

JOURNAL WRITING AS A DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE METHOD

JOHN BUTTERY

Brooke Elementary School, Delta, British Columbia

and

JOHN A. B. ALLAN

Department of Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia

Abstract

Students in a regular Grade 7 class participated in a developmental guidance program that was designed around writing two journal entries a week for the school year. The program was included in the Language Arts curriculum and was seen as a natural part of school life. The students used the program to write about their own individual tasks and issues. Seven key journal themes were identified that reflected concern over parents, siblings, career aspirations, national and international issues, emotions, and philosophical and religious themes. The writing process and class discussions which followed seemed to facilitate emotional, social, and academic growth, to improve the classroom climate, and to increase the communication flow between students, teacher, and parents.

Résumé

Les étudiants d'une classe de la septième année ont participé à un programme d'orientation en développement dont l'activité principale était d'écrire leurs pensées dans un journal deux fois par semaine durant l'année scolaire. Le programme était compris dans celui de Language Arts afin d'être perçu comme une partie normale de la vie académique. Ce programme donnait l'occasion aux élèves d'écrire sur des tâches et des questions personnelles. On avait identifié sept thèmes clés, pour ce journal, touchant les questions par rapport aux parents, aux frères et soeurs, aux aspirations de carrières, aux problèmes nationaux et internationaux, aux émotions et aux thèmes philosophiques et religieux. Le fait d'écrire et de discuter en classe par la suite, a semblé rendre la croissance émotive, sociale et académique plus facile ainsi que d'augmenter la qualité de la communication entre les élèves, les enseignants et les parents.

For a number of years now, in their capacities as both counsellors and teachers, the writers have been concerned that many school systems do not effectively deal with the developmental concerns of children. As developmental issues tend to peak during the middle school years (Tanner, 1970; Morris, 1978) it is important that the regular curriculum should provide appropriate outlets for the normal concerns of the students (Cottingham, 1973).

The purpose of this article is to describe the use of journal writing as a method of developmental guidance and to show how students use their journals for "sorting out" and thinking through important issues in their lives. Examples will be used from a journal writing project developed by the first writer and used with his regular Grade 7 class during an academic year (Buttery, 1980).

Journal writing has long been used as a source of self-knowledge and self-help (Jung, 1961). In the counselling literature, journals are reported as

being useful aids to both group and individual counselling sessions. Riordan and Metheny (1972) found that logs helped counselees to safely express their emotions and opinions without the effects of peer pressure. They also noted that the logs allowed the counsellors to uncover real sources of conflict and unvoiced emotional concerns. Crabbes (1973) noticed that one of his clients was more at ease in writing to him than in attending sessions. He found that writing helped the client attain personal distance from her problems. Later he was able to encourage her to "be on the outside what she was feeling in the inside" (p. 390). Similarly, Carroll (1972) emphasized the integrative qualities of journal writing. She noted that journals helped the students create, experiment, and bring together inner and outer events in a meaningful way. Finally, Progoff (1975) reports that journal writing develops understanding and an inner perspective on life.

As far as we are aware, journal writing has not

been specifically used as a developmental guidance tool. By developmental guidance we are referring to Dinkmeyer's (1971) definition where the guidance program is an integral part of the curriculum, purposefully organized by the teacher and geared for all students. Some of its goals are to integrate the affective and cognitive domains, to personalize the educative process, to help children understand themselves and others, and to cope with and master various developmental tasks.

A well organized journal program can do this because it lets each student start at their own level of readiness and choose their own issues and topics to write about. Also within this one format emotional, social and academic tasks can be integrated (see below).

Method

At the beginning of the academic year, the first writer informed his Grade 7 students that as part of the Language Arts curriculum they would be writing their own journals twice a week (one in school and one at home) for the entire school year. The journals were to be called "experience journals" and in them students could select and write about any topic based on their experiences or thoughts.

They were specifically instructed that time-tabling logs (i.e., "Today I did this and then that") were not permitted unless they referred to a common theme or thread about life and the world around them. The goal was to help children to be perceptive about their environment and their experiences and to be able to develop cohesion of reflective thought in their writing. It was hoped that such a programme would provide an outlet for thoughts and feelings and hence act as a form of self-counselling.

