

April 1994

## A Teacher's First Experience as a Researcher: Exploring Reading/ Writing Connections

Diane L. Kinsler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

### Recommended Citation

Kinsler, Diane L. (1994) "A Teacher's First Experience as a Researcher: Exploring Reading/Writing Connections," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol27/iss3/8>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## A Teacher's First Experience as a Researcher: Exploring Reading/Writing Connections

ARTICLE BY **DIANE L. KINSLER**



"Teacher as Researcher." These are words that struck my heart with terror. My immediate response was to think that teachers should teach, researchers should research, and the two words should never be spoken together in the same breath. So, when a teacher/researcher project was required in the course of my graduate study in reading instruction, I balked, I froze, and I panicked. I decided that I may as well just fail that class.

Of course, I did not fail the class. I dug in, completed the research project, and in the end, was glad to have had the experience. I will probably even attempt it again some time. This is an account of my experience as a teacher/researcher. I share it with you in the hope that you will also muster the courage to do some research in your own classroom. As you will see, it was quite an eye opener for me!

### Getting Started

With this research project, I decided to investigate the question of whether first graders make a reading/writing connection in the production of their own stories based on literature that is read to them. My question grew entirely out of curiosity. I was a brand new teacher, working with a group of first graders with whom I had had no previous contact, much less experience, so I had no idea what question I would be interested in exploring with them. The reading/writing connection, however, was a recurring topic in the course of my graduate study that had always held a certain mystery for me. So I thought I

would like to see exactly how the reading/writing connection manifested itself among these children. I chose the Language Experience Approach (LEA) as the vehicle for helping me explore this question. Language Experience is an instructional approach used with beginning readers that emphasizes using the learners' own language and experiences to create their own reading materials. Very simply, the children verbalize their ideas, the teacher writes them down, and then the children practice reading with their own stories. They are motivated to learn to read their own stories because they feel that they have created something useful and important. It seemed that LEA stories would not only provide some information about children's knowledge about reading and writing but would also be a good way to reinforce new learning (Jones & Nessel, 1985), which became important in terms of the instruction on story structure that occurred later on in my project.

Another parallel question arose in the course of this project: "How can I help first-graders to make the reading/writing connection?" Vivian Paley (1986) had written that curiosity was what guided her research with her students. She also wrote about the importance of listening to what children say as opposed to waiting for outcomes pre-determined by the teacher to emerge. Dorothy Strickland (1988) influenced the formation of my second question with her statement that teachers use their research to improve their own instruction. Though I was not yet sure what I was looking for, these writings suggested listening carefully to

see if the children could answer the second question for me.

It was most interesting to me, in the course of the literature review that I conducted, that the discoveries I made in the course of my research are supported both in the literature and by teaching theory. I also found support for my methods, as you will see as I describe the course of my project itself.

My plan was very simple. I had decided to use literature about snow to provide the experience for the LEA stories. I chose the snow theme because it seemed logical for February and because I had some fun activities to go along with it. I had planned to have the children write both group and individual stories as we read the literature to see how and if what they read showed up in their writing, as this was my understanding of what the reading/writing connection meant. Nancie Atwell (1984) says that students write about what they read using themes and ideas from the literature. Dorothy Stephens (1989), who also worked with first-graders, says that literature furnishes models and examples that children use in their own writing. In addition, Sandra Stotsky (1983) has cited research that indicated that using children's literature is beneficial in teaching composition.

Beyond my initial plan, the research unfolded itself, and I felt as if I were on a treasure hunt, just waiting to see what I could discover, and what I could do.

As far as record keeping was concerned, I used "kid-watching" (Y. Goodman, 1990). I kept informal notes that I jotted down immediately after each experience. I also noted which child said what during the writing of group stories. Though I read the individual stories to see what was there, I chose not to focus on individual children because I felt the whole group told me more about what I needed to know.

