items when I reinforced the use of these words on a daily basis

The phonemic awareness teacher also directed the children to draw after the class had used these words for a few days to describe a special picture she had introduced. This was done twice during my study, and the students’ drawing became much more detailed and accurate over the three months’ time. Here are some samples of a spider, and then a lion three months later.





The initial picture of the spider done by Dennis was to include a segmented body with eight legs in all, four on each side, two pointing up, two pointing downward. Note that all of his legs were on one side of the spider's body. He had initially drawn a ninth leg, but I asked him to count the legs again to see if he had the right number. His lion picture included a large animal looking sideways, a very difficult view of the lion for kindergarteners to draw. It includes a mane, but the face is drawn as a human face. There is also a tail, and five or six legs.

Ned's spider picture has eight legs and a segmented body. The legs are evenly divided between the sides, but all point downward, and they appear skinny and not hairy, as in the original picture. The lion picture has a side view of the animal, with a definite animal face. There are four legs included, a long body that takes up most of the page, and a tail. The face is surrounded by a mane.

During the weeks to come I would notice subtle changes in my children's work during free choice time. Susan was able to write two words from memory. She wrote

Mommi and *Basb* for dog, but she said *dog* began with *D*. Nick wrote his name without copy. Rose wrote *ME*, and noticed it was the first two letters of her name. It became her favorite word to write beside her name. Maddie had some issues with directionality, but began to notice which side her writing should come from. I noticed lots of smiles from everyone; this writing process was not labored or disheartening because it was a natural progression of the stories that came from my children's hearts and minds. They became increasingly competent at hearing and recording sounds in words when I stretched the words with them. I definitely noticed shifts in writing behavior. Socially I saw increased collaboration between students when writing. The girls seemed to talk first to develop a story, and then they wrote independently with their own spin on things. They loved to sit very close to each other. The boys seemed to develop a story collaboratively, sharing ideas as they went along, constantly adding to the story and writing on one large paper they had taped together. There was constant give and take here.

Sometimes I get upset when Susan and Lori don't want to sit with me first. They should sit with me. I can write stories with them; they can be so mean to me. I like the stencils and the skinny markers. Today they took them to their table and I want to sit at this writing table. It's better. The other one is too sunny. Over here I can see what everyone in class is doing. Celine likes to sit with me. We talk.

Mrs. Benson and I can stretch words together. We say them slowly. She says it first and I write down what I hear. This is a lot of fun because I get to talk to Mrs. Benson all by myself for a lot. I don't like to wait too long. I

like to share first in Author's Chair and get a sticker first. If I share first I will always get my turn. I hate to wait for Show and Tell if we do that first.

Journal Writing

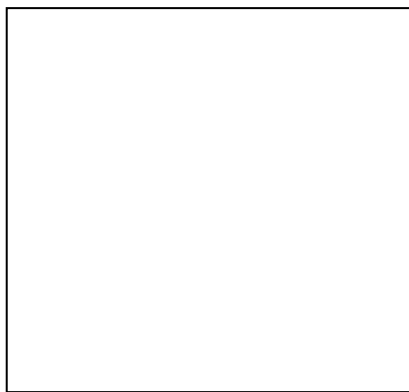
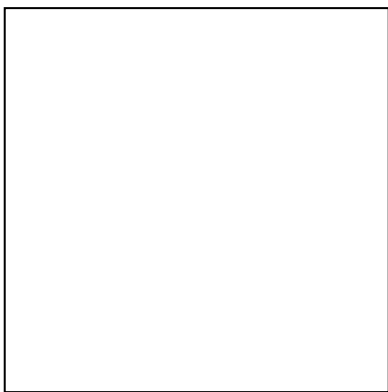
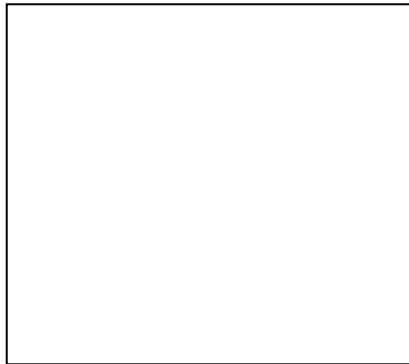
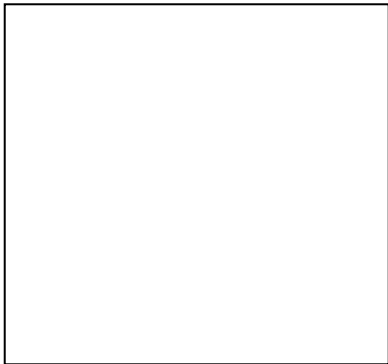
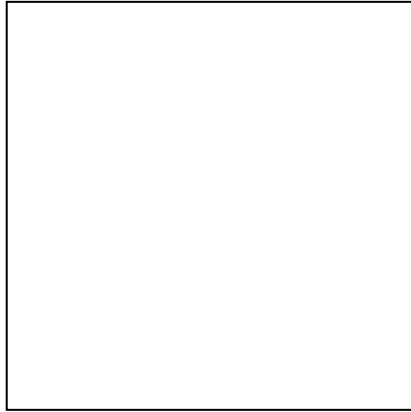
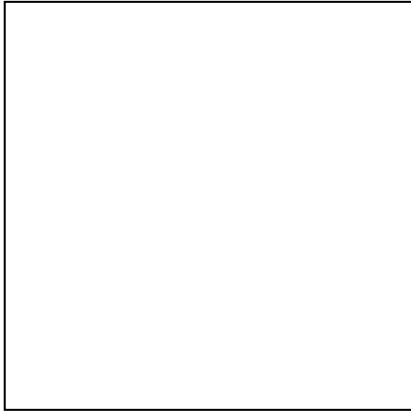
All journal writing in kindergarten had been saved until the second part of the year. I was determined to see if journals could be successfully used during the first part of the year. I knew I would have to provide an extensive amount of support during the first attempts, and I expected more of a picture journal from most children.

