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## The importance of writing with young children

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# The Importance of Writing with Young Children

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## **Introduction**

For years there have been countless amounts of research done on writing in the elementary grades. However, there has been little research done on preschoolers and writing. According to Miller (2000), countless books and journals can be found on how to incorporate writing into the elementary curriculum, but few can be found on writing with those students younger than kindergarten.

Writing instruction has been emphasized in elementary literacy instruction during the last two decades. As stated by Miller (2000), it is quite clear that over the next decade or so American workers in most settings will probably write more than they have before. The prevalence of electronic communications in everyday life further influences this trend. For example, many workdays are spent composing and answering E-mail.

Writing is also important to young children before kindergarten because they are already writing. Although their writing may not look like words, their attempts to write are part of the literacy learning process. Graves (1983) wrote children want to write. They want to write from the beginning of school. Before school, he continues, young children write on walls and pavement. Children may seem like they are scribbling, but there is meaning behind it; the children need only be asked what the scribbles mean (Graves, 1983).

The idea for this thesis started while I was completing my elementary education student teaching. During my student teaching, I was taking a course about the reading and writing connection. While taking the course, I completed an honors contract to implement two writing projects with my second grade class. The projects consisted of carrying out writing activities that took the students through the entire writing process.

The students enjoyed these projects so much I continued to bring ideas from the reading and writing connection course I was taking into their classroom. The students in my class had never been through the writing process. Through my writing activities, they were able to become comfortable with the pre-writing or brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing procedures for writing a story. These activities went off with great success. I wanted to bring something similar to my preschool student teaching just as I had during my elementary student teaching.

During my first few days in the preschool classroom, I noticed there was little writing happening in the classroom. However, when I asked the children what they were doing or building, they had the most creative stories to share. It was then that I knew for sure that I wanted to begin writing with them each day.

I wanted to have the children write in journals and share their stories. Throughout the semester I hoped to see changes and enjoyment for writing progress. By the end of my student teaching, I wanted to find out what four year olds could do and how far they could move through the writing process. In conjunction with the students' writing, I would continue to look for research on writing with children to include in my thesis.

There could be a significant impact this thesis may have on the field of education. Numerous studies and research (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Tompkins, 2004) have been done in the elementary grades for writing, and I hoped to investigate the same type of results with preschoolers. While working with young children I hoped to demonstrate that writing could be done at any age and be a successful part of the learning process.

From this research, I hoped to gain more insight into the important role that writing has on students and their learning. This may be something that I continue to

research while working on my masters. Reading and writing has always been an interest of mine, and I hope to be able to bring my love of them into my classroom one day.

## **Review of Research**

A renewed interest in early literacy has grown to a frenzy in the United States according to Jeffrey Trawick-Smith and Teresa Picard (2003). They state that during his presidential campaign, George W. Bush pledged to make Head Start a reading program; his No Child Left Behind initiative further focuses extensively on reading. Millions of dollars in federal grant money are now earmarked for the implementation of "scientifically based" reading programs for young children. Head Start has launched a new early literacy initiative, as have many states and school districts.

Traditionally research viewed young children's literacy learning as a skills-based approach, (Elbow, 1973; Shanahan, 1988). Today, research shows us that young children can naturally develop how to read and write through playful explorations and learn rules from it (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004; Gambrell and Mazzoni, 1999; Roskos and Neuman, 1998; Ruddell, 2002; Sulzby and Teal, 1991).

The following review of research begins with how literacy evolves through language and continues with the importance of play and symbols in literacy development. I follow these sections with the importance of literacy in the home and continue with written language and how invented spelling evolves from emergent writing. The next sections show how whole language is related to literacy development and the school setting. I conclude with how writing develops in preschool, kindergarten and first grade settings.

### **How Literacy Develops Through Language**

Language is the foundation of literacy (Tompkins, 2004). Acquiring language is one of the most complex tasks humans will ever accomplish, as indicated by Ruddell

(2002). According to Lawhon and Cobb (2002), language and literacy are rooted in social interactions. Similarly, Ruddell (2002) suggests that language acquisition is influenced by the language used at home. This begins before birth and expands rapidly during the preschool years. Infants try to communicate with those around by crying, smiling, and making baby noises. As they grow to become toddlers, their communication changes to imitate the sounds and gestures of their caregivers all while attempting to make sense of the world (Beaty & Pratt, 2003). Gradually young children become adept at using language to address their needs and to carry on social interactions (Rice, 1989).

