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## A child's emerging writing abilities in first grade

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## **A child's emerging writing abilities in first grade**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to study a young boy's exploration of the writing process in first grade. A review of literature will examine the nature of young children's responses in the writing process and will offer suggestions for implementation of a writing program for grade one that will nurture emerging literacy. Then, the study of the child's responses while engaged in the writing process will be presented.

A Child's Emerging Writing Abilities  
in First Grade

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
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by  
Katherine L. Heck

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Children at an early age learn that print in their environment represents ideas. They quickly come to expect written language to be meaningful and to be related in some way to the situation in which it occurs (Klein & Schickedanz, 1980; Wiseman & Watson, 1980).

Young children learn both oral and written language through experimentation. Each spoken exchange and written effort represents an experiment. This activity is nurtured through opportunities to engage in the functions of language (Newman, 1984).

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to study a young boy's exploration of the writing process in first grade. A review of literature will examine the nature of young children's responses in the writing process and will offer suggestions for implementation of a writing program for grade one that will nurture emerging literacy. Then, the study of the child's responses while engaged in the writing process will be presented.

#### Review of Literature

This review of literature will summarize current perspectives of young children's responses in the writing process and elements of an effective writing program for these students.

### Responses of Young Writers

Most children come to school believing they can write (Graves, 1983; Smith, 1983). While older children concern themselves with the rules of writing and how their story will turn out, first graders write with ease and confidence. Their attention is bound to the work at hand. Usually, they write for themselves, but their audience may extend to their classmates (Calkins, 1983). First graders' reading and writing are closely intertwined; as they write they read what they have written (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993).

For first graders, the writing process is linear. Children at this age write one idea after another until they have completed the work with little concern for redrafting. Their redrafting is characterized by adding on to the end of the story or starting over to rewrite the whole piece (Calkins, 1983).

Writing is an active task that involves children in their own learning (Dobson, 1985). When children put their thoughts in print, they are learning about the alphabetic nature and conventions of language. They can explore the graphophonemic system of language through invented spellings and can discover the function of letters which aid in determining sound-to-letter and letter-to-sound matches. As a result, students discover the code of print. Unlocking this code is related to learning to read and write (Harste, 1990).

Children find more people around them reading than writing and for more purposes (Ken and Yetta Goodman, 1983). To bring about more involvement in the writing process, young primary-age students need experiences with print and time to hypothesize about written language. These experiences will nurture both writing and reading abilities (Clay, 1979).

Because first grade children write to satisfy their own voice, they enjoy hearing what they have written. When teachers accept children's ideas expressed in their writing, they promote students' ownership of their composition experiences, thus energizing children to continue to create their own meaning through the writing process (Calkins, 1983). Children's literacy is also nurtured through interactions with others. Children need to see and hear their fellow students and teacher model writing (Graves, 1983).

As children grow and have experiences that prompt them to respond through writing, their use of written symbols gradually comes to resemble conventional spelling (Graves, 1983). Atkins (1984) describes children's emerging spelling that is typically observed at different ages: First, two-year-olds scribble for the fun of it. Second, three-year-olds make curvy lines resembling cursive m's. Third, from three to five years of age, children form mock letters and are beginning to use symbols. At this stage, children expect adults to be able to read what they

have written. Fourth, at six years of age, children's invented spellings are being replaced by conventional spellings. At this age, children perceive the difference between their spellings and the actual spelling of words. Gradually, they try to match their spelling with what they see in their reading material. Fifth, children at seven years of age are learning to write by writing. Spelling words are memorized, and spelling rules are integrated into the spelling process.

Gentry (1982) has described and labeled five developmental stages in children's emerging spelling abilities observed in their writing:

1. In the precommunicative stage, symbols of the alphabet are used to represent words. An example of this would be "p+FwA" for "monster."

2. In the semiphonetic stage, letter-sound correspondences are understood. An example would be "d" for "dog."

3. In the phonetic stage, children include sounds that represent the entire word. An example would be "PPL" for "people."

4. In the transitional stage, children are moving from sounds representing the word to the inclusion of vowels in all syllables. *Familiar spelling patterns are used. Children's use of written symbols gradually comes to resemble conventional*



spelling, and standard spelling is interspersed with "incorrect" phonetic spelling. An example would be "bote" for "boat."

5. The final stage is the correct spelling stage.

Children in this stage have learned a great number of words and are able to make predictions and to apply generalizations about the spelling of words. Children's writing frequently indicates a response indicating more than one stage. Therefore, stages in children's spelling development are not clearly designated.

