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Self-Selected Journal Writing in the Kindergarten Classroom: Five Conditions that Foster Literacy Development

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Based on their research, the authors discuss five conditions that they feel should be evident if daily journal writing is to facilitate literacy development.

"What can kindergarten children write?" This question came from Doris, a middle school language arts teacher when she was told about Nancy's kindergarten classroom. Nancy had a regularly scheduled self-selected journal writing time. The children were allowed to choose their messages and forms of writing. Children scribbled, drew, wrote nonphonic letter strings, and demonstrated phonetic and conventional spelling. These are all forms of spelling exhibited by emerging writers according to Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis, 1989.

Research on emergent writing was given little attention prior to the 1980's (Sulzby, 1992). Sulzby (1992) points out that "... a tragic paradox lies between kindergarten classrooms in which children are treated as if they cannot write except through handwriting drill or copying from models and those classrooms in which all children, regardless of background, are writing freely and eagerly" (p. 260). Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis caution that a "destructive assumption" teachers sometimes make is that children cannot write (compose meaning) until they have mastered the mechanics of letters and sounds. Goodman (1986), Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984), and Sulzby (1983) explored a variety of methods to elicit reading and writing behaviors in young children. Sulzby concluded that

the simplest method to teach writing is to simply ask children to write. Teachers should capitalize upon the desire to make meaning of print by creating risk free, enabling environments where children's "can-do" attitudes toward writing are nurtured and nudged.

In our experience we have encountered primary teachers who, like Doris, still hold to the belief that kindergarten children cannot write. Goodman (1992) points out that children's literacy abilities have been underestimated. He suggests that we have not given young children the chance to write on their own. As a result of a one year qualitative research project focusing on the inclusion of a daily self-selected journal writing time, we have concluded that kindergartners are able to write when certain facilitating conditions are evident. In this article we will discuss the five conditions we feel should be present during self-selected journal time to foster literacy growth and development. In so doing we wish to encourage teachers to make "constructive assumptions" about young children's writing ability.

Condition 1: Print Rich Environments

Journal writing should be supported by a print/rich literacy environment where there are daily opportunities for students to explore language in a variety of contexts. Listening to and reading quality literature, engaging in social interactions with adults and peers, reading environmental print, and interacting with real-life literacy props in activity centers are examples of practices that invite children to engage in meaningful literacy experiences (Routman, 1994; Stewig and Jett-Simpson, 1995). It is important that the teacher guide children to use these practices and materials as references when writing. A print rich environment that is not used as a resource can be little more than a display of a teacher's decorating skill.

In Nancy's classroom, print materials related to current themes are widely available and visible. Quality literature is read aloud daily to the children. Martinez and Nash (1995) point out that "the key to successful writing is rich experience, and literature is incredibly rich" p. 219. Poems, songs, and environmental print decorate the room. Children refer to

books, song charts, and other environmental print as they draw and/or write in their journals. The print in the dramatic play center is changed periodically according to the theme. During the thematic unit on food and nutrition, the children voted to change this area into a restaurant. They listed the props and materials necessary to run a restaurant. The center was then equipped with the following: a variety of menus, food containers with logos on them, telephones and phone books for call-in and take-out orders, play money and cash registers, note pads, pens and pencils for taking orders, open and closed signs and newspaper ads for various restaurants. Even the aprons were stitched with the name of the restaurant on the pocket. (This was done by a parent volunteer).

During another unit of study, the children voted to turn the dramatic play area into a travel agency. A travel agent was invited to talk to the class and then the children began to gather materials to set up their travel agency. It was stocked with travel brochures, maps, desk calendars, appointment books, travel itineraries, tickets (with carbons), a computer terminal, phones and phone books. The walls were covered with travel posters. The children chose brochures for their destinations, contacted "agents" to plan trips, ordered tickets, chose types of travel via boat, plane, train, etc. and wrote up trip itineraries complete with arrival and departure times. Abundant supplies of writing materials are accessible to the students at all times. Children have daily opportunities to author and make their own books, and to make signs labeling classroom procedures and materials. They make their own class phone or address books and write, mail and deliver notes and letters to their friends. In addition, each learning center, (e.g., science/discovery center, art center, and construction center) has a writing component that reflects the current theme of study.

Condition 2: Scheduling

A consistently scheduled writing time helps children expect it, value it, and look forward to it (Routman, 1994). Routman states that daily journal time allows for oral discussion, mini-lessons, demonstrations, and teacher time to conference with children individually. Children in Nancy's class feel cheated if they do not get to write in their journals. On the few

occasions when Nancy did not have the journal time, at least one child would ask why or would remind her they had not written in their journals that day. The children seem to sense that what is valued is given part of a daily routine.

Children who have the opportunity to write every day have prolific practice in manipulating letters, words, and completing sentences even though conventional capitalization and punctuation may not be evident. Growth in phonemic awareness is facilitated as youngsters learn to use the sound/symbol system to communicate something that has personal meaning to them. The environment is safe, supportive, and social as children interact and collaborate about their self-selected journal entries.

