The Birth of a Writer

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Abstract

As a university teacher with expertise in children’s literature, the author discusses the development of a P-3 grade writer as she participates in typical preschool and early grade writing curricula in class and writes storybooks freely and expressively at home. The differences in her writing and her attitudes toward writing suggest the necessity as well as specific considerations for implementing storybooks in school writing programs.

Young children understand story. They are familiar with story acting, storytelling and storybooks. When children are given an opportunity to play (story acting), they are ready to tell and create stories through talking, drawing, and writing (storytelling and storybooks) (Hubbard, 2015).

Since young children enjoy exploring, figuring out, and playing around with stories, Ray and Cleveland (2004) teach their students how to write by using storybooks and story writing. Cleveland staples blank paper together to make books in which her primary students take risks and write much more than they would in journals. These teachers discovered that making storybooks has many benefits: Children write a lot, children enjoy writing, and children become writers. In contrast, some primary teachers teach writing through very simple journal writing. Their young students use a spiral or bound journal to write about familiar topics such as how they spent their weekend or other personal experiences. Children typically draw a picture first and then write a sentence or two on the lines below.

In this article I share the journey of one child who wrote bland, lackluster journal entries in school, but created original, engaging picture books at home. I include examples of Aaliyah’s journal entries along with some of the books she created at the same time, discussing differences between the styles of writing. I close with ways primary teachers can incorporate book making into their writing instruction.

Early Writing Instruction

Many teachers and researchers have advocated for beginning with journal writing in the primary grades (Behymer, 2003; Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999; King, 2012). Daily journal writing helps young children learn phonics and written language conventions. Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) explained that if children are to be successful at journal writing they need to write about topics they choose themselves, have social interaction with peers and adults, play and experiment with written language, observe writing demonstrations from a teacher, and try out their own kid writing.

Calkins (1994) found that young children can write much sooner than teachers or parents realize. Most students come to school knowing a handful of letters, and they can use this knowledge to begin writing labels, creating stories, forming poems, and composing songs. Rog (2007) suggested that primary students write on the very first day of school and each day after. Early writers can
begin with a picture and add letters and sounds to form words. All research recommends that primary teachers demonstrate how to write in the early grades and scaffold instruction to support emergent writers (Calkins, 1994; Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999; Rog, 2007).

Even though many have advocated that they do this through journal writing, some teachers have switched to making books. When Brown (2010) first began teaching kindergarten, she used journals but found they weren’t personally meaningful for her students. Her kindergarteners’ writing was short on content, creativity and spark. When Brown changed to book writing, the level of authentic and meaningful writing increased. In fact, she found that students were deeply engaged in making books and did not want to stop writing. Another teacher, Snyders (2014), noted that when her kindergarteners created picture books during writing workshop they formed individual writing identities, and their writing stamina increased. Students made books in a style similar to Mo Willems and started to think like writers.

Letters vs. Stories (Preschool)

Aaliyah attended a private preschool where her teacher taught one alphabet letter each week and the students practiced writing the letter every day during that week. Later in the school year Aaliyah copied and wrote two and three letter words and practiced writing her name. But beginning in preschool Aaliyah made picture books at home during playtime. As Ray and Cleveland (2004) suggested, Aaliyah enjoyed selecting materials and making books about her family, creating individual books for each family member.

One of the first books Aaliyah created was The Kissing Monster about the family dog, Sushi, who kisses a lot (see Figure 1).
The types of writing that Aaliyah completed at preschool were quite different from her writing at home. At preschool Aaliyah copied and practiced writing letters, numbers, small words and her name. In contrast, *The Kissing Monster* shows that Aaliyah knew a lot about what goes inside a story. She understood that stories have a beginning, middle, and end; that every page includes writing and pictures; and that illustrations complement the writing or show different things. In addition, Aaliyah knew that there are letters for every word and that spaces go between the words. In her story the lines signified spaces between words. She used mostly capital letters and was sounding out words. Aaliyah was definitely aware of punctuation, which she showed by putting an exclamation point at the beginning and end of one sentence. The story structure and the print awareness in this picture book confirm that Aaliyah was a writer, even though the writing she completed at preschool only showed her ability for copy work.

