

Inquiry:

“On the Wings of Writers”

A Look into the Patterns of Beginning Writers

April 27, 2004

Julie Kennedy

Background: The Professional Development School Experience

I have had the privilege of observing, planning for, and teaching children for an entire school year as a Professional Development School intern in a quaint building called Panorama Village Elementary School, in the State College Area School District. The yearlong student teaching internship within the district provided me teaching and learning experience in both a third grade and first grade classroom. I was in the third grade classroom from September 2003 through January 2004, until my mentor moved to a different location. Unable to stay in the same classroom with my beloved third graders, I had the unexpected, but delightfully fortunate experience of moving into a first grade classroom further down the hallway in the same building. The switch from an intermediate classroom to a primary classroom was almost like starting back at day one again – except this time, I was with children who really were learning basic academic skills for the first times in their lives.

Down the Road to Inquiry:

Reading and writing were abundant in both classrooms – which please me greatly. I enjoyed both reading and writing since reading first clicked in my brain years ago with a book I had received in a McDonald's Happy Meal and had persistently tried to read over and over again until the words on the page made sense to me. I will never forget *that* “ah-ha” moment. Writing was something I had always done: whether I scribbled, practiced the J's of my name until they weren't backwards anymore, or showered my mother with silly limericks in grade-school.

My interest in reading and writing, and the interconnectedness between the two subject areas, helped bring about my curiosity into the field of Inquiry. I could not really

remember learning to write in school in the younger grades, and now that I use writing all the time so naturally, I wondered if I lacked the techniques, proper expectations, and right mind-set to teach first graders about writing.

Wonderings:

How do beginning writers become writers in the classroom and what patterns emerge among beginning writers?

This of course, was followed by a series of other interrelated wonderings:

- How do I develop realistic expectations for students at varying developmental writing levels (especially during the beginning stages)?
- How can I use students' writing as a diagnostic tool to teach beginning reading?
- How can I effectively and appropriately incorporate student writing activities into my lessons and center activities in the first-grade classroom?
- How do students' oral language skills effect their writing skills?

Professional Thoughts from Others on Beginning Reading & Writing:

My mentor teacher and student teaching supervisor (Professional Development Associate – PDA) also helped guide my inquiry in the direction of beginning writing. My mentor, a veteran teacher of over twenty-five years teaching experience, discussed how she focused on reading and handwriting during the first half of the school year with the first grade students. The students had two hours of language arts centers each morning and rotate through six centers, where both guided reading and round-robin style reading approaches are used.

Students also type up prepared unit-related papers on classroom computers in the room, which are saved and printed later for checking. Students are encouraged to read what they are typing while in the process of typing the words. Teacher-made, handwriting booklets are also provided for student use as part of a daily “morning work” routine every morning. Each student should complete one page each day of handwriting. Students work their way up from forming and perfecting the letters of the alphabet in the booklets, to writing words and sentences that they once again read as they write. Reading and writing was already a large portion of the daily work load for students, but my mentor mentioned that the students would be moving into a more writing-focused half of the school year as the curriculum called for fiction and nonfiction writing pieces from students.

Gay Su Pinnell and Irene C. Fountas, authors of *Word Matters*, feel that reading and writing go hand in hand in terms of literacy education. Reading, sharing, and discussing meaningful text is an important and vital activity in any language arts curriculum. Creating a balanced literacy approach can be accomplished through read alouds, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading, combined with various correlating writing activities and follow-ups (27) to enhance knowledge and understanding of words and letter formations, and to increase automaticity within reading and writing. The two processes of reading and writing, as I similarly believe, cannot be separated one from the other: “Writing and reading are parallel and complementary processes. Learning in one area helps children in the other area”(Pinnell 29).

An interesting concept that also seems to surface when researching beginning writing are children’s use of pictures and drawings to convey messages, and perhaps

whole written meanings. According to Margo Wood, teachers expectations of student writers should be “developmentally appropriate”(1994, 96) instead of solely grade or age-appropriate. She also feels that first graders often use drawings to convey most of the meaning in their writing, and most students finish one page in one session (1994, 96). My students seemed to already be writing more often without any pictures at all. I felt another wondering coming on...

