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Kindergarten writing program

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Abstract

In the kindergarten writing program, many experiences can help writing become an enjoyable experience for children. The learning environment can nurture pleasure in literature, an enthusiasm for reading and writing, and foster many opportunities to engage in the writing process. Some of the activities can be presented by the teacher while others can be initiated by the children.

Kindergarten Writing Program

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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During the first-quarter conferences with the parents of my kindergarten students, I explained the writing aspect of the language arts program. Many parents responded, "How can you expect my child to write before he/she can read?"

At that time, I was motivated to become more knowledgeable of young children's emerging writing ability, the role of the teacher in nurturing their literacy, and the elements of a kindergarten program that would support their writing ability.

Young Children's Writing Responses

Parents and sometimes educators are not aware that kindergartners can write. They know a lot about writing before they enter kindergarten (Fisher, 1991). Their scribbles, drawings, letters, and words do have meaning. Kindergartners and their parents need to realize that writing is important, for it serves as a tool for thinking, influencing others, clarifying meaning, and expressing ideas (Graves, 1994).

Children's writing develops in overlapping stages. They move from drawing to scribbling to what is considered more conventional forms of writing. Before using conventional spelling, or the correct spelling of words, children engage in invented spelling, which allows them to create meaning. In this phase, children are applying what they know about letters and sounds to their writing. The first stage of invented spelling involves the use of an initial consonant to represent an entire

word. An example is "M" for "monster." In the second stage, the initial and final consonants serve as word boundaries. An example is "MR" for "monster." In the third stage, all the sound features of words are included as the child hears them. An example is "MSTR" for "monster" (Dailey, 1991).

Role of the Teacher in Young Children's Writing Experiences

Children can benefit from their kindergarten teacher's guidance in many ways as their written language abilities emerge. Young children find difficulty in coping with the directionality of writing: beginning on the left-hand side of the page at the top, going across to the right-side, returning to the left, dropping down a line, and continuing to the right again. The same directional difficulty also occurs in reading, but even after children resolve that issue in reading, they continue to have difficulty in writing (Temple, 1988).

Young children have a tendency not to indicate word units while writing. Perhaps, beginning writers do not have a clear concept of what a word is. They usually do not leave spaces that indicate word boundaries. It is common for young children to insert periods between every word. Children not only believe this is the correct way to indicate word boundaries but also it is a positive use of space (Temple, 1988).

A teacher can help children become more interested in writing and maintain that interest in many different ways. A

teacher can nurture children's writing by encouraging them to write about ideas and experiences that are from their life experiences and are important to them. When children are able to choose their own topic, they have more investment in their writing. Teacher-dictated topics can thwart children's interest in writing. By demonstrating his/her own writing and writing when the children write, the teacher can show that writing is not only important to the students but also to the teacher (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1994).

When teachers confer with students, individually or in small groups, they can assess children's writing progress and instructional needs. Teachers, at times, may need to nudge children to take risks in their writing. Mini-lessons sometimes are needed to assist children with form in order to enhance their ease in writing and the clarity of their written ideas (Graves, 1994).

Elements of a Kindergarten Writing Program

"Learning should take place in a supportive environment where children can build a positive attitude toward themselves and toward language and literacy" (Schickedanz, 1986, p. 44). Writing is a cooperative effort among the teacher and the children of a classroom (Temple, 1988). For children to develop a sense of community in a classroom in which they can work

together, they need opportunities to assume responsibility in organizing and maintaining the classroom (Graves, 1994).

In the kindergarten writing program, many experiences can help writing become an enjoyable experience for children. The learning environment can nurture pleasure in literature, an enthusiasm for reading and writing, and foster many opportunities to engage in the writing process. Some of the activities can be presented by the teacher while others can be initiated by the children (Graves, 1994).

Quality Literature Experiences

Everyday the children should be exposed to different types of literature. The children can experience quality literature individually, with peer or older school friends, and in small peer groups and large groups. Other adults as well as the teacher can read aloud to the children throughout the day to help foster their interest in reading and writing and also to offer models of language. When children are read aloud to, they become aware of the processes involved in reading and writing. Children learn how to hold a book; how pages are turned; what letters, words, and sentences mean; and more importantly, that print represents the author's message (Kontos, 1986). Exposure to different genres of literature can enhance children's imagination and increase their comprehension (Huck, Hepler, Hickman & Kiefer, 1997). After quality literature is shared, children can engage in many types

of related activities to extend the experience, such as oral retelling, flannelboard stories, dramatizations, and journaling (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Print-Rich Environment

In a print-rich environment, children are exposed to a great deal of written language displayed throughout the classroom. The environment can offer labels on objects, name tags on tables/cubbies, center labels, designated helper lists, books, poems and story charts, and tapes and records to accompany books (Graves, 1994).