I began journal writing in October and continued twice a month until December. I was interested in seeing changes over time, changes in the amount of support children would need, changes in letter formation, changes in sound - symbol recording and even changes in story writing. Could beginning journal writing earlier foster more independent writing and more use of richer, descriptive words and phrases?

I have chosen work from two children to show some of the changes over time that I noticed.

Susan's Journal

Susan came in with very low letter identification, and almost no knowledge of sound symbol relationships. She was very shy and hesitant about coming to school and even reluctant to share any information about herself. Her six journal entries show a definite increase in what she was able to do independently, as well as an increase in willingness to create her own story.



The first entry read “Iseeoredl,” and is followed by a red heart. I had provided “I see a red” on the board for the class. Susan wrote “Iseeor” while I was sitting next to her. I had to write the phrase on a sentence strip in large letters. She stopped writing after the *r* in

red, and I added *ed* to finish the journal prompt. She said she wanted to write *heart*, but was unable to come up with *h*. I wrote *h* for her on another paper, but she only managed to write the line down before she said she was exhausted and couldn't do any more.

I provided the class with "I like orange" for the second prompt two weeks later. It was Halloween time, and most of the class liked pumpkins. I again provided Susan with a sentence strip with I like orange written on it. Susan copied "Ilike" on one line, and attempted to copy *orange* on the next line. It came out *oraeyes*. She wanted to write *pumpkin*, and I wrote it for her. She did write *PK* by herself this time and added a period at my suggestion.

In mid November I provided "I see... and ... leaves". Students were to write color words in the middle. Susan wrote "I See red independently" (even copying off of the board) and I dotted "and brown leaves" for her. She did finish added a period independently, and colored her picture.

By the end of November she copied "The turkey is" off of the board, and wrote "red And fat." independently from a list of brainstormed words on the board. I provided help with word placement on the second line. In December she wrote, "The snow is white". I asked the children to write something about the snow, and the class and I compiled a list of words they might need on the board. She composed the sentence and wrote the words independently. Susan wrote one word on every line, and there were many erasures as she tried to decide where everything should go. Still, she composed and searched for words she might need, and came up with *The* and *is* independently.

Our last journal entry was to write something about a snowman. I wrote the word *snowman* on the board, and I said I would again walk around and help if needed. Susan

wrote “The snowman is coLD anb white”. With one or two words on each line, lines following each other appropriately (without huge spaces on the page) and with much better letter formation. She appears to be well on her way to connecting with story writing and print.

Chris’ Journal

Chris came in with a lot more information about writing and letter sound relationships in his control. His growth in composing and recording sounds in sequence was also evident.





Chris began with “I see a red STB” for *strawberry*. I said the word slowly for Chris, and he wrote the consonants he heard, all in upper case letters. He did not include a period. Chris’ second entry included “I like oranges.” I had written “I like” on the board, and asked them to write about something orange. He asked how he could change *orange* into *oranges*, the fruit. I showed him how to add the *s*, which he did below the word *orange*, and he added a period. I shared his wonderful thought about oranges with the class.

In mid November I gave the prompt “I see...and...leaves” and he added *orange* and *red* quickly. He did not appear to look at the color words charts to add the color words. We had been doing the word chants that included the two color words daily, and he seemed to be searching internally to bring up those words. At the end of November, he wrote, “The turkey is Big And rainbow,” and drew a very elaborate turkey for an illustration. Chris wrote “The turkey is big and” independently. We had been talking about beginning sentences with upper case letters for a few days, and I think that may have been why *Big* and *And* were capitalized. He asked me to help him with *rainbow*. We stretched *rain*, and then *bow*. I believe Chris had some visual memory of the word *rain*, because he included the *I*, and he was able to write *bow* because I linked it to *crow*, a

word we had on a poem on a chart in the room. That was a very high level of working with words for a beginning kindergarten student.

In December Chris wrote “The snow is white and falling” independently. I had given the word *snow*, and again asked they write something about *snow*. Chris wrote “The snow is white and fall,” but went back and reread. He asked me if *ing* should go at the end; it was something I had pointed out a number of time when reading aloud to the class. He completed the story and drew a picture rather haphazardly. I wonder if the picture was less than his usual because he had already told his story and had concentrated on what he had to say with the written word. Sometimes five year olds will let illustrations, or handwriting slide if they are attending to something new or something they consider more important. Perhaps Chris had exhausted himself writing his story independently.

Chris’ last journal entry is a story unto itself. I provided the word *snowman*. Chris wrote “The snowman is melting and wet.” His illustration has a snowman with puddles at its feet, and an eye that has already dropped off of his face. The sentence and picture truly do tell a story so incredibly well. Even though Chris came to journal writing with more under control than Susan, it is easy to see that he, too, had made great progress.

One of the firmest ideas I came away with is the confirmation that journal writing can and should begin earlier in the school year. I had doubts whether most children would be able to contribute, but the opportunity to see changes over time was powerful. I also noted that so much of the story was told through the pictures, and felt that I had missed some of the little nuances in years gone by.