The Inquiry Plan:

After working with the first-grade students at a reading center for several weeks, I developed a fairly good sense of their reading levels and capabilities, along with some sense of their writing abilities. To carry out my inquiry plan, I led a series of writing workshops with the first grade students, and also incorporated some writing into my language arts center – that before was mostly just reading around the table. The first two lessons focused on nonfiction writing, the other two on fiction, or “Creative Writing.”

Though the students had been working on nonfiction writing sometime before I came into the classroom, I began my inquiry writing lessons with a more familiar writing with the students to gain an awareness of how beginning writers write their thoughts down on paper. With the students learning so many new things for the first time, I wanted to see what kind of writing they could produce in a familiar format.

I worked closely with some students who tended to “struggle” more with reading and writing at my center, as well. I sometimes asked them to tell me their “version” of a fairytale story that we had read, or one that we had not read yet, but one they knew already. One student dictated her “story” to me, and I wrote her story down. She was so excited! We are currently in the process of making a “book.” This is her version of the

story “The Elves and the Shoemaker,” after I noticed how well she was able to just look at the pictures and tell me something about each one in the book.

*“One time my brother saw little elves.
When we hid behind the curtain, we saw them.
The elves made some new shoes for us!
When they were gone, we made clothes, hats, and shoes for them.
When the elves came back, they took off their ugly clothes,
and put on their new clothes.”*

Building on our “Under the Sea” unit, I started with familiar, unit-related read alouds from a series of books written by a woman named Suzanne Tate. The colorful little picture books told a story about an animal but also incorporated facts about each kind of animal in picture book format. As a class, we discussed facts about the sea animals in the different books, from which I wrote up a chart of student ideas on butcher paper to hang on the chalkboard. Students then wrote nonfiction pieces, about a page long, about each animal: the octopus and the seahorse. I organized facts about each animal for the students ahead of time, typed up on white paper, as well, for them to take back to their seats to springboard ideas when writing.

My second wave of writing workshops consisted of two creative writing sessions in which the students were able to write their own stories. The first lesson was based on another Suzanne Tate book. For the Creative Writing lessons, I discussed different basic story elements that I wanted the students to think about within the read aloud.

My first creative writing lesson broke from the usual flow of things with the selection of paper the students could use for their writing:

LESSON PLAN ~ Creative Writing: From *Spiny Star*

Name: Julie Kennedy

Date: 3-31-04

Grade: 1

Group (large/small)

PURPOSE

(Why am I teaching this lesson?)

- To begin teaching Creative Writing to first grade students
- To begin teaching the idea of writing a story with a beginning, middle, and an end

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

(What materials will I need?)

- tagboard
- *Spiny Sea Star* by Suzanne Tate
- thinner-writing markers (but not thin-line or fine-point; use about Crayola size)
- magnets & butcher paper
- thicker markers for writing on butcher paper

(What will the students need?)

- tagboard
- pencils or markers (thinner kind)

ACTIVITIES/PROCEDURES

(How will I introduce this lesson so that the students become interested and engaged in this activity? What steps will I follow? How will I provide closure?)

- Explain how most stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end – where everything in the story comes together. Mention how these 3 things relate to the next important things that most stories have:

- Ask students to think about who the characters are in the story, what the main problem is in the story, and how the problem is solved in the story (write on butcher paper on chalkboard)
- Read aloud of *Spiny Sea Star*
- Refer back to butcher paper chart: ask students if they can remember who the characters were, what the main character's problem or trouble was in the story, and how the problem was solved or taken care of;
- Relate these then in discussion or possible other cueing system as to when they occurred in the story: beginning, middle, and end. (Could make separate chart) – Depends on how well students are getting the hang of the concepts.
- Explain to students that they are going to be working on their own stories about a sea creature:
 - o Emphasize that this will be an ongoing “creative writing process” and that it does not have to be perfect the first time, so that students can get their ideas for stories flowing – then we will worry about getting the stories structured neatly for framing or “publishing” later.
 - o Allow students to choose either white computer paper, regular handwriting paper, tagboard, or regular notebook paper to write on so they are able to get their ideas flowing.
 - o 2 choices for writing tools: pencils or thin-line markers (I have noticed with several groups that students love to write. and to write stories, with markers. They are easier to write with and this writing phase can be more of a “sloppy copy” where they can cross out words they choose not to use if markers are easier to write with.) If markers are not feasible, pencils will always do!
- Ask students what things they think their stories will need to have: (Could have elements on tagboard)
 - characters (main characters)
 - problem
 - problem solved