#### Implementing a Writing Program for Grade One

In considering a writing program for grade one, students' responses to the process need to be considered before the instructional environment and the assessment techniques are developed. Ways to nurture first graders' involvement in the different aspects of the writing process are described as follows:

1. Choosing a topic for writing. For purposeful writing to occur, each child needs to choose his/her own topic. Selecting a topic can be facilitated by a discussion among peers and the teachers. Each child can develop a list of topics which can be kept in his/her writing folder. For first grade students, drawing pictures can play an important role in choosing topics. These pictures provide a scaffolding from which written pieces can be constructed (Graves, 1983).

2. **Composing.** This aspect of the composition process produces the initial written text. Even though first grade students explore strategies for the spacing of words and left-to-right direction for printing while composing, their focus should be on the content, or the message, conveyed in the written piece, not on form. The use of invented spelling can facilitate students' ease in creating meaning (Graves, 1983).

3. **Redrafting.** First graders usually do not view this aspect of the writing process as important. They usually feel that once the writing is put down on paper it is finished. By discussing children's writing, particularly pieces composed in a group, teachers can introduce young children to the process of extending and refining their ideas. Calkins (1986) recommends rereading the written text to assist children in extending their ideas and then in focusing on selected form elements.

4. **Publishing.** This last stage of the writing process can be facilitated through bookmaking activities. Also, children's writing can be developed into illustrated chart stories that can be shared with an audience (Graves, 1983). In the process of publishing, first graders can be guided to focus on some mechanics, such as handwriting, margins, and a title (DeFord, 1980).

Classroom environment. An effective classroom environment that supports the writing process is print rich. Books should be

a natural part of this environment. The teacher needs to love books, share them aloud with children, and provide time for children to read (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993).

Sustaining centers, areas for activity that are maintained throughout the year with their content changing to reflect the classroom curriculum, facilitate language activities. A listening/reading center with books and accompanying tapes can offer print experiences. A writing center containing an assortment of writing materials, word lists, and other school supplies encourages student writing. An author center providing information about authors or focusing on one author's work with related expressive activities, builds the students' knowledge of writing and illustrating styles. A poetry center with information about poets, poetry charts, and poetry collections relating to the classroom curriculum, can offer print models, can sensitize children to sensory and rhythmic elements in the environment, and can energize children's imaginations. A bookmaking center offers directions and materials to make books. Students can use the materials to publish their writing. A puppet center provides ready-made puppets and also directions and materials for puppet construction. Puppetry encourages experiences of oral and written activity (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Reading aloud quality literature pieces to children, a teacher-directed activity, fosters language abilities and creates

positive attitudes toward literature and language activity. In grade one, many books should be shared throughout the day in large groups, small groups, and individually (Trelease, 1989). Children's understanding of literature pieces and elements of language can be extended if read aloud sessions are accompanied by related expressive activity (Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Hepler, 1982).

Children need to have opportunities to write daily. These opportunities can be in the form of journal writing, stories, letters, and poetry. By choosing their own topics and materials, children will have ownership of their writing (Graves, 1983). The teacher needs to provide time for the student to write and collaborate with other students and to be accepting of the writing students produce (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Through group story writing, a teacher can introduce children to redrafting to extend ideas and to revising to improve form. To develop a group story, students can contribute their ideas in selecting a topic. The teacher can record their ideas on a sheet of chart paper which can be displayed in the classroom. To extend this composing experience, follow-up activities can include providing illustrations, creating a big book, and reading the story out loud (Calkins, 1986; Goodman, 1986).

Assessment. The assessment of children's writing needs to be natural and holistic; therefore, informal measures that describe children's involvement in the process need to be used. Goodman (1985) relates that the most significant information about children's growth in writing is gained while they are engaged in this process. Teachers can use informal measures to assess children's involvement in the writing process, such as observations, checklists, conferences, and portfolios (Tierney et al., 1991).

A checklist of language tasks for each student can facilitate teachers in observing and conferencing with students and in developing portfolios (Tierney et al., 1991). Writing conferences can be conducted with individual children or with small groups. In peer-teacher conferences, the peers and the teacher can give comments and ask questions to facilitate the writer's understanding of his/her composition, while allowing the writer to retain ownership of the experience. From these conferences, the teacher can provide mini-lessons in response to children's specific needs (Graves, 1983).

A writing portfolio for each child can be developed as an assessment tool representing the collaboration of the teacher and student. A portfolio is an ongoing collection of documents that gives insight into a child's emerging writing abilities. The

collection can reflect many types of writing experiences (Reardon, 1991; Valencia, 1990).

### Study of a First Grade Child's Growth in a Writing Program

The writer has been developing a writing program for her first grade classroom. To aid her in this program development, she studied a child in grade one to give her more insight into young children's emerging literacy. She chose to study a boy, Don, who was interested in engaging in much reading and writing activity. His parents gave written permission to the school for their child to be the focus of this study. His parents provided experiences that encouraged Don to discover reading and writing as essential and enjoyable activities.