Results

Overview

At first the program was difficult for the students. There was considerable resistance and complaining. The students were not accustomed to so much writing and had trouble finding topics. However, as the year progressed the content of the journals became rich in social and emotional themes. Also they improved academically: work skill errors dropped from 18.75 per pupil per assignment in September to 3.15 per pupil in March; writing style, grammar and organization showed considerable gains.

The program came to play a big part in the life of the classroom. A discussion period was set aside where students could read from their journals and talk about the difficulties they were experiencing. Over time they seemed to come to value good writing and each other's opinion. They began to use

the journals to solve social problems. For example, when upset they would write out their side of the story so that the class and teacher could see their point of view. Later they became effective in analyzing social situations that they observed or had been part of.

The social influence of the journals extended beyond the classroom into family life. Children often shared their journals with their parents and asked them for help with topics, proofreading, and in dealing with social conflicts.

In regard to emotions, students wrote about a wide range of feelings, states, and situations which elicited feelings. The main themes were about themselves, their family, their friends, and their interactions at school. They used their journals to write about developmental issues which normally would not have been shared with parents or teachers. Some of the topics were issues of identity and career, frustrations, anger, love, fear, happiness, worries, sexual awareness, power, and stealing.

As the year progressed they showed a greater ease in expressing their feelings on paper, became more considerate of each other, and were more sensitive to the handling of emotional issues in general, especially when others were expressing their feelings in the classroom.

Examples from Specific Journal Entries

At the end of the year the writers went through the journals and found that the topics seemed to gather around seven specific themes. These were recording journals, "why" journals, family issues, national and international issues, imaginative situations, philosophical and religious themes, and emotional themes.

Recording journals. In these journals the students described events such as family and class outings, singing for the Christmas concert, school, and sports activities. These journals were popular. The pupils seemed to enjoy recording events as they happened just as people enjoy taking family photos. A moment in time is preserved by their writing and in doing so they are able to value their own unique past.

The First Day

At first I hated the idea of going back to school because of all the boring work we'd have to do. Sue and I sat together while Mr. Buttery went through the basic work we would be doing and I realized it would be a little harder than I thought.

Recess came and then my friends and I discussed what we thought about being in grade seven. Sue got an earache so she ended up going home after recess. I didn't go back after lunch because I had to pick up my grandparents at the airport who were just arriving from England. My grandparents bought us a couple of presents that were really nice. I don't think that school will be that bad this year.

This journal is typical of the beginning writer of journals because it tends to follow a diary format and list a series of events. It is interesting to note the change of feeling that occurs during the writing process — from hating school, to the awareness of having to work harder and finally stating: “I don’t think school will be that bad this year.”

Writing about experiences provides an appropriate outlet for feelings and a vehicle through which difficult feelings can be transformed. Likewise, in the excerpts from other journals, the reader will be aware of subtle emotional changes that occur as the pupils reveal their thoughts and feelings about developmental issues.

“Why” journals. These journals were popular too. Students seem to have the need to understand “why” — why things happen to them, why life is the way it is — and to be able to answer some of their own questions.

Why Do Mexican Jumping Beans Jump?

Today my mom and I went to Richmond. When we got there I saw some Mexican Jumping Beans and I got four of them. They are in little plastic boxes and whenever they jump they make a noise.

When I was smaller and I thought that only some people could have Mexican Jumping Beans because the beans were magic. Now I read on the label that there are little caterpillars inside the beans and whenever the caterpillar takes a bite from his shell it jumps. It keeps jumping until it is out of its shell. They jump for about six months.

I guess I found the answer to my question!

The primary purpose of this student seems to be to describe and to achieve a sense of understanding of her own experience. Journals such as these often provide the opportunity for integrating knowledge. This journal reflects a developmental movement from magical thinking to rational understanding.

Family issues. Two main journal themes emerged: siblings and parents. The following excerpt concerns siblings.

My Brothers and I

I’m sitting on my front steps doing my journal and watching the sun go down.

I’ll tell you why I’m sitting out here. My two older brothers kicked me out of the house because they want to listen to their new stereo which they put in the front room and they won’t let my little brother and I listen to it.