Somewhere between the ages of two and four, children progress from single words in language, to what is known as telegraphic speech, to a high degree of control (Ruddell, 2002). Telegraphic speech is how children illustrate the patterns in early oral language development, in which pivot words and remainder words are used to convey meaning. Pivot words are words like where, want, no, and see. According to Ruddell (2002), these pivot words occur with high frequency words and correspond to adverbs. The remainder words are represented by words such as cookie, bib, and doggie, which are lower frequency words that correspond to nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Following the development of two-word utterances, this telegraphic speech progresses so that children's sentences reach greater complexity within a year or two (Ruddell, 2002).

### *Learning before Formal Instruction*

Can young children really learn to read and write before they receive formal instruction in kindergarten? Young children are constantly thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). As Graves (1983) points out, thinking is an important part of learning. Through this

thought process children are able to come up with answers that show children are constructing their own knowledge (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978).

While children are constructing their knowledge, they learn to use symbols, combining their oral language, pictures, print, and play into a coherent mixed medium. They use this mixed medium to create and communicate meanings in a variety of ways. From their initial experiences and interactions with adults, they acquire substantial knowledge about letter-sound relations and gradually use this knowledge to begin to read words. As children become readers, Birnbaum and Emig (1983) state that readers and writers transform their experiences through the use of verbal symbols. They also point out that the parallels between reading and writing are more obvious for young children than for older students and adults.

According to Hall and Robinson (1995), very few have considered the relationship between play with literacy-related objects in situations. Play offers an opportunity for children to develop a wider understanding of literacy by allowing them to explore literacy (Hall & Robinson, 1995). Play, also allows, children to involve themselves with aspects of life that demand they think and behave like the people in the outside world. Bessel-Browne (1985) did a study of dramatic play areas and found that the children were using literacy as an oral language substitute, as a source of information, for self-expression, and to confirm their identity. Schrader (1989) found that children demonstrated their developing knowledge of written language functions not only by writing for real-life purposes, but by reading their writing and discussing the meaning of their written language with others.

Numerous studies, states Miller (2002), demonstrate that children whose play activities are enriched with literacy props or interventions acquire a fuller understanding of print. Roskos and Neuman (1998), for example, discovered that when teachers included literacy props (i.e., books, markers, and signs) in the dramatic play area, their students became engaged in "literacy routines" of reading and writing routines they had seen adults perform. These literacy routines demonstrate their increased understanding of print awareness.

Studies (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004) have shown that children learn written language in much the same way as Piaget states they construct their knowledge about the world through exploration and experimentation. Similarly, in their research, Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999) report that preschoolers' engage in a wide range of emergent literacy activities and behaviors. For example, they observed children listening to stories, discussing and making up stories, scribbling letters, writing their names, and creating invented signs through play.

### **Emerging Literacy**

What is emergent literacy? Emergent literacy refers to the first signs of abilities and knowledge with regard to written language, the period between birth and the time when children conventionally read and write (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). When Clay (1975) is describing literacy development, she uses the term emergent literacy.

### *Learning Sequence*

Educators used to think that children learned to talk, read, and then write. Recent studies (Butler, Liss, & Sterner, 1999; Clay, 1975; Miller, 2002) show that there are no stop points in literacy development; it is a continuous process. Children do not

acknowledge the sequences we think of when discussing the forms of written language. Children do not see the letters or hear the sounds of the letters. Clay (1975), reports that children take their first critical steps toward learning to read and write very early in life. Long before they can exhibit reading and writing production skills, they begin to acquire some basic understandings of the concepts about literacy and its functions. As they continue to learn, children increasingly consolidate this information into patterns that allow for automaticity and fluency in reading and writing. Consequently, reading and writing acquisition is conceptualized better as a developmental continuum rather than as an all-or-nothing phenomenon (Butler, Liss, & Sterner, 1999). What is important, in agreement with Clay (1975), is that children should know the purposes and uses of written language.

What does this all mean? It simply means that teachers, schools, and publishers cannot determine how children will learn to read and write (Fields, Groth, Spangler, 2004). All children do not follow the process at the same time. They are each unique and are aware of different aspects of written language. It is important, as preschool teachers, to use diverse forms of support for individual learners (Clay, 1975). The caregivers, parents, and teachers who observe children and know a child should support their individual efforts. For these reasons, young children need active models, supportive conversation and writing, and praise for what they have written.

Miller (2002) states young children teach themselves to write by being personally motivated and through directed trial and error. From this motivation children begin to make their own forms of writing. Literacy experiences (i.e. reading, writing tools to explore writing, and literacy play centers) throughout the early childhood years, birth

through age 8, affect the development of literacy. These experiences constantly interact with the characteristics of individual children to determine the level of literacy skills a child ultimately achieves. Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are schoolage can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain (Butler, Liss, & Sterner, 1999).

