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## Writing in kindergarten

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## Writing in kindergarten

### Abstract

Children's oral language development is easily recognized by observing their oral vocabulary development, use of sentence structure, and involvement in the functions of language (Wiseman, 1984). Young children's oral language development has been considered a natural aspect of growth, but their written language development has generally been overlooked and has not been considered a part of acquiring literacy. Research indicates that young children show knowledge of written language long before formal instruction begins: Young learners develop abilities necessary for reading and writing on their own, as they grow and have experiences, just as naturally as they learn to talk (Beardsley, 1987; Morecek-Zeman, 1987).

WRITING IN KINDERGARTEN

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
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by

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Children's oral language development is easily recognized by observing their oral vocabulary development, use of sentence structure, and involvement in the functions of language (Wiseman, 1984). Young children's oral language development has been considered a natural aspect of growth, but their written language development has generally been overlooked and has not been considered a part of acquiring literacy. Research indicates that young children show knowledge of written language long before formal instruction begins: Young learners develop abilities necessary for reading and writing on their own, as they grow and have experiences, just as naturally as they learn to talk (Beardsley, 1987; Morecek-Zeman, 1987).

#### SUPPORT OF CHILDREN'S EMERGING LITERACY

Adults praise children for their first attempts at oral communication. They do not point out the errors children make but listen for the ideas children are trying to communicate (Bissex, 1981; Calkins, 1986). As a result, children see the function of oral language as a means of achieving their personal needs. While children are involved in the process of oral language, they are taking risks and making mistakes, thus learning language. They do not wait until they know all the conventional rules and forms of oral language (Rhodes, 1981).

As children learn to speak, they are using whole units of language, not fragments. Using this whole language approach also

facilitates learning to write. When children can naturally express their ideas in writing, they learn that this process, too, is a way to create meaning. It is functional and relevant to them (Goodman, 1986).

Children's emerging literacy is nurtured by their observations of written language used by the literate members of their community in a meaningful way (Teale, 1983). The whole process of literacy development hinges upon the experiences children have in reading and writing activities that are mediated by literate adults and older siblings and events in children's everyday lives. As children use oral and written language in social interactions with more literate persons, they internalize social relationships and develop their reading and writing abilities (Teale, 1983).

When children are read aloud to they become aware of the processes involved in reading and writing at a very early age (Kontos, 1986). Children expect written language to work in much the same way as the oral language they hear: It is predictable and functional (Beardsley, 1987; Moracek-Zeman, 1987).

Research on early writing has shown that children come to school believing they can write. They are already composing through drawing, scribbles, and words; they will continue to write if the school provides opportunities that are meaningful to them (Goodman, 1982). A supportive teacher responds to children's

early writing by accepting whatever writing they produce, responding positively to these written messages and answering their emerging questions (Dyson, 1984). The teacher's acceptance of children's writing plays an important role in promoting their desire and attempts to write, thus building confidence and nurturing writing abilities. If the teacher is not accepting, young writers will become discouraged and disinterested and will stop writing (Calkins, 1986; Clay, 1982; Haley-James, 1982).

When children are allowed to select and write their ideas and feelings, they assume the ownership of the experience. Accepting this responsibility gives them opportunities to explore the writing process through which their needs and those of an external audience can be satisfied (Calkins, 1986; Goodman, 1986). In supporting children's ownership of their writing experiences, the teacher needs to be a careful observer and listener, or a "kid watcher," as Goodman has labeled this activity. If only the finished product is observed, the children's thought processes will not be considered and supported (Goodman, 1986).

#### WAYS TO NURTURE YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING

Kindergarten writers need to be encouraged to take risks. Invented spelling allows children to learn the process of writing at their own pace (Calkins, 1986; Clay, 1982). At this time in their lives, spelling is usually derived from their ability to hear and isolate the separate speech sounds that comprise words.

Read (1975) found that beginning spellers, after learning the names of the alphabet letters, usually began to spell using blocks, plastic letters, or alphabet toys and then progressed to producing written messages.