The actual research got its own start

one day. I had read *Jumanji* to the children. *Jumanji* is a Chris VanAllsburg story in which two children play an unfamiliar board game. The most important rule of the game is that the instructions must be followed exactly. If the players quit before the end, there could be dire consequences because, in the process of moving around the game board, the players are actually transported into a jungle setting that takes over the house. (It makes me think of the electronic "virtual reality" games that we hear so much about in the news today.)

My first graders really enjoyed the story, and we followed it with a lively discussion of what would happen to Daniel and Walter Budwing, the brothers who were about to play the game and who were notorious for not following instructions. I asked the children if they would like to write their own story about what would happen to those boys when they played the game. They jumped at the chance, and we wrote the story with the children taking turns dictating their contributions while I wrote them down. Their story was called "They Don't Read Directions."

### **Applying Structure to the "Da-Di-Da" Story**

That LEA story included material that was taken directly from the original story, such as a lion roaming the house, as well as the children's own personal experiences such as sucking one's thumb in response to the fear created in the children by the lion. But what struck me most about the story was that it was very long, and there was little, if any, structure among the thoughts the children verbalized. For instance, the story started out with these contributions, which also characterize the rest of the story. "Daniel and Walter got bit by a snake." "A lion bit both boys on the elbow." "They didn't read directions." One of the articles that I had read called

this the “da-di-da” story — just a list of events (Jagger, Carrera & Weiss, 1986). Then the sillies took over. The boys in the story somehow ended up travelling through North Carolina and South Carolina, and then everyone jumped out of the plane into the water. I pointed out that we really needed to finish this story and get back to Jumanji. Finally one little girl took the ending from the actual story and said, “They yelled out ‘Jumanji,’” and together the class agreed to say, “And that’s the END of the Jumanji story!”

This story made me decide that the children needed some instruction on structure. As I think back, imposing structure per se was not the point as much as was trying to help the children manage the length and breadth of their story production, as well as to focus on the story itself and move away from the “da-di-da” story. But I held off on this idea until we read two stories on snow and wrote another group story, because I wanted to broaden my own experience with the children as well as with what I was trying to do. I read *The Snowy Day* and *The Biggest Snowstorm Ever*. In the group story that was a response to these books, I noticed that the children had drawn very little on the literature. One boy took this directly from the story — “You can bang snow out of a tree and it will plop on your head.” The rest of it was pretty much personal experience based on snowball fights, getting your car stuck in the snow, and so on. At first I thought this was cause for concern because this deviated so much from how much the children drew on *Jumanji*. However, I found that this is also frequently the way that the reading/writing connection may manifest itself. Diane Barone (1990) tells us that sometimes children will follow a section of text. At other times, though, they may isolate just a sentence and then include a personal response that was recalled by the

literature stimulus.

At this point I decided to give a mini-lesson on structure in simple terms of beginning, middle, and end, and within that, some sort of sequence such as first, second, next, etc. I used *The Big Snow* and *The Mitten* as the context for instruction. I read *The Big Snow* to the children, and stopping at points along the way, I pointed out what I thought were good places to call the beginning, the middle, and the end.

We immediately wrote another story that the children entitled “The Story of the Animals.” I told the children to think about both the story and the mini-lesson on structure. I found that this was a viable approach to take because in her work with first graders, Dorothy Stephens (1989), who was also trying to help her students to write a more interesting story, followed much the same procedure. She also gave a mini-lesson with modeling through literature, dealing with story leads.

### Re-Telling Stories

In *The Story of the Animals*, the children drew more closely on the literature than they had before, almost re-telling the story both in terms of content and structure. There was a clear beginning — “The animals are getting ready to hibernate.” There was a clear middle that dealt with the animals’ preparations for winter and the continually falling snow. And there was a clear ending when the groundhog saw his shadow. This is when I realized that a large part of what children do while making the reading/writing connection is to re-tell the stories from the literature, in part, in whole, or in combination with personal experience. The journal literature offers wide support for this tendency, (Beaver, 1982; Morrow, 1985; Manning, 1987; Barone, 1990; Hepler, 1991).