**Sentences vs. Details and Variety (Kindergarten)**

Aaliyah attended a public elementary school where the primary grades had a Monday tradition of having every child write about his/her weekend first thing in the morning. On the other days Aaliyah’s kindergarten class copied sight words, practiced writing numbers or addition facts, and wrote in a journal for 45 minutes while the kindergarten teacher took attendance and worked with individual students. Like her preschool teacher, Aaliyah’s kindergarten teacher introduced a new alphabet letter each week during reading time. She showed students how to make the letter and taught them a song to help them remember the sound the letter makes. As a class they made a list of words beginning with the letter for the class word wall.

Some examples of Aaliyah’s weekend news in kindergarten included “I watched a movie at home” and “I vacuumed the house.” These entries demonstrate the type of writing Aaliyah completed in kindergarten—one sentence with a picture at the top.

In February Aaliyah spent two days at home with a fever. As she lay in bed, she created the picture book *Fever* (see Figure 2).
1- Fever

2- Haveing a fever is not fun

3- Becaase you have to stay in BeD

4- You have to take nap’s

5- And it isent fun (hee hee)

6- You get out of bed all the time and your mommy is not happy

7- You have to drink likuids.

8- You miss scool.

You get to stay home! That’s fun! I am well!
Ray (2004) noted that young writers usually attempt only a sentence or two in journals because that is the space available. In most of Aaliyah’s weekend news or journal entries that is what she did—drew a picture and wrote a couple of sentences. Yet writing the picture book Fever seemed to give her some momentum; her weekend news entry was much longer, and it showed the picture book’s influence. “I stayed in bed the whole weekend. It was not fun! I don’t like having a fever! I hate it. It’s really not fun.”

Comparing the writing and thinking in Aaliyah’s weekend news entries to the nine pages in Fever, we find considerably more content and voice. The picture book showed that Aaliyah knew how to communicate a story or experience because it was organized and consistent, with a clear ending; the narrative included more details. In addition, she added humor and speech bubbles, and she sounded out difficult words such as “likuids” and “scool.” Furthermore, Aaliyah showed her growth in print awareness as she left spaces between her words and spelled frequently used words correctly.

At home during playtime Aaliyah made over 20 books as a five-year-old, with variety ranging from color and number books to adventure titles: The Tomato and The Gingerbread Puppy. In addition, she wrote about losing her first tooth and about her pet—Sushi Loves Us.

**Routine vs. Thoughtfulness and Voice (First Grade)**

Aaliyah continued to write about her weekend every Monday morning in first grade. She also wrote in journals for science and social studies, as well as about what she was reading during language arts. Examples of Aaliyah’s weekend news in first grade still showed only routine thinking: “I went to my neboir’s,” “I do not remember what I did,” and “I was riding my bike.” Some of her journal entries were longer: “I had family and friend’s over at my house! I went out for lunch at a chinese restaraunt! I had ice-cream for dessert!” These examples do not show much thinking or writing stamina but represent what she completed—one to three sentences with a few details.

During January Aaliyah’s first grade class read about Martin Luther King and other African American leaders. After the social studies lesson she wrote a journal entry: “The president’s live in the White house. Brock Obama was the first brown man to be president of th[e] united states of America.” Later when she returned home she made a picture book about Barack Obama (see Figure 3).
OBAMA: Born in America

He is brown like me because he is African-American.

He is president of the U.S.A.

He was born in Honolulu, Hawaii.

OBAMA has a dog named Bo.

His nick-name is BARRY!!!

He Lives in the White House.

He has two daughters named Maila & Natasha OBAMA.

He was a little boy when segregation was around.
While Aaliyah’s journal entry shows a couple of details about the President of the United States, her *Obama* biography has voice, style, and much more information. The journal entry has two sentences, whereas the storybook has eight. The picture book is simple, with descriptive facts about President Obama including his nickname, birthplace, daughters’ names, and the family dog. Furthermore, Aaliyah plays around with language by using an ampersand symbol and a hyphen. But most important, Aaliyah writes from her heart, sharing that she is “brown” just like Barack Obama.

