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# Using Journals in First Grade: A Teacher's Reflections

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Just as students need authentic purposes for writing, it was the IRCJ call for manuscripts that captured my interest. As I considered submitting a proposal for this issue on journals and journaling, memories of using journals with my first graders were rekindled. Thoughts of sharing these vignettes through my own writing have developed over time. A kind of prewriting has been occurring as I've shared the stories with undergraduate and graduate students. The following reflections are remembrances of a former first-grade teacher who continues to write, teach and learn.

The notion of asking first graders to write in journals or to engage in the writing process was a novel idea for many educators in this country only a decade ago. Through the National Writing Project movement, research on emergent literacy, and the informative writings of Donald Graves (1983), Lucy Calkins (1994) and others, our understanding regarding literacy has been enhanced, and the opportunities for fostering students' literacy acquisition have been extended.

In 1987 as a recent fellow of the National Writing Project and writing project teacher consultant, I was committed to fostering writing opportunities for all students in my first grade classroom. Too many teachers, engaged in conversations of which I had been a part, claimed that first graders couldn't and wouldn't write. After a transforming experience of being a writer myself for six weeks in a summer writing institute in 1985, I knew that my first graders would write and that they could write. Their approximations would be valued; and they would be given many meaningful opportunities to engage in writing for their own purposes.

As a new first-grade teacher, planning for the first days of school in August 1987 was exciting, exhilarating, and often overwhelming. Reflecting on that time in my teaching career, I remember a strong commitment to have my first-grade students write the first day of school. Among a long list of preparations for the beginning of the year was that of preparing individual student writing journals. I made each

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child a journal with unlined paper in a 3-prong Duo-tang folder. So, there on the first day of school in August 1987, first graders in my class wrote in their journals like I knew they could. I don't remember my exact prompt to engage them to write, but my recollection is one of fostering an environment that would be supportive, inviting, and risk-free. I modeled what I might write about, and encouraged the students to do the same. As a former special education teacher, these were exciting times that offered new experiences and challenges. The responsibility was overwhelming! I was up to the challenge, but still confronted by the task of teaching first graders to read and write.

That first day of first grade my students wrote stories that showed evidence of each child's developmental level. Some drew their stories or scribbled, while others wrote random letters or used invented spellings to capture their ideas on paper. Each response offered me the opportunity to extend that particular child's literacy development. I was thrilled with their responses! I *knew* that they could write and now I could prove it to others!

### Journals and Mini-Lessons

Overwhelmed by my first day of teaching in first grade, I did not read the journals of my students until the end of the second day. As I began to read through their journals and make anecdotal notes about each child's writings, I started to think about my mini-lesson for the next day. Knowing that most first graders add to their writings to make them more complete, I wasn't surprised to find such an example in those journals. But, I was surprised to discover the clarity of one particular example (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

August 19 1987 Eddie  
I MAK MOM  
HAPI MAK DAD  
HAP

August 20 1987 Eddie  
I MAK MOM HAP  
I MAK DAD HAP  
I MAK MIY SUS HAP  
I MAK THE HOW WR  
HAP

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This concept would be developed for my mini-lesson the following day. I planned to get Eddie's permission to use his writing and share it with the class. I made transparencies of his first two journal entries, and planned how I was going to invite students to do what Eddie had done in *his* journal writing. The next day, with permission requested and granted, I gathered the students around the overhead projector and explained that I had something to show them about writing.

I don't think I'll ever forget the look on Eddie's face when I projected his writing onto the large screen for all his classmates to see. A look of surprise and pride covered his little face, and his beautiful brown eyes widened with amazement! With Eddie's first journal entry available for all to see, I asked Eddie if he would like to read what he had written the first day of school. After he had read his first entry, then I showed the transparency of his second entry. I made the comment that he had written the same thing the second day but had added a little more to it. At that point I asked, "Eddie, why did you write the same thing the second day that you wrote the first day of school?" He stated as a matter of fact, "Well, I didn't get finished writing what I wanted to write the first day." Eddie's reply was genuine and helped to extend the invitation of that particular mini-lesson to others. With this demonstration and explanation, many students came to realize that they too could add more to their stories.