Administration- Always an Open Door

Another practice that developed in the midst of this writing research was the development of a writing relationship between my children and the administration in the school. About a month into the project, one of my afternoon students asked if he could write a letter to Mr. T, the principal. Kindergarten students were allowed to bring a cupcake up to the office on their birthday, and, in turn, they received a pencil and a banner from the principal. Soon after his own birthday, Lars decided to write to the principal. Several other students decided to follow suit, and they wrote *To Mr. T*, and *Dear Mr. T*, as well as *Love*, on a permanent poster. Students asked, on a daily basis, to visit the office with a picture they had made for the principal. The only requirement I had was that they wrote something on the page before they took it to him. I knew I had to be somewhat vague about this because of the varying level of skills in my class. Within a few days, this desire to bring stories spread to include the vice principal and the guidance counselor, an incredible example of writing for an audience!

Mr. Tobin likes my letter I write to him. I wrote him a feelings book. I wrote feelings on the first page and then drew a happy and a sad face inside. Mrs. Benson helped me stretch " feelings, " but I wrote happy and sad all by myself. I know how to write happy from Happy Birthday. Sad is like dad but with s. All of the kids like it. Sal said it was beautiful with all the faces. Lars said the writing was nice. Hope asked where did I get it.

When I write to Mr. Tobin or Mr. Gregory I like to use fancy paper and envelopes. Mrs. Benson got some real red envelopes and some stamps for us to use. These are the best

envelopes. Every day she puts them out we use them up. Rose and I Like to write to Mr. Tobin. We even know how to write To Mr. Tobin all by ourselves now. So do Lars, Sal and Vinnie. Sometimes we write three and four letters a day. We usually draw a picture and write the words by ourselves. This is the best way to have free time.

Of course, my morning class saw the poster and asked what it was for. After I explained it, they, too wanted to share this experience. The administrative staff in my school was so wonderful, graciously making time for my kindergarten students. Only on rare occasions was any of the three not able to do so almost immediately. Some of the children moved from posters with their name to letters with headings and a sentence or two. I usually tried to provide fancy envelopes for this purpose, and lots of regular class stamps the students could use. Quite a large number of children came to participate. The following is a pastiche of some of the writing that went on to the administration.

Pastiche: What Can I Write to the People who Run My School?

Principal

Vice Principal

Guidance

I love football!

Buildings

I love you

The leaf is red.

You are nice

I like you

Football games and football men are cool

I like the Jets

Vehikls (vehicles) and army men

I love you

Mpir stat blding and noo yrk (Empire State Building and New York)

Happy Halloween

Love and flowers

I like basboll. I like the Red Sox.

The snow is white

I love you

Merry Christmas. Wt (What) do you want? (want)

Merry Krismus

Merry Christmas. I Love you.

Just as energetic as my writers to the administrators were the girls who came to be known as the “Pink Ladies.” They were afternoon students who wrote to one particular first grade teacher every single day of December. Each day they would either bring something they had drawn and written at home, or they would spend their free time making some little note to bring to Mrs. S’s class. Of course, it probably helped that she fussed over them each and every day, as well. I had an agreement with Mrs. S. that any child that wanted to do so could visit her at the end of the day. Three or four little girls, and sometimes Lars, went for their regular visits. Mrs. S carefully read every last word they had written, and cooed over each picture they had created. This writing that was well received by someone outside of the classroom, whether it be teacher or administrator, was an unexpected but highly motivating component of the writing experience for my children.

I went on to conduct a formal interview with my afternoon students twice during the three months. I used the same format and the same questions. I conducted this interview one-on-one while sitting at a regular work table. The student and I spoke privately, uninterrupted by classmates, and I spoke to them during their free play time as well. All fifteen students I interviewed said they liked writing. Six students shared that they like to write about family; two said words and letters; four mentioned things in nature; one said a color; one said hearts; one said clowns; and one said stuff. Responses to when they liked to write included five specific times of day, as well as by themselves or when they were sleeping. Two mentioned location, and one did not know.

When questioned what kinds of things they like to write about, two mentioned stories; one mentioned words; three talked about family; and one mentioned songs and ABC's. One additional student talked about rainbows; one said the beach; one said animals; and one offered his house and backyard. Finally, one had no response; one said she wasn't sure; and one said everything we do at school.

Most of the children in my class said they like to write both with their friends and by themselves; but six only wanted to write with friends. All boys except for one wanted to write with friends and by themselves; one child only wanted to write alone. I wondered if this tied in to the collaborative story writing I had found so prevalent among the boys in both classes.

I noticed that twelve out of fifteen students said they help one another when they write. I tried to convey this feeling of helping one another in this pastiche, composed from the actual responses of the children in my class from the interviews.

Pastiche: Helping

If someone wants the crayons, I give them

WE tell how to spell words

WE attach our stories with tape

When HE messes up, **I** fix him

When I mess up, HE fixes me

WE sit together and swing outside and share

WE talk and then **we** help

People ask ME how to spell fall

WE help each other coloring

If I mess up with a marker, HE can get it off I help by
drawing a circle or a pig

THEY GIVE ME IDEAS

The poem really gives the feeling that my students regard writing as a social event, a collaboration between students in the most positive, helpful way. They seem to nurture one another, to be there for one another. There seems to exist a symbiotic relationship between children; and it is a good one that they want to indulge in day after day during their free time. The helping process affirms them as people, and lets others know that they, too, are worthy of helping.

