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ABSTRACT

Over the past several years, teachers at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory have used the language experience approach to develop the literacy skills of young children. To increase child involvement, a scrapbook project for 4-year-olds was conducted each Wednesday for 1 academic year. Each child received a scrapbook and crayons, markers, pens, pencils, and erasers. Children were randomly divided into groups and worked on their projects at three stations. At the first station, where the story starter group worked, the teacher planned an activity that would elicit a story from the children, and provided cues, suggested topics, or offered some sort of motivation. The children dictated stories to the teacher, who then printed them in the children's scrapbooks. At the second station, the children decided what kind of props would fit in their story, made the props, and revised their story. The third scrapbook station was set aside for acting out dictated stories. One child author served as the director, while the other children acted out the story or served as the audience. To assess the project, the children's stories were examined for conventional elements of a beginning, setting, characters, sequence, feelings, description, conversation, and an ending. The children's first stories had a median score of four of these elements. After story six, all stories maintained a median score of five or more elements. The acting out of personal stories seemed to elicit commitment from children. The project description contains 24 references and 3 figures illustrating trends in the presence of story elements. (AC)

# Curtain Call for Preschoolers--A Literacy Event

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# Curtain Call for Preschoolers--A Literacy Event

Recently much attention has focused on the literacy development of young children. Many researchers (e.g. Fields, Sprangler, & Lee 1991) stress using a whole language approach, letting children explore an enriched print environment in conjunction with activities that they engage in naturally. Play is one of those activities that is basic to childhood and the early childhood curriculum. Children are continuously learning through their play and it can offer a wealth of opportunities to introduce literacy events. The most complicated grammatical and pragmatic forms of the language including the use of dramatic dialogues appear first in play activity (Bruner 1983). Therefore, play is a logical place to promote literacy events.

Recommended literacy events that fit into the child's play incorporate real life reading and writing materials in the dramatic play area (Fields, 1991). For example, many early childhood centers use real props in the housekeeping section. These include appointment books, bank ledgers, menus, telephones, typewriters, and any other item that shows print is functional. Dodge and Frost (1986) found highly structured settings that suggest specific roles and themes are best for older preschoolers and produce more elaborate play sequences. Morrow (1990) specified that young children are more likely to do voluntary literacy behaviors during play periods when teachers guide them to use these materials.

More specifically connected with literacy development and this article is sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play occurs

when two or more children adopt roles and attempt to create a real life situation (Christie, 1982 & Smilansky, 1968). Sociodramatic play is classified as the most highly developed form of symbolic play which predominates the pre-operational stage of age two through seven (Piaget, 1951). Sociodramatic play significantly contributes to children's cognitive and social development (Christie, 1982). Vygotsky (1976) believed that this type of play has an important role in the development of abstract, logical thought.

Recent studies suggest that children using sociodramtic play to act out stories helps their story recall and story related comprehension (Pellegrini 1984). Christie (1987) further emphasized the reconstruction of a story should help with specific and generalized story comprehension. Mandler and Johnson (1977) note that dramatic play not only improves story comprehension but helps children to recall and produce narrative.

Since story re-enactment involves many of the same skills as sociodramatic play (Bretherton, 1984) and children appear to reach their peek of involvement in sociodramatic play at age four and five (Fein, 1979), we wanted to provide our preschoolers with some structured opportunities for dramatization. Planned dramatic play periods have been shown to improve language development (Levy, Schaefer & Phelps, 1986) as well as story comprehension (Pellegrini; 1984, Silvern, Taylor, Williamson, Surbeck & Kelley, 1986). If these strategies help children with literacy development as research implies, then it seems the addition of children writing and acting out their own stories would further enhance their literacy skills.

The teachers at the WVU Child Development Laboratory incorporated a traditional language experience approach with dramatic play by having children dictate their stories and then act out the story they had created. This combination of dictating stories, preparing props, and acting out child authored stories along with the school's philosophy of whole language was intended to produce observable outcomes of increased story structure and story awareness.