### *Literacy in the Home*

Parents are children's first and best teachers (Tompkins, 2003). Tompkins (2003) points out those parents can do many things to support their children's literacy development at home. For example, Clay (1979), and Durkin (1966), note the importance of reading to children before entering school, adding that these children are more likely to succeed in learning to read. Literacy in the home can begin as easily as having an adult become a role model as they read to the children, a resource by providing literacy materials in the home, or even a supporter as the children pretend to read and write. Not only can adults help young children to become literate, but so can older siblings, grandparents, and caregivers (Fields, Groth & Spangler, 2004). Caregivers and siblings in the home also model the function of print for children (Dechant, 1993). Young children learn to write when they see us writing for real purposes (Calkins, 1994), for example, when they see us writing grocery lists or writing emails and letters. Children need only to be invited to join in on these purposeful writing activities.

Children's attitudes and motivations with respect to literacy learning are further forged in the home (Ruddell, 2002). Children learn literacy in an environment where they can choose how to spend their time or what books they want to read; they learn literacy when reading and writing materials are available. They also gain knowledge by

watching adults or other children using print and by seeing that print is important (Butler, Liss, & Sterner, 1999). Ruddell (2002) informs us that the children's background knowledge and literacy experiences thus serve as the foundation for reading comprehension and literacy success in the school.

Butler, Liss, and Sterner (1999) further point out that children learn the power of print when we help them make sense of it. Some ways they suggest you can accomplish this is by asking your child to 'read' symbols such as arrows and figures on doors or buildings, asking your child to read traffic signs, or asking your child to write captions for family photographs. Other ways might involve: when writing letters, incorporate your child or give your child writing tools; read to your child, or write down activities that you and your child are planning to do.

### **Written Language**

Children learn written language in the same way as oral language because it is language (Cambourne, 1988). In her early writings (1972), Chomsky points out that parallels exist between learning to talk and learning to read and write.

Even though there are similarities there are also differences between oral language and written language. For example, Holdaway (1979) acknowledged that oral language and written language differ in form and in function. He explains one's ideas are written down as a means to record important matters, whereas oral language may serve just to pass the time.

### *Drawing or Writing*

In the beginning as indicated by Fields, Groth, and Spangler (2004) children do not distinguish between drawing and writing. Once children have figured out the

differences, however, they begin to make what are called linear-repetitive forms. This form looks similar to cursive writing. Over time, children begin to notice the letters around them in their environment. When children begin to attempt to incorporate these letters into their writing, their understanding of print awareness begins to evolve.

It has been found that children's emergent writing mimic the principles found in the earliest writing systems of Chinese, Egyptian, and Greek people (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004). For example, they say that children rely on drawing and symbols to tell stories before they accept the alphabetic writing system. However, before they can accept the alphabetic writing system children need repeated experiences with print to understand that letters represent the sounds we make when we speak. From the research of Ferreiro (1978) it was found that emergent readers initially believe only nouns are written, demonstrating the belief that print represents things.

In accordance with Dyson (1989) and Graves (1994), children's writing develops through the constant invention and reinvention of the forms of written language. For example, children write their own ways of making letters and words. They move from primitive forms toward the conventional forms. For example, in the primitive form of writing children just invent the writing from their observations of environmental print and through their observations of literate adults and children as they interact with print (Miller, 2002). As their writing progresses, they move toward conventional writing, which follows the mechanics of writing.

As stated by Griffith and Leavell (1995), spelling development begins the first time a child picks up a writing instrument and makes a mark on a page. These authors report that the time spent scribbling, drawing and writing mock letters (i.e., forms

resembling actual letters) has been given a variety of labels-prephonemic, preliterate, precommunicative and deviant stages. Ruddell (2002) says that "Emerging" is perhaps a more appropriate descriptor because emerging is an understanding that things can be represented on paper by symbols that are not pictures.

### **Invented Spelling**

The relationship between spoken and written words is alphabetic and incorporates three organizational principles: spelling by sound, spelling by pattern and spelling by meaning (Schlagal, 1989). Children use their knowledge of English orthography to "invent" spellings for words they do not know how to spell. These spellings provide a window into children's growing comprehension of written language's organizational principles. Two decades of research on children's misspellings indicates that their invented spellings are governed by the hypotheses the children construct about spelling (Beers & Henderson, 1977; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Read, 1971). Teachers can use children's invented spellings to determine how a child is applying information about words and thus would be able to relate spelling instruction to the child's level of understanding (Nelson, 1994; O'Flahavan, 1989).