To support Don's involvement in the writing process, the school program offered him opportunities to keep a journal, participate in teacher and peer conferences, and develop a portfolio. The classroom environment was print rich with read aloud sessions, independent literature experiences, and related expressive activity presented in centers.

#### Child's Writing Responses






This is a summary of Don's emerging writing abilities from August 28, 1992 through March 23, 1993.

August 28, 1992. The teacher modeled journal writing on the overhead for the class. She encouraged the students to use


pictures to represent words and to share their writings. Don made his first journal entry (see Figure 1). He chose to model his writing after the teacher's. He wrote with confidence and shared his writing with the class.


A checklist was used as an informal assessment of Don's writing responses in his first journal entry. His responses indicated that he had an understanding of the placement of print on a page: He placed his writing at the top of the paper and moved from left to right with appropriate spacing between words. He used simple sentence structures with subject-verb agreement and correct plural forms of nouns. His sentences began with capital letters and ended with periods. He was at the transitional spelling stage as defined by Gentry (1982).



Don:

I like my   with my   .

I like my dog.


~~I like~~ .


I like .

I like  .

I like the D.

I like my cat.

I like .

I like the .

I like Paul.


I like .

Figure 1



September 14, 1992. The teacher read several weather poems and talked about how poets express their feelings through language. Don wrote his own poem about a storm after drawing a picture in his writing folder (see Figure 2). Don expressed his feelings in his writing about the rain. He used an upper case letter to begin each line of his poem and used ending punctuation although it was not always placed correctly. His spelling was representative of the transitional stage of spelling. Don's drawings were precise and full of detail.