When I read *The Mitten*, the children were told to listen carefully so they

could re-tell the story. Then I gave them a construction paper mitten and some animals to color. When they re-told the story, they were to insert the animals into the mitten in the same sequence as in the story, and they were to repeat this as many times as they could while telling the story to others in the classroom. I realize now that I was reinforcing the re-telling strategy that I had seen evidence of in their group stories, but I did not realize it at the time. The point was for them to practice using a little structure in their storytelling which would prepare them for using that structure in their writing efforts.

At this point, the children listened to author Jane Stroschin, who had been invited to school to speak. What a stroke of luck for me! She explained and showed samples of the entire writing, illustrating, and publishing processes. She told the kids that they could read and write just like adults. Jane explained that it is okay to make mistakes, so don't be afraid to try. She explained how her stories start with personal experiences or other things she already knows and grow with her imagination. Jane read her actual books to the kids. Above all, she was authentic. Here was a person who really knew what she was talking about!

The kids could hardly contain their excitement. The next day they wrote their individual stories and then read them to the rest of the class. I told them to think about our classroom experiences with the snow as well as what they had learned from the author about her writing. Three children attempted to re-tell the author's story about a kingfisher. Four children combined the author's subjects with our snow stories. For instance, she had also written a story about a unicorn, and one boy wrote: "A unicorn is playing in the snow. The unicorn was having fun in the snow." One attempted to re-tell the king-

fisher story, but he called it "The Kingfisher in the Snow." The rest wrote stories about personal experiences.

So, in their writing, the children displayed the same behaviors observed in their oral re-tellings for the group stories. Susan Hepler (1991) says that children may recall or rehearse content, or in other words, practice their own comprehension if time is allowed for talk to occur. In this way, I also discovered that the oral re-telling can make contributions in support of the reading/writing connection that I otherwise would have never observed.

As far as structure was concerned, I saw some in the individual writing. One girl used phrases in her story such as "so," "the next day," "when he got there," etc. One girl started her story, "Once upon a time..." But for the most part I saw a return to the "da-di-da" story.

About a week later, I asked the children to write one more individual story. This time I told them to write about whatever they wanted. I was curious to see if their writing would still be closely connected to the literature that had previously been their topic. It was not in any way. They wrote about whatever personal experience was on their minds — a new dog, friends coming for a visit, monkeys, and "I love my mom and dad." Again, there was not much evidence of structure although one story started with "Once upon a time" and ended with "The End." Another started with "Once upon a time" and ended with "They lived happily ever after."

### **Supporting the Reading/Writing Connection**

So on the question of structure, I discovered that children *do* make that connection between reading and writing both in their own writing and in their oral re-telling (Morrow, 1985). But it was most evident in "The Story of the Animals" that we wrote immediately

after the mini-lesson and the modeling that I did on the beginning, middle, and end, through the literature. Of course, the sequencing that they practiced and did so well with in "The Mitten" was inherent in telling that particular story. But once they wrote their own stories and I did not give specific instruction on structure, it disappeared for the most part. Goodman (1990) tells us that children do possess their own knowledge of structure. However, it is tacit knowledge that children have developed simply by being exposed to literature through their emergent literacy years. So when I supported their use of that knowledge, it came to the surface and was manifested in their writing. When I removed the support, it was no longer observable. Therefore, another way in which I can help my students to make the reading/writing connection is to continue to give support for the students' tacit knowledge of structure through mini-lessons such as the one I attempted until such time as the students are able to internalize their knowledge and use it independently. This is described by McCarthy and Raphael (1989) in their discussion of the social constructivist theory on instruction, and by Applebee and Langer (1983) on reading and writing.

Barbara Eckhoff (1983) says that there is very little known about the exact nature of the connection between reading and writing except that children may learn print and language structures from reading and use it in their writing. Further, much of the literature on the reading/writing connection suggests that there are still any number of questions to consider for research (Eckhoff, 1983; Stotsky, 1983; McCarthy & Raphael, 1989). So it is of little wonder that the reading/writing connection still holds mystery for me. My research yielded

some valuable insight, however, as far as first graders are concerned.