Emergent writing slowly evolves into invented spelling, the spelling in which children apply their own spelling rules for the purpose of connecting speech to print (Ruddell, 2002). Children use five different patterns of invented spelling as they progress toward conventional spelling. The five patterns are prephonemic, phonemic, letter-name, transitional, and conventional (Temple & Gillet, 1989). Prephonemic is when letters and letterlike forms are arranged on lines horizontally, showing the child's awareness that words are made from letters (Ruddell, 2002). The phonemic pattern is when letters and

letterlike forms appear in short strings, revealing the child's discovery of the alphabetic principle. The letter-name pattern happens when letters' names are used to represent sounds in words. An example of this is when an "h" may be used to represent "ch" because "h" is the only letter in the alphabet with the "ch" in its name. Transitional spelling, the fourth pattern, is when letters are used but the letters may not represent the correct rule for the spelling pattern. Conventional spelling, the final pattern, is when letters reflect the rule-governed spelling patterns.

### **Whole Language Learning**

In the United States, around the late 1970s, the whole language movement gained increased recognition due to Kenneth Goodman's insights into reading as a psycholinguistic process (Weaver, 1995). The social, psycholinguistic process integrates sociology, philosophy, child development, anthropology, as well as other fields of study, with reading (Newman and Church, 1990).

As indicated by Weaver (1995), one way of characterizing whole language, is that it is a philosophy rather than a methodology, a constructivist view of learning, with emphasis on the development of literacy. Whole language teachers (Strickland and Cullinan, 1986) put little emphasis on terms such as reading readiness. They prefer the term emergent literacy. Goodman (1989) notes that whole language builds on the base of print awareness, the knowledge about print that children bring to school. He explains that print awareness is the awareness that writing is composed of letters, that clusters of print are separated by spaces, print can represent speech, and writing moves from left to right (Goodman, 1989).

In whole language classrooms, teachers develop their curriculum and environment based on what the students need. The day is organized in blocks of time, with larger and more satisfying projects. Skills, which evolve as they become necessary (Galeota-Wozny, 1995), are taught through mini lessons and conferences in a meaningful context.

Studies of writing development, according to McDonald and Burris (1995) have suggested that young children learn to write through a process that is quite the opposite of what phonic advocates say. Rather than learning to write by mastering first the parts (letters) and then building up to the whole (written lines), it appears that children attend to the whole and only much later to the parts (McDonald and Burris, 1995).

However, whole language and phonics are both essential in teaching young children to read. Young children need to be able to comprehend and spell words, in essence, to be able to decode the English language (Smith, 1992). When both the whole language methods and phonics are combined, children have a greater opportunity to understand and appreciate the written word.

### **Preschool**

One of the most important and useful emphases of the 1980s and 1990s was the attempt to integrate the teaching of all the elements of literacy – listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Miller, 2002). Consistent with whole language advocates the preschool years seem to be the natural time for young children to develop these early elements of literacy. Researchers have learned more about the process of writing and realized that the earlier adults can encourage and support younger children, the more successful they will become in their reading and writing abilities during the elementary years (Beaty & Pratt, 2003). Cambourne (1988) furthermore suggests that the similarities

between learning to talk and learning to read and write should guide educators in deciding how best to teach reading and writing. As stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1998), the reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout a person's life, however, the early years are the most important period for literacy development.

Language learning, becoming literate, is more than memorizing what is told or shown. Young children use their knowledge of symbols and letters from adults to construct their own knowledge of how print works (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004). The informal, everyday experiences with print seem to be a crucial part of the literacy learning process for children. Pretending to read and write, reading labels on food, and seeing their own names in print can all be part of these everyday experiences.

Reading aloud to young children can also be part of the daily activities. Reading to children, as young as infancy, helps them to develop listening skills and eye focus. Reading also stimulates their imagination, sensory awareness and language skills (Kupetz & Green, 1997) as well. Reading further lays the groundwork for increased enthusiasm, appreciation, and comprehension of literature (Galeota-Wozny, 1995). Studies also show how language has been enhanced when we read aloud to children (Freppon, 1995; Percell, Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon, 1995).

### *Preschool Authors*

The early childhood years are crucial for the development of emerging writers. According to Calkins (1994), it is essential that children are deeply involved in writing. She also highlights the importance of having young children share their writings with others so that they will perceive themselves as authors.

Preschool teachers need to engage young children in activities that promote early reading and writing skills (Box, 2002). Journal writing is an excellent way for young children to develop the courage and confidence as writers as stated by Fields, Groth, & Spangler (2004). In preschool, literacy centers also seem to invite actual writing (Hall & Robinson, 1995). When literacy resources (i.e. blank paper, index cards, journals, crayons, and pencils) are made available to playing children, these resources become a vital and critical part of learning about written language in the school settings.

