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ABSTRACT

What first graders chose to put in their journals when given no direct suggestions for topics was studied during the 1985-86 school year in a suburban Birmingham, Alabama, classroom. Journal writing was scheduled for 30 minutes daily throughout the school year, but not all children chose to write every day. At the end of the year, all of the journal entries for the 20 children in the class were studied and placed into ten categories: (1) pictures only, (2) scribble and/or random letters, (3) labels or descriptions of pictures, (4) lists, (5) copies of texts, (6) retelling of texts, (7) personal content, (8) imaginative content, (9) informational content, and (10) other written forms such as puzzles. Regardless of the children's writing levels, all were confident of their writing abilities. They varied in capability and in selection of topics, though some common writing behaviors were noted. Informational content accounted for 28.4% of journal entries, personal experiences for 36.6%, and information about holidays for 11.9%. A given student's entries were not always at a consistent level, but researchers interpreted the variance as part of normal writing development. The children enjoyed journal writing and gained confidence in their writing ability during the year. (Tables and writing samples are included.) (AEW)

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A Study of the Contents of First Graders' Journals

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## A Study of the Contents of First Graders' Journals

A great deal of research has been conducted in recent years about the writing development of young children (Bissex, 1980; Calkins, 1986; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Giacobbe, 1981; Graves, 1983). Indeed, just as Giacobbe suggested, "First graders can write the first week of school."

Although much is now known about young children's writing, more research is needed. The area we were particularly interested in exploring was the journal contents of first-grade children. A number of researchers such as Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) have examined children's selection of writing topics, and a number of authors have described journal writing. However, no study was found that looked specifically at the journal contents of first graders. The question we attempted to answer in this study was: What do first graders choose to put in their journals when given no direct suggestions for writing topics?

This study took place during the 1985-86 school year in Mrs. Hughes' first-grade classroom at Hall Kent School located in a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. Children were encouraged to write in their journals daily, but not all children chose to write every day. Journal writing occurred during a daily thirty-minute block of time throughout the school year. Each child was given a writing booklet every month which contained about twenty-five sheets of paper stapled in a construction paper cover; the child could put anything he/she wanted in the journal.

At the end of the school year, all of the journal entries for the twenty children in the classroom were studied and the contents were placed into ten

categories. These categories are: (1) pictures only, (2) scribble and/or random letters, (3) labels or descriptions of pictures, (4) lists, (5) copies of texts, (6) retelling of texts, (7) personal content, (8) imaginative content, (9) informational content, and (10) other written forms such as puzzles (see Figures 1-13 and Appendix).

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Insert Figures 1 - 13 about here

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All of these first graders wrote in their journals from the very beginning of the year and did not seem to lose interest during the year. Most of the children wrote several times a week and shared what they had written with their teacher and peers. As we would expect in first grade, the journal entries of several of the children at the beginning of the year were pictures only, scribbles, and/or letter strings with no letter-sound correspondence. Regardless of the level of writing development of the children, they all wrote and were confident of their own writing abilities.

Of the children who wrote at higher levels (writing that had letter-sound correspondence), we noticed they wrote after drawing a picture and that the story was about the picture. According to Graves (1983), beginning writers often use drawing as a form of rehearsal (preparation for writing). As the children became more proficient writers, their entries contained fewer drawings and the drawings usually followed rather than preceded the writing.

The children varied in their writing abilities, and in their selection of topics (See Table 1). For instance, one child wrote personal content in her journal 71 times (70.3%), but another child wrote personal content only 7 times (7.8%).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Although the children varied in their choice of writing topics, some common writing behaviors were noted. For example, most of the children, at one time or another, copied direct text from charts or from books. The teacher felt that copying was contagious because when one child copied a text several other children followed. The teacher also observed that many children reverted to copying from time to time, but this did not seem to interfere with children's overall growth in writing. As can be seen in Table 1, most of the children who copied did so only a few times.

We also noted that most children had at least one entry that was a retelling of a text. In these entries, they retold a story they had read, had heard read by someone, or had seen on television. We were not disturbed by children retelling texts for Graves (1983) suggested that through retelling a text children learn to make choices and to gain more control over their writing.