- beginning, middle, end
- Read a few student examples.
 - Tell students they may begin writing their ideas on the tagboard or paper of their choice, working hard to get their ideas down and do their best with sound spelling.

ADAPTATIONS/EXTENSIONS

(How will I provide for individual differences?)

- Allow some students to draw small pictures in their writing to help them convey meaning, and possibly help them come up with the words to their story (the Cheetahs, the Tigers, etc.)

EVALUATION OF STUDENTS

(How will I assess what students can do and what they are ready to learn?)

- Assess discussion of read aloud and see how well students pick up on the elements of the story
- Assess how readily students are able to form their ideas and how well they take to freely writing their ideas down on their choice of paper – does it get ideas flowing? or are they stumped?

ANALYSIS/REFLECTIONS

(What went well? What could I have done differently? What have I learned? Goals?)

- The students enjoyed writing on the tagboard and adding pictures to their stories.
- They were able to come up with great ideas, although some stories were missing a problem, or the problem was solved quickly, as in: “She didn’t have any friends, but then she met a dog and he was her friend. The end.” The steps in between, “the adventure,” or the middle aspect to their stories is mostly still weak on the benchmark scale – their ideas however, are great.”

The second creative writing lesson plan was based on a simple picture book that lent itself well to explaining all of the basic story elements. I reviewed the story elements needed for a “good story” with student input first, and then proceeded to do the read aloud of *The Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch. I questioned the students during the read aloud to maintain a sense of the story elements: setting, characters, problem, adventure, and solution. The story elements were reviewed in an almost a retelling style format, where the students basically told me the story again in their own words, while I wrote their ideas on butcher paper on the chalkboard.

Student ideas for individual stories were added to the end of the butcher paper chart after the discussion: “a talking clock,” “a fancy dog,” “dragons and dinosaurs,” “Statue of Liberty Comes to Life!” Students began writing on regularly lined paper and came up with very creative stories.

The lesson plan for this creative writing lesson plan is attached for review.

**LESSON PLAN ~ Creative Writing Components: Setting & Problem Solving through
*The Paperbag Princess***

Name: Julie Kennedy

Date: 4-07-04

Grade: _____

Group (large/small)

TIME: Wed. afternoon; we may start right after lunch at 12:15 and work until about 1:00 or so.

(Then brief break, Calendar/Math, and Gym at 2:00/Planning.)

PURPOSE

(Why am I teaching this lesson?)

- To teach first-grade students necessary components of imaginative, or creative writing: (description of) characters and setting of story, plot or how the story takes place, and the problem is solved in the story through a series of steps leading up to the ending of the story.
- To provide another opportunity for students to build their background of ideas and skills for writing and writing ideas.
- To teach students useful skills in brainstorming writing ideas through discussion, webbing, questioning techniques, and retelling.
- To allow students to share their ideas about writing.
- To assess student comprehension of the read aloud and the writing process skills discussed in the mini-lesson.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

(What materials will I need?)

- 1 copy of *The Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch
- butcher paper (for webbing or listing)
- markers (for butcher paper)
- paper for student writing

(What will the students need?)

- paper and pencils

ACTIVITIES/PROCEDURES

(How will I introduce this lesson so that the students become interested and engaged in this activity? What steps will I follow? How will I provide closure?)

