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**Learning to Write in Kindergarten:
Using Writing Journals to Improve Independent Writing Skills**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of 33 kindergarten students and their teacher when incorporating journal writing into the curriculum to improve independent writing skills. In this study, the teacher explored the process of implementing writing journals, establishing an understanding of letters and the sounds they make, and fostering a classroom setting that promoted the development of independent writers.

The author designed the study to focus on engaging students in the writing process, maintaining student interest, providing the students with a purpose for the writing, and providing opportunities to share student journal entries. In order to maintain a classroom where students understood the writing journals, the teacher established a routine, assisted the students in understanding the relationship between letters and sounds, and encouraged the students to write on topics that were of interest to them. The teacher also provided positive feedback and one-on-one or small group assistance to help students complete their work.

The author found that the strategies implemented during the study worked for many of the students. However, being that the classroom contained a variety of diverse learners with various learning needs, the author found that some students benefited from different strategies that enabled them to be successful with the writing journals.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
MY STANCE.....	1
Why Journals	2
What the Research Says.....	5
MY RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	18
Participant Observations	19
Field Notes and Field Log.....	20
Student Work	20
Written Surveys	22
Trustworthiness.....	23
MY STORY	26
What is a Journal?.....	28
Play: The Start of Something Great.....	32
Let's Try This Again.....	38
Writing in the AM.....	39
Small Groups Work Best	43
John's Story	45
Learning to Write Independently	48
Pastiche: Why Won't She Just Help Me!	51
Tony's Story.....	52
Pastiche: The Frustrations.....	57
Writing in the PM	58
Beyond the Writing to the Author's Chair.....	60
Writing Outside the Journals	63
What Did the Parents Think?.....	66
DATA ANALYSIS.....	67

FINDINGS	71
THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE	84
REFERENCES	87
APPENDIXES	89
A HSIRB Approval Letter	90
B Principal Consent Letter	91
C Parent Consent Form	92
D Student Writing Survey	93
E Parent Survey-Beginning of Study	94
F Parent Survey-End of Study	95

LIST OF FIGURES

1	The Journal Cover.....	29
2	Jane’s First Entry	37
3	Steve’s First Entry.....	37
4	Mary’s First Entry.....	38
5	John’s Journal-September.....	47
6	John’s Journal-October	47
7	John’s Journal-November	48
8	Sue’s Journal-Whole Group.....	50
9	Sue’s Journal-Independent Work.....	50
10	Tony’s Journal-September	55
11	Tony’s Journal-October	56
12	Tony’s Journal-November	56
13	Tony’s Journal-December.....	56
14	Writing Task-Cookies for Sale!.....	64
15	Writing Task-Clothes for Sale!.....	64
16	Writing Task-Ice Cream for Sale!.....	65
17	Writing Task-Purses for Sale!.....	65
18	Writing Task-Flowers for Sale!.....	65
19	Coding Graphic Organizer.....	68

RESEARCHER STANCE

As a former Special Education teacher, I have seen many students struggle in a variety of different academic areas. Simple concepts such as building word families, adding single-digit numbers, and even recognizing their own names have been large hurdles for some students to overcome. Although I have only been teaching for a relatively short time compared to some, I have seen many students struggle to succeed in many different areas. One of the most common areas I've seen a majority of students, both regular and special education, have a great deal of difficulty with, is writing. Students first need to think about a topic. Then they need to think about the words that go with that topic, the sounds each letter makes to form those words, and then work to get all of that put down on paper, all of which is just way too much for some to consider. In turn, the look of fear often falls on the faces of those students when they hear a teacher say anything about having to write. It was those looks that even frightened me as the teacher. I knew the anxiety they felt. The looks on their faces told me everything. There had to be something I could do to help change that, and from very early on, I made the decision that I was going to try and find it. I was going to make writing okay, even fun, for my students.

I first became interested in writing with young children during my first semester of student teaching. I was placed in a second grade regular education classroom with an excellent cooperating teacher. She had such a positive

relationship with all of her students and parents, and I could see the joy and respect that they gave her in return. She captured the students' attention and kept them enthralled in every activity. She was a super role model, and I knew that I wanted to be just like her. It was during this time that Ms. O., as the students called her, introduced and explained to me the dialogue journal. She explained the role it played, the purpose it served, and how she worked the journal into her routine each week. These tiny notebooks captivated me. They also opened an entire new door for the students. This was their opportunity to talk one-on-one with their teacher, asking any question they liked. Most importantly, all of the students looked forward to their next opportunity to write in their notebook.

Although the rule Ms. O had made for herself, and I as well, was not to have more than six students write in their journals per day, I often found this not being the case because of the students' excitement to share their stories and ask me questions. I found myself responding to eight or ten journals a night, reading various notes from each of the students. They would ask a wide array of questions: Where did I live? Did I have any brothers or sisters? Was I married? Did I like being their teacher? It was then that I knew this was a really great activity that I wanted to incorporate into my future classroom. The excitement and joy I saw on all of the students' faces made me realize that writing was a fun activity for them. They were learning to write in a way that peaked their interest

and made them want more. This experience helped prove to me that teachers could find ways to make writing exciting for children.

During a pilot study in a previous course, I was able to give this idea a go, and incorporate the dialogue journals into a weekly routine with my small group of primary learning support students. I discussed with the students how we would be writing small letters to each other, asking questions to one another, and finding out some fun facts. After encouraging the students to ask any questions they'd like, and building up the dialogue journal, I still saw the same look of fear every time I mentioned writing in the journals. I also heard the typical questions: "How many lines does it have to be?"

"How many questions do I have to ask?" "I don't feel like writing."

I began to wonder if these students had been given the wrong impression about writing. Was there an experience that these students had encountered that gave them the idea that writing was never meant to be fun and was always for a grade? Could it possibly be that they were already in the mindset that they were going to fail at writing and there was nothing that was going to change that? I needed to find a way to change their minds, to let them know that writing can be both a fun, and enjoyable thing to do. I had seen it happen during my student teaching experience, and I was going to try my best to see that it happened for my students as well.

This year has brought about some changes for me that, although were unexpected, have been exciting and promising. I was given the opportunity to move from my primary learning support position, which I had been in since the beginning of my teaching career, to a regular kindergarten classroom. Although I was extremely happy with the change, I immediately became concerned about my research question and how I could take the idea of writing in journals and incorporate it into the kindergarten curriculum. Immediately my mind began racing and all of these questions popped into my head. I remember thinking: can kindergartners write at the beginning of the year? Are they able to form letters when they first arrive in the classroom? How long will I have to wait to start the study with my kindergartners? I was driving myself crazy! My interest in writing with children had only increased more over time, and had become something that I really wanted to see take place in my classroom. I didn't want one door to open for me, and then have another shut at the same time.

After talking with colleagues and professors at Moravian, I came to the conclusion that having students write dialogue journals at the kindergarten level may not work quite the same way as it had during my second grade student teaching experience. However, that did not mean that I would have to give up on my topic altogether. The idea of having Kindergartners write in their own personal journals could actually be quite a wonderful aspect of my curriculum. This would also be a chance for me to show students that writing can, and should

be fun from the very beginning of their educational journey. Monica Mulhall (1992) notes that, “Educators, parents, and the public may not be convinced that all kindergartners can write, but their scribbles, pictures, letters, and words all have meaning” (p.738). I realized that this was quite an extraordinary concept to read and learn more about. It was then that I decided to continue forth with my topic of writing, and the question of my research became: *What are the benefits to using writing journals in a kindergarten classroom to assist students with improving independent writing skills?* It was here that one of the most interesting and rewarding rides of my life began.

As I began to research the articles and books I came across in the library about young children and writing, I found a great deal of information. I had some prior confusion with the relationship writing had with phonemic awareness and phonics, confusing the two terms. According to Dr. Kerry Hempenstall (1997) *phonemic awareness* is an individual’s ability to recognize that spoken words are made up of a sequence of individual sounds (p.201). Phonics is the relationship of letters and the sounds that they make. I discovered that my goal was to improve students’ phonics abilities, and in doing so, I would also improve their phonemic awareness skills. Eileen Feldgus and Isabell Cardonick (1999) found that when exploring teaching phonics in kindergarten “daily journal writing sessions in which children can write their own stories are key elements in creating exciting, relevant, and effective opportunities for learning phonics and other conventions of

written language (p.7). Bea Johnson (1999) also believes that writing enhances reading and pre-writing skills in the classroom (p.10). Allowing students to write in a journal on a daily basis is one of the first steps I can take to help my students develop the skills necessary to be successful readers and writers.

Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) encourage teachers to allow students to begin writing using *invented spelling* (p.7). Dorothy Strickland (1989) tells us that invented spelling, also known as temporary spelling and/or developmental spelling, is the “early spelling that children produce independently” (p.427).

These terms describe a process that allows students to sound out and write words at their ability level before their writing becomes conventional. This strategy also allows the teacher to take note of a student’s letter-sound correspondence skills over time. Johnson (1999) lists seven benchmarks of writing that can be used as guidelines in the classroom to help individualize a child’s writing instruction.

Johnson’s (1999) stages are as follows:

Stage 1: scribbling

Stage 2: curvy lines, cursive m’s, and small circles and vertical lines

Stage 3: arrange known letters in various ways to represent words; little or no knowledge of alphabet

Stage 4: beginning to trace and copy letters; divides words at any point; may change direction of writing or reverse known letters.

- Stage 5: use of random lettering, labeling, and listing of key words;
temporary spelling appears; invents spelling when not sure of
proper spelling; begins writing one letter for each sound heard.
- Stage 6: begins using more alphabet letters and vowels begin to appear;
temporary spelling moves closer to conventional spelling.
- Stage 7: conventional spelling is used a majority of the time.

Johnson's (1999) benchmarks are vital to understand when considering the experiences and changes that have and will occur within a regular kindergarten classroom. We have moved from a time where kindergarten was once about socialization and play, to one where students are pressured to learn to read and write by year's end. Jean Piccirillo (1998) reminds us that "the relationship between reading and writing is interdependent" (p.1). "Knowledge of which letters represent certain sounds within words is useful not only for writing, but also for decoding words in reading" (Burns, Roe, Ross, as cited in Piccirillo, 1998, p.2). If this is true, then journal writing will, in turn, foster students reading development, and continue to help it grow over time. It is important for me to make sure my students understand that the words they are conveying on paper have meaning. "Young children effectively gain understanding of print by actively participating, on a daily basis, in writing" (Jarvis, 2002, p.2). It is also important to remember that although the letters that students put on paper may not

have meaning for me, they have a great deal of meaning for the student. “This word writing reveals that their concept of words might be stated something like this: Words are a string of letters with spaces between. Of course words are not strings of randomly selected letters; yet many preschoolers and kindergartners operate with this concept” (Ferreiro & Teberosky as cited in McGee, 1996, p.10).

To unlock the writing talent within each student, Johnson (1999) describes what she refers to as an Individual Language-Experience Study (ILES). This activity helps students understand that spoken ideas can be put into written format. The ILES can take anywhere from five to thirty minutes at a time, but has proved to be extremely successful. It begins by having the teacher read a short story aloud. He or she then states two to three complete sentences, while transcribing them on a large tablet. After the teacher completes one or two examples, the students can then begin to take part. Johnson (1999) suggests that a very verbal child should be asked to complete the first one in front of the class. The teacher should ask the student which color marker they would like to use, and should also include the student’s name on the sheet as well. It becomes important to the students because they get to make up the piece on their own, and everyone else has to listen. The teacher can then hang the piece on the wall for the rest of the day for all to see. This activity is one that can be completed on a daily basis and helps to convey to students how words that are spoken can be put onto paper

and vice versa. It is important to keep in mind that different types of stories need to be modeled (Johnson, p.67).

Writing also plays an important role in the curriculum because it provides students with another form of communication with parents, teachers, and peers. Johnson (1999) states that writing helps build confidence and self-esteem and can also help students express ideas (p.4). She also states that writing makes students organize and clarify their thoughts and allows for the discovery of meaning and comprehension of a subject (p.4). It is important that students not be judged on their writing styles or methods when writing in their journals. They need to feel that they can write about any topic of choice and not worry what someone will think. Bouas, Thompson, and Farlow (1997) state, “Teachers should capitalize on 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” (p.4). Students need to feel comfortable enough in the classroom that no matter what they write on the paper, they will understand that their best efforts are what matters most.