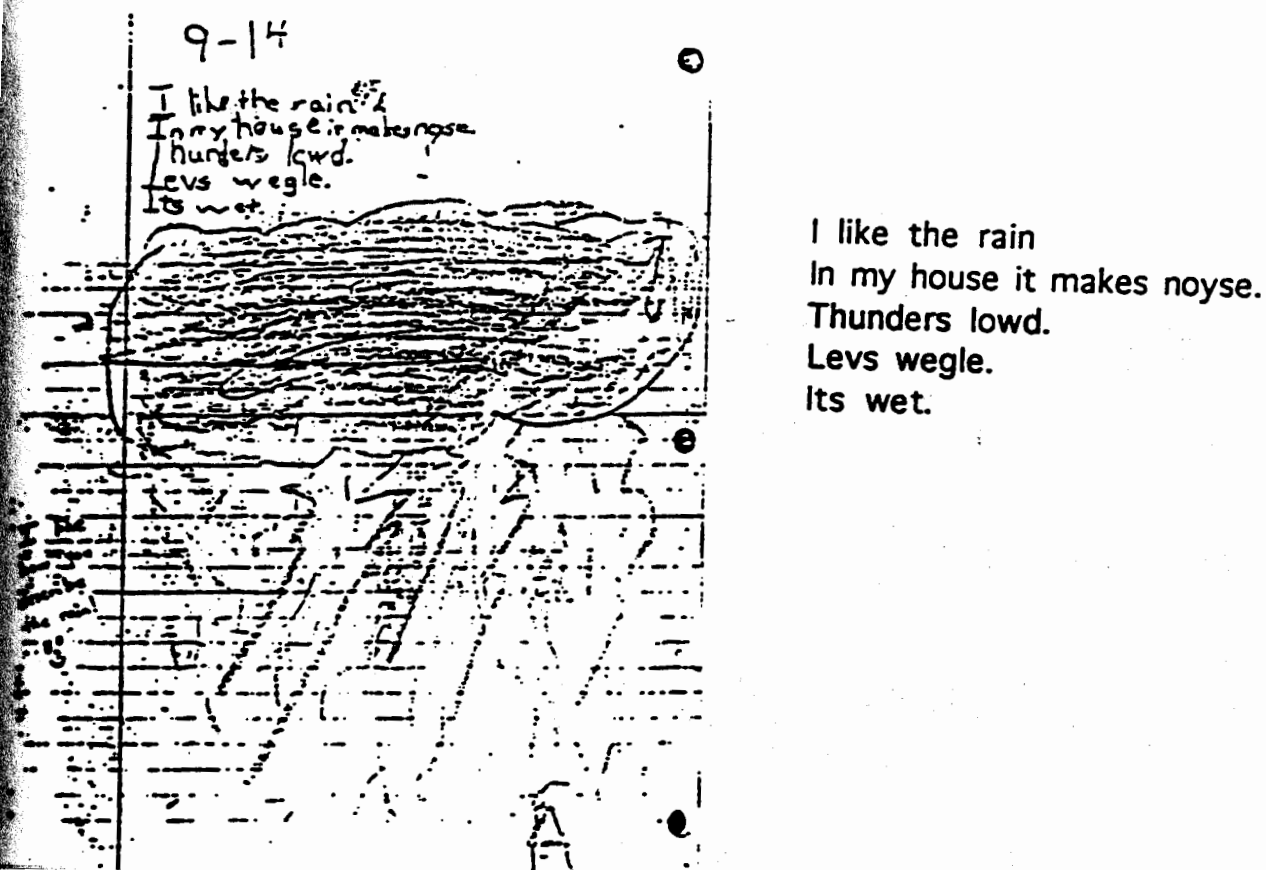


Figure 2

October 13, 1992. The teacher read aloud several Eric Carle books and discussed his stories and illustrations with the children. His books with accompanying tapes were available in the author center. Don participated in the discussions and used the Eric Carle author center independently. Along with several other children, he decided to write a letter to Eric Carle. He used stationery provided at the writing center. As Don was writing his letter, he and other children conferenced with each other about their writing, resulting in an exchange of ideas. This letter (see Figure 3) shows Don's developing understanding of capitalization and punctuation. He used capitalization for the title of the story, names of the city and state, names of people, and the greeting. Periods and question marks appeared in the work; all except two were placed appropriately. Don's sentence composition included subject-verb agreement and simple sentence structure. Words were either spelled correctly or phonically correct.

or Eric  
 like your books.  
 My favorite book is the Very  
 Busy Spider. We live in T.A.  
 the town of WAIKONA. I live  
 in the country. I have one little sister  
 named Sarah. I have one big brother  
 named Matt. Do you have any kids?  
 Where do you live.

My favorite book is the very Busy Spider.  
 We live in T.A.

I like to go on vacations.  
 My name is Bill Potts my favorite father



I am 7 years old.  
 There is a Oiksher  
 on the other  
 side

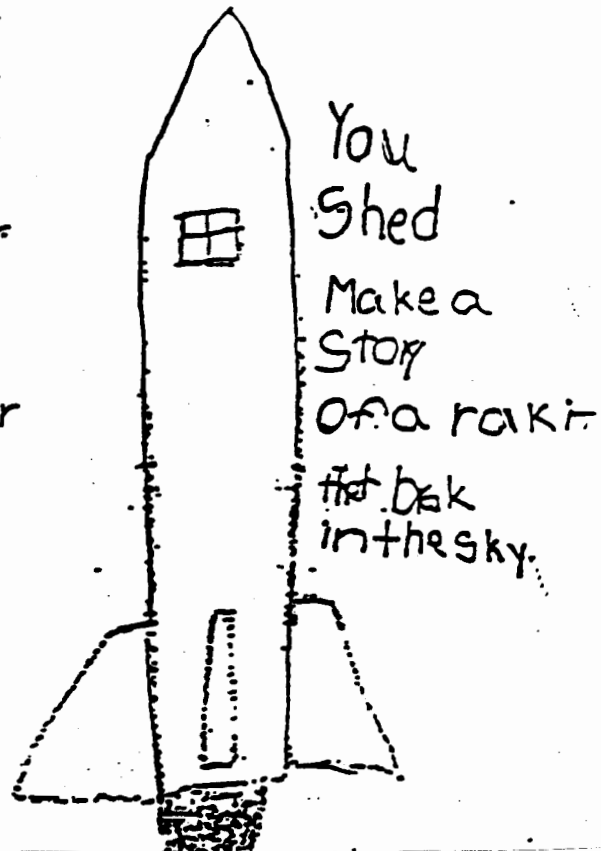
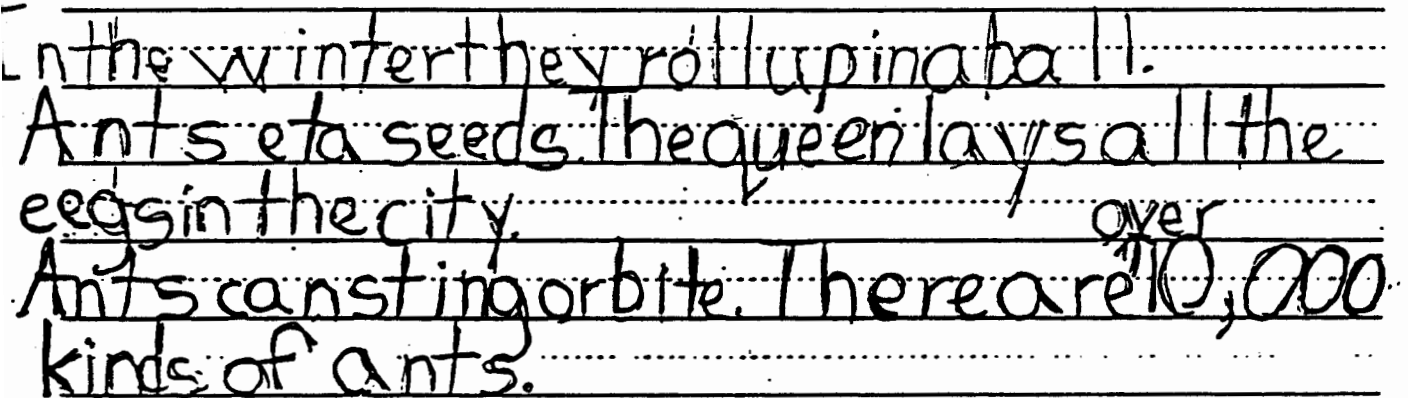