Earlier we pointed out that children varied in the topics they chose for their journal entries. Although there was much variety in the children's choices of topics, many (36.6%) chose to write about personal experiences. See Table 2 for a profile of the topics.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Informational content also accounts for a large percentage (28.4%) of the journal entries. It was the second most popular category, trailing personal content by only a small percentage (8.3%). Table 3 shows in detail, the types

of information about which the children chose to write. For instance, writing information about holidays was especially popular, accounting for 11.9% of the total number of all journal entries.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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The first-grade children in this study wrote on a wide variety of topics, but some children showed preference for a particular type of content. Their entries were not always at the same developmental level; some days they constructed stories; other days they would only draw pictures. This was of no great concern to the researchers as we interpreted the variance as part of normal writing development.

In summary, when given the opportunity, first graders can and will write in journals, and can select their own topics. In addition to learning about the contents of children's journals, we also observed that these first graders enjoyed journal writing and gained more confidence in their ability to use written language during the year.

## References

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- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). Literacy before schooling. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.
- Giacobbe, M. (1981). Kids can write the first week of school. Learning, 6, 132-133.
- Graves, D. (1983). Writing: Teachers and children at work. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.

Table 1

## Profile of Journal Contents

|   | 1          | 2          | 3          | 4          | 5          | 6          | 7          | 8          | 9          | 10         | 11         | 12         | 13         | 14         | 15         | 16         | 17         | 18         | 19         | 20         |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Pictures                                  |            |            | 1<br>.9    |            |            | 2<br>3.6   | 6<br>6.7   | 6<br>10.2  | 2<br>2.3   |            | 6<br>9.1   | 1<br>1.1   | 1<br>.8    | 2<br>2.9   |            | 7<br>6.1   | 5<br>6.3   |            |            |            |
| Scribble and/or<br>Random Letters         | 1<br>.8    |            |            |            |            |            | 36<br>40.0 | 8<br>13.6  | 1<br>1.2   | 21<br>20.0 |            |            |            |            |            | 3<br>2.6   | 2<br>2.5   |            |            |            |
| Labels or<br>Descriptions<br>of Pictures  | 1<br>.8    | 3<br>5.0   | 7<br>6.1   | 3<br>3.9   |            | 10<br>17.9 | 4<br>4.4   | 1<br>1.7   |            | 2<br>1.9   | 3<br>4.5   | 6<br>6.5   | 4<br>3.3   | 4<br>5.8   | 6<br>6.1   | 2<br>1.8   | 9<br>11.1  | 2<br>1.4   |            | 3<br>2.9   |
| Lists                                     | 3<br>2.5   | 5<br>8.3   | 6<br>5.3   | 8<br>10.4  | 2<br>2.2   | 5<br>8.9   | 7<br>7.8   | 7<br>11.9  | 5<br>5.8   | 18<br>17.1 | 3<br>4.5   | 11<br>11.8 | 11<br>8.9  | 6<br>8.7   | 8<br>8.2   | 15<br>13.2 | 6<br>7.4   | 7<br>4.8   | 5<br>5.0   |            |
| Copies of Texts                           | 4<br>3.1   | 2<br>3.3   | 2<br>1.8   | 2<br>2.6   | 1<br>1.1   |            | 3<br>3.3   | 6<br>10.2  | 5<br>5.8   | 9<br>8.6   |            | 24<br>25.8 | 3<br>2.4   | 7<br>10.1  |            | 3<br>2.6   |            | 8<br>5.5   | 4<br>4.0   | 4<br>3.9   |
| Retellings of<br>Texts                    | 9<br>7.5   | 9<br>15.0  | 15<br>13.2 | 7<br>9.1   | 13<br>14.0 | 3<br>5.4   | 15<br>16.7 | 4<br>6.8   | 6<br>7.0   | 3<br>2.9   | 1<br>1.5   | 2<br>2.2   | 6<br>4.9   | 14<br>20.2 |            | 5<br>4.4   | 6<br>7.4   | 13<br>9.0  |            | 2<br>1.9   |
| Personal<br>Content                       | 48<br>40.0 | 18<br>30.0 | 35<br>31.0 | 24<br>31.2 | 36<br>38.7 | 16<br>28.6 | 7<br>7.8   | 18<br>30.5 | 39<br>45.3 | 31<br>30.0 | 33<br>50.0 | 28<br>30.1 | 43<br>35.0 | 11<br>15.0 | 43<br>43.9 | 42<br>36.8 | 23<br>28.0 | 64<br>44.1 | 71<br>70.3 | 49<br>47.6 |
| Imaginative<br>Content                    | 6<br>5.0   | 1<br>1.7   |            | 3<br>3.9   | 1<br>1.1   | 2<br>3.6   | 1<br>1.1   |            | 5<br>5.8   | 3<br>2.9   |            |            | 7<br>5.7   | 3<br>4.3   | 33<br>33.7 |            | 3<br>3.7   | 4<br>2.8   | 3<br>3.0   | 12<br>11.7 |
| Informational<br>Content                  | 48<br>40.0 | 22<br>36.6 | 48<br>42.1 | 26<br>33.8 | 38<br>40.8 | 18<br>32.1 | 8<br>8.9   | 9<br>15.3  | 22<br>25.6 | 17<br>16.2 | 20<br>30.3 | 18<br>19.4 | 48<br>39.0 | 18<br>26.1 | 8<br>8.2   | 37<br>32.4 | 24<br>29.0 | 47<br>32.4 | 17<br>16.8 | 33<br>32.0 |
| Other Written<br>Forms such as<br>Puzzles |            |            |            | 4<br>5.2   | 2<br>2.7   |            | 3<br>3.3   |            | 1<br>1.2   | 1<br>1.0   |            | 3<br>3.2   |            | 4<br>5.8   |            |            | 3<br>3.7   |            | 1<br>1.0   |            |
| Total Number<br>of Journal<br>Entries     | 120        | 60         | 114        | 77         | 93         | 56         | 90         | 59         | 86         | 105        | 66         | 93         | 123        | 69         | 98         | 114        | 81         | 145        | 101        | 103        |