### **Kindergarten through First Grade Schooling**

Just as researchers have encouraged educators to encourage and support young children to explore reading and writing, kindergarten and first grade children need the same encouragement and support (Beaty & Pratt, 2003). The natural process of learning to talk should guide our teaching of reading and writing at the early grade levels (Cambourne, 1988). Children further need to be deeply involved in writing through journaling and literacy play centers (Calkins, 1994).

#### *Interactive Writing*

Research (Tompkins, 2003) has shown that interactive writing develops young children's understanding of written language. During interactive writing, children and the teacher create a text and "share the pen" to write the text on chart paper. The text is composed by the group, and the teacher guides the children as they write one word at a time on the chart paper.

As Tompkins (2003) shares, there are four reasons interactive writing is important for young children. The first reason is to practice reading and writing high-frequency words. An example of this is when the children take turns writing the words that are

familiar or are known. When they finish the writing, they read the words together. The second reason is to teach and practice phonics and spelling skills. During the activity, for example, the children discuss punctuation and how they believe the word should be spelled. The third reason is for the children to be able to successfully read and write texts that they could not do independently. The final reason, as indicated by Tompkins (2003), is to have the children share their reading and writing expertise with classmates.

### *Guided Writing*

Another way to promote understanding of written language is through guided writing (Tompkins, 2003). Guided writing is when the teacher plans a structured writing activity and then supervises as the children do the writing. For example, when children make a page for a class book, they are doing guided writing because the teacher has set up the writing activity (Tompkins, 2003). Teachers can also guide children's writing when they are in writing groups. Tompkins (2003) also states that there are four reasons for guided writing. The first reason is to support children's writing in instructional-level materials. While working with small groups of children, for example, the teacher can focus on the children's writing. The second is to teach literacy procedures, concepts, skills, and strategies during minilessons. The third reason is to introduce different types of writing activities. The final reason for guided writing is to teach children to use the writing process. The sections of the writing process that are paid particular attention to during guided writing are revising and editing (Tompkins, 2003).

### *Independent Writing*

During independent writing children do the writing themselves. Writing on their own allows children to explore and use what they have learned about writing from

modeling and other experiences with print (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004). For example, children can use what they have learned about writing during writing workshops or at a writing center. It is through independent writing that Tompkins (2003) states that children begin to view themselves as authors.

One way children can do this independent writing is through the use of journals. In the elementary classroom, children use journals to record personal experiences, explore reactions and interpretations to books they read and videos they view, and to record and analyze information about literature, writing, social studies, and science topics (Piazza, 2003; Tompkins, 2004).

What or how they write doesn't matter. Donald Graves (1994) says that although it is important to be able to spell, we should not associate the quality of a person's ideas by their spelling. He stated that he has found many people, especially those who are poor spellers, end up feeling that they are poor writers because of their struggle with spelling. What does matter is that they spend the energy exploring their understanding about writing and feel comfortable writing (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

From my review of research I found that there was a scarcity of research done on written language for preschoolers. However, research (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004; Graves, 1983; Ruddell, 2002) suggests that literacy learning is a continuous process and begins as early as infancy. Since literacy develops at an early age, there is definitely a need for more research on written language for preschoolers (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004; Graves, 1983; Ruddell, 2002).

Researchers have traditionally thought that children learned to talk, read, and then write. Cambourne (1988), however, suggests that children learn written language in the same way as oral language because it is language. Literacy first emerges in the home because of the ways language is used to address children's needs and to carry on social interactions in the home environment (Rice, 1989).

One way to expand children's knowledge of language is to read to them. The home environment also needs to be supplied with appropriate literacy materials (i.e. books, paper, pencils, and journals) so that children will experiment and play with written language.

Cambourne (1988) suggests that the parallels between learning to talk and learning to read and write should guide our instruction within school settings. In order to replicate this natural way of learning, the school setting should provide opportunities for literacy to evolve from children's needs, interests, and social interactions. Classroom teachers, as well as writing researchers, have discovered that even young children communicate through writing, and that they begin writing as they are learning to write even before they read (Graves, 1983).

One way to follow this natural way of learning is through literacy centers (writing centers within the dramatic play area that include paper, notebooks, post-its, envelopes, and pencils) in preschool settings. Through play and exploration with literacy materials and resources children can extend their understanding of written language and its functions. Through play, young children invent and reinvent the forms of written language, moving from primitive forms to conventional forms of print. By modeling the use of print and supporting young children when they pretend to read and write, educators can reinforce and extend children's knowledge of print. Also they can continue to expand children's language and understanding of written language by reading to them in the preschool setting daily.