Figure 3

October 26, 1992. The teacher introduced the science center on insects, which included informational books, magnifying glasses, and microscopes. While exploring the center, Don read The World of Ants, (1989), by Virginia Harrison. Don then wrote a report (see Figure 4) and shared it with the class. Don engaged in redrafting for the first time, using an arrow to insert the word "over" which showed that he was reading as he wrote. Prior to this, the teacher had modeled redrafting in group experience stories. He used standard spelling in his report.



In the winter they roll up in a ball.  
Ants eat seeds. The queen lays all the  
eggs in the city.  
Ants can sting or bite. There are <sup>over</sup> 10,000  
kinds of ants.

Figure 4

October 27, 1992. After the teacher read the story Two Bad Ants, by Chris Van Allsburg, (1988), the students were asked to draw a picture of their favorite part. Don drew a picture and then wrote a brief text (see Figure 5). His picture depicted a top view of the toaster rather than a side perspective. Each ant was yelling "help." His writing included an upper case "I" and a period at the end. All words were spelled correctly except "get" and "toaster."

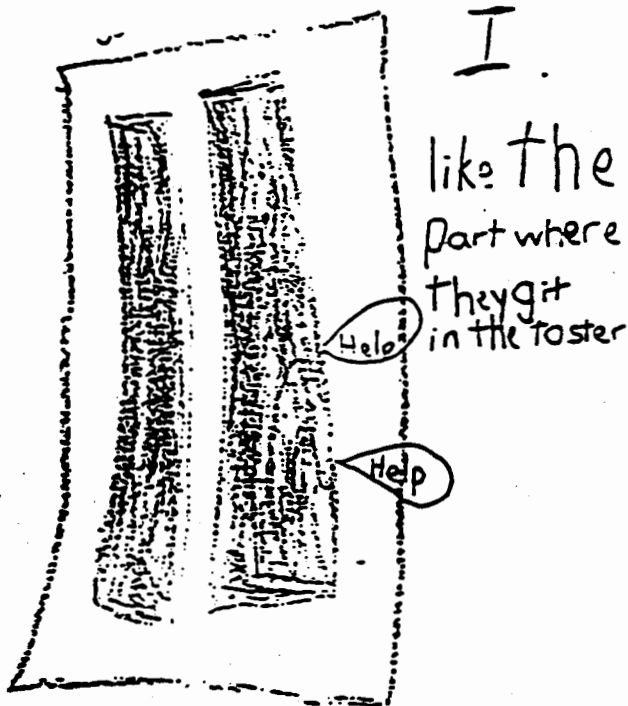


Figure 5

October 29, 1992. During October, the teacher read many Halloween poems and stories. The teacher printed the list of October words developed by the students on a chart for reference in their writing experience. Don wrote a Halloween story about a ghost with a surprise ending (see Figure 6). He demonstrated the correct use of the "ed" suffix. His periods were darker, larger, and appeared more frequently than before though they were not always placed correctly. All the words in his story were spelled correctly. In Don's illustration, the ghost is coming out of the house, scared by the other ghost and asking for help. Don used the speech balloons to show conversation, a technique that he had encountered in some of his reading experiences.