Table 2

## Profile of Personal Content

|  | 1          | 2          | 3          | 4          | 5          | 6          | 7        | 8          | 9          | 10         | 11         | 12         | 13         | 14         | 15         | 16         | 17         | 18         | 19         | 20         |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| About me (I am, I did...)                        | 24<br>20.0 | 3<br>5.0   | 25<br>21.9 | 9<br>11.7  | 11<br>11.8 | 6<br>10.7  | 4<br>4.4 | 9<br>15.2  | 18<br>20.9 | 7<br>6.7   | 6<br>9.1   | 6<br>6.5   | 27<br>21.9 | 6<br>8.7   | 13<br>13.3 | 12<br>10.5 | 7<br>8.6   | 29<br>20.0 | 34<br>33.7 | 9<br>8.7   |
| Family   | 7<br>5.8   |            | 2<br>1.8   | 2<br>2.6   | 2<br>2.2   |            |          | 3<br>5.1   | 2<br>2.3   | 5<br>4.8   | 5<br>7.6   | 6<br>6.5   | 7<br>5.7   | 1<br>1.4   |            | 8<br>7.0   | 2<br>2.5   | 5<br>3.4   | 9<br>8.9   | 19<br>18.4 |
| Other People                                     | 1<br>.8    | 3<br>5.0   | 1<br>.9    |            |            |            | 1<br>1.1 |            |            |            | 4<br>6.1   | 1<br>1.1   |            |            | 2<br>2.0   |            |            |            |            | 2<br>2.0   |
| Pets   |            | 2<br>3.3   | 2<br>1.8   | 1<br>1.3   | 1<br>1.1   |            |          |            | 5<br>5.8   |            | 1<br>1.5   | 3<br>3.2   | 1<br>.8    |            | 2<br>2.0   | 2<br>1.8   | 3<br>3.7   | 2<br>1.4   | 5<br>5.0   | 2<br>1.9   |
| Feelings for People                              | 10<br>8.3  | 5<br>8.3   | 3<br>2.6   | 3<br>3.9   | 8<br>8.6   | 7<br>12.5  |          |            | 8<br>9.3   | 7<br>6.7   | 12<br>18.2 | 11<br>11.8 |            | 2<br>2.9   | 4<br>4.1   | 5<br>4.4   | 7<br>8.6   | 13<br>9.0  | 12<br>11.9 | 12<br>11.7 |
| Feelings for Things                              | 4<br>3.3   | 4<br>6.7   |            | 7<br>9.1   | 14<br>15.1 | 3<br>5.4   | 1<br>1.1 | 5<br>10.2  | 5<br>5.8   | 12<br>11.4 | 5<br>7.6   | 1<br>1.1   | 6<br>4.9   | 1<br>1.4   | 16<br>16.3 | 15<br>13.2 | 4<br>4.9   | 15<br>10.3 | 8<br>7.9   | 7<br>6.8   |
| Feelings for Toys                                | 2<br>1.7   | 1<br>1.7   | 2<br>1.8   | 2<br>2.6   |            |            | 1<br>1.1 |            | 1<br>1.2   |            |            |            | 2<br>1.6   | 1<br>1.4   | 6<br>6.1   |            |            |            |            | 1<br>.1    |
| Total Number of Journal Entries in This Category | 48<br>40.0 | 18<br>30.0 | 35<br>31.0 | 24<br>31.2 | 36<br>38.7 | 16<br>28.6 | 7<br>7.8 | 18<br>30.5 | 39<br>45.3 | 31<br>30.0 | 33<br>50.0 | 28<br>30.1 | 43<br>35.0 | 11<br>15.9 | 43<br>43.9 | 42<br>36.8 | 23<br>28.4 | 14<br>44.1 | 71<br>70.3 | 49<br>47.6 |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |

