

# A Sense of Story: Interactive Journal Writing in Kindergarten

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Journal writing is a way to encourage process writing which promotes a sense of story. Written interactions or dialogues between the child and the teacher can support the story as children are involved in the writing process. The article describes one way to support the development of a story through journal writing. Children begin the story on their first page of the journal. The teacher responds in writing and the child subsequently converses with the teacher to produce stories and personal narratives. The written conversation helps children produce a story with a sense of meaning. Suggestions for kindergarten teachers and teacher education students include how to create the journal, what the writing center looks like, the necessity for a long-term commitment to writing, the importance of verbal and written interactions, and directions for beginning the interactive journal writing experience.

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**KEY WORDS:** process writing; sense of story; kindergarten; journal writing.

## INTRODUCTION

The teacher hands Nicole a new journal, ten pages of plain white paper bound by a construction paper cover and stapled on the side. Nicole says, "I can do anything I want [pause]. I think I'll write about the president. I'll have to make up my mind—there are so many things I do not know what to do. I think I'll write about places I'd like. First I'll write about Disney World." Nicole starts drawing the picture and exaggerates the sounds of the words (Fig. 1), "Mickey Mouse is running and he is going to jump over that half circle." The first page of Nicole's journal is complete. Nicole expresses her knowledge of a concept of story through her writing. She thinks about what she will write, draws a picture, and starts her story.

The scene takes place in a kindergarten classroom in April of the academic year. Children in this classroom have been given the opportunity to write since the begin-

ning of the year. The writing center was open every day. Children drew pictures, sent messages to friends, made cards, or expressed themselves in writing and drawing to fulfill their needs.

Journal writing began in February. Although children were encouraged to write every day, the amount of time they spent at the writing center ranged from 20 minutes to an hour. Generally, children stayed in the writing center area where their writing tools were readily accessible.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the 1980s, a flurry of excitement over journal writing became a fertile ground for discussion. Fulwiler's (1987) *The Journal Book* is devoted exclusively to this topic. Articles in the book present accounts of journal writing in classrooms from elementary school to higher education. Although journal writing in kindergarten did not receive the intensive investigation of older children, it was the focus of several studies.

In the 1980s, research of early writing evidence indicates that kindergartners are capable of writing, at different levels, their own stories. Hipple (1985), Kintishon (1986), and Hall and Duffy (1987) each

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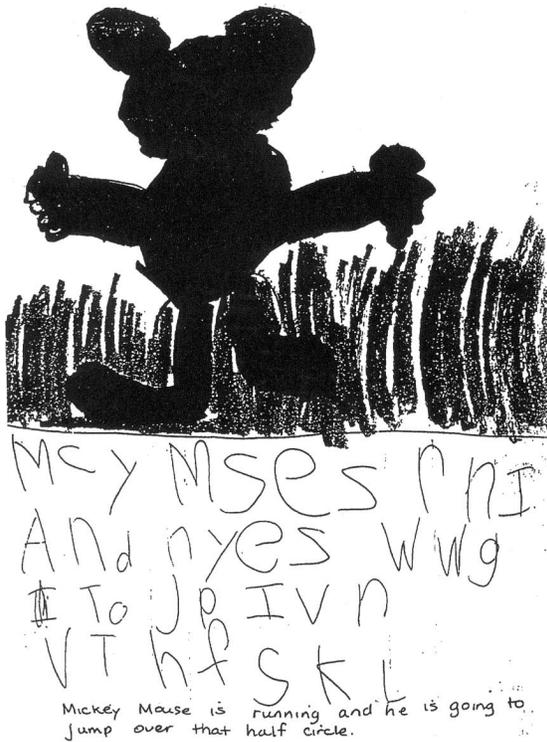


Fig. 1.

looked at journal writing as process writing. All graphics are labeled and accepted as writing. Hipple (1985) described journal writing in her kindergarten classroom of 23 children. She reported that a sizable amount of time was spent in writing each day; 30 minutes of this time was devoted to journal writing. All graphics were termed writing so that the children would think of themselves as writers. Some dictation was taken daily by an adult regardless of the child's ability to produce conventional writing. Two children per day were encouraged to share their writing with the rest of the class. Three content categories were found. In the first one, real events in their lives were depicted. The second category involved fantasy tales, and the third category involved stories which were descriptions of isolated concepts about pictures drawn, such as, "This is my house." The first two categories indicate that kindergarten children are able to produce writing which shows a developing sense of story.