Benson (2004) states that parents also play a key role in helping to shape a child’s writing development. “Parents help set up the oral language skills that children bring to the writing piece. They serve as models for writing and reinforce the children’s concept of themselves as writers” (Benson, 2004, p.10). It’s important for parents to surround their children with books and print as soon as

possible. Benson (2004) also explains that the earlier parents begin referring to their child's drawing and scribbling as writing, the more likely it is that the child will be willing to write (p.9). Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) remind me that I need to "sell" the program to parents (p.106). Mulhall (1992) suggests guiding parents in appropriate ways they can respond to their children's writing (p.739). When a child asks the parent what he or she has written, a positive response for parents is to ask the child to read it back to them. "The child will then read the journal entry as its meaning was intended. The parent should always respond positively and ask questions about the writing" (Mulhall, 1992, p.739).

Role models, such as peers, teachers, and other faculty members, also play an important part in the writing instruction. Julia Holmes (1993) discusses a study completed in a kindergarten class where adults, including parents, university professors, and the classroom teacher, served as writing models. "The adults wrote letters, stories, lists, and other pieces suggested by the teacher. While modeling writing, the adults talked about how and what they wrote. They also talked with the children, trying to motivate and nurture the children" (Holmes, 1993, p.12). Holmes (1993) notes that the results of the study showed that students who had role models while writing had written letters and strings of letters. Those children who had only previously drawn in their journals had begun labeling their pictures when they were encouraged to do so by role models. Holmes (1993) also shared that the children had a wider range of ideas written in

their journals, thanks to the conversations taking place with the role models.

“Children need the same kind of support when learning to write as we provide as they are learning to talk” (Clyde & Mills, as cited in Holmes, 1993, p,12).

Holmes (1993) helped me realize the importance of having parent volunteers in the classroom to assist students as they work on their journal entries. It is vital that volunteers understand the students look up to them and see them as role models. With this in mind, I worked closely with my volunteers by explaining what the students were doing and how they could be most helpful to the students. This included ways to positively reinforce students when writing, ways to help students without doing the work for them, and also, the appropriate way to write for students when it is necessary. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) refer to this process as Guided Phonics-Based Spelling. “Children become more accomplished writers when adults help them sound out words at the early stages rather than just tell them, as many teachers do, “Write it the best you can” or “Just sound it out” (Feldgus and Cardonick, 1999, p.38). By helping the students sound out letters, sounds, and words, the volunteers are playing an active role in helping foster the student’s reading and writing development.

The physical environment in the classroom also helps to foster the writing development of students. Many times, students come into the new school year with items in the classroom already labeled, and often, teachers don’t discuss the words until they come up in discussion. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) suggest

that teachers include students in the creation of the environmental print in the classroom (p.16). It is recommended that together, teacher and students create signs or labels for the classroom that they need to become better writers. “The emphasis should be on the usefulness of the print, both for classroom functioning and for children’s use in their writing, rather than on labeling for the sake of labeling.” (Feldgus and Cardonick, 1999, p.16)

At the start of the school year, the students and I worked together to label important items in the classroom that students were able to use to become better writers. An example was labeling the restroom in the room. This provides students with examples of the key words “rest” and “room.” When a student needs one of these words, I encouraged him or her to look around the room and locate it. This rule also applies when breaking down larger words with chunks in them, like “classroom.” Bouas, Thompson, and Farlow (1997) state “A print rich environment that is not used as a resource can be little more than a display of a teacher’s decorating skill.” (p.4) Terri Beeler (1993) also shares that literacy activities should be scheduled into the school day. “Once you have a print-rich environment, give children time to interact with the print materials. ...let students explore print as they pursue ongoing class activities” (Beeler, 1993, p.16).

The area that students write in, either at their desks or in specific spot, and the materials they write with, should be welcoming and exciting for students. Bobbi Fisher (1998) had a writing table that she had her students use every day.

She also allowed students to write in other areas of the room “in connection with a project or theme they are pursuing” (p.85). Johnson (1999) provided many materials for her students at the writing center. They were permitted to use markers, crayons, pencils, colored pencils, post-it notes, envelopes, lined paper, unlined paper, and various other materials. The idea is to get students excited about writing, and to do it in any manner possible. Mulhall (1992) even suggests supplying a playhouse that is full of paper and writing utensils (p.739). It’s important to keep in mind that not all students are comfortable using the same materials. Some students write better using the fat markers on unlined paper, while others find that using skinny pencils with lined paper works best. This varies quite a bit from the experiences I have encountered previously. In the past, students were told to use pencil at all times, because writing in marker or pen was unacceptable. Now we can convey the message to students that we not only accept their writing in the fashion that is best for them, but we also accept the tools that they feel most comfortable using.

Tools and location are only two important factors when encouraging students to write. Lucy Caulkins (1994) discusses how important it is that teachers develop a routine for students when it comes to writing. She reminds us that although as teachers we want to be creative by stimulating our students’ minds and experimenting with different thoughts and ideas, it is also important to provide consistency for students (p.183). As a beginning teacher, I, too, thought

the only way to get through to my students was to plan a phenomenal lesson, creating a busy, whirlwind environment. This does not need to be the case with the writing environment. Caulkins (1994) explains that the writing environment should be predictable and consistent because “the work at hand and the changing interactions around that work are so unpredictable and complex” (1994, p.183). The students’ journal entries will be constantly changing on a daily basis, and that is just enough to allow for different experiences each day.

Student choice of topic is essential when completing journal writing. Perry and Drummond (2002) state that “When students have choices, they are typically more interested in and committed to activities, and committed learners are more likely to increase effort and persist when difficulty arises” (Turner and Paris, as cited in Drummond, 2002, p.306). The topics that students choose to write about in their journals should be personal and meaningful to them. Many times, students convey messages in the journals that they are not comfortable sharing in person. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) remind us that teachers can be hesitant in allowing students to select their own topic, but we need to be patient (p.97). We are also reminded that, “...the essence of journal writing and writing workshop is that children follow their own interests and preferred genres.” (Feldgus and Cardonick, 1999, p.97)

Although many authors speak differently about when to start journal writing with kindergartners, Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) suggested starting

journal writing on the first day. When following this suggestion, Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) introduced the students to the *magic line* (p.33). This strategy is one a student can use when they are unsure of the letter to use to represent a spoken sound. The benefit to this strategy is that it shows that students understand something needs to be present in a words, they are just unsure at the time of what it is. The teacher should model this process on chart paper with the entire class, where everyone works together to create the sentence to write and helps to sound it out. For words that students are unsure of, they will be encouraged to use the magic line. Then, after finishing the kid writing, it's important to praise the students for doing such a great job. However it is then just as important that the students be shown how the writing looks in "adult writing." Connections need to be made for students between kid writing and adult writing, even if it is something just as simple as praising appropriate letters and sounds.

When students finish completing a journal entry, Johnson (1999) suggests that they immediately meet with the teacher or volunteer in the classroom for a conference. The conference should be done privately in a specific place. During the conference, the teacher can then transcribe in adult writing the message the students are trying to convey. Johnson (1999) explains that transcribing the students' words show that their words have meaning and can be written on paper (p.42). Transcribing also models left-to-right directionality, proper sentence formation, capitalization, and other writing essentials. If the teacher chooses to

complete the journal activity as a whole class, the students need to be given explicit instructions on what they can do while the teacher is meeting with individual students. In the case of my study, I completed journal entries as a whole group activity. Baskets that are in the middle of each table contained books for the students to browse through and read while others were completing their entries. I also made it clear to all of the students that when I was having a “teacher meeting” with a student, there were specific rules that need to be followed. One rule was that there are to be no non-essential interruptions while I am speaking with a student. Parent volunteers during this time were also able to assist with student questions.

Bobbi Fisher (1998) created a Class Assessment Profile for Writing as an assessment tool to keep track of how children are doing with writing, and also how they go about putting their thoughts onto paper. She records “...what they draw, what they say to each other as they work, their interest in drawing and writing, how deliberately they work, and how long they stay at the writing table” (p. 87). She also has a special spot, the “sharing basket” where she has the students put their work when they are finished, so she can compare her notes to the students work, looking at it more closely (p.87). Fisher’s (1998) example of the assessment form is an excellent one, and provides a basis for something I may develop for my students. She has answered the ultimate question of, “How can I

track student progress?" I now have an example to go from and something that I can show parents during parent/teacher conferences.

I have gathered a great deal of information that supports the idea that journal writing in the kindergarten classroom can have a positive effect on students' abilities to write independently. The writing activities that have taken place in my classroom will not only help to improve this area, but will coincidentally improve student success across the curriculum. With daily opportunities to write in their journals, students will develop a positive attitude towards writing and will be inspired to write independently. The students' reading abilities will also be reinforced through writing in the journals. They were asked to read back what they had written, slowly improving both reading and writing skills over time. With this study, students will be open to a new world of possibilities that they never knew existed. The writing journal is the place to start to encourage students to grow as learners.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

My research design and methods of data collection were based on much of the educational literature I read regarding elementary students and writing. The purpose of the design and data collection was to gather and report the information and behaviors collected on writing with my kindergarten students. The variety of data I collected includes samples of student journals, student surveys, parent surveys, participant observations, and field notes located in my field log. An appendix also includes sample principal and parental permission letters and survey questions.

My classroom is located in a public school in a borough that has a variety of economical backgrounds. The elementary school has approximately 630 students, primarily Caucasian, and is funded by Title 1. There are a small percentage of students who participate in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and a small percentage of students who are a part of the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. I teach both AM and PM Kindergarten, with 50% of the AM class staying for the Extended Day Kindergarten Program, which will be explained later. My AM class consists of nine boys and eight girls, while my PM class includes seven boys and nine girls. Four of the AM students receive enrichment time once every "A" day, while others from the AM class receive extra support from assistants or associates in the building on average of once a week for 30 minutes. Five students from my PM class also receive enrichment

time for 30 minutes every “A” day, while no other supports or services are provided.

I submitted the application for my study in August to Moravian College’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSRIB). The board is a committee that reviewed all research plans to ensure that my study would be completed in an ethical manner. After approval from both the board and my school principal, my study began in September. Samples of these letters are found in Appendix A and B. I then gathered primarily qualitative data using the following methods:

Participant Observations

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) note that, “Whether we decide to observe at a distance...or to become a full-fledged participant observer...or anything in between, knowing what to look for, how to apprehend it, and how to describe it for later reflection is a key element...” (p.142). Being that I was very much engaged in teaching while completing my observations, I became a participant within my observations and not just an observer. I conducted participant observations on an average of three times per week by taking anecdotal notes that included class name, date, students behaviors, student/teacher conversations, and student/student conversations. Later, either at school or home, I would take the time to write the observations in greater detail, capturing moments and voices.

Field Notes

During the course of the study, I kept a field log that held the participant observations, samples of student work, and observer comments. Observer commentary serves as a way of self-reflection and understanding. MacLean and Mohr (1999) note, “As soon as possible, whether later that day or over the next day or two, take time to reread...fill in more of the details as you remember what happened” (p.28). When reviewing my observations at a later time, I would add comments or references, place them in brackets, and label them “OC.” As stated by Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (2001), “...qualitative researchers are counseled to bracket preconceptions, prejudgments, beliefs, and biases as observer comments” (p.351). These observer comments allowed me to remember moments in the classroom or add new reflections, and make connections between situations and student writing behaviors.

Student Work

“Student essays, poetry, problem-solving, work, musical compositions, journals, and the many types of performances that students use to demonstrate their understanding and appreciations are ways to document student learning”
(Arhar, et.al, 2005, p.167.)

Journals- Each student had his or her own writing journal that I used to document experiences and growth over the course of the study. The students

began writing in the journals in September, and were encouraged to write about something that was of interest to them. As noted by Feldgus and Cardonick (1999), “Children need many opportunities to write about topics of their own choosing” (p.9.) An entry was made in each journal two to three times per week. Initially, prompts were provided for the AM class due to level of difficulty for most students. The sentence starters were often times made up of small, short words, and required students to fill in only one or two words. The PM class was given no starters, and was permitted to write on a topic of their choosing. All students were encouraged to use the words around them in the classroom, and then to draw a picture that was related to their sentence. Teacher support was always available to all students, and ranged from writing with the student to stating words slowly so they were able to hear the sounds and write the letters for themselves.