Even more evident in the surveys was the power of the Author's Chair. The first survey with the afternoon class found fourteen out of fifteen children who said they liked to use it. The remaining child did not reject it, but rather chose not to respond at all. The rest shared adjectives to describe how they felt when they were seated in the chair that included *happy, fun, pretty, nice, or good* or using the word *like*. Two months later, the adjectives got even more meaningful and descriptive. Students described the Author's chair made them feel *smart, strong, intelligent, creative, interesting, funny, artistic, and powerful*. As the vocabulary became much more descriptive, the feelings attached also seemed to become much more intense. All fifteen students said they liked the Author's Chair the second time I asked, and there were no students who did not respond. It became a part of all of us; it validated all of us.

I continued to encourage and support writing within my classroom. In December, my morning class still did not have as many students use the writing center, but I also saw most of my students engage in story creation while building or playing and embellishing the play activities with some written sign, menu, or grocery list. I did see an increase in writing of holiday cards to the principal, vice principal or parents at home when I provided holiday style paper and stamps. This class thoroughly enjoyed Author's Chair, too. It just became a bit more awkward when we had to save the block buildings or the set up grocery store to have the class see what had been created and how its story could be told. I wish I had a larger classroom so I could readily save and display large block and Lego structures. Perhaps this would encourage more story telling by building on previous tales. I interviewed Chad about his attitude towards writing, and I created a Patai poem by taking out the interview questions and letting the child's voice speak for himself. This process was developed by Dr. Patai, a noted Brazilian researcher who felt the power was in the words of the participant, not in the questions.

A Patai Poem by Chad

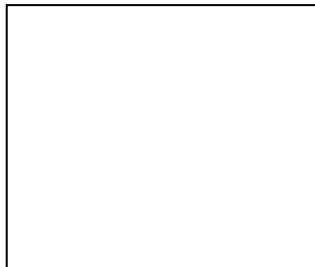
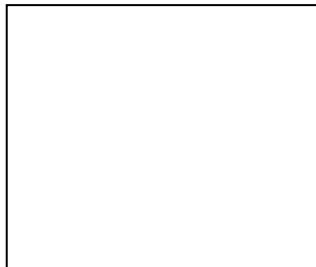
Reading my bionicle book and writing was fun.
This word was hard to write.
I asked Mrs. Benson.
I could think about it in my mind or write another word
if it got tricky.
All my friends, Sidney, Ned, Dennis and Richard like to write.
If they forgot what to do I could tell them, or write it
For them or my friend.
My friends draw the picture when I get stuck.
This week I learned how to write about adventures.

My afternoon class continued to be everyday writers. We had to budget at least twenty minutes each day for Author's Chair, which seemed like so much out of a two and

one half hour day. However, the teachable moments and the discussions that have developed at this place have been some of the best of my teaching career.

Many more of my students began to read this year than in years past. I have been able to use the Rigby PM and PM Plus readers with every child. Most of my children are using readers three and four, which are leveled for first graders in November and December. Even the most at risk students shared excitement about journal time, participating in our spelling chants, our Author's Chair, and our writing activities. The afternoon class has seemed to have become a very close group, with lots of collaboration going on between boys and girls at all skill levels. They never seemed too busy to stop and help with an idea or to stretch a word for another child. All of my students seemed eager to share a story of their own, or to stop and hear someone else's. Perhaps Lori can share the last part of her story.

Mrs. Benson says I am a poetry princess. I like to tell everyone poems I learn from Mommy, or ones we do at school. Soon I will write all of the poems down and put them in a book for my friends. Now Mrs. Benson writes them on chart paper. She even lets me write on her big easel chart with friends. We write all of the color words, the days of the week. We write stories and draw pictures with her markers. I really love to write every day.



ANALYSIS

As is common in teacher action research, my analysis of the research data began almost immediately. Hubbard and Power (2003) note, “Data analysis does not begin after collection has been completed; rather, it is part of your research from the very first day”(90). This ongoing reflection upon data allows the teacher researcher to look at what has happened and to decide where to go next to provide students with the best possible experience. I tried to reread at least some portion of my field log three times a week and to jot down any additional insights or reflections in the margins. This helped me to think about any part of the study I might be minimizing without realizing, or to see early patterns or places where I needed to rework my original plans.

My data analysis plan was one of emergent design. I knew where I planned to go at the beginning of the study, but a few parts of my study were of necessity altered in response to the students and the demands of the classroom. I had originally planned to put a visualization and verbalization piece in my regular classroom routine, but, at the suggestion of the speech and language specialist, I instead used just the first six descriptive words during Show and Tell or Author’s Chair time. I did not, as I had initially planned, end up using pictures that would be provided to me by my colleague for daily discussion. I did, however, collect two sets of drawings done by my students, one at the beginning of the study and one near the end. I used these drawings to compare the use of detail in drawing by the students at the beginning and end of my study.

My plan for analysis required that I write reflective memos on a regular basis. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) suggest:

Reflective memos help researchers become conscious of how they construct their realities while living the research experience, how they grasp the appearance of things, or interrogate and acknowledge aspects within their field of study. (p.78)

In my reflective memos I looked back at what had happened during the last few days and recorded how I felt about it. This prompted me to take action in a direction that was guided by the literature I had read as well as the students I was teaching. I could confirm I was on the right path, or bend a bit to the left or the right. Hubbard suggests, “Data analysis is a way of ‘seeing and then seeing again’ It is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the data, to discover what is underneath the surface of the classroom” (88).