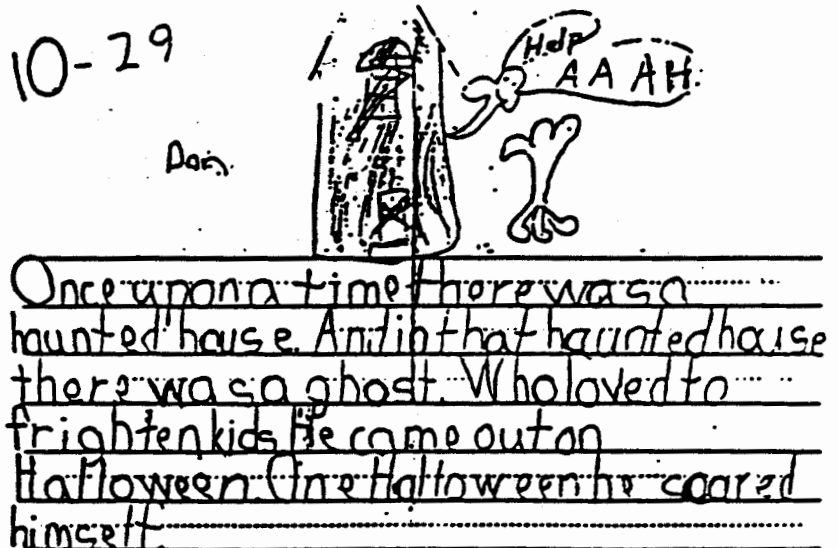


Figure 6

November 18, 1992. Each week one student was the star of the classroom. The honored student was encouraged to bring favorite books from home to share with the class. This week was Don's turn to be the star. He shared his personal collection of books written by Bill Peet. After Don read The Luckiest One of All, (1982), by Bill Peet, he wrote his own story using the same form (see Figure 7). In Bill Peet's story, the character wished to be something other than himself but finally realizes that it is best to be oneself. Don used periods and began his sentences with upper case letters. Don's writing included a complex sentence.

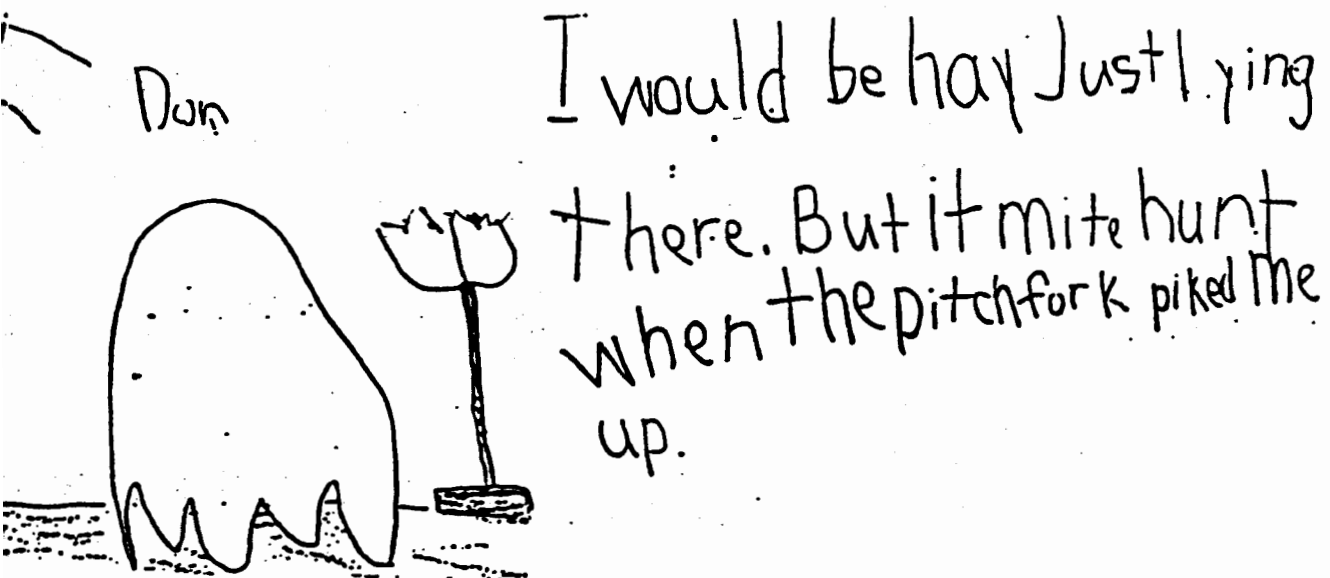


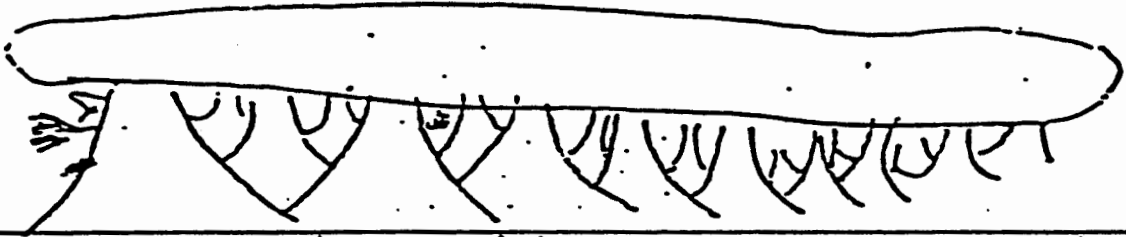
Figure 7

December 14, 1992. The teacher read several versions of Little Red Riding Hood, including Red Riding Hood (by Beatrice Schenk DeRegniers, 1972), Red Riding Hood (by James Marshall, 1987), and Little Red Cap (by Bros. Grimm, 1983). The class' discussion of the variants was compiled by the teacher into a chart with categories, such as What did Riding Hood take to Grandma's?, What did the wolf do to Grandma?, What happened to the wolf?, How did the story end?, What version did you like best? Why?. The teacher then encouraged the students to write their own versions.