Class Writings- I gathered samples of student writings completed during instructional time throughout the course of the study. I looked at the samples closely to determine student progress with letter/sound association, and also with their independent writing skills outside of the journal. This enabled me to see how well students were transferring skills across the curriculum.

Written Surveys

Student Surveys- A written student survey (see Appendix D) was administered to students prior to the start of the study in September, and then again upon completion of the study in December. The survey consisted of three statements, all of which were followed by a happy or sad face, and one question asking students to circle a particular picture or draw their appropriate answer in a box. Students were asked to color the appropriate face to indicate how they felt when they were presented with the statement. The surveys were administered whole group, and each statement was read aloud to the students. I was later able to analyze the answers students provided on the survey, which provided with the thoughts and feelings my students had towards writing.

Parent/Guardian Surveys- A written parent survey (see Appendix E) was sent home to parents along with their permission forms prior to the start of the study. The survey sent home consisted of six questions, two of which required a rating for an answer, two questions requiring a yes or no answer, and two requiring a written response. The surveys provided me with information on the reading and writing habits and attitudes of my students outside of school before beginning journal writing in school.

A similar survey was sent home to parents in December at the end of the study. (See Appendix F) This survey, again, asked two questions that required a rating for an answer, two questions that required a yes or no answer, and two

questions that required a written response. This survey provided me with information regarding the writing and reading attitudes and habits of students after using the journals in school. This allowed me to compare the results with the parents' initial survey answers and note any changes, both positive and negative.

Trustworthiness

My research and data collection allowed for trustworthiness and credibility. I reviewed literature and research regarding journal writing at the kindergarten level and have based my research on such. My research design included multiple data sources such as the writing journals, participant observations, parent and student surveys, and various student work samples. These sources provided different perspectives into my research throughout the three-month study.

I explained to parents the purpose my research study and asked for their permission to include their children in my study. As indicated in the ethical guidelines provided by Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2005), I informed parents of the nature of my study and the important role it played in the daily curriculum. I assured parents that their children's work and identity would remain anonymous and that if at any time they were uncomfortable with their child participating in the study, they had the right to request that their child be withdrawn without penalty. All students had the opportunity to write in the journals, however

students who did not return a consent form or had been withdrawn from the study would not be reported on.

To minimize the risks to my students, I used pseudonyms when reporting my findings. My pseudonym key was kept under a separate password in my computer rather than in my field log to ensure privacy. I did not keep a hard copy of the pseudonym key at school, and documentation of the study, including observation notes and the field log were kept in a secure location at my home.

The multiple forms of data collection that I chose to use also allowed for triangulation to occur. The data collected from the students, along with my research, allowed me to see the positive and negative aspects of using the writing journals to create more independent writers. As shown in the examples provided by Ely (1997), it was very important that I remain open to unexpected findings, and consider the various points that may appear over the course of my research.

I conducted routine participant observations and recorded the observations and my own reflections into the field log in a timely manner. I was sure to capture my students' attitudes and behaviors during the journal sessions to help me further analyze my data. I consistently revisited my field log to add observer comments.

I gained an understanding of my students' attitudes and beliefs regarding the writing journals through whole group surveys. I also gained an understanding of the parents' attitudes and beliefs regarding their child's feelings towards

reading and writing tasks through the parent surveys. The surveys provided me with feedback in written form.

I protected my students' anonymity and minimized any possible risk by safeguarding my data. Any typed information was saved under my confidential password on the computer. All tangible data was kept locked in a filing cabinet in my home when I was not working on it. My researcher field log included both typed information as well as written observational data. The typed information was kept on my home computer under a file with a secure password, while the written information was in a locked filing cabinet also at my home. The pseudonyms also minimized the risk of anyone knowing who the students were since they were not similar to their actual names in any way. A hard copy of the pseudonym key was not kept at school. All surveys were kept confidential and all data was kept off school grounds when not in use.

I shared my data with a support group of another thesis candidate with whom I work. I was interested in any ideas or suggestions she had to offer regarding the study. Her feedback provided me with another viewpoint and insight into my study.

MY STORY

Very early into the summer my eagerness and excitement about starting a new year and beginning my study started building. I was highly anticipating the beginning of a new school year with many new things to learn. There were many uncertainties as to how the year would begin because of a new curriculum, a new environment, and the types of students that would be entering my classroom on the first day. What would they be capable of doing? How much assistance were they going to need? How much would the students be capable of doing independently? I was becoming responsible for 34 lives and was going to lay the foundation for their future learning. I wanted to be the absolute best kindergarten teacher I was capable of being. To help prepare, I had completed a great deal of research over the summer during an Independent Study course. I was learning about many new creative strategies and concepts that I was sure would work their way into my study. As soon as they entered the room on that very first day I knew I was exactly where I wanted to be. I was enjoying getting up in the morning and coming to work each day. I looked forward to seeing my students and watching each of them grow.

Previous conversations with fellow colleagues prepared me for just how different my AM class could be from my PM class. It wasn't until I actually experienced working with the two groups of students that I truly understood. Prior to this class of students entering kindergarten, all students had been screened on a

district approved screening assessment. This provided feedback on the students' strengths and weaknesses in specific skill areas. Areas that were assessed included name writing, letter identification, rapid color naming, blending words, sound matching, number identification, shape identification, and counting to 10 and 20 with one to one match. Students that scored below a specific number were asked to attend the Extended Day Kindergarten Program (EDK.) These students would attend a regular Kindergarten class in the morning, stay for lunch at school, and then attend an afternoon class that extends both reading and math concepts. The EDK program also provides a "jump start" on concepts that may be coming soon. My AM class consisted of nine EDK students and eight non-EDK students. My PM class was strictly all non-EDK.

Students in my AM class were also eligible to receive extra support over a variety of areas provided by a part-time teacher and a full-time aide. A small group of students would be taken out of the classroom and to another room where they would work on drill and repetition of new and old concepts. A fellow team teacher and I assigned a concept to each day of the week, and then used the results from the unit skills assessments to determine who would receive the extra help. The groups would change with every report period, or cycle, and then new concepts and students would be assigned based on the weak areas of assessment results.

The difference in the ability level of students became very obvious from day one. As I stated earlier, my AM class consisted of 17 students (nine boys and eight girls,) while my PM class consisted of 16 students (seven boys and nine girls.) I had very few readers in my AM class, while the majority of my PM class was well into the reading process. I was also able to see a large difference in the ways they behaved in the classroom and their maturity levels during group and independent working times. I was also noting how well my PM class was at identifying letters and their corresponding sounds, while students in my AM were struggling to identify just letters. Although all of my students were very sweet and kind, many of the students from my AM session needed a greater deal of assistance in academics than my PM class did. Knowing this, I was extremely hesitant to begin the study with my AM class. I had worries and fears that it just wasn't going to work and I was afraid of not being successful. But in the end, I decided to send home consent letters and parent surveys to both AM and PM students.

What is a Journal?

A few weeks into school, after I had introduced my students to my routine and calmed any school jitters shown by myself, the students or their parents, my study officially began. I was granted permission to begin from the Human Subjects Internal Review Board and my building principal, and had received

consent letters and survey information back from most parents. Two students from my AM class did not return consent forms, while everyone in my PM class did. While awaiting the consent letters and survey information, I had printed a cover page off of the computer for each student that read “My Writing Journal,” and then stapled it to 20 sheets of blank, unlined printer paper. This would serve as each student’s own personal journal.

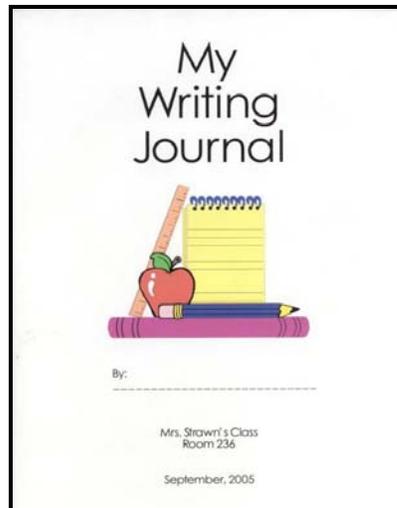


Figure 1. The Journal Cover. The figure shown above shows what the cover of each student’s journal looked like.

I also took some time to look closely at the survey results I received back from parents regarding their child’s current reading and writing habits. Of the fifteen surveys I received back from parents in the AM, eight of them reported that their child likes to write every day. Thirteen of the fifteen parents also responded that they wrote two or more times per week with their child. Of the

sixteen surveys returned in the PM, seven parents reported that their child likes to write daily, while fourteen parents reported that they wrote with their child at least two times per week. This provided me with some background information on the students and gave a preview as to what the students might already be familiar with.

In addition to explaining all of the papers that were going home for their parents, I also explained to all of my students how I was currently in school just as they were. I was working hard to learn new things too, so I could be the best teacher I could. I went into detail about school, the course I was taking, and how I needed each one of them to help me. Many were just amazed that I went to school, and didn't seem to question much of the study.

Soon, I began to go into detail about what it was that I needed each of them to help me with, and explained how we would begin writing in a journal. It was then that Jane, a student in my PM class, asked what a journal was. "Huh?" I thought to myself. It never dawned on me that the students would have no idea what a journal was. I had just assumed that everyone would know what a journal was. There I was, standing in front of my students, not even a month into school, speechless for the very first time. So I explained, while holding up one of the journals and in my best kindergarten language that, "A journal is a notebook that each of you will get to write in. In it, you will be writing about anything that you want. It can be about your mom or dad, your pets, your friends, or toys you like to

play with at home. The journal is going to help you learn your letters and sounds, and will make you really great writers.” To my relief, they all seemed pleased with my explanation and no other questions were asked.

After the introduction to the journal, I told the students I wanted to know more about them and what they thought of writing. I asked each of the students to take out a crayon, any crayon that they would like. I passed out the student surveys and began reading the questions aloud and asking them to fill in the answers. I told the students that I wanted them to fill in the face that they made when I read the sentence, and that it was okay if this was a different face than the person sitting next to them. The students answered the survey questions the best they could, but I was hesitant to use the information gathered. I was unsure how truthfully the students were answering the questions, or if they were simply copying off of the student next to them. I know the students were not doing this intentionally, maybe just looking to see what the person next to them chose. Although I reviewed the surveys from both classes, I chose not to report the findings for this reason.

Over the course of the next few days during our morning and afternoon meetings, I modeled many different writing techniques to the students. I showed them how to sound words out slowly so they were able to hear all of the sounds they make. I modeled how we write letters down when we hear their sound. I also introduced the students to “The Magic Line.” I was introduced to the concept of

“The Magic Line” while reading the book by Feldgus and Cardonick (1999). This special line is what we use when we know a letter goes into a word, but we are unsure of what that letter is. Students simply draw a small horizontal line (—) to show that they know a letter that makes a sound should be put here, just at this time he or she is unsure of what that letter is.

Play: The Start of Something Great

SCENE: PM class. All students are seated in the front of the room on the carpet. Teacher, slightly nervous, is standing in front of the large white board facing the students.

TEACHER: Please raise your hand for me if you remember talking about writing in a journal.

(Three-fourths of the class raises their hand.)

TEACHER: Does anyone remember what we do when we are writing, and we come to a spot in a word where we aren't sure what letter to write?

(Several students raise their hand and teacher calls on Mary.)

MARY: Use the magic line.

TEACHER: Great! *(Turns and points to white board)* Today we are going to pretend that the large white board in front of me is my piece of paper in my writing journal. I am going to write a sentence about anything I want to.

(Teacher pauses and holds her chin.)

TEACHER: I think I am going to write about my dog because last night he hurt his leg. So I want my sentence to say: My dog hurt his leg.

(Teacher begins taking to herself out loud in front of the students repeating the sentence over and over.)

TEACHER: What sound do you hear first in my sentence?

(A few students shouted out the letter "M" and the teacher proceeds to write it on the board.)

TEACHER: What letter do you hear next?