Table 3

## Profile of Informational Content

|  | 1          | 2          | 3          | 4          | 5          | 6          | 7        | 8         | 9          | 10         | 11         | 12         | 13         | 14         | 15       | 16         | 17         | 18         | 19         | 20         |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Statements of General Knowledge                  | 11<br>9.2  |            | 1<br>.9    | 2<br>2.6   | 2<br>2.2   | 1<br>1.8   |          | 2<br>3.4  | 2<br>2.3   | 2<br>1.9   | 7<br>10.6  | 1<br>1.1   | 5<br>4.1   |            | 2<br>2.0 | 3<br>2.6   |            | 3<br>2.1   | 3<br>3.0   | 4<br>3.9   |
| Curriculum                                       | 19<br>15.8 | 11<br>13.3 | 26<br>22.8 | 7<br>9.1   | 9<br>9.7   | 2<br>3.6   | 5<br>5.6 | 1<br>1.7  | 6<br>7.0   | 8<br>7.6   | 4<br>6.1   | 5<br>5.4   | 10<br>8.1  | 4<br>5.8   | 3<br>3.1 | 11<br>9.6  | 8<br>9.9   | 14<br>9.7  | 3<br>3.0   | 7<br>6.8   |
| Holidays   | 14<br>11.7 | 8<br>13.3  | 12<br>10.5 | 9<br>11.7  | 20<br>21.5 | 13<br>23.2 | 1<br>1.1 | 2<br>3.4  | 9<br>10.5  | 4<br>3.8   | 7<br>10.6  | 10<br>10.8 | 17<br>13.8 | 9<br>13.0  | 2<br>2.0 | 20<br>17.5 | 15<br>18.5 | 27<br>18.6 | 6<br>5.9   | 16<br>15.5 |
| Seasons  | 2<br>1.7   | 1<br>1.7   | 1<br>.9    | 5<br>6.5   | 5<br>5.4   | 1<br>1.8   |          | 2<br>3.4  | 4<br>4.7   | 3<br>2.9   |            | 2<br>2.2   | 10<br>8.1  | 2<br>2.9   |          | 3<br>2.6   | 1<br>1.2   |            | 4<br>4.0   | 3<br>2.9   |
| Current Events                                   | 1<br>.8    |            | 8<br>7.0   |            | 2<br>2.2   | 1<br>1.8   | 2<br>2.2 |           | 1<br>1.2   |            |            |            | 5<br>4.1   | 2<br>2.9   | 1<br>1.0 |            |            |            |            |            |
| Questions about Content (for others)             | 1<br>.8    | 2<br>3.3   |            | 3<br>3.9   |            |            |          | 2<br>3.4  |            |            | 2<br>3.0   |            | 1<br>.8    | 1<br>1.4   |          |            |            | 3<br>2.1   | 1<br>1.0   | 3<br>2.9   |
| Total Number of Journal Entries in This Category | 48<br>40.0 | 22<br>36.6 | 48<br>42.1 | 26<br>33.8 | 38<br>40.8 | 18<br>32.1 | 8<br>8.9 | 9<br>15.3 | 22<br>25.6 | 17<br>16.2 | 20<br>30.3 | 18<br>19.4 | 48<br>39.4 | 18<br>26.1 | 8<br>8.2 | 37<br>32.4 | 24<br>29.6 | 47<br>32.4 | 17<br>16.8 | 33<br>32.0 |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |
|  |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |           |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |            |            |            |            |            |