Children dramatizing their own stories add a new twist of involvement. Previous studies (Ishee & Goldhaber, 1990) have focused on re-enacting familiar stories or books. Other studies (Levy, Schaefer, & Phelps, 1986) have advocated that teachers plan sociodramatic play opportunities. Combining these strategies of dramatizing their own dictations in a planned play time would seem to further increase children's literacy knowledge.

**Background for Dictating Stories in the Scrapbook Project**

Over the past several years the teachers at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory have investigated methods to the Language Experience Approach (LEA). LEA has long been used as an accepted method to develop the literacy skills of young children (Allen, 1974). Through LEA children dictate their experiences as teachers write the dictations. This approach allows the child to associate the printed word with spoken language. Recently, many teachers have been altering the use of LEA to accommodate for more independent writing (Srickland & Morrow, 1991).

To incorporate more involvement from the child the scrapbook

project was introduced at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory (Warash & Kingsbury, 1988). This project has taken many routes before coming to its final stage of development.

Originally, the project was geared to having children dictate stories and draw pictures in their own 11" by 14" hardbound book. Even from the beginning the added dimension of a hardbound book was reinforcing to children and parents. As the years went by new strategies were added until it became a full process oriented project incorporating children's acting of their own stories. In retrospect, the scrapbook project was a bi-product of childrens own play development.

**Instructional Procedures**

All 15 children of the four year old class enrolled at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory participated in the scrapbook project. The ages ranged from four years to four years, eleven months. At the beginning of the project, the children were assessed using the Early Skill Inventory-Preliteracy of the Metropolitan Readiness Test (1985). The Early School Inventory is an informal method of obtaining relevant information about a child's concept of print, writing and story awareness. More relevant to this project was the assessment of each child's first scrapbook story and subsequent stories using the criteria for evaluating story structure from the Early Skill Inventory-Preliteracy (1985). These informal measures were used primarily to show individual progress. Informal assessments such as these are recommended ways to evaluate story awareness of young children (Jensen, 1985).

The project consisted of giving each child a hardbound scrapbook and their own box containing crayons, markers, pens, pencils and erasers. The scrapbook project was conducted once a week for one academic year. Children were randomly divided each Wednesday into three groups to participate in each station.

The first station was known as the story starter group. The teacher planned some type of activity that would elicit a story from the children. For example, many times the teacher would read a story and the children would respond by dictating and drawing their own ending to the story. Other activities have included asking children to do some reflective type of thinking after the teacher discussed a situation relevant to the days events. The teacher's role in this group was to give minimal directions so the children could react by using their imaginations to create. It has been found through related research conducted at the Lab school, children need direction or some type of stimulus to get started in dictating stories (Warash & Strong, 1990). Children do not indicate their true ability when they are asked to respond to an open ended request to produce a story (Stein, 1979). Children need cues, appealing topics or some type of stimulus to motivate them. Teachers also used some prompting cues such as asking children, "What happened next."

Children dictated their story to a teacher as they were printed in the scrapbook. Some children opted to write their story using their own personal print. Often children combined some letters with some pretend print or included drawings with the story. Each child's work was accepted and valued from

scribblings to letter like formations (Warash & Kingsbury, 1988). The teacher printed a title of the assignment at the top of the scrapbook page in order to communicate to parents what the child was asked to do. This type of reference is especially important when children and parents go back through the scrapbook.

After their stories were completed the children took their scrapbooks to the second station. The children decided what kind of props would fit in their story. Some children opted to make a representation of something for a prop. Poster board, markers and collage materials were always available for those children who wanted to make a prop. After these materials were made and used, they were kept in the prop box for future use.

In addition, the second station provided an opportunity for children to make revisions in their dictated stories. This further involvement with their dictated stories often promoted simple editing. A new line would be added or a change in the story would occur.