(Many students raise their hands, and the teacher calls on Jen.)

JEN: I know it's a "y".

TEACHER: Excellent. Then what do we do?

(Several children raise their hand. Teacher calls on Kim)

KIM: Move our pencil over.

TEACHER: Super! What do we hear next?

(Students continue to volunteer information about words. The final result becomes, "My dog prt hi_ le_.")

JEN: That's not how you spell 'hurt.' I hear an "r" in there.

TEACHER: That's okay Jen. Our words don't have to be perfect. Even though you might hear an "r" in there, someone else might not. We're going to leave it just how it is for now. I think it looks great!

(Jen, not happy with the teacher's answer, accepts it, but shows signs of disagreement on her face.)

TEACHER: Now I'm going to draw a picture that goes along with my sentence. What should I be drawing?

(A few students raise their hands and the teacher calls on Matt.)

MATT: A picture of your dog with a cast on his leg.

TEACHER: That sounds like a good picture.

(Teacher proceeds to draw a picture of a dog on the board with a cast on his leg.)

TEACHER: *(Turning to the students)* Okay, now it is your turn to write about something that you want. I'm going to hand each of you a journal, and sitting right where you are right now, you are going to write. You can write about anything that you want. All that I ask is that you write something.

BOB: We can write anything?

TEACHER: Yes, anything.

KELLY: Does it have to be at the top or the bottom?

TEACHER: Wherever you would like it to be, it's your journal. *(Teacher smiles and pauses for a moment to see if there are any other questions.)*

TEACHER: As you are writing, I will be walking around the room and asking you what your sentence says. I will then write what your sentence says in grown-up language at the bottom of the page so everyone can read what it says. When you're finished with your sentence, you can then add a picture to go along with it.

(Teacher passes out the journals)

TEACHER: Please write your name on the front, and then turn to page one.

(Students quietly write their first names and then turn to the first blank page.)

TEACHER: You are free to begin writing about anything you want. I am here to help you, but I will not provide you with the spelling. Good luck, and let me know if you need anything.

(Students stare at teacher for a few moments, then slowly, one by one, pick up their pencils and start to write on the page. The teacher moves around the room slowly as well, monitoring the students as they work. Realizing that all of the students have begun writing, the teacher smiles, offering a sign of encouragement.)

TEACHER: You are all doing a fantastic job! Keep going!

(Soon, sounds are heard coming from the students mouths.)

JANE: Sssssttttttrrrrr

JOE: Mmmooooommm

SALLY: Ttttaaaaaagggggg

STEVE: I don't know how to spell this word.

TEACHER: Try the best you can and say it real slow so you can hear the sounds it makes.

STEVE: Can we use all magic lines?

TEACHER: Try the best you can. Listen for some letters that you hear in the words.

AMY: What makes the Lllll sound?

TEACHER: Use your alphabet and see if you can find out.

(As the teacher walks around the room, she notices that many of the students were copying off of what she had written in the example. She doesn't say anything to anyone, feeling that if that's what it took to get them started, then she was okay with that.)

(A few moments pass and the teacher comes upon Matt, crying with tears rolling down his cheeks.)

TEACHER: Are you alright Matt?

MATT: I can't spell Sarah.

(Teacher sits down on the floor next to him.)

TEACHER: Okay, well, let me try saying it and you tell me what you hear.

(Teacher says the name 'Sarah' over and over again as Matt writes down on the paper what he hears.)

TEACHER: I'm now going to come around and ask each of you to share with me what your sentence says. I will write your sentence again at the bottom of the page, and then let you continue with what you were doing.

(Teacher slowly moves from student to student writing down what each of the students had written for their first entry. As each student completes the writing section of the journal he or she then gets their crayons to complete a picture.)

Figures 2, 3, and 4. The First Entry. The figures shown below are the first journal entries completed by Jane, Steve, and Mary.



Figure 2



Figure 3

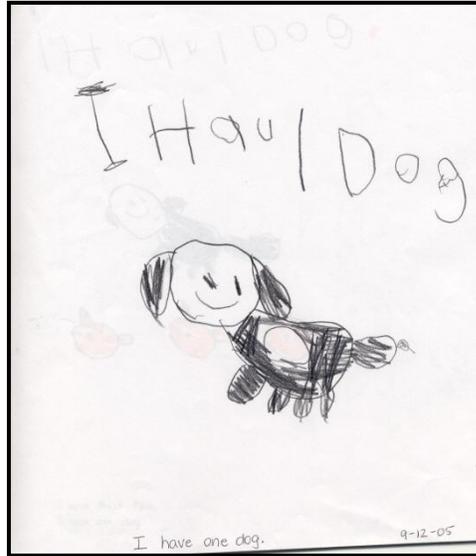


Figure 4

Let's Try This Again

After seeing and feeling the success of our first try with my PM class, I thought I would run the same routine again with my AM class. I was anxious to see how they would respond to the same activity. However, I was not as successful the second time around. I started once again whole group on the front carpet, using the white board as my piece of paper. I reviewed quickly the difference between a letter and a word, and found that many students still had some confusion over the two. I reiterated the difference, and explained that we were going to use letters to make up words in a sentence. I wanted to write the sentence, "I like dogs." We worked through the sentence the same way we had in

the PM class, but I found that the students in the AM were less interested and less focused than those in my PM. They did not appear to want to learn to write. I felt as if I was pulling teeth to get anyone other than the same three people to volunteer any information. I felt as if this class was defying anything I had ever read in the research over the summer. I was becoming extremely frustrated and felt myself taking it out on the students. Was I pushing too much on them too fast? The final outcome for the group sentence looked like, "I lik dujns." I did compliment the students on their good effort, but was unsure of what would happen next. Was this going to work as well as I thought it would?

Writing in the AM

I was unsure of the next steps to take with my morning class and the writing journals. After discussing the situation I was in with one of my team teachers, she suggested writing with the students in their journals using a sentence starter provided by myself. I realized that this isn't what I wanted to do, or what the research had said to do, but I felt it was the best way to introduce my students to the journals, and allow them to gain an understanding of what it was they needed to do before letting them delve in alone. After the discussion with my team teacher about how well the process worked for her, I decided to give it a try and see what the result was.

I had made this decision towards the end of September. I called all of the students to the carpet, and asked them to make a large circle. I showed the students the journals and where it was they needed to write their names, and then passed one to each. I also showed the students how to turn the page to find a new, fresh page where we would start writing. I explained that the first sentence we were going to add to our journals was going to be about something we liked. “It can be anything in the whole world. I just want it to be something that *you* like.”

“What words could I write if I wanted to share how I like pizza?” I asked.

“I like pizza.” Rosie responded.

“That’s perfect! Now what do you hear first when I say the sentence ‘I like pizza.’”

A small group of students responded with “I.”

I then showed the students on the large white board where we start a sentence, modeled how to make a capital “I”, and then asked the students to do so on their papers.

“Now whenever we write, it’s always important that we leave spaces between our words. If we don’t, all of our words will run together and we won’t be able to read what we wrote.” I modeled for the students how they could use their index fingers as a marker, and then moved to the next sound heard in the sentence. With many students raising their hands to volunteer information, we did this same routine for the word “like” and then stopped so each student could add his or her own word

to finish the sentence. I reiterated that I wasn't going to help them write their words because I wanted them to try it on their own. I instructed the students to talk out loud and write their word or words the best they could. I let the students get to work as I made my way around the carpet listening and writing as each of them worked. I noticed a few students copying off of each other, and just made a general statement that everyone should be writing their own words.

Slowly, as each student finished, I had them return to their seats to complete a picture that went along with their sentence. I had a few remaining on the floor and helped each one by stretching out words so they could hear the sounds. I wasn't sure if these students were really giving it their best effort, or if they were simply waiting for me to help them do the work. At one point I did stop everyone and ask what went at the end of every sentence so we knew it was the end and we took a breath. Steven responded with "a dot."

"Yes, a dot. We call it a period."

Many students grabbed their pencils and added a period to the end of their sentence.

Our second journal lesson, and many following, went much smoother than the first. I began placing the student journals on the floor ahead of time (usually during snack) in an order that I chose, usually placing a weaker writer next to a stronger writer. I would stamp each page with the date and then we'd start writing together using a writing prompt that I had chosen. We'd walk through each word

together, listening for sounds and writing down what the students heard. In my PM class, after just a few sessions done together on the floor, I allowed the students to move to any spot in the room that they would be comfortable writing. I did not follow this same rule with the AM class because I wasn't sure they were capable of such independence. Seeing the struggles we went through as a whole group to complete a sentence didn't leave me with a good feeling about leaving them write on their own.

We'd stop occasionally and do small reviews on spacing, capital letters, and periods. A hard concept for the students to understand was what to do when they ran out of room at the end of a page, before they were finished with their sentence. Many of the students would continue writing vertically, word under word. It took many writing sessions for some to grasp the idea of moving to the next line. Many students were also writing very BIG, using the entire page to write one short sentence. That would mean that they would have no room left for a picture, and they'd move to the next blank page. Writing large letters was another area we would review as well.

I sometimes would have to remind myself that the students were only five and six years old, and I couldn't expect them to be perfect. Some days the letters and sounds would correspond and on others they wouldn't. Some days it would appear as if everyone understood what it was that we were doing, and on others, we would completely flop. However, the students were slowly gaining an

understanding of the writing process and that the importance of writing was not just so they could read it, but so others could read it as well.

Small Groups Works Best

Occasionally, in the beginning, journal time would fall during the 30-minute block that small groups of students would leave the room for drill and reinforcement of skills. This provided me the opportunity to work with a small group of students in writing as well. We still followed that same format as stated earlier, where I would provide a prompt, but I felt as if I were making a stronger connection for the students. I also found that the small group allowed me more time with each of the students to talk about their writing or to assist with any questions. I found that I was able to focus in more on specific areas that students may have been having difficulty with and discover students who may have been having difficulties, but may have blended in with the large group and gone unnoticed.

For these reasons, I would initiate the journal writing time during the same time slot every day. The same students would not always leave the room, so I wasn't always working with the same individuals. When I did have the small groups, I would also allow students to move to any spot in the room that they found comfortable to write. I felt with the smaller group it was easier to manage. It was during a journal writing session in mid-November with eight of my AM

students that I felt like things were starting to click for more than just a few students. After passing out the journals and asking the students to take out a writing tool, I let the students get to work with little direction. Michael, a student who was really starting to come out of his shell academically, could be heard sounding out words from his seat. I was beaming...I hadn't heard him work like this before! Sarah, a fairly quiet student, but very strong academically, showed me a beautiful sentence about her brothers. Andrea and Dominic had each chosen to lie on the floor and use words from our high-frequency word list. They approached me with their journals to show me what they had written, only to have selected one word to write. I reiterated that although I had loved what they had written, I wanted to see if they could do some more. I asked them to add more "food to their fork" as I called it. I scanned back to a few entries we had completed together and showed them what I meant. They both smiled at me, returned to the carpet, and put more food on their fork. When they returned, the sentences they had formed were super. Dominic, an avid monster truck lover, wrote about just that. Andrea formulated a beautiful sentence about something she likes to do. It appeared as if concepts were slowly starting to click for students, and we were finally getting somewhere. It had taken us a few months, along with a few moments of frustration on my part, but they were writing and I was so proud of all of them.

John's Story

My name is John and I am five years old. I am in Kindergarten and love to play with my friends. It feels like I have been in school forever because I have been learning for a very long time. My mommy is always making me do "homework" at home that takes so long! In kindergarten, we learned how to know our letters and write them too! I really like to learn, but it makes me mad sometimes, too. Like this one time, I raised my hand to answer a question in front of the class, but I really didn't know the answer at all. I told my brain, "Think, think, think," but it just wouldn't come up with the right answer. My brain made me really mad! Mrs. Strawn always tells me to think about the question before I raise my hand, but I get too excited and want to be like all of the other students. They all raise their hands and I want to, too.