- Read aloud of the book above
- Discuss why the author might have chosen the characters for the book
- Discuss and chart on butcher paper (or web) the characters, setting (where/when story takes place), the problem faced by the main character (Elizabeth must save Ronald from the dragon); and the various steps taken to solve the problem (Elizabeth outsmarts the dragon by tiring him out), etc.
- Discuss the ending of the story – does the story end right when the problem is solved? (No.)
- Discuss the use of the 5 senses in the story to describe these main things in the story.
- Brainstorm ideas for stories from the students (or have students write a story about a dragon that secretly lives in the school basement (if we had one!), or just

- continue building ideas with the students to get them started on a list before sending them back to their seats to start.
- Discuss Writer’s Checklist of things their stories should have; discuss; pass out to students. Have 2 paper people put paper on everyone’s desk. Send students back to their seats in a “creative manner” for “creative writing” time

ADAPTATIONS/EXTENSIONS

(How will I provide for individual differences?)

- Work with students individually to help brainstorm ideas and build story webs; ask them questions to get them going.
- Allow students who “finish early” to add illustrations to their story or ask them to switch stories with a partner and read quietly to edit, add/change anything, and revise stories.

EVALUATION OF STUDENTS

(How will I assess what students can do and what they are ready to learn?)

* Assess class discussion after read aloud to see what they remember from prior creative writing lesson for new chart lesson. Hopefully the students will build up the characters and problem-solving aspects of their stories more, and successfully develop and describe a setting for their stories.

ANALYSIS/REFLECTIONS

(What went well? What could I have done differently? What have I learned? Goals?)

Goals:

- For students to write creatively, targeting main focus areas:
 - described main character or characters
 - described setting (when or where)
 - problem in the story
 - how the main character tries to solve the problem in the story
 - how the problem is finally solved
 - how the story ends
 - using the 5 senses to help describe things in their story – to help readers “see” their stories in their minds, rather than just be told about it!

Data Collection:

- student writing samples – 4 class sets
- teacher lesson plans
- teacher handouts; anecdotal notes
- photographs of students writing, working with students, class bulletin board
- written records: PDA and mentor notes/observation of class
- teacher journal

Analyzing the Data:

I read through all of the reflective pieces of data, such as the observation notes, anecdotal notes, and journals to reorganize and focus my thoughts. The student writing samples for each different lesson were placed in a separate folder. I wrote brief notes on the folder describing the date, the plan, and the overall reactions of the class. The students' writings were read through two to three times each set, and placed into piles based on "meets expectations," "above expectations," "working towards expectations" for a first grade writer at the end of the school year. After looking through the State College Area School District Language Arts Continuum describing various stages in writing, and Roger A. McCaig's *Learning to Write: A Model for Curriculum and Evaluation*, I had a better sense of exactly what kind of criteria to look for in each piece of student writing. However, I thought back to my main wondering about the patterns of writers, and decided to focus on a generalized span of first grade writers, with some specific cases to show the differences in reading and writing abilities developmentally.

For the creative writing pieces, I placed sticky notes on each paper, with a few notes jotted down that described whether or not the student had written a beginning,

middle, and an end his or her story. I also described any noticeable sound spellings the student used or any words that seemed difficult for a first grader to use or spell. Three students papers surfaced in each of the four categories with the noticeable speech impediment issue: one student spelled the word “home” as “huom,” and the “change” as “shan.”

Claims:

1. The approach used in our classroom is a more traditional, teacher-directed style approach to teaching writing, but it seems to be very effective. The focus on handwriting and some mechanics at the beginning of the year, despite the lack of focus on drawings, has allowed students to dive right into their writing when they return to their seats.

Evidence: Pinnell and Fountas believe that: “Flexible, efficient word solving is an essential aspect of both reading and writing processes”(25). Because of the build up of skills earlier in the school year, the transition into writing one’s ideas down on paper, has been fairly smooth for most. Handwriting and letter formations, “are coordinated smoothly by the competent writer, who needs to give little attention to word solving and writing and can focus on meaning”(26).

2. Reading and writing are inextricably linked, and should be enthusiastically incorporated into one’s curriculum together.

Evidence: “Writing can be used to integrate content areas so that you can use the language-arts block more effectively” (Johnson, 5).

Evidence: “[W]riting involves reading, and...it reinforces and develops skills traditionally viewed as reading skills” (Calkins 155-56).