Calkins (1994) reported that ninety percent of children come to school believing they can write. Similarly, Beaty and Pratt (2003) emphasize that the earlier adults encourage and support young children, the more successful they will become in their reading and writing abilities in elementary school. Furthermore, the early years are the most important period for literacy development.

## **Classroom Implications**

True teaching involves much more than providing facts and numbers in order for the children to learn the different subjects. Teaching involves providing meaningful experiences, to encourage thinking, and to offer pertinent information. Our goal as a teacher is to keep the children improving and investigating their knowledge of reading and writing. We can accomplish this by providing support for their thinking, opportunities for them to explore and experiment with written language, a print rich environment, and literacy play centers.

One role of a teacher is to provide support for thinking. One way to accomplish this is to provide numerous opportunities (i.e., books on tape, books, and blank journals) for the children to freely explore their hypotheses about written language. Making literacy materials (i.e., books, paper, markers, pencils, envelopes, and notepads) available for children to use and experience throughout the classroom helps increase their understanding of literacy. Another way to encourage thinking is to include time for asking questions. Allowing the children to feel free to ask questions during explanations, group times, playtimes, or any other time of the day gives the children the freedom to express and think about what is on their mind.

Children learn to write when they see us writing for real purposes (Calkins, 1994). Providing an environment for learning these real purposes can be achieved in a preschool classroom. By watching others, children can learn that writing is not only within their capabilities, but it is also worth doing. The children need to see teachers and other adults copying lines from a book, pausing to record a story or fact, or expressing their feelings onto the page. They need to see that we write letters, poems, songs, lists, postcards, and

recipes. The children need to have us invite them to join in on all of these purposeful writing activities.

This purposeful writing can also be established through providing a print rich environment. The print available should be placed in a meaningful manner so that each child is able to associate print with meaning. For example, the things in the classroom can be labeled so that children can associate the abstract symbols with the concrete objects, thus providing meaning for it. The children should have available writing materials and books. A print rich environment is a type of classroom environment commonly found in whole language programs.

Dewey (1916) points out that all children learn by doing. Center learning is one way to offer a personal, nurturing, and stimulating environment that involves active learning. Centers set the stage for meaningful hands-on exploration, experimentation, and practice. Centers should involve open-ended materials that are organized to support independent activity and to extend their learning. With teddy bear counters, for example, children can count, sort, make patterns, create designs, add, subtract, and act out their favorite stories about bears. Centers should be organized in a way that promotes order and ease, but also sorting, classifying, and independent activity.

Literacy play centers allow children to learn about the purpose of reading and writing as they use written language in their play. Housekeeping centers are probably the most common play centers in preschool. These centers can be transformed into a post office, a doctor's office, or grocery store by simply changing the props. Each center should also include authentic literacy materials (i.e., blank notebooks, puppets, chart

paper, chalkboards, and chalk) to experiment with and use to learn more about the purposes of written language.

Through meaningful literacy experiences, young children are gaining the confidence to express their thoughts not only verbally, but also through the use of written language. This nurturing and stimulating environment allows for active learning to occur. The young children begin to see during their play that writing has real purposes and functions in life. The children will also learn that not only does writing have multiple purposes and functions, but print is also associated with meaning.

## **Informal Classroom Research**

The early years are crucial for emergent literacy because it is a natural time for young children to develop the early literacy skills. The earlier adults can encourage and support young children, the more successful they will become in their reading and writing abilities (Beaty & Pratt, 2003).

When I first started my student teaching at the preschool in January, 2004, there were few writing experiences available for the preschoolers. The only real evidence I found of the children's writing was that done by the teacher through language experience stories or by the children as they wrote their name on their paper. I would have thought that there would have been opportunities for writing, however, there were none. Many of the children, in fact, were uncomfortable writing their names.

The children were very verbal and loved to share stories. They would tell me about the things they built, or just talk with me. I needed to figure out how to reach them and how to get them to write their stories down. Consistent with the research (Hall & Robinson, 1995; Ruddell, 2002), I provided writing materials for the children to write with in different areas of the room. However, the children did not change their writing behaviors with the materials that were available.

Next, I started adding regular writing paper to some of the choice tables. During the explanation of the choices for the day, I modeled how they could write a story or a letter. Then, I asked if there were questions about what they could write. Everyone seemed to understand. As the day went on, however, no one wanted to write. I would even model writing a story and ask if someone would like to join me, but no one did. I did notice, however, that some of the children came up to me after choice time was over

and mentioned that they wanted to write a story, but forgot. They would ask if I could do it again another day. I observed that the children were getting involved in other centers that interested them more. I decided that I needed to figure out a way to include writing into the more popular centers so that writing might happen naturally.