I don't like writing very much. Not at all really. It's hard for my brain to tell my hand what to do. Mrs. Strawn gave us a writing journal, and I try my best in it, but I really don't like it. Sometimes I

even cry, but that's because it's so hard! Mrs. Strawn helps me a lot with my writing, but it never looks how the other kids' does. She always tells me, "Write what you hear." I do, but I can't do it without Mrs. Strawn or someone else saying it. I try very hard, but sometimes I just hit my brain real hard and tell it to think. For a while, I would just write any letters. But soon, I was learning my sounds and I would write a few letters. I get really happy when Mrs. Strawn tells me I am doing a good job. It makes me get a big smile on my face. After we write, we're supposed to draw a picture too, and I don't like that much either. I have a hard time drawing people and things.

John always did what he was told. Not because he liked it or because he was good at it, but because he was told to do it. He never had any trouble making friends or being social with other students in the classroom, but he had a great deal of trouble keeping up with the other students in the class academically. It never really seemed to bother him except for when he would feel pressured or frustrations would build. John always gave it his all. He did the best he was capable of, even though there were many days where he struggled to find the

sounds and letters. Writing was not the easiest task for John to complete, but he never refused to complete it. It was almost like he knew what he wanted to write, but he couldn't get his brain to make his hand do it. He appeared to not understand the connection between letters, sounds, words, and sentences in the beginning, but as time progressed, so did he. I came to understand that John moved at a much different pace than the other children, and that was okay. He did what he was capable of and learned. His progress made both him and me very proud.

Figures 5, 6, and 7. John's Journal. The figures shown below are journal entries completed by John throughout the study.



Figure 5

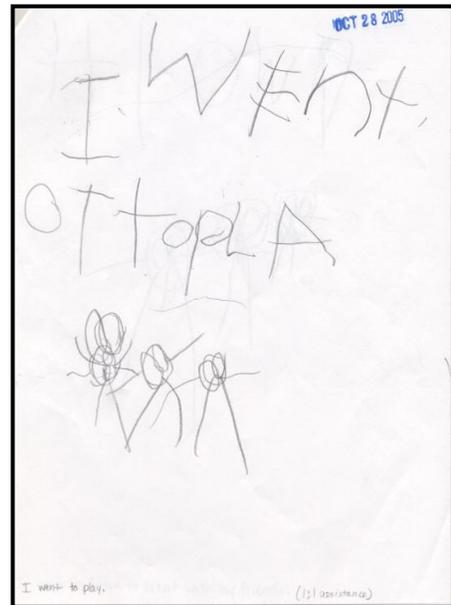


Figure 6

like they were trying really hard, I would come to the rescue and work them through a sentence. One of those students was Sue, a student in my AM class.

Sue was an average kindergarten student who seemed to thoroughly enjoy school. She had lots of friends and was what I would refer to as a real “girly-girl.” However, Sue had difficulty writing. She struggled in the beginning with making the connections between letters and sounds. She always had something she wanted to write, but couldn’t put the letters down in the right order for others to understand it. During group writing times, Sue would sit on the carpet and wait for others to provide an answer. If it was a fill-in-the-blank situation, Sue would wait for me to patiently come around and walk her through step-by-step. Sue wasn’t the only student who tried to use this method, but she definitely tried to use it the longest. I was quick to remove any such thoughts from her mind by providing support, but not doing the work for her. On some occasions, that meant walking away at times when the easy thing for me to do would be to just give her the answers. However, I knew this would not be the way for Sue to learn, so I play the game of “Tough Love.” When Sue looked frustrated or like she was going to explode, I reiterated time and time again that if she wrote what she felt was correct, than it was. “This is how we learn” was a statement that I made to her almost every day.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figures 8 and 9. Sue's Work. The figures shown above are two of the journal entries Sue completed during the study. Figure 8 is an entry completed whole group with the class. Figure 9 is an entry completed independently.

The following pastiche illustrates some of the thoughts and comments that were made by Sue throughout the study and collected in the field log.

Pastiche: Why Won't She Just Help Me!

Oh, I like to write!

Let me see what Kate wrote and I'll just write that too.

I'll just sit here and wait for Mrs. Strawn.

Hmm...how do I write "pony?"

I know what I forgot, a period!

I'm trying to write "horse."

I hate writing! This is too hard!

Why won't she just help me!

This is not how I will learn! This makes me mad!

Journals again!

I hear an "h" at the beginning of "horse."

I love to draw the pictures in my journal.

"B" says "bbb." "A" says "aaa."

Oh I get it!

Tony's Story

My name is Tony and I am six years old. I have one older brother and I want to be just like him! This is my first year in the big school with my big brother. My teacher, Mrs. Strawn, is very funny. She makes me laugh all of the time by making funny faces and doing funny dances. We do fun things in school like read stories and learn math. We are also doing a lot of writing. We have these special books to write in called writing journals. When I first got my journal, I would look around the room for words I knew, and then I'd write them on the paper. Mrs. Strawn always told me that I was doing a good job, and that made me happy. Then one day Mrs. Strawn told me to try and write a sentence, and I didn't like that. I felt like Mrs. Strawn would just go and leave me alone to do something that I couldn't and I didn't like that. I would get so upset I would start to cry. Some days, as soon as I saw her take out the journals, or just hear the word journal, my face would start to feel hot and I would get very nervous. Mrs. Strawn would tell me I could do it, but I just didn't even want to try by myself. I would sit

there and hold my breath until someone would help me. Sometimes I think I made Mrs. Strawn mad because I wouldn't even try, but I just didn't think I could do it, so I didn't want to.

When Mrs. Strawn would help me, I was able to do it. She would sit with me and talk to me about things that I like. Then she would make me say words and write down the sounds I heard. After I would write a sentence, I would feel really good and not cry anymore. I would draw a picture and then close up my journal. I was just happy to get through another day of writing.

Then, one day, I didn't need Mrs. Strawn anymore, and I didn't get upset. I just took the journal and started writing. At first, I would look back at other pages in my journal to see what I wrote, and I would copy some of the same words. I would also walk over to the writing center and use some of the words from there, too. On certain days, when I knew I was going to have to write in my journal, I would sit at home before school and think of my sentence. I would know exactly what to write when the time came. But then, I watched the other kids in the class and they were

writing, and I wanted to, too! So I just started writing all on my own. Mrs. Strawn was so proud of me that she would look at me with this big smile on her face. That always made me feel good. Now, I just do the best I can when I write. I haven't cried in a long time. I just listen for the letters and write them down. I'm doing the best I can and that is what Mrs. Strawn always says. "Do the best you can."

Tony has a fear of the unknown. This is why he was so uncomfortable with journal writing in the beginning of the study. There was no comfort zone for Tony when it came to beginning to write, and he just didn't want to do it. It took many days of writing for Tony to understand that he didn't have to be perfect, just that he had to try his best. He was very uncomfortable with trying the journal writing independently. I had thought that if I just let him sit there long enough and let the uncomfortable moment pass, he would be alright. However, in the beginning, those moments never seemed to come.

Tony never expected to work with me, or any other adult in the room. He always waited until he was asked, and even that sometimes was not enough to get the tears to stop. There was even an occasion when he didn't even want to work with me, and he didn't want to do the journal. I never forced him because I didn't

want the journal to constantly be viewed as a negative. When he was ready, so was I. When the time would come, we would work through any sentence that he could think of with little trouble, and then he would return to his seat and work on a picture.

A few weeks into the study, journal writing no longer became an uncomfortable situation for Tony and the tears and frustrations all of the sudden disappeared. One day he had decided that he was going to work on the journal entry with other students in the class, and he went to the writing center with a few friends. From that point on, I never saw another tear fall from his eyes again. He would ask questions when he would get stuck, and he even guided others when they got stuck. He was comfortable with writing and was confident enough in himself that he could do it. All it took was just a little getting use to and patience. That made all the difference to Tony.

Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13. Tony's Journey. The figures shown below are journal entries completed by Tony throughout the study. All entries shown were completed independently with no assistance.

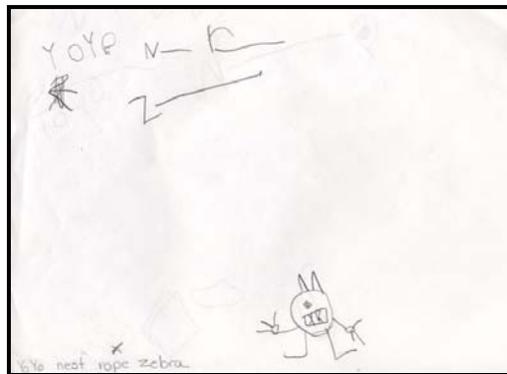


Figure 10

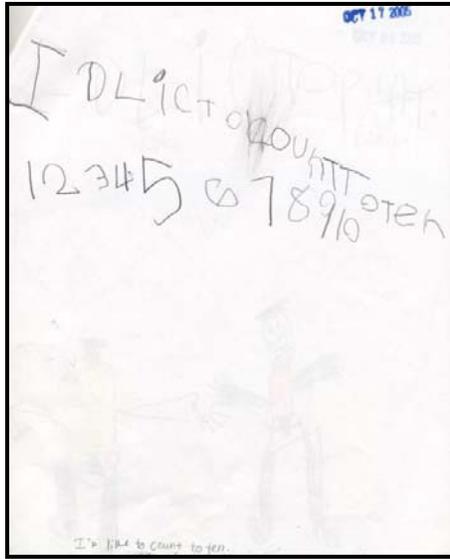


Figure 11

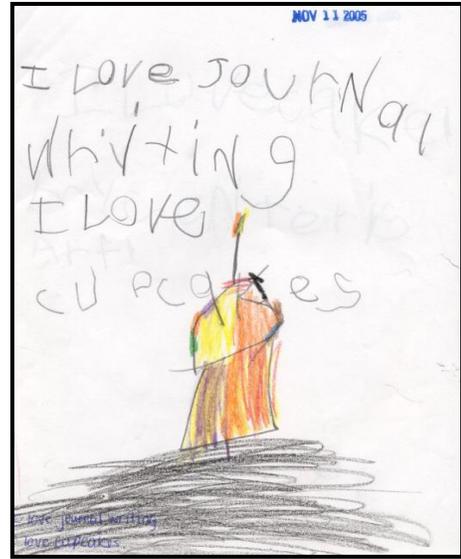


Figure 12



Figure 13

The following pastiche illustrates some of the frustrations shown by both the students and teacher throughout the study. This pastiche is a collection of the students' and teacher's words and thoughts that were recorded and/or written in the field log.

Pastiche: The Frustrations

"I can't spell her name!"

They needed help differentiating between letters and words.

Sobs were coming from the corner of the room.

As soon as I handed him his journal, I saw the look of fear fall on his face.

It appeared as if he wasn't trying.

He would not do this independently.

"Journal writing...aaauuugghh!"

His face was bright red and his eyes were beginning to well with tears.

Am I helping or hurting?

Many students were putting space between each letter instead of each word.

Sarah placed a period after every word in her sentence.

"Come on Mrs. Strawn, just help me out!"

Many were moving to a new line right in the middle of a word!

Time restraints prevented us from finishing.

She had written a bunch of letters just simply strung together.

When I asked Marie what it said, she had no idea!

“I can’t do it!”

Writing in the PM

The beginning of journal writing with the afternoon class got off to a much smoother start than that in the morning class. Following our first session, the students completed a journal entry on an average of three times per week. Prior to starting each entry, we would review the importance of spacing, periods, and writing down the sounds that the students heard. I would also encourage students to think about topics that were of interest to them and would be something he or she would enjoy writing about.

I also had the assistance of a parent volunteer on most afternoons. All parent volunteers were given a thorough explanation of what the journal sessions looked like and how the students were encouraged to write. Often, parent volunteers would pass out and stamp journals with the date, work with individual students and their writing, and dictate sentences at the bottom of a page. I was sure to see all student journal entries before closing them for the day, but the parent volunteers were a great support in the classroom at all times.

After the first writing session, I no longer had the students join me on the carpet to write, although I didn’t allow the students to move freely about the room until we were a few weeks into the study. I wanted to be sure all students were

comfortable with the journal writing process and understand what was expected of them before I gave them complete freedom. For the first few weeks the students would complete entries at their desks, but were encouraged to talk to their classmates about what they were writing or ask classmates for help.