The third scrapbook station was the acting out of the dictated stories. Each child author was the director while the other children portrayed the characters or an object in the story. If a child did not want to act, that child could be part of the audience. Often children would make verbal declarations that substituted for an action. For example, instead of pretending to climb the steps the child might say I am now climbing the steps. Smilansky's (1968) says that the verbal declarations are part of the child's play development.

Several times through the year the acting out of personal stories was video taped so that children could see their

productions. Parents checked out the tapes and reviewed them with their children. This type of home extension activity is positive for child and family relationships (Warash & Saab 1991).

**Assessment**

The most relevant assessment for this project was the examination of the children's actual stories. Jensen (1985) has recommended that instead of using formal tests that are artificial, it is better to assess children in an informal setting with materials that help the child respond in a way that reveals their story telling abilities. Therefore, the dictated stories were examined for conventional elements of a story. These elements were obtained from the Early Skills Inventory-Preliteracy of the Metropolitan Readiness Test (1985) and included examining each story for a beginning, setting, characters, sequence, feelings, description, conversation, and an ending.

The children's first story along with their subsequent stories through April were examined for existing story elements. The median scores were used to detect observable trends (see Figure 1). The children's first story had a median score of four elements. The next two stories had a drop in elements before an increase was observed in story four and five. There was a drop in story six with a median score of three elements. After story six, all remaining stories maintained a median score of five or more elements. Some of the drops in story elements could possibly be explained by the type of story starter activities. For example, children had an overall drop in story six. In this story, children were to dictate their interpretations of

Thanksgiving. This proved to be difficult. Four year old children may have few recallable memories of this event. Most of the initial stories consisted of children listing what they drew. These "list" stories seemed to cease after children gained more experience using descriptors. It was in December when a noticeable increase in story elements were used by the class. Figure 2 shows a comparison of their first story with ones dictated in December.

Nine of the children included a beginning, ending, characters, sequence, and description in their first stories. At the end of three months, 14 of the children included a beginning, characters, and a sequence, 13 included an ending and setting and 12 included description. Three children had started to use conversation in their December stories.

It was apparent that children were becoming more involved in their stories. Because they were using what they had dictated to act out their story might be one explanation for this involvement. Graves (1983) says that children grow as writers when they are given the opportunity to write and be critical readers of what they write. Children's stories were re-read several times on scrapbook day and again when they were published for the school library.

Children often dictated stories about their own experiences. When children are given the opportunity to write they include personal experiences. This is very rewarding to children (Jensen, 1985) and probably stimulates longer stories which in turn gives them more experience using language.

Children also began some simple editing. After they had

dictated a story and were in the second station they sometimes changed sentences. Several children had significant gains in their story structures. Christopher's first story was quite different from the one he wrote three months later. He began with two elements and eventually included all of the story elements. His first story stated:

> "The girl saw a bug. The bug scared the girl. The bird is going to scare the bug. The cat scared the bird away."

Three months later he dictated the following story:

> Christmas Morning
> "I got up and my mom fixes me hot chocolate. Then I open the presents that Santa got me, and I play with them. I look outside then I close the door. I go in and call some of my friends to come over and play. Then my Grandma and Grandpa come over to give me my presents. I play with my sister, then I lay on the couch and watch TV and eat candy. My Grandma tickles me, that always happens! Then I watch Mr. Rogers. I go outside and play. Then I go see Santa Claus at the Mall. Then I go to the Zoo. I eat dinner that my dad fixes. Then I go to my Grandpa's and it is not snowing. I get on the tractor and my grandpa snow plows. Then I go home and lay down on the couch and go to sleep. Then I go to bed, it is night time, and my dad rubs my back."

Stephanie's first story was entitled, "Late Last Night I Dreamed." She dictated:

> "I dreamed about a big dinosaur. He snored real loud and woke me up. Then I screamed at him for snoring too much."

Her story of three months later entitled "Disneyland" was a recreation of a family trip. This step by step simulated version is interesting since children often center on one event. This story shows her ability to recall a sequence of events.