The research about writing states that children learn about the purposes of reading and writing as they use written language in their play (Calkins, 1994; Hall & Robinson, 1995). After trying to add writing as a separate choice, I chose to add writing to an established play center. The first center I chose to add to their classroom was a post office in the housekeeping area. The post office went along with the theme I was teaching for that particular week. I added wrapped packages, post-its, postcards, envelopes, paper, and pencils to the housekeeping area. In order to introduce the area, I read a book (*The Jolly Postman*) about different types of mail. Once I had explained the different materials in the center, I allowed them to explore and experiment with the center. I also modeled writing a letter and making a postcard. As stated by Fields, Groth, and Spangler (2004), what is important for young children is the opportunity for them to construct their own knowledge of how print works.

What happened next was the best part. After I had modeled writing a letter, I left the center and just observed the children interacting with each other. What I observed was that the children were creating their own letters, writing notes to others in the class, and sending their mail to their peers. After the first day, I realized that I didn't need to model the writing anymore because they knew how to do it for themselves. Gradually, the children became engrossed in the center. Each day the children flocked toward the post office. When the children ran out of certain materials to write on, they had no

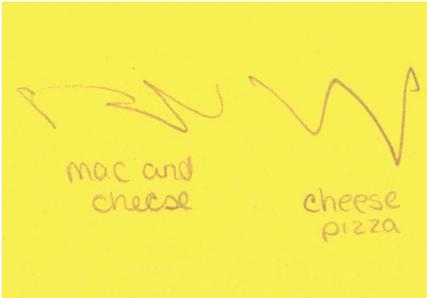
problem asking for more. Everyday I added something new to write with or write on. For example, on the second day, I added labels for the children to write on. On the third day I added index cards with and without lines to the center. The best surprise that came out of this center was when my cooperating teacher and I were cleaning up the papers; we found a piece of paper that had the student's name on it. This was the first time we had experienced him being able to write his own name.

Similarly, the next center I developed to promote writing turned the housekeeping area into a train car. I expanded this center by lining chairs up in a row in the rug area. I told the children that they could pretend they were sitting inside a train car. Since the housekeeping area included food that the children were cooking, one boy, Nick, took it upon himself to start taking orders from those seated in the train car. I approached him and asked if he would like something to write the orders on. He responded excitedly that he would like some paper and a pencil. As soon as I had brought over his paper and pencil, the other children in the train car wanted a piece of paper and pencil to write their orders down and to look at some menus. Each time one child asked for something to write with or write on, I found more to add to the center. The next time we had the center I added order forms from a restaurant for them to write on.

This was the first time I really noticed the different stages of writing evolve from some of the children. Some samples of their writing from the train day are seen below:



Even though this appeared as scribbles, A.J. told me it meant hot dog and chips.



Cade's order was for mac and cheese and cheese pizza. I noticed that his writing had progressed since the post office theme. While writing during the post office theme, one little line on the page meant a whole sentence. Now he has separate scribbles for each type of food that he ordered.

I even saw children who were already in the invented spelling stage of writing. The example displayed below was from Natalie who was already writing the initial and final constants in her writing. The 's' and 'd' meant the word salad.

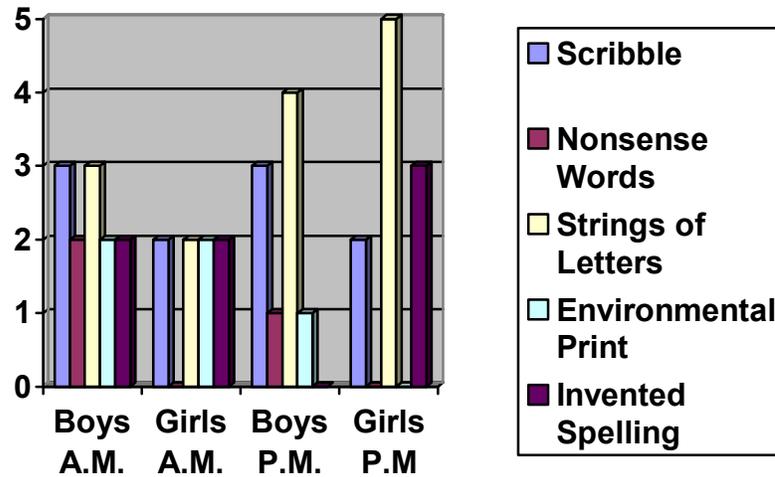


As I continued to add more centers, I was able to see more changes in the children's writing. The next center was a doctor's office. As the children were writing prescriptions on real prescriptions pads, I asked them what the names of prescriptions were (The prescriptions were a string of letters, which always meant bubblegum). However, when I looked at the prescription and noticed the area where the doctor would sign, the children always scribbled. I asked one of the girls why she had scribbles for the name and letters for the prescriptions. She told me it was because that was how doctors wrote their names. This demonstrated that the children were using what they knew about the real world and what they observed from real life models. Thus, they used their background experiences to construct their knowledge of print.