My mom has gone to Seattle until late and I didn’t have a chance to talk to her about the stereo. You can hear it at least two houses down and I can’t stand it. The music is terrible and I’ve had an earache from early this morning and now it’s getting worse.

I’ve been thinking of running away but I haven’t got the guts to because I wouldn’t know where to go. I have tried to make a big noise like bouncing the ball out in the driveway but all they have done is come down and scream at me.

It’s hard living with three brothers and without a dad. Sometimes I wonder if I could ever get along with my brothers. I guess maybe in the future but right now . . . I don’t really know. I guess after all my life is getting harder and harder to live and handle.

I’m sorry to have this in my journal but this was my thought for the day!

The above journal goes into considerable depth about an extremely painful situation. The girl openly communicates feelings of hurt, hopelessness, anger, and yet shows some emotional strength and maturity. The journal provides an outlet for an in-depth exploration of a difficult family situation and also signals a need for help. By ending the way she does, she is asking for assurance that it is acceptable to use the journal to express herself in this manner.

The following excerpt concerns parents.

Different Types of Mothers

Over the past couple of years I’ve noticed that mothers are not the same. There are different kinds of them. I’ll introduce you to some I know.

The worry-wart. The worry-wart mother is always concerned with where you are going, with whom, and when you’re expected to come home. Try to reason with this kind of mother, she’s not a pain in the neck she just wants you home safe and sound!

The tired mother. The tired mother’s always tired, she’s too tired to do anything so if she doesn’t want to do the dishes you have to. Don’t fight with this mother, it’s mother’s day, if you do some work for her she won’t be tired!

The working mother. The working mother is always working, you never see her, and when you do she doesn’t talk to you as she doesn’t feel good. This mother is just too involved in her work, take her out to dinner, just get her mind off her work.

The forgetful mother. The forgetful mother is always forgetting things, you have to remind her a million times until she gets it through her head. This kind of mother isn’t forgetful she just has other things on her mind.

I have mentioned four different kinds of mothers but there are many other types of mothers, each one is different from the rest. My mother is all of the personalities mentioned throughout the journal and that is why I did this journal.

Mother’s day is to remind you to respect your mother. You only get one true mom so if she’s a worry-wart or the working mother help her along; don’t make it worse.

It is significant that the student is able to analyze the roles of her mother; she abstracts some of her mother’s attributes and sees them as typical personalities in other mothers. She was able to make a conceptual leap from the specific to the general. In doing so she demonstrates her own emotional maturity and her intellectual ability to analyze social-emotional issues. This insight and understanding seems to help her respond to her mother in a caring way.

National and international issues. Here students wrote about pressing social problems that were national or international in scope. They wrote about the current gas shortage, conservation, national unity, and war.

That Funny Feeling

Ever since the Russians have started to make nuclear weapons I have had a feeling that any minute I could be blown up by a bomb or nuclear weapon, because to me the Russians seem like they would like to kill everything on Earth so that they can rule the world. (They probably do). I don't know why I think it but they just seem so weird. I suppose however that there is a lot of insane people in the rest of the world that would like to kill everything. To be on the safe side, I will build a small radar to make sure that there aren't any missiles heading towards me.

Most of the students wrote journals about greater social issues only when they perceived that the issue had some direct relevance to them. In this journal the pupil is expressing his fears about nuclear weapons in the context of an issue which affects many other people. The writer is able to weave his concern for himself with a realization that this issue also affects others. In the face of such an overwhelming feeling, one solution for a 13-year-old is that of humor and magical thinking.

Imaginative situations. In these journals the students wrote about themselves in fantasy or imaginative situations. In the fantasy they were able to express their wishes and their dreams in a safe context thereby deriving some emotional pleasure from the exercise. Such fantasy projections are normal in adolescence and, at times, they are used to express and test career aspirations and life goals.

*What it Would be like to Play
in the N.F.L.*

I would like to play in the National Football League because you would feel like one of the guys and that would make you feel great. Imagine playing with the greatest players that may have lived now, that would give you some security. I would love it so much it wouldn't matter if we lost every game that season. I would just say to the guys we'll get them next year, don't let it get you down. Also it wouldn't matter what team I was on or what position I played. But how great it would be if we won every game, also the play-offs and the cup. I would be almost crying for joy. Oh! how I would like to play football in the N.F.L.