I had not anticipated the powerful impact of my teaching decision to use his writings. Eddie authored and published the first book written in our class titled *Eddie Makes the Whole World Happy* and later the first chapter book, *Army, A Chapter Book for Kids*. Other students accepted the invitation and added to their stories throughout the year. But, most importantly, these students were on their way to building our literate community that we would flourish in as readers and writers that year.

Mini-lessons began each period of writing known as writing workshop (Calkins, 1994). The mini-lesson was a whole class activity that usually was five-to-ten minutes in length. The purpose was to give options to the student writers by adding information to the class through direct teacher instruction. Particular mini-lessons arose from a need that was identified in the students' writings. Most of the mini-lessons ended with specific suggestions of what students could do next with their writing. These lessons were viewed as invitations to students.

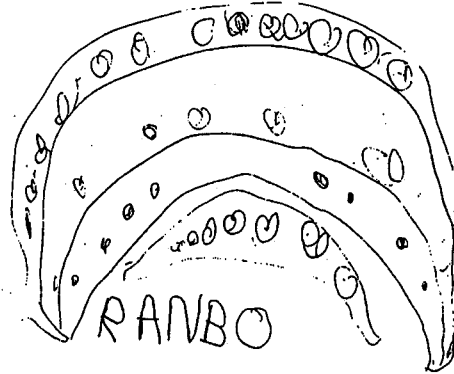
As Calkins (1994) suggests, categories from which teachers can begin to build their own mini-lessons may include, but are not limited to, ways to begin writing workshops, classroom procedures, revision

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strategies, and qualities of good writing. A mini-lesson that combined two of these categories was originated from another first-grade student's writing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

AUGUST DEBRIA  
191987



Dedria's journal entry on the first day of school was also shared with students. This mini-lesson provided an appropriate lesson combining the early writing of first graders with that of children's literature. During the mini-lesson in which Dedria's writing was shared, we discussed that Dedria was an author like Tana Hoban. Using *Push, Pull, Empty, Full: A Book of Opposites* by Hoban (1972), we talked about how Dedria wrote like Tana Hoban, who also wrote one word on the page to describe the picture or concept. Dedria's picture of a rainbow was labelled in the same manner using her invented spelling. For some students this mini-lesson was an invitation to add words to their pictures. A variety of needs was met with a variety of mini-lessons appropriate for varying developmental levels in writing.

Mini-lessons that were developed from journals were powerful because they were planned based on specific instruction needed for a particular student, or class of students, and because examples came from the students' own journal writings. Teaching was responsive to student need and, thus, powerful for literacy learning.

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## A Variety of Journals

Throughout the year various types of journals were used as powerful tools for literacy learning and teaching. Writing in individual student journals was a part of our daily schedule, which had been an established routine from the first day of school. Additional ideas for journals emerged as student need indicated. Traveling journals and science journals were two such journals that extended and enhanced literacy opportunities.

Expectations for students to write, and encouragement to support their writing, were present in our literate community. Instructional time was dedicated to sharing the students' writings through the use of an author's circle. Students particularly liked sitting together in a large circle to share their writings with each other. The author's chair was an antique desk with the folding chair seat attached in front of the desk, circa 1920. The children sat in the author's chair to read their stories, poems and other writings to the entire class. Those students who were listening would give feedback to the author regarding his or her particular piece of writing. We would always begin with something that we liked about the piece, and then offered suggestions for clarifications.

Toward the end of the first grading period, I realized that some students were writing and sharing more than others. It also appeared that some children had more supportive home environments for promoting literacy than others. Therefore, the concept of a traveling journal was originated to meet and to support the literacy needs of the students. This journal was obtained for each student to use while away from school. It was made available to travel with the student from school to home, and to other places. A commercial black-marble, bound composition notebook was selected as the traveling journal, for durability and student convenience.