Condition 3: Teacher Modeling

To help children develop proficiency and confidence in their ability to write, teachers must surround them with meaningful demonstrations of language, e.g., the teacher modeling writing in front of the students, taking dictation, and reading quality children's literature aloud on a daily basis. Fields and Spangler (1995) state, "Models of writing, both from reading materials and from adult demonstrations play an essential role as children learn to write, with adult demonstrations emphasizing the thinking involved in writing" (p. 179).

Nancy takes advantage of the many opportunities that occur naturally in the classroom to model the purposes, processes, and conventions of written language. Her practice of reading quality literature to the children on a daily basis is supported by Hayes (1990); "Quality children's literature is a powerful model of good writing and should be included daily in the program" (p. 67). She frequently invites children to help compose thank you letters, invitations, messages, and lists. For example, as Nancy records children's thoughts and ideas for the message of the day, she calls attention to many different features of print. Each day as the message is written with input from the children, different literacy skills are introduced and reviewed. The children find familiar words, look for letters in initial and ending positions, and notice punctuation, capitalization, sentence

structure and spelling. Early in the year the children even begin to notice such features as plurals and compound words.

By mid-September the children are telling her how to spell words as she writes the message. The following quotes reflect the children's awareness of literacy concepts of print in the messages, e.g., "Mrs. Farlow, the word soup is in our message four times!" "I see six H's/h's in our message." "I see the word to. I see a 2 too, but it's not the same as yours!" "There's a 'P' in the middle of the word pumpkin — it's like the one at the beginning!" "You forgot to write that it is Tuesday." "You didn't put in that there are only six days left until Halloween. You need to fix that!"

Journal writing time affords the teacher the opportunity to model writing for students on an individual basis. Many journal entries produced by kindergarten children, especially at the beginning of the year, are in a scribble form. Stewig and Jett-Simpson (1995) recommended the teacher ask the children to read their entries individually so their dictations can be written in standard form on their entries. (However, before the teacher writes in a child's journal, the child should approve where the adult writing will be located on the page.) After the dictation is completed, the teacher reads it inviting the child to read along.

Condition 4: Honeybee Conferences

During the self-selected journal writing time, teachers need to hold "momentary conferences." Ruddell and Ruddell (1995) refer to these as honeybee conferences because the teacher only lights for a short period of time to talk with and encourage emerging writers. Honeybee conferences allow a teacher time to provide individual coaching in a number of children within a 15-20 minute writing period. In these conferences, teachers take cues from what children have written in their journals and what children say about journal entries. Because emergent writers are at an ego-centric stage of development (Sawyer and Sawyer, 1993), they want to be noticed and affirmed. Therefore, it behooves teachers to honor children's attempts to express themselves in writing. The following quotes come

from our field notes as participant observers in Nancy's classroom during daily journal writing time.

I see you have drawn some of the vegetables that were in the story we read today. Can you tell me the names of the vegetables?... Can you write the names of the vegetables?

Tell me about your picture.

You have written a lot of letters/words. Can you read what you have written?

Tell me about the striped animal you have drawn. What does zebra start with? Can you write the letter? Let's see if we can find the 'z' on our key word cards.

I see you have written some family names; can you read them to me?

Each quote reflects part of several different one to two minute conferences held with kindergarten youngsters. Honoring children's attempts to communicate by putting something on paper is the first order of business in each honeybee conference. Youngsters are invited to try writing or reading something. For example, Ellen read the fruit and vegetable words she had written. The words were in the concept book that had been read in class before the journal time. Tim described the toucan he had drawn and when prompted to tell what the first letter of toucan was, he voluntarily wrote two 't's' and said "It's a tropical toucan." The theme at the time of Tim's journal entry was jungle animals. Cathy was invited to write something about the picture of her garden. She wrote "My grdn is pride" and proudly read "My garden is pretty." All of this reading and writing was done with prompts such as "Will you read to me what you have written?" "Will you tell me about your picture?" "Will you write about that?" Or, when children asked an adult to spell a word the adult replied "Write what you hear." If we want children to be risk takers, we have to convince them that it is safe to try. It is the trying that counts at the emerging literacy stage.

Honeybee conferences support children as they are engaged in writing that is meaningful to them. According to Labbo, Hoffman and Roser (1995), teachers should follow the child's lead. However, it is important that teachers not take a hands-off attitude during journal writing time.

Interacting with the learners and holding honeybee conferences is how individual instruction is provided. Goodman (1993) says that "knowledgeable teachers give enough support to build on children's strengths and help them over their hangups and plateaus" (p. 109). Teachers scaffold (Bruner, 1978) learners and encourage them to use strategies that move them toward writing competence. The amount of support (scaffolding) needed by each child is a matter of individual development. During honeybee conferences, children can be cued to use key word cards (the alphabet with pictures), phonics, environmental print, books that have been read, language experience charts, etc.

