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A kindergarten teacher's growth: creating an authentic writing program

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A kindergarten teacher's growth: creating an authentic writing program

Abstract

In examining several elements of the kindergarten writing program I chose to focus on the importance of the connection between reading and writing and the role I, as a teacher, can play in encouraging children to grow and develop as young writers. By improving the process of discussing and recording a child's writing with each child we were able to focus on how reading and writing are connected and use the child's strengths and interests to foster growth.

A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER'S GROWTH; CREATING AN AUTHENTIC WRITING PROGRAM.

A Graduate Journal Article Paper
Submitted to the
Division of Reading and Language Arts
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

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Titled: A Kindergarten Teacher's Growth: Creating an Authentic Writing Program

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Deborah L. Tidwell <u>4.28-98</u> Date Approved

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Many factors have an impact on the development of young children as they begin their life of literacy. "Researchers who have studied the development of written language from an emergent literacy perspective have found that young children learn about print through active and meaningful experiences in real life situations" (Bruneau, 1992,p.33). Literacy development, more specifically writing growth in kindergarten children, may be impacted by environmental issues such as; the availability of literature in the home, parental and caregiver level of literacy and attitudes and valuation placed on reading and writing in the home.

Environmental issues, people involved in the child's life and the child's individual literacy development and abilities have a great impact on the child's emergent literacy (Sumison, 1991). Within the school setting, the emerging reader-writer can be better understood through an investigation of the connection between reading and writing, the developmental stages of young writers, and the role of the teacher in an emerging literacy setting such as kindergarten.

In recent research, reading and writing were found to be closely linked

together and many authors note that this is a natural and necessary connection (Sulzby, 1992; Rosberg, 1995; Lancia, 1997). Reading and writing experiences are social as well as cognitive experiences (Rosberg, 1995). Reading and writing are not separate processes but rather mutually supportive literacy acts that develop simultaneously (Brown & Briggs, 1991). Elizabeth Sulzby (1992) further discusses the readingwriting connection in relation to the "stages" of reading. As many experts discuss stages of writing (such as scribbling, distinguishing pictures from print, writing approximations, temporary or invented spelling and alphabetic spelling) Sulzby connects the stages of reading with writing and defines conventional writing as the point a child reaches when he/she can read his/her own writing. The ability of another conventional reader to read a child's writing is also an indication that the child has reached the conventional writing stage (Sulzby).

Quality literature is also an excellent way of connecting reading and writing. Many educational researchers have recognized the importance of literature in a writing program as it offers models for children in their own writing (Lancia, 1997). Lancia calls the process of adopting the ideals of already established authors "literary borrowing" and provides

many examples and much rationale for using quality literature for making connections and encouraging literacy development.

As previously mentioned, educational literature has defined writing stages of development and documented the importance of these stages (Peterson, 1995). Writing is seen as a process that emphasizes making meaning (Richgels, Poremba & McGee, 1996) and children move through stages or levels from beginning approximations to conventional writing. These stages are recursive as the children move through them at the kindergarten level (Graves, 1994). The recursive nature of writing involves the children moving back and forth among the stages of writing. This writing process has been compared to the process children go through as they learn oral language - they begin with approximations and move toward conventional language (Peterson, 1995; Sumison, 1991). The specific stages of writing have been described by varying researchers and authors using varying terminology but the stages generally contain similar aspects of development. These stages may include a child's scribbling, some sort of "pretend" writing, some random letters in the writing which may include lists, invented or temporary spelling using beginning or consonant sounds, and a more conventional alphabetic spelling.

The third aspect to be discussed is the role of the teacher in

kindergarten writing program. Jane Hansen (1996), coordinator of the reading and writing program, director of the writing lab and a teacher at the University of New Hampshire, wrote about evaluation as the center of writing instruction. She discusses the importance of a teacher placing value on the writing process and the role of teachers as educators who value themselves as learners. Hansen emphasizes the modeling aspect of teaching in respect to valuing the writing process. Teachers need to have knowledge of the child's current writing stage (where they are in the process) in order to help the child set goals and progress as they are ready. This idea coincides with the notion of "nudging" that Graves (1994) and Sulzby (1992) both discuss. Teachers provide developmental nudges that facilitate literacy development. Nudging involves assessing the child's current level or ability and encouraging them to progress onto the next level as they appear ready and able to progress. This nudging should be used in conjunction with providing a "rich, engaging literacy environment is the most developmentally appropriate kind of instruction during the primary grades." (Sulzby, 1992).

As a kindergarten teacher I was interested in learning techniques which would help me assess and encourage my students in their literacy development. I tried to expand our existing writing program to ensure

that I know where each child is and how to encourage growth. My classroom story attempts to accomplish this goal - to learn how I, as a kindergarten teacher, can best facilitate growth in kindergarten writers.

Our kindergarten writing program came into existence many years ago following a workshop attended by our district's kindergarten and first grade teachers. We were enthusiastic and surprised to learn that beginning readers were also beginning writers and there was a significant connection between the two processes. We went back to school ready to implement a writing program that fit the needs of our students. The first grade eventually formed a writing workshop format that is still in existence today and is very age appropriate and meaningful for the students. Kindergarten put into place writing journals and that is still our writing program focus. Writing is integrated throughout our day and curriculum, but writing time involves the children writing in their own journal and dictating to the teacher what they wrote.

Following an increase of professional reading via a master's degree program I began to feel that I may be able to strengthen the connection that my students saw between reading and writing and I may be able to assess their level and use this knowledge to better aid them in progressing through the stages of writing. I desired to better assess and

know the children's ability and using an authentic, student-centered writing program was my area of focus.