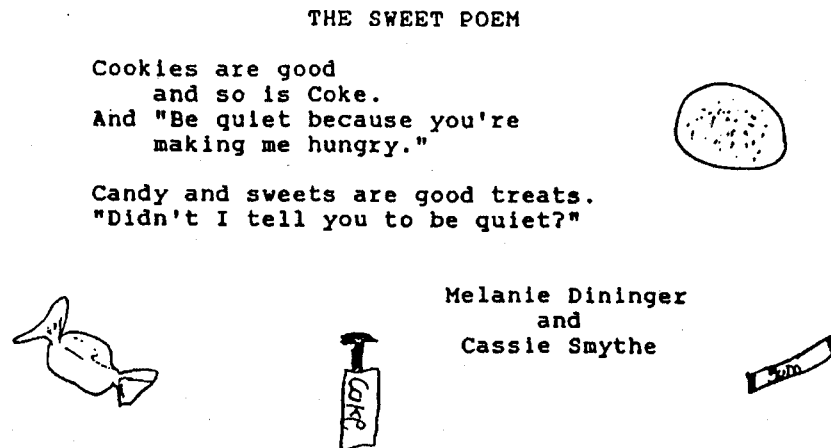
I wanted my students to understand that their writing was personal and that each one had something to say. I also wanted the students to realize writing was a pleasurable lifetime activity that didn't occur just at school. When I first introduced the idea of writing in the traveling journal, I suggested that writing might be enjoyed at home, at grandmother's or anywhere.

One day during sharing time at the author's circle, Cassie and Melanie asked to read a poem that they had written together while riding home on the bus. Of course, I was elated that they were using their traveling journals and that they were finding other opportunities to write as I had hoped. "The Sweet Poem" by Melanie and Cassie is

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an example of student-initiated, independent writing that was first drafted in the traveling journals and later published for our class Poetry Box and class anthology (see Figure 3). Through the use of the students' traveling journals, ideas for individual and co-authored poems, songs and stories were generated.

Figure 3



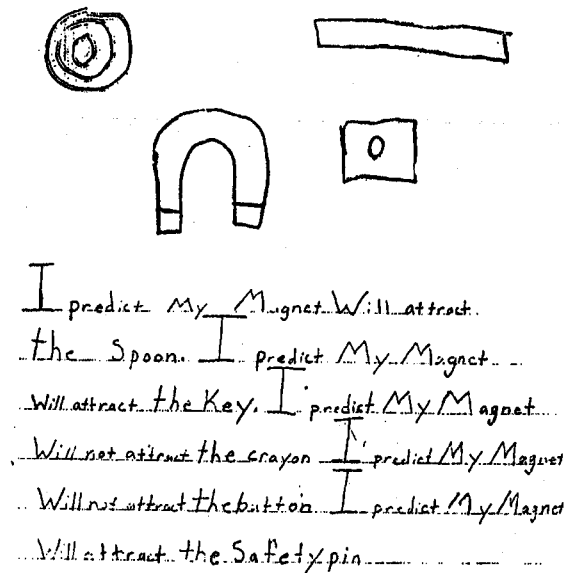
Science thematic journals were another kind of journal widely used in our first-grade classroom. A myriad of topics provided themes for science instruction and class thematic journals throughout the year. Opportunities for students to observe, and to write about their observations, first occurred as students were asked to observe mealworms at the beginning of the school year. The notion of integrated curriculum was promoted through this use of thematic journals with a science focus. Students were engaged in using process skills for exploring and discovering many concepts through science teaching and learning. The use of the thematic journals provided rich literacy opportunities for integrating writing, reading, listening, and speaking while engaged in the study of a particular content area. Such was the case of the science unit which focused on our class pet. The science journal titled *The Hamster* was an example of the rich learning opportunities that fostered literacy and inquiry skills in an integrated manner. *The Betta Fish*, *Mealworms*, and *Caterpillars*, *Chrysalises*, and *Butterflies* were examples of other class thematic journals made by compiling individual student writings on a daily basis through learning centers.

Throughout the year, learning centers offered students experiences

to explore science concepts. In the spring, *Chicks and Eggs* was compiled as one of the science journals focusing on a specific unit of study. Students had the opportunity to watch baby chicks hatch from eggs housed in an incubator. Each day in the science center, students made observations and recorded their thoughts on paper. At the end of center time, students shared their writings with others while informing their classmates of the latest information about the eggs and chicks, hamsters, or butterflies!