Don's Red Riding Hood version, shown in Figure 8, had motifs and the elements of plot--beginning, middle, and ending. Don used a familiar folk tale beginning, "Once upon a time." He included magic in his version--"a wich that tirned Ashley's Mom into a frog."

This writing experience was preceded by a mini lesson on possessives, which Don then used for all words that ended with "s." Most words were spelled correctly. Periods were placed after most sentences.





ce upon a time there was a girl named  
 Ashley. Her Mother said her Grandmother  
 was not feeling well. So she baked some  
 cookies to take to Grandma. So she took the  
 cookies to Grandma's house and on the  
 way she met a witch that turned Ashley's

After Ashley told the witch where she lived  
 now Ashley's Mom lives in the pond.

m into a frog and Ashley lived with Grandm

Figure 8

December 21, 1992. The teacher presented a mini lesson on quotation marks. The students looked through books for quotation marks and then engaged in writing. Don used commas and quotation marks correctly in his story (see Figure 9). He also used possessives and periods in the appropriate places. Don titled his story for the first time.

Don included three periods after the phrase, "Santa saw me." During his writing conference, Don said that the reader was to pause when there were three periods, then read on. He stated that he had read books that used this technique.

My Magic Carpet Ride.  
 I disappeared and ended at  
 Santa's house. I said, it must  
 be the North pole. I saw Santa  
 workshop. An Elf gave me  
 a present. I said, "thanks". When  
 Santa saw me.....  
 he went hoho ho.

Figure 9

January 25, 1993. The teacher read Norman Fools the Tooth Fairy, by Carol Carrick (1992), to introduce Dental Health Month. While the students discussed ways that they could fool the tooth fairy, the teacher wrote their ideas on the overhead. Using a tooth-shaped cover page, Don created an illustration (see Figure 10). Don then wrote his story "The Way I Fooled the Tooth Fairy" (see Figure 11).

Don used the contractions "isn't" and "didn't" for the first time. He used ending punctuation and began sentences with upper case letters. He spelled most of the words correctly.

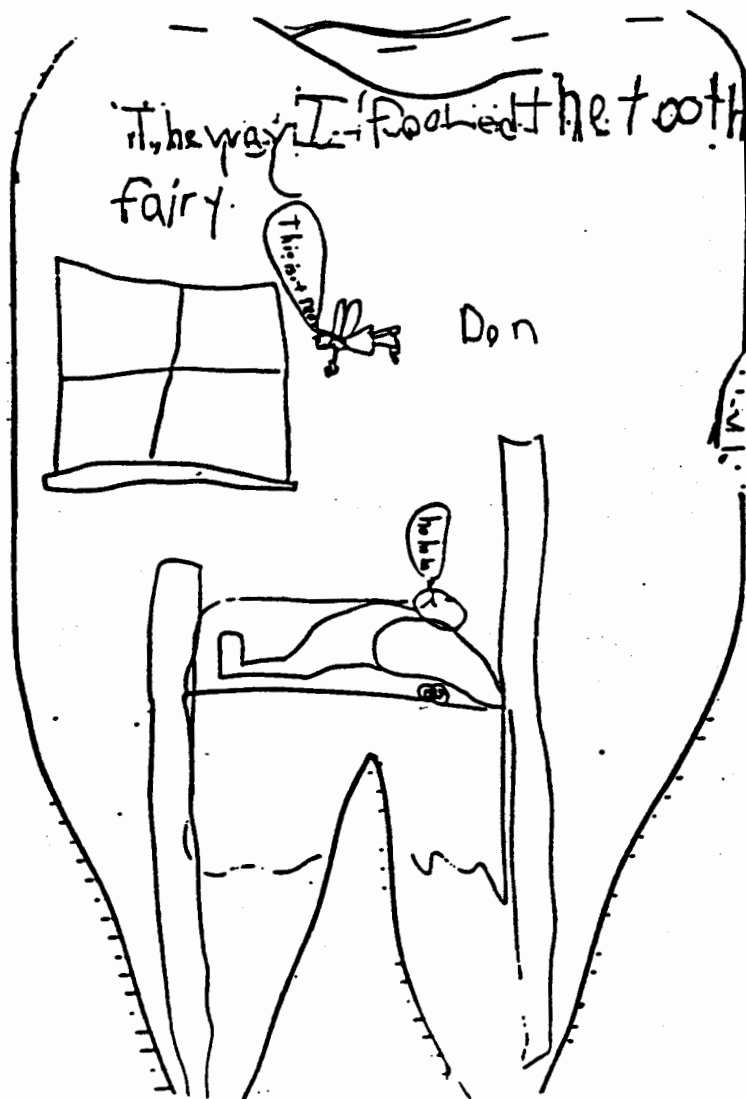


Figure 10

One Monday I saw the tooth fairy.