In a print-rich environment, children can be encouraged to read and write by being involved in the functions of language found in the learning program. When young children experience environmental print, they not only learn to read words but discover that those words represent a message (Hall, 1987). For example, when children play in play centers, such as restaurants, school, house, office, and hospital, they can be given opportunities to read and write (Strickland & Morrow, 1988).

Sustaining Centers

These centers are maintained throughout the year to enrich a theme. They provide for a predictable, secure learning environment. Most of their contents are related to the theme being studied. "These centers offer a constant source for a literature-based language arts program that extends across the

curriculum to the social studies and sciences" (Harms & Lettow, 1992, p. 134). The centers can include a Listening/Reading Center, a Writing Center, and a Retelling Center.

A Listening/Reading Center is full of literature that is representative of the different genres (Harms & Lettow, 1992). This center has a variety of picture books that are fiction and nonfiction works. There are teacher-prepared cassette tapes that accompany these books so that all types of student learning styles are accommodated. Also, included in this center are the books that are written by the students. Some of these books are created by individual children, partners, a small group, and a large group.

The Retelling Center can assist children in a concrete way to develop greater meaning from a story. By participating in this center, the children are able to focus more on major elements of the story, such as characters, events of the story, setting, and plot. In the center the students also have an opportunity to retell a story with puppets and flannelboard pieces. These manipulatives can also be accompanied with a book and tape to help the children in retelling the story (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

The children can initiate activity in the Writing Center every school day. They can write in their journals or develop a story individually or with a partner. The students are able to take ownership of their writing by selecting their own topics and

materials. The center is filled with various writing materials that include lined and unlined paper, story paper, paper for making booklets along with crayons, markers, pencils, and colored pencils. This environment supports social interaction during the writing time, for the children are encouraged to share their writing with their peers as well as the teacher (Graves, 1994).

Sharing Sessions

Each day children need opportunities to share their writing with a partner, a small group, or a large group in the author's chair. Children particularly enjoy the "author's chair" because it provides them with the chance to have attentive listeners and to request other children's responses to their piece. The response time is important to them because it can nurture self-confidence and contribute to their emerging literacy (Graves & Hansen, 1983).

Daily News

Near the end of the day, the teacher can serve as a scribe to assist the children in recording what they believe are the most important events of the day. Their ideas can be recorded on chart paper and can serve as a diary of experiences as the year progresses. This reference source can expand children's vocabulary, can offer ideas for their writing, and can also provide needed spellings of words for their writing (Graves, 1994).

Dictated Stories

Writing abilities can be enhanced through dictated stories. A small group or the class can dictate to the teacher who writes their ideas on chart paper, or individual children can relate a story to the teacher who serves as the scribe. Such experiences allow for an interchange of ideas, modeling of form, and expansion of vocabulary (Graves, 1994).

Study of Kindergartners' Writing Progress

From my reading, I extended print opportunities, both reading and writing in my classroom. I chose three children during the school year to follow their progress closely in order to further my understanding of young children's writing. The three students studied in particular entered kindergarten at different writing stages. Anecdotal records were kept of their progress. These records reflected my observations of their involvement in the writing process, interactions with their peers, and student-teacher conferences. At the end of each month, I selected samples of each child's writing as exhibits of their progress and instructional needs for a portfolio. A label was attached to each sample denoting progress and instructional needs.

Beginning of the School Year

The children's first writing experience in kindergarten included selecting a topic of their choice. This piece was used

to assess their writing ability. The writing sample of each child in my study is accompanied with my assessment.

Student A. Student A had limited experience with print. He turned five years old in August and was the youngest in the class. His first writing attempt was a scribble and a picture. When asked what he had written, he replied, "pizza" (see Figure 1).

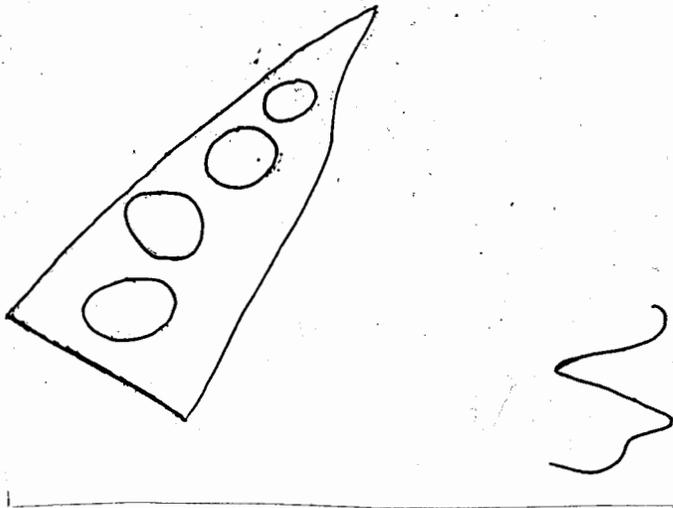


Figure 1. (Untitled)