During those first few weeks during journal writing time, I found myself working either with small groups of students or working with a student individually. I worked with Tony quite a bit until he felt comfortable with the journal writing process. I also worked up on the carpet in a small group with other students who were having a little difficulty getting started such as Joe, Amy, Bob, and Steve. Many of the students in the PM class caught on quickly, and the journal writing time began to become something the students would look forward to. They would even ask about it on days that it wasn't included into our schedule!

Once students really began to understand how to write and what to do with the journals, our journal writing sessions really became a very enjoyable time. The atmosphere in the classroom during journal time was positive and upbeat, and the students appeared engaged and happy. All of the students were extremely excited when I delivered the news that they were permitted to move to any spot in the room to write. Many students chose to go to the front carpet and lie on their bellies to write. Some students went to the Art Center, while others preferred the Writing or Math Center. With every session students were finding

new spots to write in and new friends to sit with. It wasn't long before many of the students were moving from writing just one sentence to two sentences or more per entry. The following is an excerpt from one of the non-participant observations I made during a journal writing session late in October.

As I sat and listened to what was happening in the room, I heard many wonderful things. The students were speaking to each other about what they were going to write, and then I heard many, many sounds coming from the students' mouths. They were really working hard! [I sat away from the students on a chair just to sit back and listen, even if I was only going to get a minute!] I observed a small group of students on the floor (Mary, Sally, Kim, Jen, Steve, Matt, and John) and watched them work for a while. I noticed how they were using the alphabet on the wall and words associated with letters of the alphabet. Many of the students were sounding out words.

Beyond the Writing to the Author's Chair

The students in the PM class were making great progress with their journals and were soon finishing them in little time. I had decided to take the

journal writing to the next level and have the students read to the class what they had written, either for that day or an entry they completed previously. It was early in November that I had decided the time was right.

Before handing the students their journals for the day, I explained that we would be adding a new part to our journal sessions that I would call the “Author’s Chair.” I pointed to the chair I sit in when working as a whole group in front of the class and explained that this chair is where students would sit, one at a time, to read an entry from their journal. A student could select any entry he or she would like, read it to the class, and then share the picture he or she had drawn. I also explained that this task would be completely voluntary and that if you didn’t want to read, you would not be forced to. I would select students at random using popsicle sticks with the student’s names on them, and if someone did not want to read, I would remove their stick from the container. The reactions I received were all positive, with the exceptions of Tony’s who responded with, “Good, because I don’t want to read mine.”

All students quickly got to work, and it was easy to see how excited many of them were about reading their writings. I overheard Kelly say to another student, “Oh, I want to read mine!” I was so amazed at the positive response that I found myself wishing that I had decided to start this earlier. After I had read all of the student’s entries, I called everyone to the carpet, having them form a half-circle, and then placing the “Author’s Chair” at the open end. I removed Tony’s

stick from the container and then selected the first student to read. Greg was the first to be chosen, and he took his place on the chair. He read his entry to the students and then showed his picture. When he was finished, I told the students that they could now raise their hands to ask any questions or make any comments. However, the student in the “Author’s Chair was only allowed to select three students to ask questions. I did this because of time restraints. As it turned out, the students were not interested in asking questions, but rather on complimenting each other on the work they had done. What a wonderful thought on behalf of my students! I was so touched by their kindness and support towards each other.

We finished that “Author’s” session with Jen and Matt both sharing with the class their writings and pictures for that day. Both students did extremely well reading to the class, and all three readers walked away from the “Author’s Chair” with large smiles on their faces.

From that session forward the most common question I received was, “Are we going to read our journals today?” The students were so excited to share what they were writing that when a name wasn’t pulled or I had to call time for the day, I heard many sighs of disappointment and “Aauuggghh’s.” Tony also came around during the second session and asked that his name be put back in the container. Although he wasn’t chosen on the second day to read, I did notice that the entry he had written that day said, “I luv journal writing.”

Writing Outside of the Journals

While learning to read and write using the journal writing experiences, we also did a great deal of writing outside of the journals. Our normal daily routine in both the AM and PM classes includes a story that relates to either a sound we are focusing on or our theme for the week. After we would read the story whole group on the carpet, the students would be instructed to return to their seats to complete a short writing activity related to what we had read. Most often, the writings would be a line or phrase that was repeated in the story that is missing key words and ideas. The students would then need to fill in the missing blanks with their own words.

The instructions one afternoon late in November were the same for a lesson that included the story Caps for Sale. After reading, students were asked to complete the following sentence: _____ for sale! ____ cents a _____! We discussed some of the different items the students might want to sell, including toys, animals, clothes, and food. The students were then instructed to do the best they could at filling in the blanks with words they wanted. When the students got to work, the sounds that were heard across the room were amazing.

“bbbbbbbbbbooooooolllll” (ball)

“Iiiiiissssss Cccrrreeemmm.” (ice cream)

“Fffillloooooorrrrs.” (flowers)

“Coooookeees.” (cookies)

The students were using the skills they would during journal writing to complete the writing activity and were asking for less assistance from an adult. It was easy to see the impact the journals were having on the students' everyday writing skills. The samples shown below are from both the AM and PM classes.

Figures 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18. Caps for Sale. The figures shown below are examples of the writing tasks completed by various students to correspond with the story Caps For Sale.

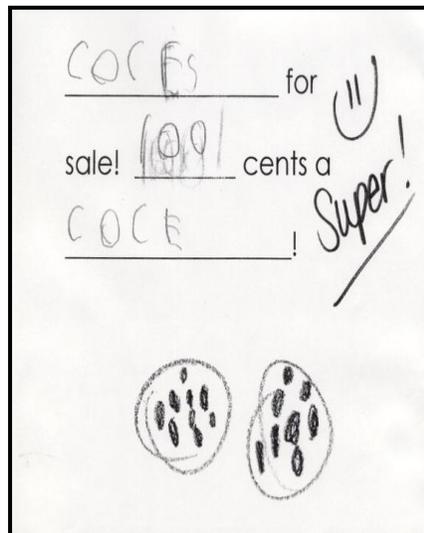


Figure 14

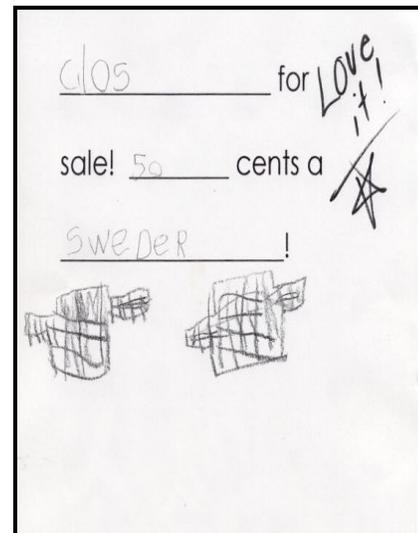


Figure 15

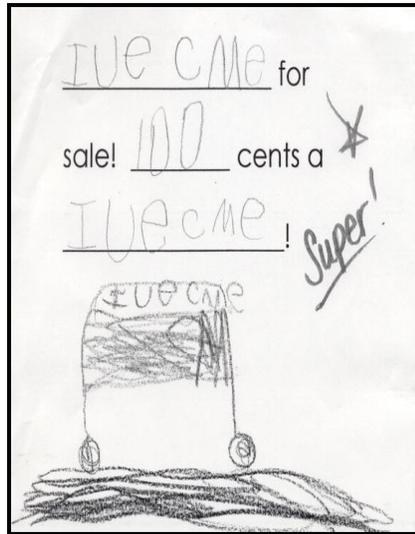


Figure 16

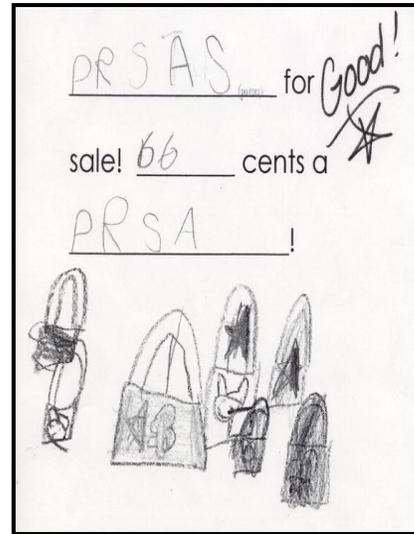


Figure 17

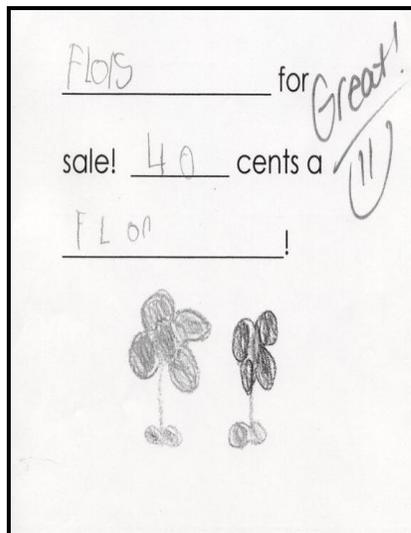


Figure 18

What did the parents think?

Towards the end of the data collection process, I decided to send home parent surveys to those who had signed the parental consent forms. I took the original survey and modified it slightly by changing the last question to reflect any changes the parents had seen since beginning to use the writing journals in school. (See Appendix F) Of the twelve surveys I received back from parents in the AM class, eleven of the parents responded by stating they have seen a change in their child's attitude towards writing since the beginning of the school year, with seven of the parents stating that they see an increase in their child's confidence. Of the fifteen surveys I received back from parents in the PM class, all fifteen parents reported that they have seen a positive change in their child's attitude towards writing, with eight parents reporting they have seen an increase in their child's confidence.

DATA ANALYSIS

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) tell us that “interpretation (making sense of the data) is not a separate part of action research...we are constantly trying to understand our students, their work, their world, and ourselves” (p.194).

Throughout my teacher action research study, I have looked very carefully at my students and the data that has evolved throughout to guide the next steps in my process. A variety of forms of qualitative data collection and analysis were used to help me collect and interpret my data. They included my field log, coding my field notes, binning, creating theme statements, and writing a variety of narrative forms including plays, vignettes, and pastiches.

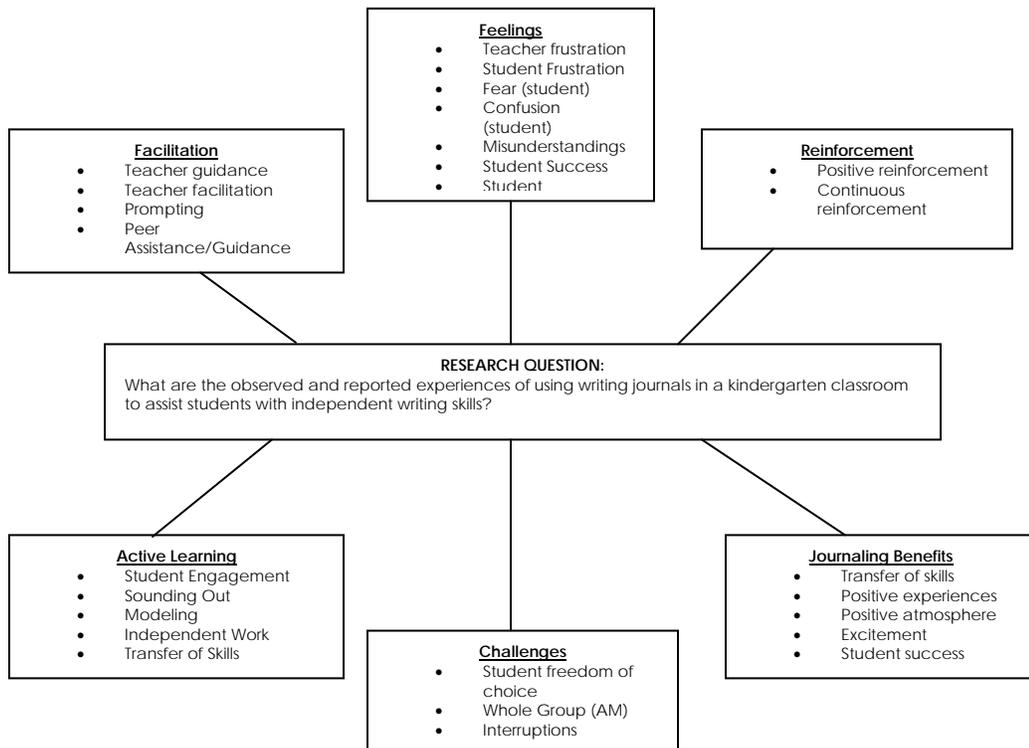
The first step in analyzing my data was to code my field log. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (2001) said that “In actual practice, we read and reread a portion of data and provide labels –usually notes in the margins-that identify a meaning unit. This process is called coding” (p.162). Coding became an ongoing process for me and allowed me to see noticeable patterns and behavior changes throughout my study. I was able to modify my future plans for the study as needed. I would return to the field log a few days after having written, and write the codes in the margin. To assist in organization throughout the data collection, I made a chart of codes along with the pages they could be found. I was able to look closely at the code chart to discover patterns and themes that began to emerge.