Because I was focused on the reading-writing connection, the developmental stages of writing and the teacher's role in the writing program I decided on some techniques that I could put into place in my classroom that would be manageable for me and beneficial as well as meaningful to my students as beginning writers.

Writing time, being a very social activity for kindergarten children, is a favorite part of our day. The children sat at their tables to write in their journal and they were encouraged to visit with each other about their writing. One of the changes I implemented was to encourage the children to write wherever they'd like in our room. I intended this to encourage children to collaborate on their writing as it was appropriate and to encourage copying from environmental print in our room for those who were at that developmental stage.

The children enjoyed moving to a new area during writing and this enabled them to glean ideas from literature and charts in our room. When I worried that some students were copying too much, a co-worker suggested that this was encouraging them to move from the scribbling

stage as they were ready. The students often grouped themselves with other children with whom they shared similar interests, or with students who could spell for them or perhaps offer suggestions as they put down letters and sounds they heard in words.

In addition to changing the format of where the children did their writing I felt it was important for me to review how I handled the feedback that I was giving the students concerning their writing. Instead of trying to visit with each child every day I concentrated on meeting with only one table. Meeting with one table a day instead of with the whole class enabled me to really assess each student and encourage them on a more individual basis. I felt more confident that I knew the children's abilities and what could be expected of them. Along with a change in how often I met with them I also felt a need to alter how I collected or recorded the children's writing and comment. Instead of dictating what the children said to me on their journal page I began to make anecdotal notes on a kid grid. This was intended to give them complete ownership in their writing and to furnish more individual time to do the nudging that I was anxious to implement in order to encourage growth as the children were ready and able. This was an exciting change for the students and for me. The children were very excited to know that their journals were so

valued. They would have complete control over them and I would make my notes on a kid grid instead of on their cherished works.

In addition to the previous changes that directly affected the children I also made a change in order to provide a positive role model for the young writers. Teacher as a model is a concept that I saw much value in and I had hoped to increase enthusiasm by demonstrating the value I placed on writing. This final change was met with great pleasure. A change that I saw as subtle and quiet was very noticeable and meaningful for the children. I had no ideas what an impact it would have on the children to see me writing in my journal. Writing in my journal also proved to be very therapeutic for me as I used that time to compile anecdotal notes on my children as well as write about ideas I had, personal notes and reflections on the changes we had put into place.

Prior to implementing these adaptations in our writing program I had been feeling less than comfortable and confident assessing the abilities of my students as they progress through the reading and writing process. In addition to that, and even more important to me, was the fact that I was not sure that I, as a teacher, was doing all I could do to encourage growth in reading and writing with my students. The process that I now use in my classroom affords me the opportunity to keep track of

individuals and more meaningfully help them progress. I am able to encourage the students who are firm on their letters and sounds to write more complex "stories" and assist those who are struggling with letters and sounds to incorporate beginning sounds or single letters in their "stories."

In making conclusions and assessing my own growth throughout the process of changing my writing program I learned a great deal about myself. As a teacher I have been faced with many challenges; deciding how to best instruct my students, how to provide an environment rich in authentic literature, how to assess their growth, how to best meet the needs of all the individual levels, etc. I have dealt with feelings of, am I doing the best I can for my students? Will I have parental support? How do I make my program meaningful and authentic yet fit in the "skills" as they are needed?

In reflecting on the current changes I have made in my writing program I feel more confident in being able to assess the level of my students and more able to help them progress to the next stage of writing as they are ready. This process is complicated and ever changing which adds to the challenge of being a kindergarten teacher facilitating emergent readers and writers.

In examining several elements of the kindergarten writing program I chose to focus on the importance of the connection between reading and writing and the role I, as a teacher, can play in encouraging children to grow and develop as young writers. By improving the process of discussing and recording a child's writing with each child we were able to focus on how reading and writing are connected and use the child's strengths and interests to foster growth.

By providing a role model through writing in my own journal I was able to emphasize the importance I place on writing and reading. This had a profound impact on the students in that they now saw me as a reader and writer with them - they included me in their idea of what and who a reader, writer and learner could be in our classroom and beyond. The changes that we had undergone through the year had a positive impact on my role as a professional and on the confidence I saw in the emergent writers in my kindergarten classroom. These changes affected my teaching, the children's learning and greatly increased my knowledge of literacy as a process that is ever changing and growing.

Deborah Reicks

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Types of submissions

The editors will consider a variety of materials for publication in *RT*. Articles, essays, and reports of different types are appropriate submissions. These should generally not exceed 20 single-sided, double-spaced pages. They should dear with literacy among children in the preschool through preteen years. Articles may

- describe literacy programs or instructional practices that are based on practical experience, theory, and research;
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- report research of all types related to literacy education programs and practices;
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Articles should have a Clear purpose that is accressed in some depth. Authors must demonstrate how their work relates to or extellars previous work on the topic maures, tables, illustrations otographs are accepta: 1 he altent that they enti-i ngerstanding or all - of the article.

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Methodology should be regrided in a concise manner, with strong emphasis placed on the applications and implications of the research findings.

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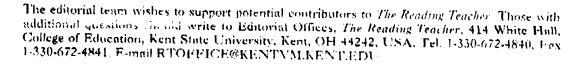
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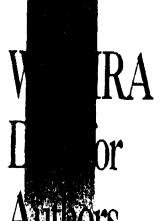
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