This fantasy features the writer's personality in a situation where he has to make value judgments and decisions. Through identification with heroic adult models, the boy prepares himself for the adult world and elicits a range of positive emotion — security, joy, strength, and pleasure. He is setting up an idealized goal orientation which is a common developmental theme in early adolescence (Offer, 1969).

Philosophical and religious themes. As the year progressed, more philosophical and religious themes were expressed. The children wrote about God, the meaning of life, synchronicity, growing old, death, and the fact that one cannot relive the past. The journals frequently led into class discussions and often the teacher suggested that they might write a sequel journal to clarify certain points.

After We Die

What happens after we die? We don't actually know.

Some people believe you go to heaven in the sky where there is a golden gate that opens up and lets you in. But some people don't believe that.

I believe that when you die you are made into a totally different person and live another life. Most people don't believe that but I don't know because I haven't gone around asking people.

What scares me is that when you die you might never come back. I've noticed that old people never look scared but I am. I guess it's because you'll never know when you're gonna die, you could die any second.

In this journal the pupil raises questions about life after death and shares some of her own personal views and concerns. She states her own belief and is aware of the transitory nature of life and the fact that we do not know when we are going to die or what really happens after death. She allows herself to verbalize some fear over the "permanence" of death. Developmental questions of this type frequently emerge in adolescents as their distinct and separate personalities are being formed and as abstract reasoning abilities begin to develop (Piaget, 1948).

Emotional themes. These journals were highly personal in nature and were used to provide an outlet for specific feelings. Though they were essentially statements of how the pupils were feeling in the here-and-now, they also helped the students learn appropriate ways for handling feelings.

Being Frustrated

Have you ever felt what it's like to be frustrated? Well, it's about the most horribly, frustrating feeling in the world. Right now I'm frustrated and it's down right driving me crazy! No thoughts are circulating in my head right now so it's hard to write about my thoughts. This journal is driving me CRAZY!!!

I took a break for a few hours and now my mind is circulating with new ideas and thoughts.

Today my dad took my sisters and I to Stanley Park and we went on a six mile walk. We had some popcorn, fudge bars, and saw the animals. I also saw Paul and his sister.

I'm not frustrated anymore and my head is all clear and I'm ready for dreaming.

This has been K.M. now signing off. Good night.

The pupil recorded her actual here-and-now experience. She wrote her frustrations out and was

then able to leave the writing block behind her and return later with a new experience and some insight. The pupil had the maturity not to continue wrestling for new ideas when the time was not ripe for creativity.

Discussion

The process of writing experience journals provided an outlet for the developmental concerns of the children in a regular classroom as part of the regular curriculum. It gave them a chance to raise and discuss their own concerns and questions, to develop deeper understanding, and to find solutions to some of their own struggles.

Growth seemed to occur in three main interrelated areas: the emotional, social, and academic. The children used the journals to express such basic emotions as fear, love, anger, sadness, and caring. They became comfortable in discussing and sharing some of their deepest feelings about themselves, their aspirations, the purpose and meaning of life, death, and war.

The journals had a social value too. They increased the information flow between children, parents, and teacher. The journals were used as a method of communication and as a vehicle for solving problems, for rehearsing what could be said to peers, teacher or parent, and for becoming aware of other peoples' points of view. If the child felt the teacher had misunderstood a situation, the journal was used to let him know. Likewise, many entries involved thinking through relationships with friends, parents, brothers and sisters, other adults, and classroom conflicts. They liked reading some of their journals to the class and hearing others. Many parents (20 out of 25) reported that journal writing increased communication at home as the children read their journals to them and used them as a springboard to other discussion (Buttery, 1980).

There were also notable academic gains. Over the year, spelling errors decreased dramatically, appearance and organization improved along with the ability to develop clear logical thoughts and ideas. The students came to value good writing

and saw it as being personally important for their lives.

Journal writing offers teachers and counsellors an important developmental guidance method. It allows each child to write about and share thoughts and feelings that are current in their lives and increases the communication flow between students, teacher, and parents. This one strategy appears to benefit the emotional, social, and academic areas of a student's life. However, further research is clearly needed to evaluate this hypothesis more precisely.

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