She dictated:

> "It was January 28, 1991 around 1:00 p.m. and I was getting ready to fly to Disney World Orlando, Florida with my mom, dad, sister, two brothers and me. My plane ride was fun. We watched the Little Mermaid on the plane trip to Florida. We rented a car and headed to our hotel to unload. Then we all got ready for the park. When we arrived, I had to go on my favorite ride which was It's A Small World. After we all rode that ride I went on Peter Pan which is my second favorite ride at Disney World. By that time, it was time for lunch. I was getting hungry. So my family and I headed to Cinderella's Castle to eat lunch."

Stephanie had an interest in getting her story exact and including many details. She also liked to do much of her own printing.

As previously stated, within a few months, children began to include more components of a story in their dictations. The teacher was also giving fewer prompts as more stories were written. By the end of the project, eight children had accumulated all the elements. Conversation was one of the latest to develop or the one that some children never did include. Feelings was another element that six children did not use in their stories until late November or December.

**Summary**

Acting out personal stories dictated by the child seemed to bring more commitment from the child. Children appeared to be more eager and involved in writing longer stories because they knew the story was going to be used again. Acting out the child authored stories certainly gave children the chance to work with their dictations as a story and as a product that was used by their peers in the acting. So often children dictate stories that are placed on the bulletin board or sent home only to be

thrown away or stored in a child's file. With the re-enactment of personal stories, children not only hear their stories read but they have the opportunity to revise, and watch their story performed.

Acting out personal stories seemed natural for children. As in play, it is an activity that does not have frustrating consequences. Children can be courageous and not threatened by mistakes. In both play and personal story re-enactment, goals can be changed. Children can explore and invent as they go along. Just as children seem to edit their own play by constantly changing their initial intent, they can edit their stories for acting. In both play and story re-enactment children can transform the world according to their desires and at the same time they are learning to conform to the real world.

The dramatic play also seemed to make the scrapbooks more meaningful to children and their parents. Parents often came to school to review a story that the child had told them he/she had written and performed. The scrapbooks also helped children that did not take the initiative in doing their own literacy activities that were available in the school environment. The scrapbooks were a developmentally appropriate teacher directed activity that offered all children some exposure to print in a non-threatening way. Children seemed proud of their scrapbooks and were often surprised at what they knew about print. The scrapbooks gave children a chance to put the elements of reading and writing together in a directed form of play.