Examples of  
Journal Contents

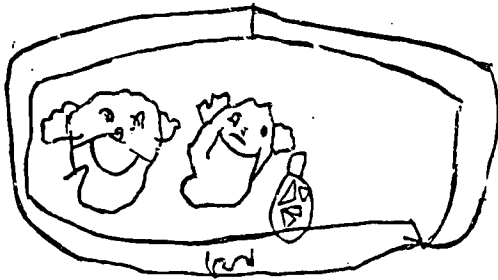


Figure 1. Picture

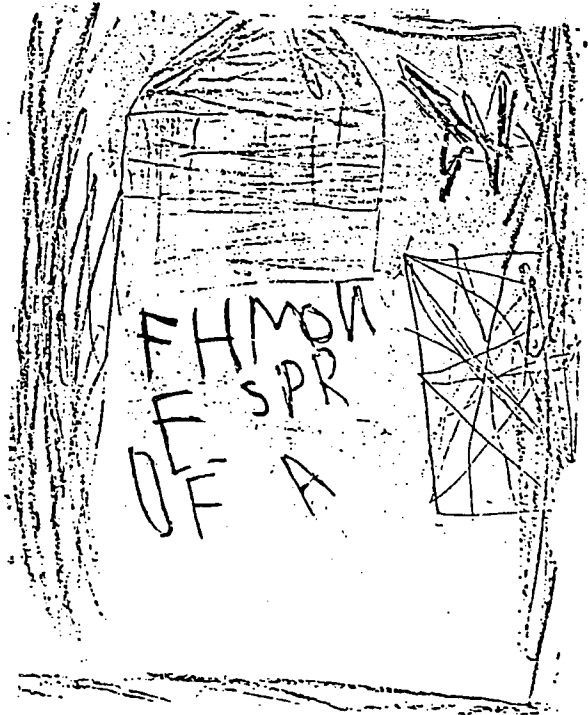


Figure 2. Random Letters

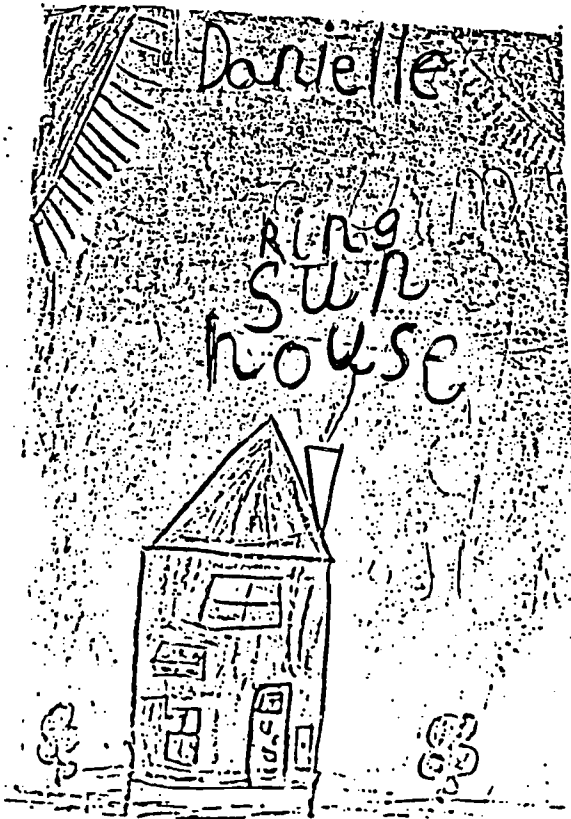


Figure 3. Labeling of Picture



Rabo is R w ngh  
th E fo Ra ta d  
p S R l d h M h e e S  
jupegawt wvetre  
apn

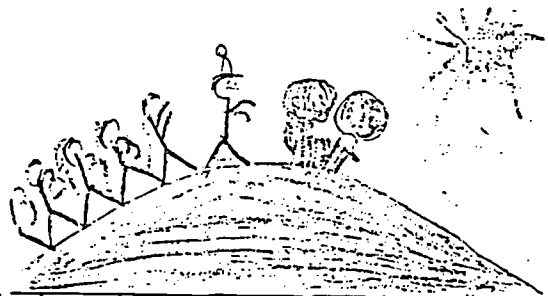
Figure 4. Description of picture

Ashley and  
 Era and Kenan  
 Jarad and Julie  
 and Elizabeth  
 and Leigh S. and  
 Cusie. the end

