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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  
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Division of Reading and Language Arts  
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by  
Deborah Reicks  
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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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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 reading-writing 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 idea 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.

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Hansen, J. (1996). Evaluation: The center of writing instruction. The Reading Teacher, 50. (3). 188-195.

Lancia, P.J. (1997). Literary borrowing: The effects of literature on children's writing. The Reading Teacher, 50. (6). 470-475.

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Sumison, J. (1991). Playing with print. Australian Early Childhood Resource Booklet. (Report No. PS022369). Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. 370694)

# Instructions for Authors

## 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 deal 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;
- synthesize or explain bodies of theory and research that are directly linked to literacy education programs and practices;
- report research of all types related to literacy education programs and practices;
- provide thoughtful commentaries on or analyses of issues related to literacy practices or instruction;
- profile or report interviews of literacy professionals or authors or illustrators of children's books. Timely and interesting interview questions should foster lively responses from the person being interviewed. Interviews should generally not exceed 10 pages and must be accompanied by a letter from the person interviewed granting permission for *RT* to publish the interview.

Articles should have a clear purpose that is addressed in some depth. Authors must demonstrate how their work relates to or extends previous work on the topic. Figures, tables, illustrations, and photographs are acceptable to the extent that they enhance the understanding or interpretation of the article.

Research articles should report findings in a clear, straightforward style that is less formal than that required for journals that publish only research (e.g., *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Literacy Research*).

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

Shorter manuscripts will also be considered for publication. They may take the following forms:

- **Instructional Ideas:** Descriptions of innovative teaching strategies, ideas, or techniques are published in the "Teaching Reading" section of *RT*. Both the goals of these activities and the description of their implementation should be clear. Graphic material (e.g., diagram or photo) that enhances readers' understanding may accompany the manuscript; references are not required. These submissions should generally not exceed five pages.

- **Literacy Stories:** Brief, poignant, insightful, or humorous descriptions of literacy learning or literacy events in children's lives in or out of school are published in *RT*. These are written by adults and should not exceed two pages.

- **Our Own Stories:** Descriptions of critical incidents, past or present, in authors' own lives as literate persons will be published. These should normally not exceed two pages.

- **Through Children's Eyes:** Children's own insightful or humorous literacy-related quotations, writings, or drawings are published in *RT*. These normally should not exceed two pages. Materials must be prepared by children and should be co-submitted with an adult; both the child and the adult will receive credit in the journal. Signed permission from the child and his or her guardian must accompany the submission.

- **Poetry:** Poetry from children or adults about topics related to literacy learning will be considered for publication.

- **Literacy Pictures:** Photographs, cartoons, or drawings will be considered. Submissions must be camera-ready (i.e., black and white glossy) and must be accompanied by permission from the photographer or artist, as well as from any persons in the photograph, for the material to be published in *RT*.

- **Research Summaries:** Succinct summaries of pertinent research published elsewhere are welcomed. Research summaries should not exceed two pages. They must include full bibliographic information about the original sources.

- **Letters:** To promote dialogue among *RT* readers, authors, and IRA members, letters to the editors that comment specifically on articles or issues addressed in the journal are encouraged. When letters are critical of works published in *RT*, authors of those works will be provided an opportunity to respond within the same issues in which the letters are published. Letters should generally not exceed two pages.

## Manuscript form

Manuscripts should be prepared according to the style described in the fourth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 1994). The *APA Manual* is available in many libraries. It may also be purchased at most university bookstores or directly from the American Psychological Association, 1200 Seventeenth Street NW, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

Authors should pay particular attention to APA guidelines for:

- manuscript organization;
- writing style, grammar, and use of nonsexist language;
- punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and headings;
- quotations, references cited in the text, and the reference list; and
- procedures for typing the manuscript, including pagination and page headers.

No abstracts are required for *RT* submissions.

## How to submit a manuscript

The editorial team welcomes manuscripts from a broad range of literacy professionals. The following information describes the submission process:

The title page of the manuscript should be limited to the title and the author's name, address, and phone numbers (home and work). Because all manuscripts are reviewed anonymously, the content within the article should not reveal author identity.

Submit five copies of all articles, along with two self-addressed, stamped, letter-sized envelopes for correspondence. Submit two copies of other manuscripts, along with two self-addressed, stamped envelopes. Authors outside North America may

submit single copies of all materials. All copies must be dark and clear. The author should retain the original manuscript, as submitted copies will not be returned. Likewise, the author should retain original figures and photographs; these will be requested later if the paper has been accepted for publication. Signed, dated permissions (if necessary) should include a statement by the photographer, artist, or child and guardian giving permission to publish the work in *RT*. Likewise, obtaining permission to quote previously published material is the author's responsibility.

Mail all submissions to **Editors, The Reading Teacher, 414 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242, USA**. Authors will receive notification of manuscript receipt within two weeks.

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Articles submitted to *RT* are reviewed anonymously by three members of the editorial advisory board or occasionally by guest reviewers. Other submissions are reviewed by members of the editorial team and may be reviewed by editorial advisors. Authors are generally notified of decisions about publication within three months. Substantive feedback on articles will be shared with authors regardless of publication decision.

Articles submitted by IRA committees, affiliates, or special interest groups are subject to the standard review process. For subsequent publication, the individuals who produced the manuscript are listed as the authors, and it is noted that the article resulted from group action during specified years.

Manuscripts are judged for their usefulness to *RT* readers, potential significance and contribution to the field, and quality of writing. Manuscript selection also depends on the editors' determination of overall balance in the content of the journal.

If a manuscript is accepted for publication, the author will receive galley proofs of the article to read and correct. Article authors receive five complimentary copies of the issue of *RT* in which the article appears; authors of other items receive two complimentary copies. Offprints of articles are available at cost directly from the printer. All contents of each issue are copyrighted by the International Reading Association, primarily to protect the interests of the journal.



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Editorial policies and procedures are based on the philosophy of inclusion. The editors intend to enhance *RT's* status as the premiere professional journal for literacy practitioners by increasing its access to professionals at all levels and by extending its appeal to and usefulness for a broad range of professionals interested in children's literacy learning. Five specific goals form the foundation for editorial policies and procedures:

- to provide balanced and in-depth treatment of current and enduring trends and issues that inform classroom practice;
- to encourage consideration of literacy issues within the larger context of education and society;
- to inform readers of findings and implications of recent research in literacy;
- to encourage literacy professionals from all settings to share their thoughts, practices, and scholarship, and
- to ensure a fair, formative, and professional review of all manuscripts.

## Audience

More than 75% of IRA individual members receiving *RT* are teachers, reading teachers/specialists, or administrators; 10% are college faculty. Most subscribers are experienced professionals. *RT* is sent to 65,000 members - including 16,000 libraries and institutions - in 100 countries although most members reside in the United States and Canada.

The editorial team wishes to support potential contributors to *The Reading Teacher*. Those with additional questions should write to Editorial Offices, *The Reading Teacher*, 414 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242, USA. Tel. 1-330-672-4840, Fax 1-330-672-4841, E-mail [RTOFFICE@KENTVM.KENT.EDU](mailto:RTOFFICE@KENTVM.KENT.EDU)

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