Student B. Student B had two years of experience with the Montessori Preschool and had had much experience with print. In her family, reading and writing were considered important and were modeled often in the home. This student immediately showed much understanding of writing. Her first story consisted of two

sentences. When asked what she had written, her reply was, "This is me. I like to do stuff." Her sentences matched her picture (see Figure 2). At this time, she used almost all capitals and did not use any punctuation. She was already using invented spelling. Her writing indicated the use of initial, final, and medial consonants and usually incorrect vowels.

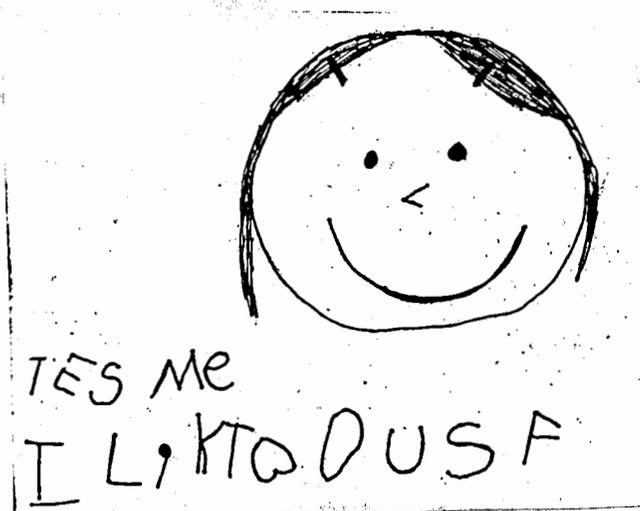


Figure 2. (Untitled)

Student C. Student C, the oldest in the class, had attended the district's junior kindergarten program, thus she had had much exposure to print. When asked what she had written, this student replied, "Alanah is my best friend. I play with her outside." Her sentences matched her picture (see Figure 3). The student used mostly scribbles and occasionally inserted the initial consonant. She used appropriate capitalization with the letter "I" but did not use any punctuation to separate her two sentences.

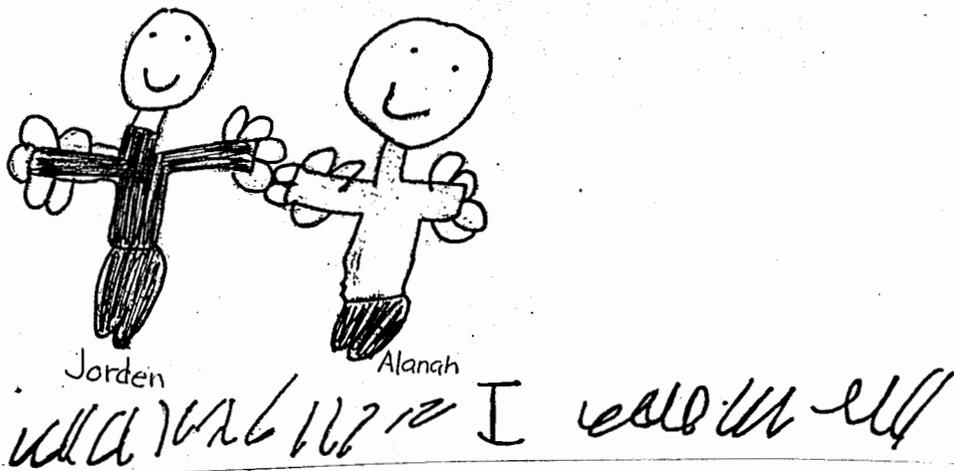


Figure 3. (Untitled)

End of the School Year

Samples of the children's writing taken at the end of the school year indicate their progress.

Student A. In this sample (see Figure 4), the boy's story involved creating meaningful sentences. He used complete sentences, capitalizing them and placing punctuation at the end. For the most part, he used conventional spelling. This sample shows a great deal of progress from the beginning of the year. At the beginning of the year his illustration usually was dominated by scribbling.