During my student teaching experience with the preschool children I also worked closely with the parents to find out what they were doing in the home to promote literacy. I used the parent teacher conferences as a time to speak with the parents and share what I had found. Most parents explained that they were unaware that their children were interested in writing at school. Once they saw their children's attempts to write, they were very supportive of the activities I was doing in the classroom during their child's choice time. They asked for suggestions that they could do at home to increase their children's interest in print. I used the children's artifacts to educate the parents. I would show them how the children produced a particular piece. This helped me to demonstrate the developmental process children move through as they experiment and explore print. However, I was lucky because many of my parents were well informed of how children's literacy develops and how to work with them at home. I had one mom tell me that she

was only working on the letters in her child’s name, but after hearing all the letters he could write at school, she was planning on working more with him at home.

### *Findings*



Through my observations of the children’s writing, I was able to find children in all of the different stages of writing. The different stages of the development of writing skills were scribbles, creating nonsense words, forming strings of letters, copying from environmental print, and using invented spelling (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2004).

From this chart, you can see the differences I found between the girls and the boys in my two classes. In my morning class, I had a similar number of girls and boys in each of the stages -- scribbling, strings of letters, copying environmental print, or using invented spelling. The girls and boys in the invented spelling stage were at different stages of invented spelling, as well. The only boys in the invented spelling were those from my morning class; there were no boys in the invented spelling stage in the afternoon class. The boys from the morning class were in the initial stage of invented spelling in

which they used the initial consonant to represent an entire word. Some of the girls from both the morning and the afternoon classes used both the initial and final consonants to represent a word.

### *A Case Study of Two Children*

While watching the two classes, I also focused on two individual children more closely to find out where they fell in the developmental stages of writing. The two children I focused on were twins, a boy and a girl.

The twins were four years old and will turn five in September. Being siblings they each had their own unique personality. Clare was very social and independent. Cade, her brother, was very quiet, emotional, and tended to follow others. By the end, Cade did become more independent, but emotionally he was still behind Clare. Over the two months that I observed these two children, I watched their writings, their play, and even did recordings of their language.

Clare from the beginning was very verbal and loved to share stories. Once I put a pencil in her hand, she was already in the invented spelling stage. By the end, she was copying words from the environment and asking how to spell certain words. From recording Clare's language, I found out that she had a very large vocabulary. Her thoughts were very detailed and organized.

Cade was very quiet in the beginning. It took me a long time to get him to even talk to me. Once I was able to get him to talk, he was willing to try and write as well. He started from the beginning in the scribble stage. Even though he remained in the scribble stage, his scribbles had progressed. His first examples of writing were a simple mark on the page representing a whole sentence. The last examples of writing I have include

numerous scribbles that are separated for each new word. What I found from recording his language was that his vocabulary was more limited than his sister's. When he spoke, he spoke in very short sentences. Many of his sentences weren't complete sentences. There were few details to explain anything he talked about.

When I did the language recordings, I did the recordings on the same day but at different times from each other. I asked both children about the same topic, their family vacation to Disney World. The responses were similar to each other. They both shared the same things about their trip in the same order. Clare's responses, however, were more detailed than Cade's.

### **Conclusion**

Through my teaching and my informal research, I discovered that the children were more interested and enthusiastic about participating in writing activities that involved dramatizing or writings that would go home.

Throughout my student teaching, I tried to support the children's individual efforts to learn. I provided them answers to their questions about print, while providing them with paper and writing materials. Offering a print-rich environment filled with books and different kinds of writing were a goal of mine throughout the focus on the children.

Since parent involvement is an important approach to language and literacy, I also tried to promote parent support of literacy within the home during the parent teacher conferences. I explained that using reading and writing materials at home, in addition to school, will encourage their children to write at home. Having both environments show

the children the value of reading and writing and will reinforces literacy development. When we provide appropriate writing resources and tools for writing, children will progress in their understanding and excitement about literacy learning.

I hope to be able to use what I have learned from this experience and my review of the research in my own classroom one day. I hope to be able to share, with other teachers and those in the educational field, the importance of bringing writing into the classroom at a young age. I hope others will discover how young children can successfully accomplish this task.

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