These early attempts to write were examined by Gentry (1981) and were developed into a model with five major stages. (1) The first stage, "deviant spelling," consists of random orderings of letters and other symbols known by the child interspersed with letter-like marks. An example of this would be "b+BpA" for "monster." There is no awareness of letter-sound correspondence. (2) In the second stage, "pre-phonetic," children use one-two- and three-letter representations of words. Letters used represent some speech sounds heard in words. An example would be "p" for "pie." (3) The third stage is known as the "phonetic" stage. Spellings include all sound features of words, as the child hears them. An example would be "PPL" for "people." (4) The fourth stage, "transitional," includes vowels in every recorded syllable. Familiar spelling patterns are used, and standard spelling is interspersed with "incorrect" phonetic spelling. An example would be "tode" for "toad." (5) The fifth stage of development is the "correct" stage. Children in this stage have learned a great number of words and are able to make predictions and generalizations about the spelling of words. Children's spelling at one time frequently represents more than one stage (Wood, 1982; Gentry, 1981; Beers, 1980; Henderson, 1980; Read, 1971).



School-age children will write if teachers let them. Their interest in writing is extended when they sense that their composition activity is important to their teacher and other audiences. Through conferences, the teacher can help children see themselves as authors by appreciating their writing and encouraging them to share it with others. Partner sharing is another way in which to share writing with peers. Children are able to share their writing with a partner, therefore assisting each other in improving their compositions (Heald-Taylor, 1984).

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF A WRITING PROGRAM

Turning a kindergarten classroom into a community of young readers and writers was the goal of this program. Throughout the year, the teacher observed, facilitated, and documented many emergent literacy behaviors.

The classroom consisted of twenty students, thirteen boys and seven girls. The kindergarten was an all day/every day program with one full-time teacher. The school is located in a small, rural farming community. The students in the classroom came from a wide range of socio-economic levels.

Many levels of literacy were observed among the students. Several already understood the purpose of writing and freely engaged in invented spelling to record their ideas. These students were fortunate to have had many experiences with print and recognized letters, some letter-sound associations, and a few

sight words. In writing, most of the students used some letters, letter-like forms, and scribbles. The letters that were used were often letters in their name or in the names of family members. The majority of the children were in the "deviant" stage of writing (Gentry's Stages of Writing). They were unaware of letter-sound correspondence.

On the other hand, one student entered kindergarten with a limited background of language experiences: Reading and writing were not priorities for his parents. This boy had not seen reading and writing modeled at home, thus he did not understand their functions. He had not had the opportunity to use writing instruments and had little or no prior experience with coloring and writing. When looking at picture books in the classroom, he often held the book upside down.

The teacher began the writing program with the intention of bridging the gap between the child-centered experiences of home and preschool and the more academic demands of the elementary school. Many experiences were planned to help children discover that reading and writing are natural, essential, and enjoyable elements in their environment. The teacher presented a learning environment in which children could develop a love of books, an enthusiasm for reading and writing, and a realization that there are many ways to communicate ideas. Many classroom activities assisted in developing the children's written language abilities.

Some of the activities were teacher presentations while others were mostly child initiated.

Daily news writing. One teacher-directed activity was the daily news period. Each morning after the opening exercises that included discussing the calendar and weather, the teacher wrote the news of the day, gathered from the children, on a chart. As a result of this activity, the students became familiar with language patterns and were soon able to read them aloud. The teacher used some rebus elements (pictorial representations along with words) in order to help students become independent readers. An example of a news story is as follows:

Today is Monday, September 27, 1988.  
 Today it is ☁️.  
 Susan is our ★ today.  
 We will go to 🎵 🎵.  
 Today is Ryan's 🎂.

After the news story was written, the class read it aloud as a group.

Many beginning reading activities emerged while reading the news: Some students volunteered to read sentences by themselves. Others chose to count the number of sentences written, the number of words in a sentence, and the number of times a specific word appeared. They volunteered ideas for the stories related to the events in the classroom. To extend newswriting, the teacher wrote the students' names on the chart for special occasions, such as, star of the week, their birthday, and the name of a

classroom helper. Since their own name had great meaning for them with much information associated with it, they soon were able to recognize their names as well as the names of their peers. By the second semester, many students chose to write the kindergarten news during their "free-choice time" and took it home to share with their families.

Through writing the daily news, the children were involved in listening and reading comprehension. They used contextual and pictorial clues along with some word and letter cues to decode a meaningful message.

Read aloud sessions. Another teacher-directed activity implemented to help foster reading and writing in the kindergarten classroom was the reading aloud of quality literature pieces to the children. A number of times throughout the day, the children were exposed to different types of literature to enhance imagination, to broaden experiences, to model language, and to activate thinking and language abilities.