Evidence: “The writing classroom is built on a foundation of literature” (Portalupi and Fletcher, 1998, 10).

3. Fiction writing (creative writing) seems more difficult for the students to do, perhaps requiring more “think-time,” but students do seem very proud of their creative writing progress and completed work. The students take ownership and pride in sharing their stories with each other and adults.

Evidence: “They were great writers today. They are able to really focus as they compare stories. And they are so proud to share with adults!” (Lynne Sanders, PDA, Observation Notes: April 9, 2004)

4. Nonfiction writing is best implemented when visual cues are used to follow up a read aloud to spring ideas into students’ minds, but students should be encouraged to think of other ideas on their own.

Evidence: It may best to use some sort of visual cue, a reminder, or “a simple note-taking strategy” that will hold students’ attention and ideas (Portalupi and Fletcher, 23).

5. Students with speech impairments, or different dialects, write the way they speak – especially when using sound spelling during writing times.

Evidence: Students may continue to write words the way they say them, and still seem to have difficulty with the /v/, /th/, /ch/, and the /sh/ sounds until they are about five or six years of age (Wood, 21).

Future Implications in My Career:

This inquiry has reinforced my beliefs on how important reading and writing are, and now I am not hesitant or doubtful in how to teach them to young children! I hope to

teach interrelating reading and writing activities everyday in my future classroom. If I am fortunate to work in a primary classroom, I feel that I would use a combination of my mentor's yearly plan with phonics, handwriting, and minor mechanics (maybe!), but that I would also already allow the students to write and write creative stories each day in the classroom, and to make pictures to help express their thoughts. As the year goes on, perhaps not so many pictures would be necessary to express a child's story or thoughts, and instead drawings could be used solely when creating a published story or book.

I will provide my students with a sense of choice and ownership when they are writing, but most likely, I will also have writing activities that tie directly into the curriculum and may require more specific teacher directions. When given "free choice," I will usually start the writing workshop by sharing an example story or two in the kind of direction I would like the students to head (poetry, nonfiction, fiction, everyday events, etc.), and ask students to discuss, ask me questions, and share their ideas as well. Students will also help conference with each other, (if teaching completely alone – which will most likely happen,) by reading each other's stories or pictures. If students are very young, then perhaps parent or community volunteers can come into the classroom to assist students during writing times.

Students will be provided a time to finish stories and have the option of publishing their work, or perhaps sharing them by reading them aloud at an "Author's Chair." Nonfiction writing pieces will also usually start with some kind of visual organizer to springboard student ideas and keep memories fresh. The cueing systems should be kept short and simple, however, so that students are sure to offer their own

ideas, thoughts, and input, rather than just a copy of the teacher's facts from the board or chart paper.

New Wonderings:

1. The reading and writing connection has definitely been affirmed throughout this Inquiry project, however, I wonder: If writing abilities improve and take off first, with daily practice, would a child's reading skills truly be noticeably enhanced as well?
2. How well would first graders (6-7 year olds) manage helping each other out during writing workshop times? (Conferencing, reading each other's papers, minor mechanics toward the end of the year?)
3. I wonder if and how my first graders could write their own story a wordless book?
 - Would this further improve their story-writing skills and order of story elements?
 - Would some story-writers, still in the developing stages, create more connected thoughts from the cues of the pictures before them?

References:

Calkins, Lucy, M. *Lessons from a child: On the teaching and learning of writing* 1983. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

Fletcher, Ralph and Portalupi, Joann. *Nonfiction craft lessons: Teaching information writing K-8* 2001. Stenhouse Publishers: Portland, Maine.

Fletcher, Ralph and Portalupi, Joann. *Craft lessons: teaching writing K-8* 1998. Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine.

Johnson, Bea. *Never too early to write* 1999. Maupin House Publishing, Inc.

McCaig, Roger, A. *Learning to write: A model for curriculum and evaluation*, 3rd ed. 1990. The Grosse Pointe Public School System: Grosse Pointe, Michigan.

Pinnell, Gay, Su, and Fountas, Irene, C. *Word Matters* 1998. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.