

Research in Creative Writing

Poses questions for the curriculum maker.

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RESEARCH in creative writing is so meager that persons compiling research bibliographies in the language arts often hesitate to include creative writing as one of their categories. Yet research has been carried out which could suggest some rather far-reaching changes in curriculum content and organization if the implications of the studies were considered.

Studies in Creative Writing

One group of studies has explored the type of subject matter which produces the best writing on the part of elementary school children. Schonell studied reproductive, narrative-descriptive, explanatory, and imaginative compositions written by children.¹ He found that children with mental ages of six to eight years experienced some confusion in writing imaginative compositions, but that this type of composition led to a greater variety of expression and greater interest on the part of children having mental ages of nine and ten. The greater interest shown led to automatic improvement of mechanical and structural aspects of writing. Several studies by Ed-

mund indicated that children in grades up to nine tend to choose topics based on derived, rather than real, experience, and that they write compositions of higher creative quality when they do write about derived experience.²

Another group of studies considered the development of maturity of expression in children's writing. LaBrant found that complexity of sentence structure varies with chronological age when mental age is constant.³ Mata Bear also found that the use of simple sentences decreases and that the use of complex sentences increases with age.⁴ She noted, however, that children often experience difficulty in constructing complex sentences correctly. She found that run-on sentences increased in frequency of use from the first to the fifth grade, at which level they reached a high point. Not much improvement was shown in the elimination of run-on sentences between fifth and eighth grades. Symonds and Lee found that errors in capitalization

² Neal R. Edmund. "Writing in the Intermediate Grades." *Elementary English* 36: 491-501; November 1959.

³ Lou LaBrant. "A Study of Certain Language Developments of Children in Grades 4 to 12, Inclusive." *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 14: 393-491; November 1933.

⁴ Mata V. Bear. "Children's Growth in the Use of Written Language." *The Elementary English Review* 16: 312-19; December 1939.

¹ Fred J. Schonell. *Backwardness in the Basic Subjects*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1942. p. 399-401.

and punctuation reach a maximum somewhere near the sixth or seventh grade when pupils are likely to be experimenting with new forms of expression.⁵ Errors in punctuation and capitalization seemed to be related to difficulties with sentence structure rather than to lack of acquaintance with the rules governing capitalization and punctuation. They concluded that learning to express oneself is a complex function and that it cannot be attained through the practicing of a series of unrelated skills.

Other studies with implications for the language arts curriculum include the research reported by Greene. He concluded that traditional diagramming of sentences was of little value as a way of improving composition.⁶ He advised the use of direct methods which involve much actual composition. Betzner studied the value of the method of having young children dictate original stories to their teachers.⁷ One of her conclusions was that hearing their compositions read aloud led these children to change their forms of expression so that their compositions were improved. Having children read their stories aloud or hear them read aloud by someone was recommended as a method meriting the attention of those interested in improving children's compositions.

⁵ P. M. Symonds and Baldwin Lee. "Studies in the Learning of English Expression." *Teachers College Record* 30: 461-80, February 1929; and 30: 686-92, April 1929.

⁶ Harry A. Greene. "Direct Versus Formal Methods in Elementary English." *Elementary English* 24: 272-85; May 1947.

⁷ Jean Betzner. *Content and Form of Original Compositions Dictated by Children from Five to Eight Years of Age. Contributions to Education, No. 442.* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1930. p. 1-53.

A study by the present writer sought to investigate the relationship of writing ability to extensive reading.⁸ Measurements were made of the amount of reading done by three groups of sixth grade children and of their writing abilities. The composition of the three groups was as follows:

Group	Number of Children	IQ	Reading Grade Level
A	21	126-140	9.6-11.0
B	21	111-125	8.0- 9.5
C	23	95-110	6.0- 7.9

The amount of reading which the children had done was determined from questionnaires completed by the children and from the records of the Kansas Reading Program for Children. Each of the four compositions written by each child for the study was analyzed and scores were determined for usage, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Rank order correlations were computed for each group between scores on each of the writing factors and amount of reading done.

The study revealed isolated significant correlations between extensive reading and some of the writing abilities studied, but there were no consistent relationships involving all three groups. A significant positive correlation was found for Group C between amount of reading done and the ability to spell unusual words. For Group A, a significant positive correlation was found to exist between amount of reading done and complexity of sentence structure.