Along with coding came the natural process of providing my own thoughts and feelings about the study. Bogdan and Bicklen (1998) identify these feelings as observer comments. “Observer comments are sections of the fieldnotes in which the researcher records his or her own thoughts and feelings” (p.151). Brackets within the log notes identified observer comments. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (2001) state, “To be available to situations as experienced by those who are living them, qualitative researchers are counseled to bracket preconceptions, prejudgments, beliefs and biases as observer comments” (p.351).

The next step in the analyzing process was to put my codes in bins. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, (2001) refer to bins as “the first broad categories” (p.162). The bins allowed me to find common themes within my data, and slowly theme statements began to emerge. A theme statement is “...a statements of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Azul, 2001, p.206). Using this information, I created a graphic organizer to visualize the codes and bins. This allowed me to focus in on topics and categories that dealt the most with my research question.

Figure 19. The Graphic Organizer. The figure below shows how I took all of the information I gathered throughout the study and organized it into bins with corresponding themes.

Coding Graphic Organizer



Theme Statements

1. Facilitation, both student and teacher, is vital in journal writing and becomes a guide for the writing process by helping students make connections between what they hear and what they write.
2. Feelings, both positive and negative, will emerge from both students and teacher throughout the journal writing process, and will help shape future entries.
3. Reinforcement is key for both higher and lower level learners as they continue to learn through, and write in, the journal.
4. The benefits that journal writing provides for both student and teacher include: transferring of skills to other areas, positive learning experiences and attitudes, positive learning atmosphere, and student success.
5. The challenges that present themselves during journal writing are often times inevitable and uncontrollable.
6. Journal writing promotes a great deal of active learning when students are working independently, together, and one on one with the teacher.

Throughout the data collection process I wrote reflective memos analyzing the perspectives of renowned psychologists in the field of education including Lev Vygotsky (1978), John Dewey (1938), Lisa Delpit (2002), and Paulo Friere (1970). Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) describe an analytic memos as "...a memo to yourself about what you see emerging: patterns of behavior, words, key ideas, events" (p. 194). While reading and learning about the different perspectives, I was able to find quotes that corresponded with the data I was collecting and used these quotes to help construct meaning of my data.

I also used vignettes, pastiches, and plays throughout the document to tell the stories of my students and our journey while analyzing the data. Vignettes "are narrative investigations that carry within them an interpretation of the person, experience, or situation that the writer describes" (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 2001, p.70). A pastiche was used to compile moments found within the data that help highlight a common theme. I also used a play as a form to convey my data. The play helped bring to life key moments or situations that took place during the data collection phase. I provided information about the scene in the classroom, introduced the characters and presented the dialogue that occurred within the situation. Though these various forms of data analysis, I was able to learn more about myself, my students, and journal writing within the kindergarten classroom.

FINDINGS

Many variables play a vital role when incorporating journal writing into a kindergarten curriculum. After analyzing my data, I found six common themes: facilitation, feelings, reinforcement, journaling benefits, challenges, and active learning. What follows is an examination of each of these themes to show how each supports my data.

Facilitation:

Facilitation, both student and teacher, is vital in journal writing and becomes a guide for the writing process by helping students make connections between what they hear and what they write.

Facilitation has played a central role in the success of journal writing with my kindergarten students. By modeling the thought process on developing a sentence and then showing them how to put that sentence on paper, my students were able to see the relationship between thinking of, sounding out, and writing a word. When working closely with a student or a group of students, each was seeing first hand how we turn spoken words into a written response. Throughout my data collection, I noted how important this teacher-student facilitation became in both my AM and PM classes. The AM students needed the facilitation to continue to grow as writers and found that having a model to follow was key to

their success. The PM students also needed facilitation to begin the journal writing experience. Although the amount of facilitation varied for many of the students in my PM class after our first experience with journaling, it was vital that the guidance and facilitation continued for a longer period of time in order for some students to succeed. With both classes, the teacher-student facilitation provided a place for students to start with their writing, and encouraged students to learn more about the writing process.

I also found that while continuing to facilitate and guide all students with writing, many of my students' self-confidence rose, along with their interest in writing. I heard many statements of excitement when I would bring the journals out, and would also have to answer to statements of disappointment when our time restricted us and journaling would not fit into our schedule. Much of the excitement about entering kindergarten has to do with learning to read and write, and all of my students were excited to do both. As a result of my facilitation, students were eager to write and share a sentence, and were learning the relationships between letters and sounds as well. Their knowledge of this relationship continued to grow with every journal entry.

Peer facilitation and guidance also became a reoccurring topic that emerged within my data. While working on journal entries, either at their seats or in different areas around the room, students were able to speak to each other and see spoken words become part of a sentence. Students were also able to help each

other when problems arose or if they had a question about a particular word or sound. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) suggest that, "...children learn to write by the company they keep" (p.19). I found that as time progressed through the study, students relied less on me and more on each other. This allowed me to move more freely about the room and take a closer look at how all of the students were doing, rather than using the majority of the journaling time with one student or a small group. This was one key-advantage to having self-sufficient students. I was able to devote additional time to students who may have needed greater facilitation. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) also suggest that "By encouraging all of the children to help each other, we not only foster cooperative learning, but also empower the children to learn from each other's phonetic challenges" (p.43). In my PM class, there were a few situations where a student would complete his or her journal writing quickly, and I was able to ask him or her to assist another student who was having difficulty. As I had stated earlier in "My Story," I felt as if I had a few "Mini-Me's" working in the room with me. Lev Vygotsky (1978) tells us that "...learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p.90).

Feelings:

Feelings, both positive and negative, will emerge from both students and teacher throughout the journal writing process, and will shape future entries.

Feelings that were shared by both students and teacher during the study helped to make the experience real and meaningful to all involved. The success I felt as the teacher after completing my first journal writing session with my PM class made me even more excited to try it with my AM class. I dismissed the students that day feeling like we had started a new chapter in the learning process that was going to bring just as much joy and excitement to my students as it was bringing to me. So, the next day when I introduced and followed the same procedures with my AM class and things did not go nearly as well, I became very frustrated. I wanted to give up and not attempt to try again.

As the teacher, I found that most of my frustrations emerged when I felt a student wasn't giving his or her best effort, students were not following my directions, or I was misled about a student's understanding of a concept or idea. Tony and John, both students in my PM class, were difficult for me to understand at first. After walking them both through a few examples together, I expected them both to be able to complete the task independently. I now understand that I needed to have more patience with my students, and allow them to grow as learners. They needed to feel comfortable with what they were doing in order to do it.

A student appeared to become frustrated when he or she was unsure of what to write, was uncomfortable with the situation, or most often, when he or she did not know how to spell a word. The students had a very difficult time accepting that all words did not have to be spelled correctly and that I wanted them to try their best without my assistance. The frustrations shown by students would often time carry over from session to session, and the students would not want to complete journal writing activities. As I stated earlier in “Tony’s Story,” the simple sight of the journal would sometimes make his face fall and the tears would begin to fill his eyes. Not until Tony was ready did he feel comfortable with the journal and write a sentence without the frustrations and anxiety that came along with it.

Student confusion, misunderstandings, and fear are other feelings that were shown during journal writing. The student confusion is most often what led to the teacher frustrations. I found this most frequently with some of the students in my AM class who were still writing random letters to represent words in mid-November. I had hoped by that point that all of the students would be beyond the random letter phase, but now looking back I know that I was trying to push those who might not have been ready. Students understanding of concepts and ideas develop at different times throughout the year, and in November some students were grasping the concept while others were not quite there yet.

Many students also showed signs of success and an increase in self-confidence as the journal writing continued. John Dewey (1938) states that, “Everything depends on the *quality* of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences” (p. 27). Many of my students had a positive quality experience with journal writing and they showed it in a variety of ways. By the end of September, many students were working their way through a sentence quite well with little assistance. Quickly, most of my PM students were asking to write two sentences for an entry. They were so happy to be writing real sentences that their excitement made them want to do more. The students would also make certain expressions on their faces after finishing a sentence that just let you know they felt good inside. I watched my AM class work through many tough days of building words with letters and sounds, until that one day that it all fell into place for them and they were making words. All they needed was a positive remark from me or another peer to make them feel like they were really doing a great job.

Reinforcement:

Reinforcement is key for both higher and lower level learners as they continue to learn through, and write in, the journal.

Reinforcement played an important role in the success of journal writing with all of my students. While all of the students were working in their journals, it was important that they felt successful in what they were doing, no matter what level they were performing at. With my lower level learners, reinforcement was the key to keeping them engaged and focused on a difficult task. The reinforcement made them feel success at something that wasn't easy for them to do. I think about John and the difficulty he had on some days just to get letters on a page. It was important that whenever he was successful at the writing task, I pointed it out to him and made him feel proud inside. My comments and his eagerness to please me were what kept him wanting to do well. Delpit and Dowdy (2002) tell us that, "...language is the closest way humans know of getting inside another person's head" (p.210). My students needed to hear the positive comments from me to know that they are doing an exceptional job on their journal entries.

Reinforcement was also an important attribute for my students who understood the writing process and were successful with it from early on. I had many students who were writing one legible, clear sentence in no time. They too benefited from my positive reinforcement and strived to do more. I am quickly reminded of a situation with a student in my PM class, Amy. It took her only a few weeks to grasp the concept of relating letters and sounds to form words, and she was quickly writing full sentences. On one particular day, Amy brought her

journal to me and read me her sentence. It was done very nicely, and I was able to read it clearly. I made a comment to Amy of how proud I was of her and how much I enjoyed her journals. With this, she smiled back at me and asked if she could write another sentence for her entry. I had such a feeling of joy inside and of course responded with a “yes.” She felt so good about what she was doing that she wanted to do more. This was how I approached most of my high-level students. The more I encouraged them and made them feel good about themselves, the more they wanted to show me what they could do.

I found that reinforcement was continuous throughout my data and had a very large impact on the attitudes, behaviors, and success of my students with their writing journals.

Challenges:

The challenges that present themselves during journal writing are often times inevitable and uncontrollable.

Journal writing was very successful with my kindergarten students; however, there were many unexpected challenges that presented themselves over the course of the study and made an impact on our journal writing blocks. One of the most difficult issues to deal with was time. I only have each of the two classes for two and a half hours per day, with one half hour devoted to Specials (Art, Music, etc.) There is an extremely large amount of information I need to present

to my students on a daily basis and there was not always enough time to include the journals. I would allow, on average, fifteen to twenty minutes to complete a journal entry. Unfortunately, there were often times that I would find myself pushing through others subjects within the curriculum to get to the journals. Then, when we would get to the journals I would have to rush the students through them to move on to the next subject. The time restraint really may have hindered the work that my students were able to complete by not allowing them to finish full journal entries.

Another challenge that unexpectedly presented itself during the study was the uneasiness some of the students felt with selecting a topic of their choice to write about. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) state “The concept of journal writing is based on the notion that children learn best when their work is personally meaningful” (p.97). Although I encouraged my students to write about whatever it was that they wanted to at that specific moment, I had many students staring off into space while trying to think of something to write. I found this to be extremely frustrating because at the same time they were losing precious writing minutes. Those students who were having difficulty selecting a topic to write about would often times then become frustrated after seeing their peers complete a journal entry more quickly. These frustrations sometimes led to students working quickly and not taking their time to do their best when writing. In turn, that became a frustration of mine, and I was hurrying students to select a topic. However,

Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) stress the importance of patience on the teacher's part when allowing students to select a topic of their own for their journals. I feel that had we had more time in our day to complete the journals, I would have given students as much time as they needed to choose their topic.