The children were read to by other adults and children, besides the classroom teacher. The principal and the librarian read aloud to the children on a weekly basis. Also parent volunteers, student helpers from the high school, and second-grade reading friends read aloud to the children throughout the school year. Children experienced read aloud sessions in large groups, small groups, and individually.

Retelling stories. The read aloud sessions were often followed by opportunities to respond to the ideas in the literature experiences. One way was reconstructing the story through oral retelling which strengthened the children's sense of story. While the children retold the story, the teacher often interacted and prompted through questioning to aid the children's understanding of the story elements and sequence of ideas. Many ways of retelling stories (speaking, writing, acting and art activities) were encouraged. Besides simple oral retelling of the sequence of the story, flannelboard stories and group storytelling were a part of the experience.

Retelling through writing included rebus stories, journal writing, language experience stories, and responding to the patterns in predictable books, for example, the story pattern in Bill Martin's Brown Bear and a familiar text as The Gingerbread Man. Other literature works chosen to be used for patterning were Judith Viorst's Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, Charlotte Zolotow's Someday and Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present, Mordicai Gerstein's Roll Over and William, Where Are You?, Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Helme Heime's The Most Wonderful Egg in the World and Barbara Williams' Kevin's Grandmother. The repetitive language in these predictable books was enjoyed by the children and encouraged their responses.

Retelling through acting included dramatization, sometimes with costumes and props and with pantomime. Retelling through art activities included drawing a favorite part of the story and supporting the oral or written retelling of a story through illustration. Other art activities included group illustrations, posters, bookmarks and filmstrips. Retelling stories was a very important experience in the children's language development; the activities were enjoyed as well as meaningful to the children. These experiences were supported by a rich learning environment with a great number of quality works available and many read aloud experiences and other language activities.

Models of print. In the kindergarten classroom, reading and writing were modeled daily. The children came to believe literacy was an important part of everyday life: Reading and writing were not isolated subjects. They came to understand the functions of language and eagerly engaged in the thinking-language processes to create their own meaning. The children were exposed to an abundance of written language. This print-rich environment included labels on classroom objects and charts with stories, poems, songs, Mother Goose rhymes, and biographical sketches of the "Star of the Week."

Sustaining centers. Sustaining centers provided predictable structure for the classroom environment. These centers maintained

throughout the year included a Listening Center, a Reading Center, a Writing Center, and a Dress-up Center.

The children had an opportunity to initiate activity in the Writing Center every school day. The students could write in their journals daily. The time spent writing in journals increased as the year progressed, partially due to their increasing attention span and emerging thinking-language abilities. The students were able to assume ownership of the experience by writing their ideas and feelings and selecting the writing materials they wanted to use. The choices were lined and unlined paper, story paper (lined with space at the top for illustrating), paper folded into booklet form, along with crayons, pencils, colored pencils and markers. The children were free to write in ways that were developmentally appropriate. The room environment contained much social interaction during the writing time, for the children were encouraged to discuss their writing with their peers, as well as the teacher.

On the first day of kindergarten the children were introduced to the writing center. The teacher wanted the students to view writing as a natural part of the kindergarten day. After the teacher read The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle, the students were given an opportunity to express themselves by "writing" what they thought they would eat if they were a caterpillar. This activity assisted the teacher in observing the

range of writing development. Five of the twenty chose to draw a picture without text; their illustrations told their story. Ten children illustrated a picture and made letter-like marks and scribbles that had characteristics similar to conventional print. The remainder of the students used letters from their own names and the names of family members, along with random orderings of other letters and symbols to express themselves.

#### ASSESSMENT

In order to assess the children's writing progress, the teacher observed them in the writing process and kept anecdotal records. The assessment was directed toward children's involvement in the writing process rather than the product. While observing the children engaged in writing experiences, the teacher noted their reactions--their remarks about their ideas and involvement in the process, interactions with other students, and requests for assistance from their peers and the teacher as well as their stage(s) of writing development.

As the record of progress grew during the year, the knowledge of each child's emerging abilities became more clear. With this available information, the teacher could plan a more supportive learning environment. At the end of each school quarter, the teacher recorded the developmental level of each child's writing along with a sample of writing in each child's progress folder.



This ongoing assessment assisted the teacher in presenting evidence of pupil growth to the principal and to parents.