She went under my pillow and left me a note and it said

Please leave a tooth  
and I will wake you  
in the night.

And I didn't have a tooth so I took a cheerio I took some toilet paper and wrapped it on the cheerio and I left the tooth fairy, she left 5 Dollars for a fake tooth.

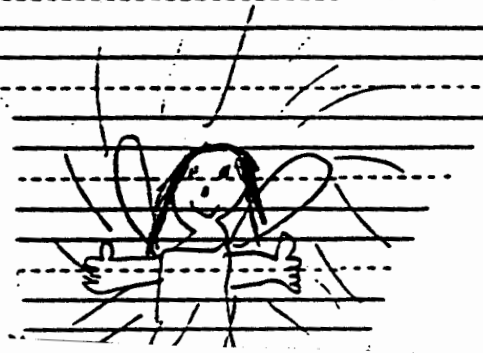
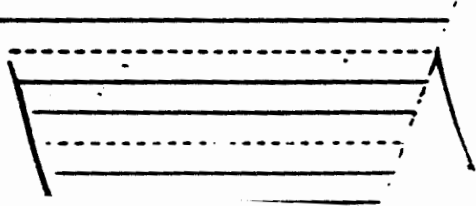


Figure 11

February 19, 1993. The class dramatized a play "The Three Little Pigs." After this experience, Don made his own book entitled "The 65 Pigs." He used four pieces of pig-shaped paper to write this story (see Figure 12).

Don used two new contractions, "weren't" and "wouldn't" in this story. He used periods, quotation marks, commas, and upper case letters correctly. Don used "are" in place of "our." Almost all of the words were spelled correctly.



of a re way." "Show off,"  
 said the wolf. And gobbled  
 them up. If it weren't for  
 the dumb pig who told  
 them to sass back  
 at the wolf he

2  
 Once upon a time there  
 was a dumb pig with 64  
 brothers. So the 65 pigs  
 went for a walk. And 15  
 pigs saw a wolf and they  
 said "Get out."

4  
 wouldn't have gobbled  
 them up.

Figure 12

March 23, 1993. At the completion of a unit on seasons, which included reading, writing, art, and science activities, the teacher encouraged students to write a story about the changes of the seasons. Don's story (see Figure 13) contained complex sentences and the cliché "go on forever." He began his story in the fall, continued through the winter, and ended in the spring. He used correctly quotation marks, commas, and past tenses. There was subject-verb agreement. Don was in the correct spelling stage.

It was fall for a long time, it seemed to go on forever. But one day it became December and it snowed. I love to play tag so I asked my brother to play with me and of course he said "yes". After that we played Fox 'n' geese. Then we went inside for hot chocolate. We went back out to play. It seemed to go on forever until one day it seemed to warm up. Then I thought it had to be Spring.

Figure 13



### Assessment of Child's Progress in Writing

The checklist used at the beginning of the study to assess the child's writing was administered again at the end of this period of time to determine his progress in learning writing tasks. The starred items indicate tasks used in the child's writing.

#### Writing Profile Checklist

	Beginning	Ending
Placement on paper		
Left to right direction	*	*
Top to bottom direction	*	*
Margins		*
Indentations		
Story Elements		
Beginning		*
Middle		*
End		*
Character		*
Sentence Composition		
Subject verb agreement	*	*
Simple sentence structure	*	
Complex sentence structure		*
Words		
Nouns	*	*
Verbs		*
Adjectives		*
Adverbs		*
Pronouns		*
Prepositions		*
Conjunctions		*
Word Forms		
Plurals	*	*
Possessives		*
Contractions		*

Punctuation		
Periods	*	*
Commas		*
Exclamation points		*
Question marks		*
Quotations		*
Apostrophes		*
Capitalization		
Capital at beginning of sentence	*	*
Capital for names/titles		*
Abbreviations		
Spelling		
Precommunicative		
Semiphonetic		
Phonetic		
Transitional	*	
Correct		*
Handwriting		
Spacing of letters in words	*	*
Spacing of words		*
Formation of letters	*	*

As the school year progressed, Don's journal responses and stories became longer and more complex. More story elements and types of words appeared. He began to use complex sentences. He capitalized the beginnings of sentences and names and titles and used many types of punctuation. He began to use apostrophes to form possessives and contractions. Don wrote with enthusiasm and enjoyed sharing his writing with others. He quickly emerged into the correct stage of spelling.

#### Conclusion

After observing Don throughout the school year, the teacher realized that young children enjoy being writers and find much

support and fulfillment from interacting with others concerning the ideas created in the writing process. Writing experiences that are meaningful not only energize children to become more involved in reading and writing activities but provide reasons to attend to form that can facilitate ease and clarity in their expression. As a result, children through experimentation with writing gain a greater control over their thinking and language.

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