Many of the picture books Aaliyah made at home during first grade were about animals such as worms and butterflies. She also wrote an information book: *How to Care for a Dog*. The personal events in Aaliyah’s life showed up in her books—attending after-school daycare and going to birthday parties.

**Discussion**

Comparing Aaliyah’s weekend news (journal entries) to her picture books, I note several differences. The writing Aaliyah completed at school is similar to what Brown (2010) described as “short on content, creativity and spark.” Her journal entries reveal a quick idea with a couple of details, but lack the depth and thinking she shows in her storybooks. In addition, Aaliyah’s journal writing doesn’t change much from kindergarten to first grade—one or two sentences showing very little writing stamina. This may have happened because of the restrictive writing she was assigned, the space provided, or the amount of time given for writing.

Obviously the picture books Aaliyah made mattered to her and show her passions: family, pets, animals, adventures, and special events. Her books sound like books and demonstrate that she notices a lot of things from the books she has heard and read (Ray, 2004). Aaliyah puts thought into the words she uses and isn’t afraid to sound out words such as “Honolulu” and “American.” In addition, she tries a variety of genres and forms in her storybooks and uses illustrations to tell her stories. Snyders (2014) found that young students formed individual writing identities when they made books during writing instruction. Aaliyah has formed a writing identity and believes she is a writer because she makes storybooks. In fact, Aaliyah’s book making, from preschool to first grade, shows authentic and meaningful writing.

**Suggestions for Teachers**

Researchers and teachers have found that making picture books as part of writing instruction is doable and beneficial for young children (Brown, 2010; Parsons, 2005; Ray, 2004; Ray & Cleveland, 2004; Snyders, 2014). Since story acting, storytelling and storybooks are such a vital part of primary students’ lives, having them write picture books makes sense. The following recommendations are included for teachers who are thinking about their current writing instruction and pondering what would be beneficial for their young students.

*Students need choice.* Ray (2004) commented that emergent writers need to produce their own ideas or topics for picture books to see themselves as writers. In addition, primary children need to write about their passions, from dogs to *Star Wars*.

*Students need materials.* Young children need a writing center stocked with tools and supplies to make picture books (Parsons, 2005). Blank and lined paper can be stapled together to create different book shapes. Tools such as pencils, date stamp, scissors, correction tape, and sticky notes can be included too.

*Students need time.* Davis and Hill (2003) advised that all children should write every day for an extended amount of time, usually 30 to 60 minutes. In addition, students need to see writing workshop as a time when they can work on a picture book for a couple of days. Students can work on more than one book at a time, start a new book when they
have a new idea, or work on improving old books. Essentially, making books is a time, not a task (Parsons, 2005).

*Students need models.* Ray and Cleveland (2004) read many picture books aloud to their students. Reading helps young children gain a vision for the kind of writing they want to complete. Students can borrow ideas and techniques from all of the picture books and professional writers they read and learn about.

Today, as an eight-year-old, Aaliyah has continued to play and make storybooks for fun. She writes traditional tales (*The Rainbow Rabbit Team* and *Snow White*), along with fantasy books (*The Typewriter* and *Hands and Feet*). She has researched strawberries and butterflies and has created multi-genre texts that include a fictional story and informative facts. Her favorite subject continues to be the family dog: Cozy, Soft Sushi.

In closing, this is what Aaliyah says about making books:

I like making books better than weekend news because I can draw pictures. When I am doing weekend news there are lines to write on and a small box for a picture—it feels closed in and I don’t like that. But when I am writing a book I am free to write anything, [not just] about my weekend. I can write easily and as much as I want on the pages of the book. On weekend news I can only write on the lines. I don’t like that. Writing books is as calming as being outside. Writing weekend news is like being trapped inside.
References


Deanna Day teaches literacy courses for Washington State University, Vancouver. Her research interests include children’s literature and technology.

Aaliyah and Sushi