For this study, three kindergartners' progress in writing was particularly noted. Steve entered school with little or no experience with print; his background experiences were limited. He had turned five years of age in June, prior to beginning school in August. The second student observed was Eric who had his sixth birthday in July. His parents had postponed sending him to school, because they believed it would be to his advantage to be one of the older children in the class rather than one of the younger ones. The third student observed was Susan, the youngest in the class turning five in September. In her home, reading and writing were modeled frequently.

Samples of the three children's writing at the beginning and then at the end of the year represent their progress. These compositions were collected from the first writing experience at the beginning of the year following a read aloud experience with The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle) and are accompanied with the teacher's assessment.

#### COMPOSITIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

Steve. Steve entered kindergarten with limited exposure to print. He had not developed an understanding of left to right directionality. He expressed himself through scribbling. While conferencing with the teacher, he said he had written "caterpillar."

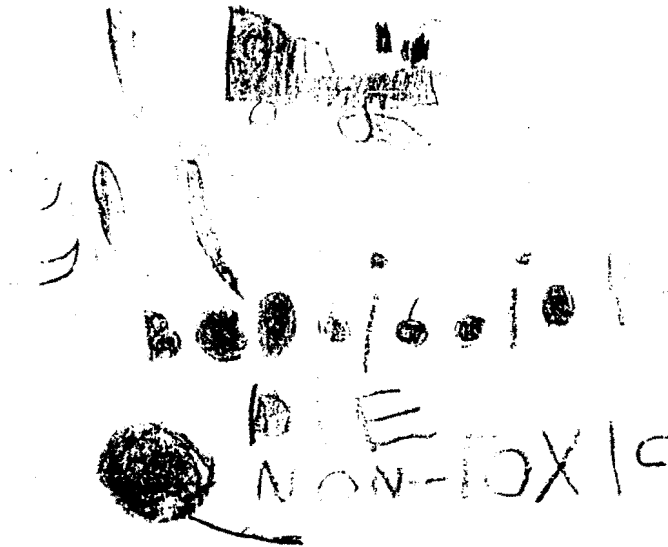
His composition is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1



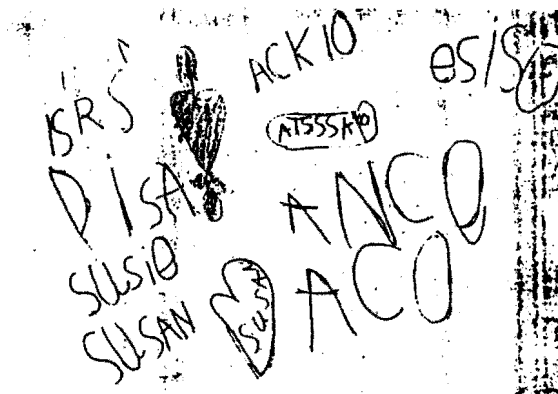
Eric. Eric's first writing experience in school showed he had an understanding of what print was. He was at the "deviant" spelling stage. He used letters along with his picture but was not aware of letter/sound correspondence. On his paper, Eric had written "DIE NON TOXIC" which he had copied from a box of markers. When asked what he had written, his reply was, "The caterpillar ate four carrots, a banana, two apples, and two cherries." His narrative description matched the picture but did not match the written words (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Susan. Susan was at the "deviant" stage of writing upon entering kindergarten. Her writing consisted of random letters with no relationship between the letters and the sound. It was evident that she had experience with writing prior to school. She used the letters from her name many times during her writing. When asked what she had written, Susan replied, "That caterpillar was so hungry, it ate and ate." (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3



## COMPOSITIONS AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

At the end of the year, samples of writing were taken after the teacher had read Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (Viorst).

Steve. Steve had reached the "deviant" stage of writing. He had an awareness that print had meaning, and he had begun using a random string of letters to express himself. He was able to show ownership of his work, by writing his first and last name. His oral description of his writing was, "I had a terrible day when my sister pulled me in the house." (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4

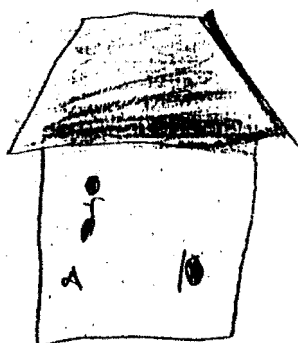


Eric. Eric was beginning to make the transition into the third stage, "phonetic": He included all the sound features as he heard them. His narrative was "I put money in a machine and

nothing came out." His writing always contained all capital letters (see Figure 5).