Working in a whole group setting in my AM class also became a challenge that I hadn't expected when beginning the study. The students in my AM class had a much more difficult time understanding and grasping the independent skills for journaling and there was not enough of me to go around. To eliminate this problem and do my best to see all of my students during the writing time, I chose to complete the journals during the 30-minute time slot where groups of students were taken out of the room for other purposes. I was able to identify and solve this problem quickly and therefore it didn't create as large of a problem as I originally thought it might.

Active Learning:

Journal writing promotes a great deal of active learning when students are working independently, together, and one on one with the teacher.

From day one of introducing the writing journals, the students were actively involved and engaged with completing their entries. The concept that students were becoming the most familiar with the quickest was the relationship they were making between sounds and letters. The first non-participant

observation I recorded showed a minimal amount of students sounding out letters to create words. However, as the observations continued, the data shows how more and more students were learning to make the connections and were actively engaged in creating their sentences. This active learning was also evident when students were working with me or together in a group. Students could be heard talking to each other and asking what sounds letters make. They would help each other by also showing certain letter formations. A specific example would be when Jen worked together with John to help him complete an entry. She was not only helping him sound out words, but also showing him on a small wipe-off board how to make the letters in the words. The same result was also found when the students were working with me. Although I would sound out words for students in the beginning of the study, I was simply modeling how they could sound out words independently. We reached a point where the students were then sounding out words on their own. From our very first writing session, my students were actively involved with creating their journal entries.

The independent skills that my students were learning while writing in their journals also transferred very easily to other areas of the curriculum. The concept of sounding out and writing letters to form a word is used when completing a variety of activities in our classroom. I found the more that students would write in their journals the better their independent writing skills would be, as well as their phonetic spelling skills. The journals allowed my students to be

more confident in themselves as writers and not worry as much about whether or not a word was spelled correctly.

Journaling Benefits:

The benefits that journal writing provides for both student and teacher include: transfer of skills, positive learning experiences and attitudes, positive learning atmosphere, and student achievement.

The positive impact that the journals made on my students throughout the study was amazing to me. Although I had hoped they would make a difference, the outcome was much more than I could have ever asked for. As mentioned previously, my students' ability to transfer the skills they learned while completing the journals was astounding. I felt as if the journals became the teacher, and slowly over time, the students grasped the concept of listening for sounds, writing letters, and creating words. Teaching students how to write in this fashion was much more successful than I felt I could be. I could also see the difference in writing activities completed outside of the journals. For many of them, it was as if on one day they didn't quite understand, and then the next day it clicked. It was so wonderful to see their minds at work.

The journals also provided a boost in all student experiences and attitudes because of the success the students were having with them. The growth my students made over the course of the study was amazing. I gave the students

freedom to make the journals a place where, regardless of what they wrote, it was perfect, and they appeared to enjoy every minute of it. They could take as little or as much time to understand the concept, and write as little or as much as they wanted to while learning. Although I had a few students in the beginning that had a really difficult time with the journals, I recorded many situations in my data where students were making positive comments or remarks about the journals. My students' happy and exciting attitudes about the journals also made the learning atmosphere within the classroom positive. Their happiness and excitement about writing and sharing their sentences was contagious for anyone who entered the room.

It took a lot of time, effort, and patience to make the writing journals a positive aspect of my kindergarten curriculum. As I continue to use the writing journals, I expect that I will also continue to modify them to reinforce the positive achievements with each unique class of students. I am no longer the direct leader in teaching my students to read and write, but simply, am one of the pieces that play a role. Together with my students, we will work to achieve additional growth and understanding of the reading and writing process.

THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

After the positive experience that both my students and I have had with journal writing, I know that I must continue incorporating the journals in the curriculum each year. Throughout all of my research, I have discovered many successful ways to implement writing journals into my classroom routine. However, I do still have some new questions to think about and explore in the future.

The journals themselves were an incredible addition to our classroom experience. Allowing students to grow and write at their own pace was crucial to student success. I feel the journals have given the students a new-found freedom to write and a positive place to start. I have discovered that the routine with which I include them will constantly be changing with every new class. Even with the classes that am currently working with, our routine is constantly changing because of time restraints and the amount of information we need to cover in a day. For next year, I would like to take the advice of Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) and begin writing on day one.

As I continue to incorporate the journals into our weekly routine, I will continue to focus on the students growth as writers. Since we began writing in the journals back in early September, all of my students have made some type of progress with their letter-sound correspondence and their ability to create coherent sentences. I would like to continue improving their writing content and take it a

step further by allowing students to write longer pieces in the journals, and possibly outside the journals. Keeping in mind that they are still kindergartners, this may mean only two or three sentences at a time. However, I do hope to expand on the progress that we have made thus far in this school year.

I will continue to search for ways to improve the journal writing experiences. I felt that incorporating the Author's Chair into the journal routine was a huge success. My students in the PM session looked forward to, and enjoy reading from the Chair and I hope to include it for my AM students before this year's end. I will try incorporating the Author's Chair earlier into the school year next year because of the positive social aspects that arose from its use. I will also continue to incorporate the Author's Chair right after the completion of journal writing. It helped by allowing students to share common experiences, and also to show support and compassion for others. However, I would like to think about the other ways I could use the Author's Chair within the classroom because of the positive experiences it created for all of the students in my PM class. I wonder if the Author's Chair would be the place to share math topics or stories about other areas of the curriculum? Would using the Author's Chair too much make it lose its value to the students?

It took me several weeks to allow my AM students to begin journal writing on their own. Looking back, I wonder how things may have turned out differently if I would have allowed them to write independently earlier. Would

the outcome for some of the students be different? Would they have made as much progress, or more? This is something that I contemplate frequently, wondering if I made the right decision with this class. I am hoping to find alternate methods of writing development for next year if the same situation should arise. I would also like to include more of the Individual Language-Experiences described by Johnson (1999) with next year's class. I'm wondering if I had more time to include such an activity, would the lower-level students be more encouraged to write? Thanks to the experience that I have had with my group of AM students this year, I will be more open to new experiences. I am just hoping that I discover those experiences earlier on in the school year.

Even after the conclusion of my study, a large majority of my students still look forward to and enjoy the writing journals. Both classes thoroughly enjoy the freedom that comes along with the journaling experiences, and I believe that their self-confidence has increased as well. Their level of independence when it comes to writing for any task has highly increased, and the students rely on me much less. By the end of March, most of the students are able to associate beginning and ending sounds in words, as well as some medial sounds independently. My students have grown much more than I could have ever imagined, and I am so unbelievably proud of their accomplishments. These two groups of students will forever hold a special place in my heart.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Approval Letter from Moravian College HSIRB



August 30, 2005

Amanda L. Strawn
475 Linden Avenue
Hellertown, PA 18055

Dear Amanda L. Strawn:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has reviewed your proposal: The Benefits of Using Daily Writing Journals in a Kindergarten Classroom. Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

A hard copy of this letter will be sent to you through U.S. mail shortly. If you do not receive the letter by the time you need to begin gathering data, please do not hesitate to contact me. Also, please retain at least one copy of the approval letter for your files. Good luck with the rest of your research.

Debra Wetcher-Hendricks
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1415 (voice)
medwh02@moravian.edu

Appendix B: Principal Consent Form

Dear Elementary Principal

September 2, 2005

During the 2005-2006 school year I will be taking courses towards a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses will help me stay in touch with the most effective ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for the students.

Moravian's program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research this year in my kindergarten classroom is to increase the letter-sound correspondence skills of my students, as well as their independent writing skills using individual writing journals. In doing this, I hope to increase student motivation in reading and writing, increase the students' understanding of the letters and the sounds they make, and also to encourage more independent writing across other curriculum areas. Each student has his or her own strengths and needs. Journaling in the writing journals will allow each student's ability to shine and communicate through their writing skills. This study will take place August 28, 2005 to December 23, 2005.

As part of my study of incorporating journaling into my curriculum, I will be observing students through their reading and writing. I plan to have students write in their journals in class. I plan to meet with each student to discuss what he or she has written, and to also keep track of his and hers personal growth. I will be conducting interviews and surveys about their thoughts and feelings both formally and informally during class time. Additionally, I will be collecting samples of student's work to analyze the students' writing skills across other curricular areas.

All children in my classroom will be involved with the writing journals as part of my regular curriculum. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect the child's grade in any way. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If a child is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to have them be a part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that child in my study.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at home (610) 838-1249 or e-mail me at astrawn@nazarethasd.org. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be reached at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1842 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

If you approve of my in-class study, please sign the bottom portion of this letter and return to me. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Amanda L. Strawn

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher participating in the research study, and that I read and understand this consent form, and received a copy. Amanda L. Strawn has my permission to conduct this research at the Elementary School.

Principal's Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Parent Consent Form

Dear Parents and/or Guardians,

September 7, 2005

I am currently taking courses toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses will help me stay in touch with the most effective ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for the students.

During this semester, August 30th through December 23rd, I am required to conduct a systematic study of my own teaching. The focus of my research this year in my kindergarten classroom is to increase the letter-sound correspondence skills of my students, as well as their independent writing skills using individual writing journals. In doing this, I hope to increase student motivation in reading and writing, increase the students' understanding of the letters and the sounds they make, and also to encourage more independent writing across other curriculum areas. Each student has his or her own strengths and needs. Journaling in the writing journals will allow each student's ability to shine and communicate through their writing skills.

As part of my study of incorporating journaling into my curriculum, I will be observing students through their reading and writing. I plan to have students write in their journals in class. I plan to meet with each student to discuss what he or she has written, and to also keep track of his and hers personal growth. I will be conducting interviews and surveys about their thoughts and feelings both formally and informally during class time. Additionally, I will be collecting samples of student's work to analyze the students' writing skills across other curricular areas. I will also ask that you as the parent and/or guardian also take part in the study by completing a Parent/Guardian survey. By completing and returning the survey, you will be consenting to include important information in my study.

All children in my classroom will be involved with the journal writing as part of my regular curriculum. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and **will not** affect the child's grade in any way. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If a child is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to have them be a part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that child in my study. Please notify me by phone or in writing if your child wishes to withdraw from the study. Your child will only be considered a subject in my study if I receive your written permission below.

If you have any questions or concerns about my research at any time, please feel free to contact the principal, Mrs. Davis, or me at the school at (610) 759-5228 or e-mail me at astrawn@nazarethasd.org. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be reached at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1842 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

If you approve of your child being a participant in my teacher research, please sign the bottom portion of this letter and return to me. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Strawn

I understand that Mrs. Strawn will be observing and collecting data as part of her research on writing journals, and my child has permission to be a participant in the study.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Child's Name: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Student Writing Survey

Name: _____

Writing Survey

1. I like to write.



2. What do you like to write?



3. I think I am a good writer.



4. Writing makes me feel



Appendix E: Parent Survey-Beginning of Study

Name _____ Date _____

Parent/Guardian Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Please note that by completing and returning this survey, you are giving consent for the information to be shared in Mrs. Strawn's study.

1. My child likes to write.

1	2	3	4
not at all	very little	frequently	daily

2. My child likes to read or be read to at home.

1	2	3	4
not at all	very little	frequently	daily

3. Describe your child's attitudes towards reading and writing at home.

4. Do you read with your child at home? _____ How often? _____

5. Do you write with your child at home? _____ How often? _____

6. What do you feel are your child's academic strengths? Weaknesses?

Appendix F: Parent Survey-End of Study

Your Child's Name _____

Date _____

Parent/Guardian Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Please note that by completing and returning this survey, you are giving consent for the information to be shared in Mrs. Strawn's study.

1. My child likes to write.

1	2	3	4
not at all	very little	frequently	daily

2. My child likes to read or be read to at home.

1	2	3	4
not at all	very little	frequently	daily

3. Describe your child's attitudes towards reading and writing at home.

4. Do you read with your child at home? _____ How often? _____

5. Do you write with your child at home? _____ How often? _____

6. Have you noticed a change in your child's attitude towards writing since the start of the school year? If so, how has it changed?