Reflective memos also appeared as I read material written by some of the notable educational thinkers of our time. As I gathered data, I read the thoughts of Dewey, Freire, Delpit, Paley, Vygotsky and others. I found many insights from these people that helped guide my study and yield new ways of looking at my data. This ongoing analysis of the struggle of progressive versus traditional education with Dewey; issues of race, class and gender as examined by Delpit; Freire’s theory of the banking system in opposition to dialogic education; Paley’s deep belief in dramatic play and natural language development as an important element in education; as well as Vygotsky’s deep insights into developmental psychology helped to broaden my research base and keep my sights on a study based on observation and support of children but well-grounded in knowledge of theory that supports best practices.

A few weeks into the study I also began to analyze the data by coding my field log. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest, “Coding is ‘assigning tags or labels to the data, based on our concepts’” (Reported in Ely, et al., p.26.) I designated codes that I felt helped categorize the information by its origin, its impact on my students or a reflection on a classroom experience. My extensive group of over fifty codes included areas such as age, Author’s Chair, collaborative efforts, building, colors, concepts about print, family, letter sound, language, and sharing. I would indicate a symbol in the margin of my field log as I reread the log to indicate which code or codes I felt a passage would fit. Ely, Vinz, Dowing and Anzul (1997) share Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) idea that:

In some cases the terms used in coding are formulated by the researcher based on topics in the log text; in other cases they stem from the actual words of participants; in still others the terms used for coding are derived from the vocabulary of an analytic system, but in all cases, the thinking and labeling processes are the same.

(174)

Later in the study I reviewed the codes for some commonality, creating bins (Ely, Vinz, Dowing & Anzul, 1997). My analytic memos reflect my list of codes, as well as my code template. I used a graphic organizer to help me develop and see the relationship between the codes more clearly, allowing for the creation of bins.

From these bins I was able to later develop themes. Margot Ely (1997) defines a theme as a “statement of meaning that (1) runs through all or most of the pertinent data or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact” (206). My analytic

memos demonstrated how I used these themes to develop theme statements, and to begin to form ideas about patterns I saw emerging from my data.

Throughout the course of my study I also took time to do participant checks. After I had written a field log entry and reflective memo, I often went back and reread what I had written to the student. I explained that I, too, wrote stories, and that I had written one about them, and I would ask if I had captured how they felt. This can be called the process of participant or member checking. If they suggested I add something, or if they did not affirm that this was how they felt, I added or changed my log entries with notations in the margins and amended my reflective memos accordingly.

When writing my narrative I utilized a variety of literary forms trying to give voice to the student. I analyzed data by explaining how my students felt using a patai, a vignette and two pastiches. A patai is a poem developed by the Brazilian researcher Daphne Patai. The poem removes the questions of an interview and gives power to the student by recording his or her answers alone. The focus is on the student, not the researcher. I developed dramas from student dialogue. My vignette of Lisa was interspersed throughout my narrative to show Lisa's journey through writing in my class. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) define vignettes as:

compact sketches that can be used to introduce characters, foreshadow events and analyses to come, highlight particular findings, or summarize a particular theme or issue in analysis and interpretation. Vignettes are composites that encapsulate what the researcher finds through fieldwork. (p.70)

I developed a pastiche of writing the students had done for the administration in my building, and another that reflected the feelings of helping and being helped voiced in interviews by my students. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) suggest that in pastiches “we are experimenting with juxtapositions, layered additions, multiple tellings, parody, mixed forms and experiments with layout” (97).

I also developed a sociogram to document the afternoon children’s choices of students to help them, and the one student they would most like to help. Hubbard and Power (2003) note, “This chart of class relationships is derived from interview with each member of the class. Developed by Jacob Moreno (1953) as a way to understand peer networks and relationships, a sociogram can be useful when your research involves determining who has power in your classroom”(73). I did not really want to see who had “power” in my class, but to see who would like to be helped by whom, and who would like to help whom. I developed two questions for each child, “If you could help anyone in class, whom would you help?” and “If you could be helped by anyone in the class, whom would you help?” I interviewed students individually at a table. I asked them to name a first and second choice for each question. I then recorded the name of the child and two responses, numbering them one and two. I used Sax’s terms (1989) in analyzing my sociogram, which is recorded in my findings.

Throughout the development of bins and themes I went back to check and see if the work I had collected from my students coincided with the analytic memos I had developed. The many pieces of student work I have included reflect the growth these students evidenced when exposed to daily writing experiences.

FINDINGS

My research project dealt with the observable behaviors of kindergarteners as they began to write. Initially this was primarily picture writing or a collection of consonants or a string of letters; but it was, I felt, an opening of the door to a wide world of written expression that would hopefully grow throughout these children's lives.

In October I already sensed that all children came to my room with some concept of writing and some writing experience. It became my responsibility to get some sense of where they were and where they had been. Dewey (1938) noted, "The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs and the past experiences of those under instructions." (71) In order to do this I studied how the students opted to use their free time by sitting in or wandering through the writing area interacting with students and recording their dialogues.

My writing set up allowed me the freedom to roam and observe students' interaction with each other as well as their individual or collaborative writing behaviors. I was free to chat with children about their ideas and why they recorded what they did. Just one afternoon with students would let someone know these children had a rich bank of knowledge and experiences before they came to me. There are no blank slates in any kindergarten classroom anywhere in the world. The challenge would be for me to figure out how to tie their experiences to their writing.