For 30 minutes a day, Kintishon (1986) followed the daily journal writing experiences of a group of students from pre-kindergarten to first grade. The children wrote their own stories, but often creativity seemed to falter as independence was gained. Additional motivation or help seems to be needed to enable children to successfully write stories.

Hall and Duffy (1987) worked with kindergarten children on process writing which included dialogue journal writing in Duffy's classroom. Duffy's main goal was to create a meaningful dialogue with the child. The intention of the dialogue was to create an interested audience for the child. Duffy reported that children's dialogue journal writing became more distinctive and more spontaneous, and it helped to develop a special teacher-child relationship.

More recent discussions about kindergarten journal writing focus on areas such as writing with computers (Haugland, 1996), the use of adults as writing models in the classroom (Holmes, 1993), and the effects of contextual factors on writing (Brock & Green, 1992). The purpose of the studies concerns the development of meaning in kindergarten writing.

Haugland (1996) discussed the use of a word processing program for journal writing. Older children typed in their own story while younger children dictated their message. Teachers encouraged children by listening to the children through their writing and affirming each child's unique qualities. With the use of computers, as part of young children's writing, meaning is stressed. The important focus was on the children's expression of thoughts and ideas through the use of journals.

Journal writing in Sue Grainiest's kindergarten involved an adult modeling writing at a table with the children (Holmes, 1993). Children in this situation drew less and wrote more with adult role models than by themselves. Journals also varied more in both interests and topics. Children began writing with more developmental spelling, and finally began to read what they wrote. Purpose was an integral part of the process as the children's writing began to flourish.

Brock and Green (1992) analyzed data of kindergarten children's writings, social interactions, and interviews over a 19-week period. Children chose their own topics and were encouraged to share their journals with their peers and the adults in the classroom. Conclusions drawn indicated that the physical environment influenced text and topic, the kindergartner's purpose for writing influenced topics, social group influenced text and topics, and the role of the teacher exerted a strong influence over the written text.

What is missing from journal writing as seen in many classrooms today is a way to encourage process writing which promotes a sense of story. Children in the studies presented label pictures, wrote or dictated short sentences, and drew pictures. The next day's writing or labeling is disassociated from the day before. The literature supports the idea that literacy programs for children should be concerned with reading and writing experi-

ences that focus on meaning rather than skills (Ellermeyer, 1988). Through creating and recreating ideas about written language, children begin to understand the many ways a person can construct meaning (Kroll, 1991). However, kindergarten children can go beyond writing for meaning as a 1-day experience. If a goal of writing in kindergarten is to promote a sense of story, as well as to encourage process writing, written dialogue with children about their writing will promote a developing sense of story (Cress, 1989).

The following describes one way to support the development of story through kindergarten journal writing.

### JOURNAL WRITING FOR DEVELOPING A SENSE OF STORY

Children are handed a journal on the first day and asked to use the first page to write about anything they would like. Based on the first day's picture and graphics, the teacher asks a question in writing on the top of the next page. When the child receives the journal back on the following day, the teacher's dialogue response is read to each child immediately before they write.

After each entry the teacher briefly responds in writing to encourage writing as a form of communication rather than for evaluation purposes. For example, a child's entry might include a picture of an animal labeled, "M DG" for "My Dog." The teacher responds in writing with "What do you like to do with your dog?" rather than "That is a nice picture." The teacher reads the question to the child. In response, the child continues the story by answering the question. The narrative continues for ten pages written by the child, interacting with the teacher to create a story.

In this way, children develop an understanding that they can communicate a written message or a story by responding to the teacher's dialogue or comments in their journals. Questions or statements written by the teacher or the child help children realize they can communicate with an adult on paper. Children use the teacher's written statements and questions to maintain an ongoing conversation or story in their journals. Children read and reread the adult written questions and comments. With practice, children begin to acquire the ability to converse in writing with the teacher to produce stories and personal narratives. The ability to carry on a written conversation helps children produce a story with a sense of meaning. Interactive journals such as these allow kindergartners to enjoy a sense of story over a period of 5–10 days, depending on the size of the journal and the interest of the child.