MY MOM
 MY MOM Plays With Me.
 MY MOM Plays With MY Dad.
 MY MOM Plays With MY Sistr.
 MY MOM base down.
 MY MOM Plays With MY Bnethr.
 MY MOM Helps Me. MY MOM Watch t.v.
 MY MOM Sleeps with MY Dad.

Figure 4. My Mom

Student B. From observing the sample of this girl's writing at the end of the year (see Figure 5), she had progressed from writing two sentences to a short story. When asked what she had written, her reply was, "I Learned in Kindergarten - I made lots of friends. I made a flower with a face and I made a spring journal. I like kindergarten and most of all I like my teacher." Illustrations were still a very important part of her writing process. Frequently, she would begin by drawing her illustration and then write about what she drew. She used a combination of capital and lower case letters throughout the piece and placed correct punctuation at the end of each sentence. She used some conventional spelling, but most of her spelling was invented. She wrote most of the sounds featured in the word as she heard them.



I Lrned in Kindgrnt

I Mad Lose of fish.
 I mad a flwr wibe a Fase
 I Mad a Sred Urdele.
 I Like Kindgrnt.
 I mshtel I Liknd Tehr.

Figure 5. I Lrned in Kindgrnt

Student C. The girl's writing sample at the end of the year is a complete story with a series of logical sentences with a title. When asked what she had written, she replied, "Fishing - Me and my dad fishing. We catch lots of fish. We go home and we eat the fish. We go fishing again." (See Figure 6.) Sometimes she used capitalization when it was needed, but she used punctuation at the end of every sentence. She used some conventional spelling, but much of her writing featured invented spelling. She wrote the sounds in the words as she heard them.

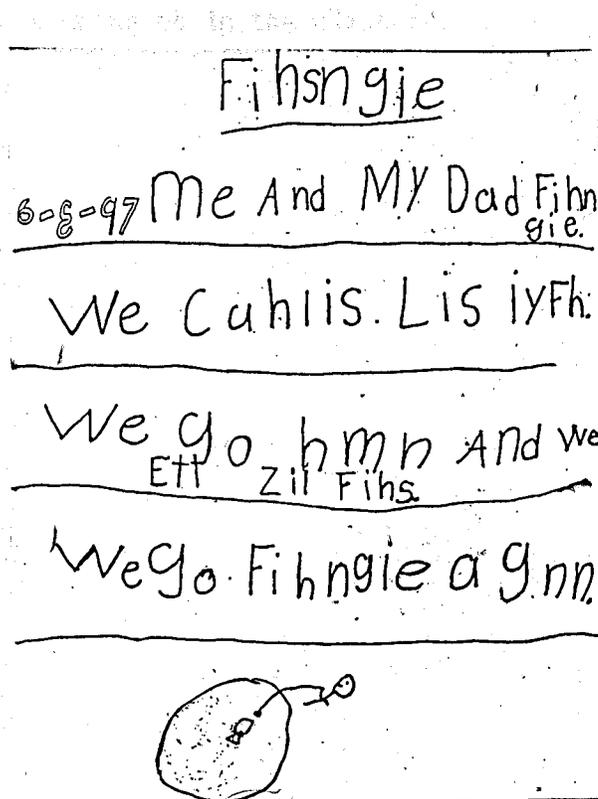


Figure 6. Fihngie

Parent Connection

The kindergarten writing program was explained to the parents through an informational letter at the beginning of the school year. The letter stressed the importance of creating meaning through the writing process instead of judging the final product. The parents were encouraged to read aloud and write stories with their children. The letter discussed the different stages of spelling with samples.

Every week a newsletter was sent home with the children to inform the parents of the various activities including the

writing that was going on in the classroom. Also, this newsletter included activities to do at home with the family, such as fingerplays, songs, poems, and a list of quality literature.

At the end of the first quarter, conferences were held and the parents were shown their child's writing portfolio. Many of the parents were pleased with the interest their child was showing in writing and also their progress.

The same kind of parental response was gathered at the end of the third-quarter conferences. The parents were pleased with their children's progress. They wanted suggestions on ways to continue to encourage their children to enjoy writing to make further progress.

Conclusions

After doing considerable reading on young children's writing and observing kindergarten children throughout the school year involved in the writing process, I gained much understanding of my students' emerging literacy. This understanding supported me in interpreting my students' behavior, which was shared with the parents. I learned the value of maintaining a rich learning environment with quality literature and other print experiences to support the children's language experiences. Also, from the students' responses, I learned the value of encouraging them to write about their experiences. The most valuable insight gained from this experience was how much all of the children gained in

writing ability no matter their ability or background of experiences. In fact, Child A who made the most growth as a writer by the end of the year was the one with the least amount of experience with print at the beginning of the year.

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