Verbal interaction was one way to begin to create ties between the students and their experiences and me and my experiences. I could spend hours just talking and

listening to their stories. One concept I kept reinforcing was that writing was basically story telling written down. I was anxious to record the students' thoughts and ideas, not my own. Freire (1970) lamented the teacher's role in a traditional "banking" model of education, where there is a constant struggle for control. as the teacher attempts "to 'fill' the student by making deposits of information which he or she consider to constitute true knowledge" (76).

Educators who follow this philosophy seek to make their students more passive. Freire (1970) was frustrated when he noted some educators saw their responsibility to reinforce this passivity.

Since people 'receive the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated person becomes the adapted person, because she or he is a better 'fit' for the world.'" (76)

I no more wanted my student to receive the world passively than I wanted them to rely on only what I tell them for their storehouse of knowledge. Who am I to think I can be responsible for another person's entire cache of knowledge? I have been in teaching too long to think I can ever (or would ever) do this. Listening to the experiences of my kindergarten students as they made connections that would never have dawned on me, or of their perspective on how and why things occur are one of my own sources of excitement about teaching.

I noticed through data collection that most children were able to write their names, even if it was all in upper case letters. Even the most at risk children were happy to draw pictures on a daily basis and share a verbal story. Most parents, as well as

students, were surprised when I mentioned that picture writing was a form of writing, and that it was totally acceptable at the kindergarten level. It was a way for all children to participate, right from the first day of school.

I also found that the topics my children liked to write about most included their families, hearts and things in nature. It seemed as though the things that were nearest to their own hearts and the most familiar to them were the first things out of their fingers. These topics were closely paralleled in their natural spoken language. Ideas shared with classmates in conversation generally centered around family and things around them in nature. With the exception of their names, the one word first mastered by most of my children was the word "I". I am not sure whether this was due to its memorable features, or the great importance of self in the stories that needed to be told.

The introduction of a variety of writing materials, particularly in different colors and textures, seemed to make my students feel more like genuine writers. Any time a new bunch of markers, or a new color of envelope or stationery appeared there was a flurry of writing activity by nearly all of the children. The experience of putting down one's ideas in a vivid color, or wrapping it in a bright red or hot pink envelope seemed to motivate even the busiest of block builders to stop by at the writing center and make use of the materials. Color played an important part in the writing materials as well. It seemed as though many kindergarten students were willing to choose writing activities during their free time if the setting was inviting and if conversation with peers was allowed. Again, writing location in the room did not seem to encourage or discourage writing, but a variety of materials and an encouragement of peer sharing seemed to foster writing.

Freire (1970) suggests we switch to “problem-posing education, which rejects communiques and embodies communication” (79). Much of what went on in my classroom was problem based. To make the writing as authentic as possible I included the envelopes, the postcards, materials for signs, note pads and anything else that simulated real life experiences. I encouraged writing notes to our principal and the students wrote to him about what they wanted to say when they wanted to say it. I encouraged writing to a friend or parent, and students did. They developed on their own the idea of making signs to inform or direct. The learning was purposeful and authentic, and most of the students responded by spending most of their free time writing. Even those at play found opportunities to write for a purpose, to connect writing to their hands on experiences. Creating a felt need, that need for an audience, a purpose for writing, seemed to drive the activity, as well. Dewey (1938) suggests, “Teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something” (117). Purposeful writing, for an audience (Author’s Chair) or for a real life need seemed to generate even more writing in the classroom.

I had decided to include a wide variety of writing experiences in hopes of encouraging everyone in my class to write. I hoped writing journals might encourage the child who needed more of a sense of structure to begin writing. Beginning journals early in the year was a positive experience; nearly everyone was able to participate on some level. Those students who drew pictures could be guided to later include at least one initial consonant; students able to do more initially were eventually able to record sentences or parts of sentences independently. Stretching of words slowly to hear and record their sound seemed to be much more independent, and the number of sounds or

total words students were able to record increased greatly from October through December. All of my students were able to stretch words slowly and clap syllables even if they were unable to bring up or record any letters of a word. The use of the writing prompt from Reading Recovery, “What would you expect to see at the beginning of _____” seemed to be one that most children could understand and eventually even use independently.

The idea that “writing should be ‘cultivated’ rather than ‘imposed’” (118), as Vygotsky (1978) suggests, seemed to be a natural outcome of my own action research. The writing must come from the children, from their own interests and needs. It is the students who largely needed to determine the purpose and the focus of their writing, which in turn appeared to motivate them to write again the next day.

There seemed to be some practical benefits to early exposure to writing as well. Daily writing experiences as well as early exposure to journal writing worked to foster a strong letter identification and knowledge of concepts about print, including left to right directionality, one to one match of printed word and spoken word, return sweep at the end of a line, punctuation and word boundaries (spaces indicate new words), and hierarchies of print (letters make up a word, words make up a sentence, sentences make up a story). Reversals of letters during name writing seemed to disappear much more quickly when daily opportunities for writing were provided. Initially, students seemed to mix upper and lower case letters and sometimes wrote the letters that appeared in their name in upper case.

I also noticed that students who were allowed to draw as part of the early writing experience seemed to transition to free writing more readily and only dabbled in copying

environmental print (writing around the room). Some did, at times, like to copy words they saw around the room, but when I asked what they were doing, they said they were copying words. I asked if this was writing, and most times the students said it was not. They themselves made a distinction between writing and copying. Every year before this most of my students who wanted to write would spend a good part of their time copying signs I had made, or poems, charts, or the calendar that was already hanging on the wall. I saw far less of that this year and much more writing of their own stories in their own natural language.