Who else was in the race? Who won the race?  
 AND DONALD  
 AND ALVINSY  
 CTRIP AND  
 ME VICMS  
 WON THE  
 RACE

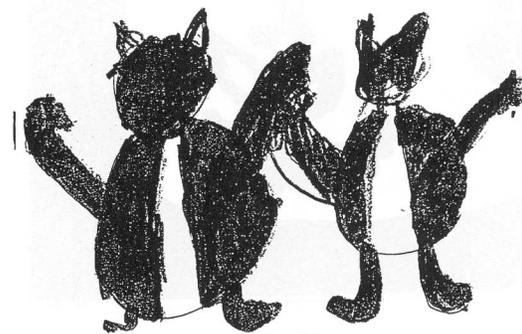


Fig. 2.

Returning to Nicole's story, in response to Mickey's running race, at the top of the second page of the journal the teacher writes, "Who else was in the race? Who won the race?" The teacher reads it to Nicole. Nicole repeats what was read and starts writing and exaggerating the sounds she hears (Fig. 2). "Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck and all the Disney characters and me." She reads it to the teacher and says, "Now I'll write who won." Nicole points to the teacher's dialogue and asks, "Does this spell 'the'?" She then writes "vi cms won the race," read as "the chipmunks won the race." Later in the story the teacher, in writing, asks "What did you play next?" Nicole responds through writing and drawing and thinking (Fig. 3), "Let's see what else, we played stick the nose on the chipmunk, I never won but Donald Duck won."

Nicole listens to the teacher read the dialogue, repeats what is read so she will remember how to read it, and begins to respond. Clearly she is using her knowledge of writing and a developing sense of story in response to the teacher's question. In rereading her writing she is practicing her role as author in order to continue writing the story. Later in the story she uses writing as a metacognitive process to think about what she will

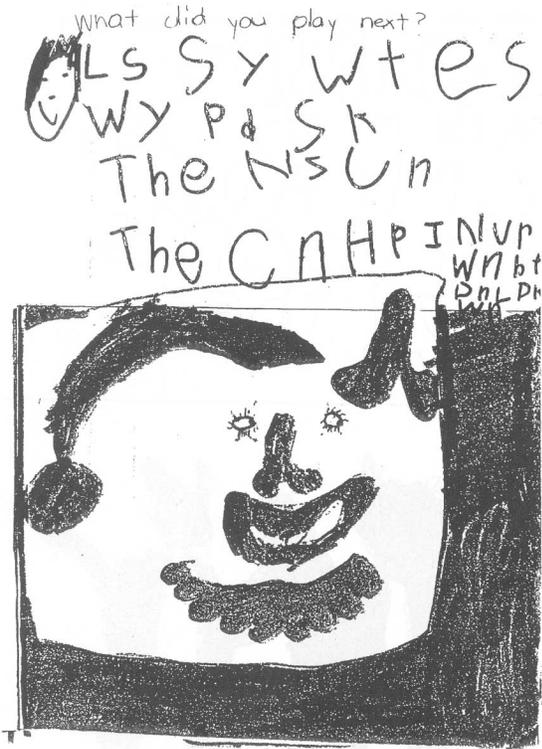


Fig. 3.

write, "Let's see what else—I don't know but I will know soon." Nicole demonstrates the competence of a young writer, using her knowledge of reading and writing to develop an entire ten page story.

## BENEFITS OF JOURNAL WRITING

Journal writing needs to be an integral part of the kindergarten program. This writing process emphasizes not only writing development, but also writing as a way of communicating a story or a message. Teachers need to make a long-term commitment to this teaching technique in order for a sense of story to emerge.

Teachers must understand that the interactions children have with self and others are extremely important in encouraging and enhancing writing. Time for peer interaction and interaction with self is essential for journal writing. Children benefit from interactions for the purposes of planning, rehearsing, revising, providing information, helping peers, evaluating, and story telling.