Following is an example of how honeybee conferences provide the touch of encouragement young writers need. Nearly all of Daniel's journal entries had been pictures. He had not responded to invitations to write letters and words. Late in March of the kindergarten year, Daniel drew a boat. Pat stopped for a honeybee conference. "Daniel, tell me about your picture." Daniel proudly explained that he had drawn a boat. Pat asked him to write "boat" below his picture. His response was "Oh, no, I can't spell it." Pat asked him to look at her (to see her lips). Pat said the word boat very slowly and asked, "What does that start with?" Daniel said "p." Pat asked him to write it on his paper. He wrote "b." Pat then said "Look at me again" and she pronounced boat and asked what he heard in the middle. The lights flickered to signal the end of journal writing time and Daniel announced, "I'm done."

As children were assembling for sharing time, Pat told Nancy what had occurred in the honeybee conference. When Daniel shared his picture, he pointed to the "b" and said, "I wrote boat." Nancy reinforced Daniel's emerging understanding of the sound/symbol correspondence by saying, "That's great, boat starts with 'b!'" It is interesting to note that when Daniel shared his journal entry he said, "I wrote boat." He referred to his writing rather than his drawing. Thus, Daniel's "writing event" was brought to a meaningful closure during sharing time. Episodes such as this enable children to see themselves as writers. Daniel's experience illustrates the value of teaching children at the point of need and interest. It is an

example of basing instruction on quality kid-watching. We witnessed this kind of nurturing and encouraging over and over in Nancy's classroom. Honeybee conferences provide the routine for such personalized teaching.

Condition 5: Sharing

Sharing is an integral part of the entire process of journal writing in the classroom. Thus opportunities for sharing should occur before, during, and after the children write. Sharing before journal writing helps children make decisions about what they will write. Prior to journal time in Nancy's classroom the children are immersed in some type of meaningful learning experience related to the theme, e.g., going on a field trip, listening to a book being read aloud, viewing a video, sharing personal experiences, etc. During the discussion that follows, children make comments, raise questions, and/or relate experiences in some way to their own lives. At some point Nancy might suggest a possible topic for the day's journal writing. However, this is always posed as a suggestion. The children know they have the freedom to write about whatever they want in their journals. Giving children freedom to choose their own topics communicates to them that their thoughts and experiences are worthy to be put on paper (Sawyer and Sawyer, 1993).

Sharing during journal time should be spontaneous and natural as children talk about their writing in progress. This is more likely to occur if the children are immersed in a safe and supportive literacy environment that invites children to interact socially. Journal time in Nancy's classroom is not a quiet time. The children are given freedom to sit where they choose and to talk with one another. Children can be found sitting alone during journal time or sitting with one or more friends at tables, in centers, or on the floor. Comments such as "I'm writing about ...", "Look, I wrote boo and bat!", or "See my boat!" are frequently heard as well as questions, "How do you make a ...?," "How do you spell ...?," "What are you writing?" The feedback and assistance from a genuine and appreciative audience of peers supports the journal writing process.

A scheduled sharing time which follows journal time allows children the opportunity to showcase what they have drawn or written with an attentive audience. Sharing is important because it validates the children's efforts, thus giving them a sense of purpose and a feeling of pride. Equally important is the peer modeling that occurs during this time. In Nancy's classroom the five minutes following journal time is established as a sharing time. While there is no pressure to share, most children enthusiastically volunteer to read their entries or to discuss their illustrations. For a few moments they bask in the glow of success as Nancy and their peers ask questions and make reinforcing comments. Such was the case of Daniel when he shared his boat illustration. The positive feedback from Nancy and his peers sent a strong message to Daniel that what he wrote was appreciated and valued. Children can learn much about literacy during share time as a result of peer modeling. Those who are ready to take a literacy leap need to have the opportunity to observe and to interact with peers at various developmental levels who are taking risks as writers. Models provided by peers reinforce children's ideas about print, challenge them to think about the purposes and processes of language, and motivate them to continue to grow as writers.

Conclusion

By spring, all of the children in Nancy's kindergarten classroom viewed themselves as writers. They wrote stories, copied environmental print, made lists, wrote letters, songs, messages, and labeled drawings. The regularly scheduled journal time played an important role in helping the children develop courage and confidence. While various developmental levels were represented (See Figures 1, 2, and 3), all the children willingly and enthusiastically participated. Writing was not pushed on the children; it was modeled and celebrated. Stewig and Jett-Simpson (1995) explain,

Because not all children experience strong physical and social environments for learning, they will come to school with wide-ranging abilities. Every child, however, is capable of doing something. The teacher's role is to recognize what each child can do and provide a positive, supportive environment that nourishes and sustains growth (p. 280).

We believe the five conditions detailed in this article cultivate such an environment. "Yes, Doris, kindergarten children can and do write!"

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