Even my most reluctant students seemed ready to engage in writing if I related the subject to a real life situation (menu, street sign, post office trip) and allowed writing to mix with play. Paley and Vygotsky both valued play as a precursor to more formal written language. I know I have seen the powerful social impact that writing intermingled with play has had in my class.

My most animated children seemed to note the importance of getting their words onto paper for signs, stories or songs at the earliest time. Writing became the social vehicle for the timid to become more assertive, for the unlikely to “play” together. Mixing writing and play became an equalizer, a way to have students at different developmental levels interact.

It was also a way for the more developmentally mature child to model oral and written language for the less mature child. I know the restaurant in the housekeeping area was an opportunity to connect play and written language. The signs the children made during building time made that connection as well. I also saw the “post office” type

activities that went on when students wrote to parents, friends, or administrators as an opportunity for modeling by peers and teachers.

Some students used the physical building of structures as a precursor to writing. This was the time some of my morning class developed their stories. Just as some of my children sat and talked to each other to develop characters, plot and story line, my morning class seemed to do this while building their block structures. Interestingly enough, a review of the signs written at the end of the research, as well as the writing recorded independently during free write time, show a great similarity in the number of words written as sight words and words stretched and recorded. Story themes on paper were similar to story signs on block buildings.

Another thread that ran through my research was the tendency of many of the boys to write collaboratively. Girls would often talk about the theme of a story before they began, but they always ended up using their own paper in their own space. The boys in my afternoon and morning class took the opportunity almost immediately to share their papers, to tape them together, to write on either side of the paper interchangeably. It first occurred in my afternoon class but began two weeks later in my morning class as well. I had conscientiously made an effort not to encourage or discourage this activity amongst the boys in my morning class; it just appeared naturally. What caused this to occur may be a question for another study.

After reviewing writing sprees taken near the end of my research, opportunities for writing, combined with the journal writing and the word spelling chants seemed to foster a larger writing vocabulary early on. Please refer to the table below for a review of the number of words each child could write independently after only four months of

kindergarten. Although I did not record data in previous years, my sense as an experienced kindergarten teacher of 14 years tells me the average number of words written by both morning and afternoon class far exceeds the number I usually see at that point in the year.

Table 1.

Student Writing Vocabulary

Name	Number of words	Writing Vocabulary
Sarah	16	first, last, I, mom, dad, red, up, no, off, blue, look, by, my, yellow, orange, is
Nick	47	see, first, last, I, go, mom, dad, red, the, two, cat, and, up, on off, blue, ball, we, no, yes, he, me, look, by, my, Jack, her, I, love, you, Lauren, Jojo, Adam, Ian, pig, March, one, yellow, brown, pen, open, purple, at, is, boo
Teresa	13	first, last, go, mom, pap, red, the, cat, an, up, blue, no, the
Yeliz	13	first, last, I, go, mom, dad, dog, red, the, see, off, no, me
Haleigh	26	first, last, mommy, I, off, orange, blue, go, mom,, up, and, dad, no, yes, purple, on, red, daddy, dog, the, cat, look, is, two, see
Richard	15	I, go, mom, dad, dog, red, the, see, cat, off, hi, come, by, red, me
Chad	15	first, last, the, one, mom, too, is, off, go,me, red, dad, can, of, see
Lauren	32	first, last, name, can, last, orange, and, we, off, me, one, dog, up, see, I, blue, look, by,Dad, I, love, cab, go, cat, mom, my, one, at, two, to , the, red
Sidney	14	first, and, the, off, up, go, dad, me, blue, cat, red, to, and, orange
Dennis	5	first, mom, bob, on, ta(at)
Chris	25	first, last, I, off, go, up, see, brown, mom, yes, no, dad, red, the, two, cat, and, on, God, this, it, if, see, me, yellow, dog
Thomas	28	first, last, orange, dad, red, the, see, Eric, blue, and, by, look, boys, go, mom, up, off, green, two, purple, gap, no, pink, it, Jack, Ian, Mrs., pass
Rick	38	first, last, mom, go, dad, red, I, the, two, cat, and,

		up, on, off, blue, yellow, orange, we, no, yes, me, look, by, Jack, black, I, an, white, green, six, one, two, twenty, see boy, purple, Matthew
Liz	11	first, nickname, go, red, is, orange, mom, dad, up, and, blue
Rachel	13	first, mom, dad, go, red, cat, and, on, off, up, is, we
Ned	20	first, last, I, mom, is, red, the, go, dad, it, cat, and, up, on, off, on, orange, see, me, look
Charlie	33	first, last, seven, it, the, he, and, we, done, my, one, is, blue, bowls, at, wee, I, red, look, bad, the mom, go on, off, see, double, too, to, ten, dog, two, cat
Larry	13	first, last, Mom, dad, I, red, Orion, and, the, up, we, me, see, blue, love
Lisa	22	first, last, mommy, mom, daddy, dad, I, wow, boo, go, red, Kayla, Kathleen, on, the , I , love, you, see, me, pink , blue
Maddie	21	first, last, by, mom, Audrey, stop, dad, joe, I, cat, at, love, go, no, see, on, me, orange, to the, red
Susan	11	first, last, dad, cat, red, I, is, the, love, me, orange
Rhiannen	6	first, mom, wow, go, red, blue
Nick	2	first, boo
Rina	5	first, mom, go, red, blue
Erika	10	first, boo, mom, dad, red, is, a, love, orange, owl
Lars	18	first, last, the, love, mom, cook ,blue, green, me, we, by, my, bo, go, red, Sofia, Sebastian, dad
Vinnie	19	first, last, mom, dad, me I, cat, go, at, the , red, love,to, Daria, on, I, orange, see, by
Celine	13	first, last, mom, Stefanie, dad, go, red, Lia, I, the, love,orange, me
Nora	15	first, last, in, I, go, see, pink, mom, dad, red, cat, the,love, look, orange
Lori	25	first, last, mom, dad, Danny, I, go, got, to, red, two, too, we, key, the, and, green, love, see, orange, dog, me, we, she, by