Although the evidence dealing with the relationship of extensive reading to

⁸ Nita M. Wyatt. "A Study of the Relationship of Extensive Reading to Certain Writing Skills of a Selected Group of Sixth Grade Children." *The University of Kansas Bulletin of Education* 16: 13-18; November 1961.

writing ability was inconclusive, other data and conclusions of the study seemed to be of some significance. There was evidence from the study to support the conclusions of the earlier research which has been reported above. The findings of Edmund and of Schonell dealing with types of topics for children's compositions were supported. In the present study the children wrote sentences of greater length and used a greater variety of vocabulary in compositions based on derived experience than they did in compositions based on real experience.

Data from the study also supported the findings of Bear and of Symonds and Lee. The run-on sentence error was very prevalent in the writing of these sixth grade children and many of their errors with capitalization and punctuation seemed to be a result of confusion about sentence structure. In Group C, 66 of the 92 compositions which were written by the 23 children contained the run-on sentence error. Only two of the children avoided the error completely. One child failed to recognize the beginning or end of 50 of the 84 sentences which he wrote. Although the children in Groups A and B wrote run-on sentences less frequently than the children in Group C, there were only three children in each of the two groups who made no errors of that type.

Even though the run-on sentence was a common problem with these children, they were highly proficient in other areas of writing. It was found that they were already able to use with a high degree of accuracy all the items of usage included in the English language textbook for the grade they were just entering. They wrote these usage items correctly in 99 percent of the instances in which they needed to use them.

The children were also highly proficient in the application of the rules

governing punctuation and capitalization which were included in their textbook. Group C maintained a level of 83 percent accuracy in the use of capitals and 73 percent in the use of punctuation. The pupils in Group A maintained a level of 93 percent accuracy in the use of capitals and 88 percent in the use of punctuation. The majority of the errors seemed to be brought about by confusions about sentence structure.

The correlations between amount of reading done and the use of punctuation and capitalization were not significant, but there was a trend among the coefficients for the three groups, and the trend was toward a higher negative correlation as intelligence increased. An inspection of the types of errors made by the children indicated that those who read the most material more often attempted more complex forms of writing, such as extensive use of conversation. Because they were not proficient in the skills involved in using these forms, they made more mistakes than did the other children. In many instances children attempted constructions which called for the use of punctuation, capitalization, and usage items which were not taught at their grade level, but were introduced later in the curriculum. Although these mistakes were not included in the error counts, they were of interest to the writer because they carried implications for curriculum organization.

A final interesting conclusion drawn from the study was that many of the pupils did not consistently rank, either high or low in the language factors studied, but had abilities that varied from one factor to another. Some who ranked near the top of their group in amount of reading done ranked near the bottom in their average rank on the writing factors studied. Some who

ranked near the top in one facet of writing ranked near the bottom in another.

Curriculum Implications

Several questions concerning the curriculum may be raised if implications of the cited studies are considered.

1. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if teachers and administrators surveyed the language needs and abilities of the children in their particular area before they adopted any textbook or any method of teaching? What is useful to average sixth grade children over the nation may be of little use to the sixth grade children in any one school.

2. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if they were helped as individuals to study the mechanics of writing for which they have the greatest need?

3. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if teachers recognized that writing is a complex function and not a series of isolated skills which may be practiced until they are mastered? Children learn to write by writing—not by learning rules and filling out workbook pages.

4. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if they were given more freedom to use imagination in their compositions? The child in the upper elementary grades writes extensively if the total time he spends with pencil in hand is considered. Much of this writing, however, tends to emphasize reproductive or narrative-descriptive writing if not actual parroting of the thoughts of others. What would happen if he were allowed to use a greater part of his total writing time in writing the

type of material in which he seems to be most interested?

5. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if teachers acted as though children differed in their writing interests and abilities and if they sometimes grouped the children for instruction in writing? Particular attention needs to be paid to the child who has already learned to express his ideas rather well, for he is the child who often receives the least help in actually improving his writing. Larom has suggested one procedure which should be of interest to children who are more mature in their writing than are most of their classmates.⁹

6. Would the writing abilities of children be improved if writing were treated as a communicative art from first through sixth grade? Too often children's compositions communicate to no one other than the teacher. Oral sharing of compositions could replace much of the marking done by teachers. The language-experience approach to teaching beginning reading in which the child uses as basic reading material his own compositions seems to hold great promise for the improvement of children's writing abilities if the underlying philosophy can be implemented through the sixth grade.¹⁰

The research in creative writing is meager, but there is enough to suggest some questions to the curriculum maker. Perhaps the volume of available research can be supplemented through the discovery of answers to some of the questions listed here.

⁹Henry V. Larom. "Sixth Graders Write Good Short Stories." *Elementary English* 37: 20-23; January 1960.

¹⁰R. Van Allen and Gladys C. Halvorsen. "The Language-Experience Approach to Reading Instruction." *Ginn Contributions to Reading*, No. 27. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1961.

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