Teachers' dialogues assist children in journal writing by promoting the importance of communicating a message. Dialogues written by an adult also provide a conventional form of English for the child to imitate in writing and to practice reading. Dialogues also reinforce

personal interaction between the teacher and child. If the emphasis in kindergarten is on meaning, it is time to include written interactions in process writing in journals.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING JOURNAL WRITING

*Creating the Journals*—Place ten pages of blank paper in a construction paper cover and bind or staple the book on the left side or on the top. If you are writing daily, 2 weeks seems to be the interest length of most kindergarten stories. Length can be adjusted for individual or developmental differences. Using a series of colors for the covers of the booklets helps teachers get a sense of who is writing frequently.

Although encouraging children to only complete one page a day seems a bit restrictive, the suggestion keeps the quality of drawing and writing as the most important objective rather than racing through the booklet to finish it. As time goes by, some children will need more room to complete their thoughts for the day and common sense would suggest giving them the opportunity to add additional pages to their daily writing on an individually appropriate basis. In response to children who feel there is not enough room for writing after they finish drawing, it helps some children to show them how to make a line across the page to place writing primarily on one half and drawing on the other half. Of course this only helps if the child is able to differentiate between drawing and writing.

*Writing Center*—The writing center is a large rectangular table which seats as many as eight children at a time. The table used in this classroom was low enough to the ground that the children sat on the floor to write at the table. Certainly any arrangement for writing that suits the needs of the children should be provided. If more children want to write, it is easy to provide extra writing tools to be taken to other areas of the room.

*Writing Tools*—A wide variety of tools is suggested. Large or thin crayons, pencils, pens, and markers should be provided. High quality water based markers will generally not "bleed" through bond paper. Many avid writers change from writing with markers to pens when they discover they can fit more on each page.

*Time*—A long-term commitment to writing journals is necessary. Some children do not fully respond to writing a message or story until about 4 weeks into the daily writing program. If time is constrained with a half-day program, two to three times a week still provides the consistency needed to keep the story going. Children should be able to choose varying amounts of time to write based

on their writing for the day. Some children will stay 10–15 minutes, while it will take others 45 minutes to complete their page of writing.

*Verbal Interactions*—The interactions children have with self and others are extremely important in encouraging and enhancing writing. Group tables of six to eight children give enough opportunity for children to exchange ideas in planning, rehearsing, revising, providing information, helping peers, evaluating, and story telling. While interactions make writing a noisy activity teachers should encourage this productive noise as important to communicating messages or stories.

*Written Interactions*—Questions or statements written by the teacher should be clearly printed on the blank page following that day's writing. For instance, if a child draws a picture and labels it "mom," after the child leaves the center, the adult would turn to the next page and write, "What would you like to tell me about your mom?" Writing on the next page helps the child with rereading the question asked, and referring to it during the writing time. On the next day, the child starts the new page after seeing and hearing the teacher's dialogue.

*The First Days*—On the first day, select a heterogeneous group of about six students. Hand them their writing book and simply say, "This is your new writing book. You can write about anything you want to in this book and then I will write back to you. For today, use the first page and start drawing and writing." Children will get ideas from each other. The teacher needs to be supportive of all ideas to encourage children to begin. Children who hesitate should be encouraged to get ideas from a friend. In the beginning, some of the children will not be able to read what they have written. Although it is not important to write the conventional writing under the child's writing, if you cannot immediately write the question for the next day's writing, it is useful to jot a note about what the child has written on a separate piece of paper. The teacher should be supportive of all levels of writing, from scribbling, random strings of letters, invented spellings, and conventional writing as valued pieces of writing.

The next day, the teacher reads the dialogue to each child as the journal is handed back to the child. Children will often reread what they heard, or a version of it, to their peers. The retelling of the question or statement

posed in the written interaction helps children focus on the day's writing. Often they will ask a peer to help them remember what it says.

"New" writers can be added to the group as the teacher feels comfortable. New writers will quickly be accepted and coached by the initial group of writers.

At the end of each of the ten-page journals, the teacher writes a quick note to the child's parent, explaining the journal writing urging support for their young authors.

## CONCLUSIONS

Journal writing for kindergarten can do more than develop process writing. Implications from past and present research suggest that kindergarten children can write for meaning. The present recommendations add to the writing process ways for kindergarten children to develop a complete story aided by written interactions with the teacher. Writing flourishes when we treat kindergarten children as authors who can dialogue with adults to create a story.

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