My students seemed to write more when they felt they had an audience, whether it was their peers or the administration of the school. The use of the Author's Chair as a motivator to write and as a vehicle for social interaction cannot be dismissed. Writing became a pathway to socialization for my children. Sharing writing on a daily basis

became a way for my students to be validated and to validate others. The students genuinely seemed to enjoy talking about themselves and their writing with their classmates. Even Teresa, my English as a Second Language child, frequently and readily participated in the Author's Chair. It was here that her voice could be heard through her colorful stories, often accompanied by one or two consonants actually written down, eventually dotted with clusters of high frequency words we had learned together. Her initial confusions of one consonant for another that reflected her native language seemed to disappear within two months, and her syntax improved through daily interaction with peers.

Students were eager to adopt questions I modeled that supported their classmates' writing. Using visualization and verbalization vocabulary seemed to give some degree of comfort about how to share during Author's Chair and Show and Tell; the words were almost like a graphic organizer. It seemed as though there was very little criticism of a fellow student's work if a child's own work was to be shown using the same format of questioning and supportive commentary. Children seemed quite willing to make positive comments about a peer's work. Framing new questions about another child's work did seem a lot more challenging. It was hard to get the concept of asking a totally new pertinent question about some work, but it was easy to use the models I had provided for questions about the writing.

The sociogram I developed asked the students whom they would like to help, and whom they would like to have help them if they had difficulty writing something. Only these two questions were asked, and no further follow-up questions were given. I asked only to give a first and second choice for each question. I assigned a point value to each

response. I assigned a child chosen first two points, a child chosen second received two points. Below is a diagram that represents answers given by students in my afternoon class in early November. I wanted to give my students time to get to know one another as writers and to experience writing with a variety of students. The method I used to describe the student rankings was taken from Hubbard and Power's (2003) description of Jacob Moreno's (1953) technique for developing sociograms for teacher-researchers. Stars are students who were chosen by three classmates. Mid-range are students chosen to help by two classmates; low-range were students chosen by one classmate to help and isolate were chosen by no classmates. Below are two figures sharing my findings. The first diagram depicts the child from whom most children wanted to be helped; the second diagram depicts the child most others wanted to help.

Figure 1.

Whom would you most like to have helping you?

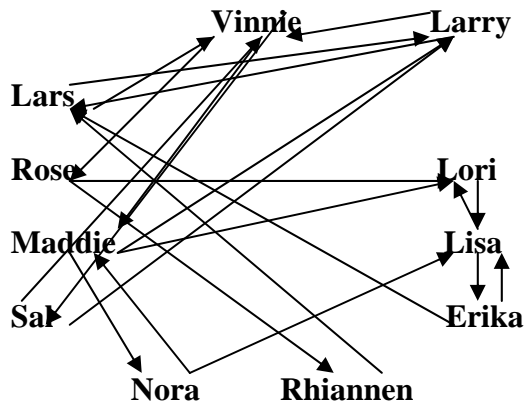
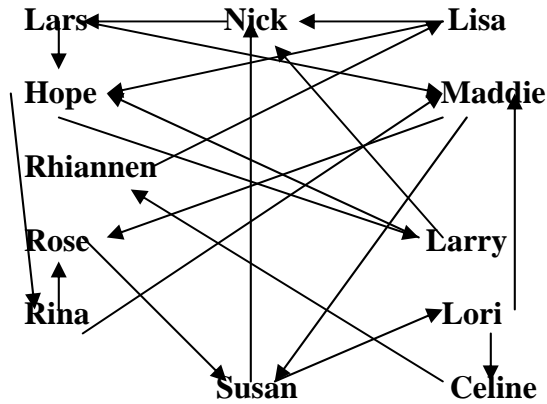


Figure 2.

Whom would you most like to help?



The students others wanted to help them most often were Lars, Vinnie, Larry and Lisa. Students picked two times for support were Rose, Maddie and Sal. Nora, Rhiannen and Erika were each chosen just once as friends others would turn to for help.

At least three of the children in class wanted to help Nick, Hope and Maddie. Two students each picked Rose, Larry and Susan as students that others would like to offer support. Rina, Lori, Lisa, Lars, Rhiannen and Celine were picked by only one other student as a friend whom others wanted to help.

There did not appear to be a cleavage in this group. Hubbard and Power (2000) define cleavage as that which occurs when “two or more segments of the class fail to nominate each other” (78). Their example of this was boys not nominating girls, or girls not selecting boys. Neither were there cliques, or, as noted by Hubbard and Power (2000), individuals who select each other and tend to avoid other member of the group (78). Stars included Lars, Larry, Vinnie, Lori and Lisa. These were some of the students who shared most often in the Author’s Chair, and who were most generous with their praise of others. There was not one isolate in our classroom, a finding which made me the happiest of all. Mutual choices, which Hubbard and Power (2000) define as two