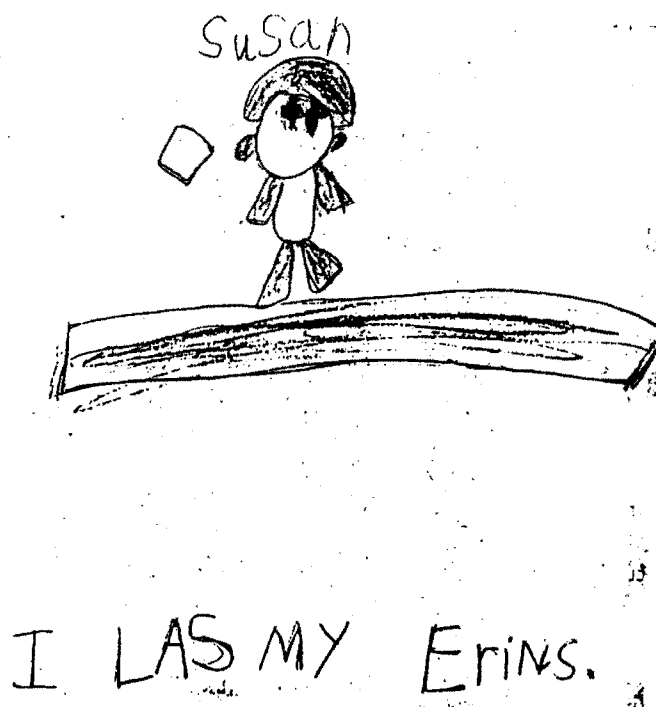
Figure 5

I P O I M N I M H S N N F E N E M E I



E H C

Susan. By the spring of the kindergarten year, Susan had moved to the fourth stage, "transitional." She included vowels in every recorded syllable. Standard spellings were used, (e.g., "I" and "My") as well as invented spelling. Susan's oral response to her writing was "I lost my earrings." Susan had not yet mastered the correct use of capital letters. However, she did use punctuation at the end of a sentence (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

#### PARENTS' REACTIONS

The kindergarten writing program was presented to parents at an informational meeting during the first month of school. The teacher stressed the importance of the whole writing process rather than the end product. The teacher encouraged the parents to read aloud at home and to allow their children to express themselves through writing. The importance of accepting children's early writing attempts was compared to the acceptance of their first attempts at oral communication. The teacher discussed different stages of writing and showed samples to assist the parents in becoming aware of the developmental stages of writing.

The teacher allowed time for discussion and questions from the parents. Parent volunteers were requested to assist with dictated stories and bookmaking in the classroom.

A newsletter was sent home weekly with the children. Its main purpose was to inform parents of what was going on in the classroom and to encourage their support of the program. It also included lyrics to simple songs, fingerplays, and poems that had been learned during the week and suggestions of books and activities to present at home.

At the end of the first quarter, conferences were held; the teacher showed the parents their child's journal and writing folder and explained their response to writing activity. Many parents reported that their children were developing an interest in writing at home: The children wrote messages and stories for their parents, made greeting cards and were interested in learning how to spell family members' names. The parents were pleased with the progress.

There were no formal conferences held during the spring semester. When informally discussing the children's progress with parents at the end of the year, there was much approval for the writing program in kindergarten. Many parents commented on their child's use of punctuation at the end of a sentence. Some parents were able to read what the children composed thus encouraging the children to keep writing. The parents enjoyed watching their

children move through the stages of writing. They reported that the children thought of themselves as writers and chose to write at home.

#### SUMMARY OF WRITING PROGRAM

After observing kindergarten children engaged in writing throughout a school year, the teacher understood more fully that this process strengthens children's thinking-language abilities and nurtures personal-social development. Writing gives children a natural way to enter into the world of reading; for they read their own stories. As children write, they come to realize that one creates meaning through the language processes. They begin to focus on the details of print, using letters and sounds within the context of their own words and stories. Stories created from a child's own experiences, concerns and special interests become powerful sources for leading children into literacy.

From this first experience, the writer has continued the writing program in her kindergarten class.



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