Figure 5. List

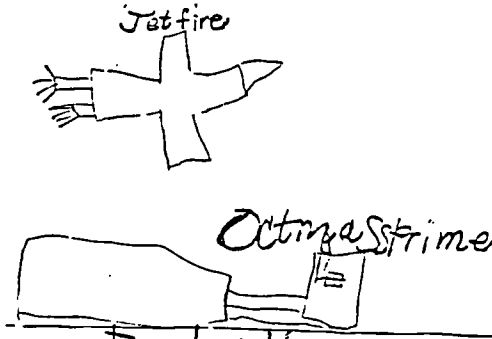
honk honk Big trucks  
 honk honk honk honk Little  
 truck: big truck  
 Little horn the big horn  
 Honk  
 Honk  
 honk  
 honk

Figure 6. Copy of Text



he littel boy who  
 and wolf wolf  
 one day a littel boy  
 was sitting up on  
 a big hill and he  
 pretend to pretend

Figure 7. Retelling of Text



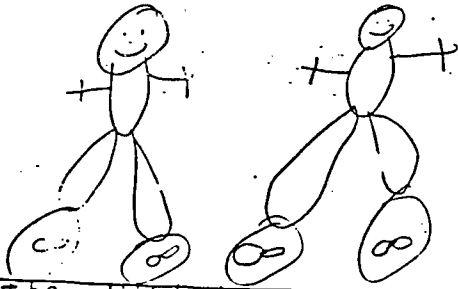
I Like  
 Transformers.  
 they are neat.  
 jet fire is cool.  
 Octmassprime is  
 cool too

Figure 8. Personal Content

Today is Mrs. Hughes birthday  
 She will get a lot of presents WE should  
 be glad. Sincerely us. No. presents

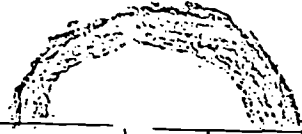
Figure 9. Personal Content

my1



The litle boy is sitting in  
the litle boy house we sat  
in my house. We had 3 races  
in the afternoon together as mine  
is his. I like him, he was nice to  
me. he liked me too. he  
today I was nice we go  
Meredy the end

Figure 10. Imaginative Content



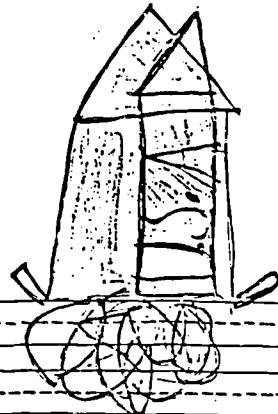
a rain bow has lots  
of colors

Figure 11. Informational Content



the hotade has  
suk d n in the  
o sun the tone  
to is s t r o g

Figure 12. Informational Content



the rokit  
blu up  
pau pau  
rok it up

Figure 13. Informational Content

Appendix

Description of Journal Content Categories

| <u>Categories</u>                        | <u>Descriptions</u>   |
|--|---|
| Pictures.....                            | The child draws a picture with no evidence of an attempt to write.  |
| Scribble and/or Random Letters.....      | There is an attempt to write but there is no sound-symbol correspondence.   |
| Labels or Descriptions of Pictures...    | The picture is central and there are words that label elements of the picture <u>or</u> the contents of the text are devoted to telling about the picture.              |
| Lists.....                               | The text is simply a listing of such things as the names of people such as classmates, family members, or things.   |
| Copies of Texts.....                     | The words are copied from print in the room or copied from basal readers or other books in the classroom.   |
| Retelling of Texts.....                  | The text is a retelling of the following types of texts: basal reader or literature stories, songs, movies, television programs, or rephrasing of reference materials.  |
| Personal Content.....                    | The text is composed of statements about themselves, family members and other people, pets, and feelings for people, things, and toys.                                  |
| Imaginative Content.....                 | The text is the child's own original story or other type of original text such as a joke.   |
| Informational Content.....               | The text includes statements of general knowledge, information from the curriculum, holiday and seasonal interests, current events, and questions for other classmates. |
| Other Written Forms such as Puzzles..... | This category includes such things as a construction of a puzzle, and other materials that resemble written instructional materials.                                    |