Students were always encouraged to be scientists through a hands-on approach to discovery by observing, questioning, classifying, and predicting. When students were exploring and learning about magnets, *The Magnet Journal* was written and compiled over the course of the two-week unit. Students were given a variety of sizes and shapes of magnets with small paper bags that contained various items such as a paper clip, a barrette, a cork, a needle, a spoon, a crayon, a key, and a button. Each student in the learning center had the task of predicting whether the magnet would attract or would not attract a particular item. After predictions were made and written, then the students would conduct experiments to test their hypotheses regarding the various items. Discoveries were made and learning was enjoyed. Student writings were offered as daily entries in the thematic journals and often were accompanied by detailed illustrations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



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### Student Anthologies

Students perceived themselves as authors because of the rich literacy environment, the various literacy events, and the acceptance of the students' varying writing abilities from the first day of school. At the end of the year in May, student anthologies were published as a celebration of the first-grade authors and their work.

By the end of the year, students had numerous journal entries in their daily journals, traveling journals and class-compiled thematic journals. From these sources students selected their favorite writings for inclusion in the end-of-the-year anthology, a compilation of representative student writings across content areas during that academic year. The variety of journals used during the year provided impetus for a wide range of student submissions for the class anthology.

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Students looked forward to having their writings printed for all to see and read. Each child received his or her own bound copy of the class anthology on the last day of school. It was a gratifying sight when children were pouring over their anthologies to find a personal entry, to look at an illustration which accompanied their writing, or to read a favorite story or poem such as "The Sweet Poem." These first-grade students spent a great deal of time reading and sharing their writings with one another as a final literacy event, which was enjoyed in our community by all the readers and writers.

*Writing is Dino-Might* was one class anthology which coincided with the culmination of a unit on dinosaurs. Every year, each class of students was encouraged to think about a title for their particular anthology. Possible titles were generated and students voted on their favorite. *Writing is to Learn* was the title of the anthology another year. The idea for this title was taken from a class book which had been written based on *A Hole is to Dig* by Ruth Krauss (1952). Students loved writing silly definitions, such as "A ducktionary is for ducks to learn new words." Through journal writing and peer reading and responding groups, the productivity and creativity of the writers were always high.

### A Teacher Continues to Learn

Even though the majority of my responsibility is teacher education for undergraduate and graduate students, I continue to work on a



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limited basis with students in the primary grades. While reminiscing about the memorable teaching experiences that I enjoyed as a first-grade teacher, I began to think about my evolving philosophy of literacy teaching and learning.

I realized that if I were to return to a first-grade classroom, I would continue to engage in many of the same instructional practices, such as using journals as an important tool for developing student literacy. I would continue to develop specific writing skills through mini-lessons, and journals would still be one of the primary means of providing independent writing opportunities. I would continue to have writing conferences which valued and discussed students' journal writings. A writing center would always be included in the learning center offerings. I would continue to publish student writing, but foremost, the literate community would be built and maintained with students engaged in meaningful literacy events throughout the year.

However, as I was reflecting, I also realized that my personal theories of how children learn to read and write, and how to teach children to read and write, have continued to develop over time and through experience. Therefore, I would strive to improve teaching and learning opportunities for the students somewhat differently. Through my own learning as a teacher, learner, and teacher educator, now I would consider the following to enhance literacy learning and teaching:

- plan time for interactive writing with small groups of students,
- tap student journals as a more significant source for authentic student assessment,
- encourage student-led parent conferences including student writing as a possible focal point for the conference,
- focus more on teaching for effective writing strategies (e.g., hearing and recording sounds; fluent writing of high frequency words; generating new words from known words)
- capitalize on journal entries to promote independent practice of effective writing strategies,
- hold students more accountable for all the things that they have evidenced that they can do in their writing (e.g., use quotation marks; write known high frequency words; begin sentences with a capital letter).

As personal theory continues to develop for each of us, over time and through experience, the need to reflect upon our practice is critical to

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refinement of that practice. Reflections not only give us a sense of where we have been, but also help us to determine what we believe about literacy learning and teaching, and provide momentum for our current practice based on theory-in-action.

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