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Median Growth

of Story Elements

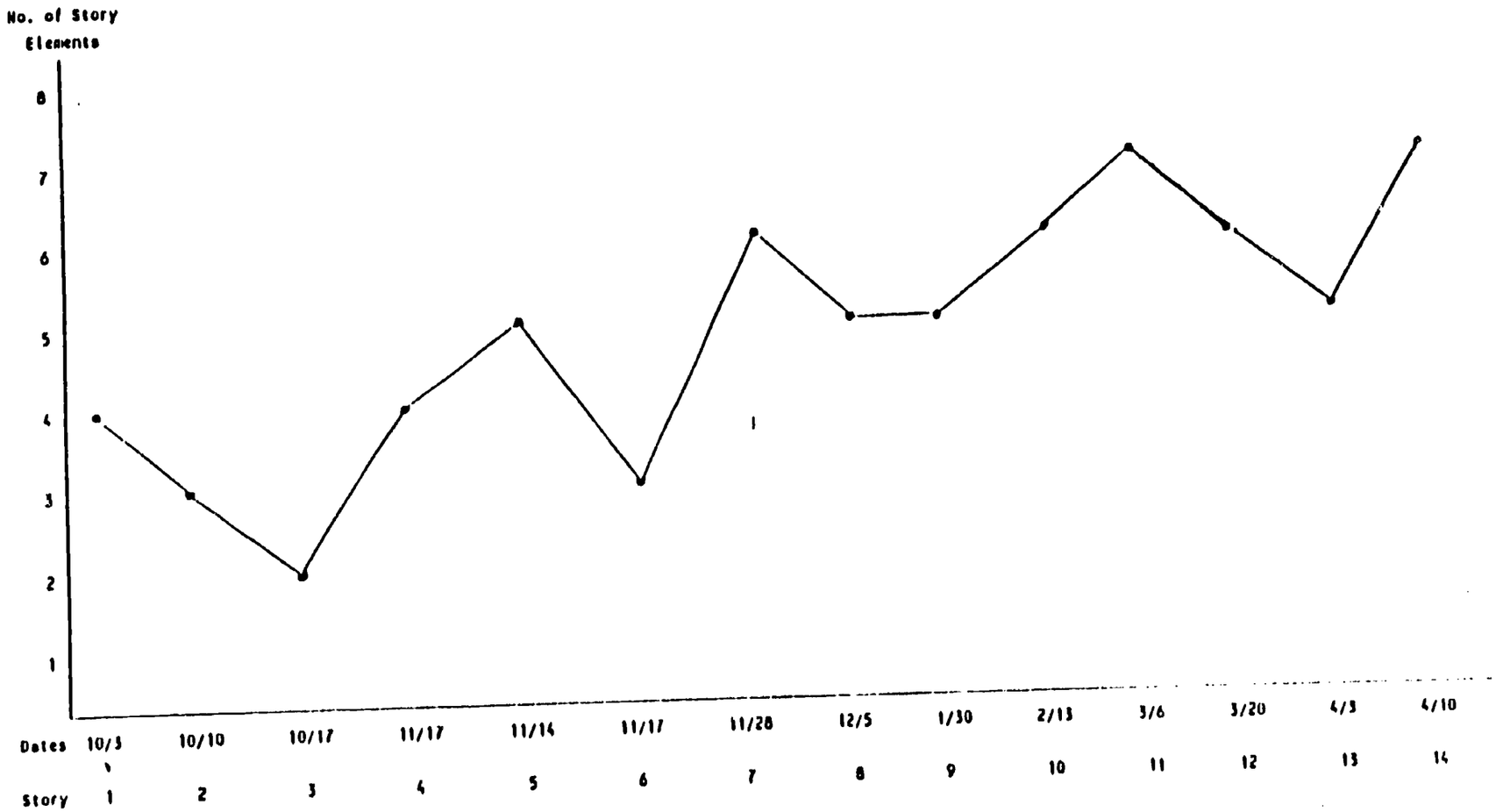


FIGURE 1

| Child | Beginning 1 | Beginning 2 | Setting 1 | Setting 2 | Characters 1 | Characters 2 | Sequence 1 | Sequence 2 | Feelings 1 | Feelings 2 | Description 1 | Description 2 | Conversation 1 | Conversation 2 | Ending 1 | Ending 2 | Total 1 | Total 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | X | | | | X | 3/8 | 6/8 |
| 2 | X | | X | | | X | | | | | X | X | | | X | X | 4/8 | 3/8 |
| 3 | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | 6/8 | 8/8 |
| 4 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | 5/8 | 7/8 |
| 5 | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | | | X | | 4/8 | 4/8 |
| 6 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | 7/8 | 8/8 |
| 7 | X | X | | | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | | | | X | 4/8 | 5/8 |
| 8 | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | | X | | | | X | 3/8 | 6/8 |
| 9 | | X | | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | | | X | X | 2/8 | 6/8 |
| 10 | | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | | | | | X | 3/8 | 5/8 |
| 11 | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | 5/8 | 5/8 |
| 12 | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | 6/8 | 7/8 |
| 13 | | X | | X | X | X | | X | | | | | | X | | X | 1/8 | 6/8 |
| 14 | | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | X | X | | | X | X | 4/8 | 6/8 |
| 15 | X | X | X | X | | | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | X | 4/8 | 6/8 |