### What I Learned

First of all, first graders do make a reading/writing connection in terms of using both content and structure borrowed from the literature in their own writing. Second, re-telling stories in part, in whole, or combined with personal experience is both a common and a practical exercise to help children increase their understanding of both story content and structure. I can help students to make the reading/writing connection by providing plenty of opportunities for them to practice this strategy. Third, I can provide oral support for the reading/writing connection in that same manner through re-telling. Fourth, children carry with them a good deal of tacit knowledge about story structure. I can help my students to make the reading/writing connection by offering support for that knowledge through modeling and instruction, and I must continue that support until such time as children can internalize their knowledge and use it on their own.

Any of these four points could be turned into a question for further research. But I am fortunate that my research project provided them as discoveries that will help me to be a better teacher. I also know that having had the experience of being a researcher, I will be more aware as a teacher. And I have learned that the words *teacher* and *researcher* should always be spoken in the same breath.

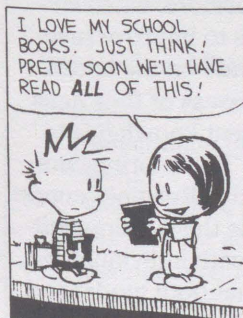
*Diane Kinsler is presently a reading and writing instructor at Olivet College. She wrote this paper while completing graduate studies at Michigan State University.*

## REFERENCES

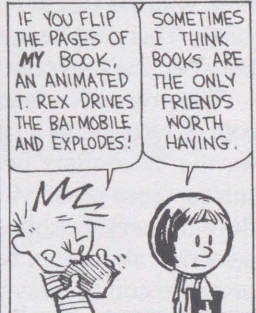
- Applebee, A. & Langer, J. (1983). Instructional scaffolding: Reading and writing as natural language activities. *Language Arts*, 60, 168-175.
- Atwell, N. (1984). Writing and reading literature from the inside out. *Language Arts*, 61, 240-252.
- Barone, D. (1990). The written responses of young children: Beyond comprehension to story understanding. *The New Advocate*, 3, 49-56.
- Beaver, J. (1982). Say it! Over and over. *Language Arts*, 59, 143-148.
- Eckhoff, B. (1983). How reading affects children's writing. *Language Arts*, 60, 607-616.
- Goodman, Y., (Ed), (1990). *How children construct literacy: Piagetian perspectives*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hepler, S. (1991). Talking our way to literacy in the classroom community. *The New Advocate*, 4, 179-191.
- Jagger, A., Carrara, D., & Weiss, S. (1986). Research currents: The influence of reading on children's narrative writing (and vice versa). *Language Arts*, 63, 259-268.
- Jones, M. & Nessel, D. (1985). Enhancing the curriculum with experience stories. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 18-22.
- Manning, M., Manning, G., Hughes, J. (1987). Journals in 1st grade: What children write. *The Reading Teacher*, 41, 311-315.
- McCarthy, S. & Raphael, T. (1989). Alternative perspectives reading/writing connections. Occasional Paper #130. E. Lansing, MI: The Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University.
- Morrow, L. (1985). Reading and retelling stories: Strategies for emergent readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 38, 870-875.
- Paley, V. (1986). On listening to what children say. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 122-131.
- Stephens, D. (1989). First graders taking the lead: Building bridges between literature and writing. *The New Advocate*, 2, 249-258.
- Stotsky, S. (1983). Research on reading/writing relationships: A synthesis and suggested directions. *Language Arts*, 60, 627-642.
- Strickland, D. (1988). The teacher as researcher: Toward the extended professional. *Language Arts*, 65, 754-764.

## Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



I LIKE TO READ AHEAD AND SEE WHAT WE'RE GOING TO LEARN NEXT. IT'S SO EXCITING TO KNOW STUFF.



Calvin and Hobbes © 1993 Watterson. Dist. by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.