X - Elements in first story and story of three months later

FIGURE 2

CHRISTOPHER

Total Elements

Grade

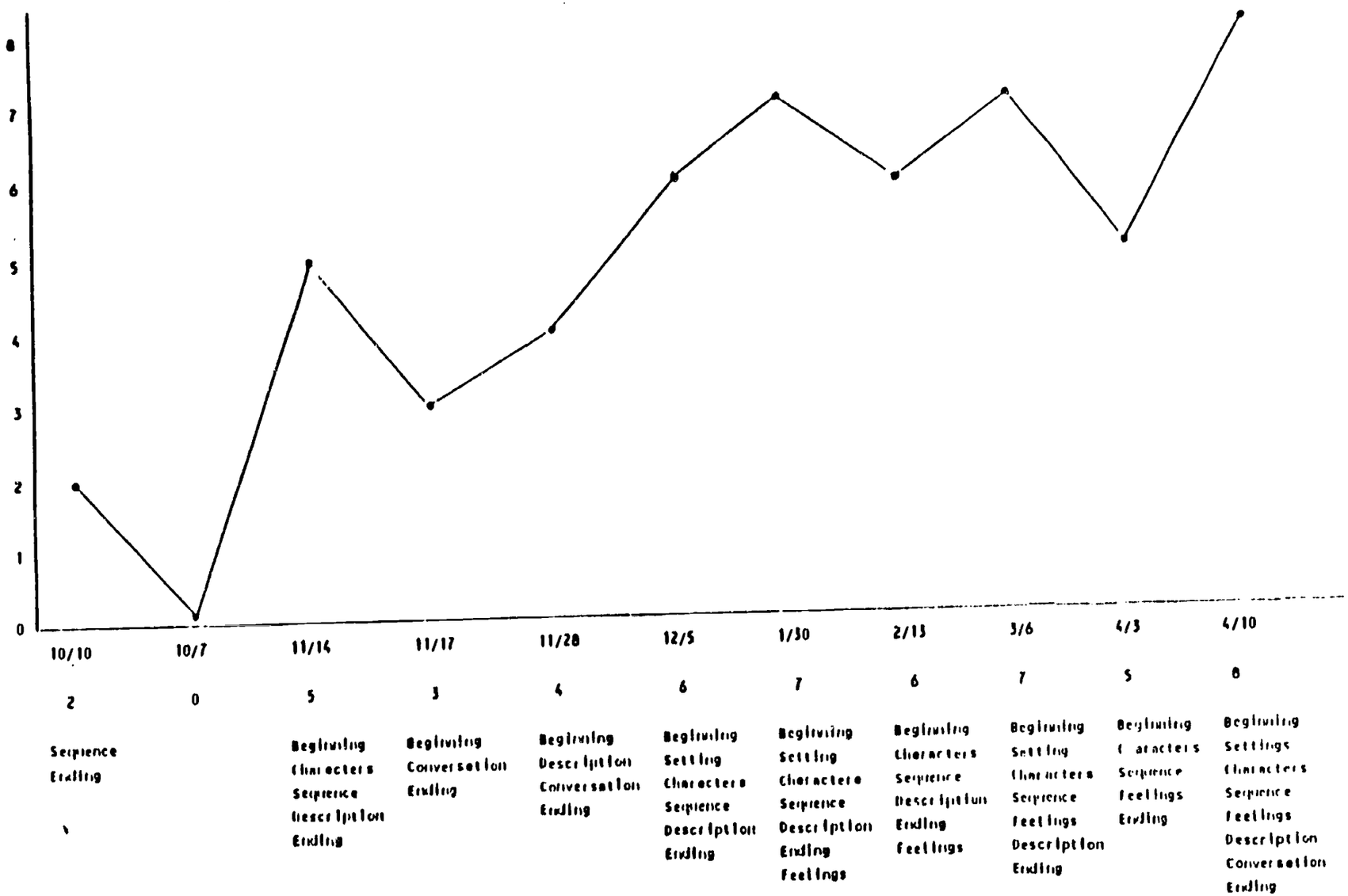


FIGURE 3