

Wright Group/McGraw-Hill



Developing Preschool Children's Writing

By Stephanie L. Strachan and Nell K. Duke

Michigan State University

and

William H. Teale

University of Illinois, Chicago



Wright Group



Summary

Often less emphasized in discussions of preschoolers' literacy development than factors such as phonological awareness or oral language, writing is also a foundational skill that is predictive of children's later literacy success (Lonigan, Schatschneider, Westberg, with the National Early Literacy Panel [NELP]; 2008). This white paper explains why writing is important in early childhood, the stages through which early writing develops, and how preschool teachers can promote young children's writing development.

Why Does Writing Matter in Early Childhood?

When coupled with other effective literacy instructional practices, writing can help develop several aspects of young children's literacy development. Research suggests that:

- Writing promotes children's phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and letter-sound knowledge because it involves children in listening to the sounds in words and promotes their exploration of the relationship between sounds and written symbols (Ehri and Roberts, 2006).
- Writing and emergent spelling promote reading vocabulary development by helping children develop more detailed orthographic representations of words (Dixon, Stuart, and Masterson, 2002; Uhry and Shepard, 1993).
- Two forms of children's early writing—orally composing a message that an adult transcribes and trying to write their own messages—may help children develop print awareness skills, both those related to the functions (inform, entertain, persuade, etc.) and forms (list, invitation, story, etc.) of written language and those related to the conventions of print (top to bottom, left to right) (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1985; Sulzby, 1992).
- Teachers can use their students' spellings as evidence of phonological sensitivity and alphabet knowledge, thereby enabling them to tailor instruction to meet their students' learning needs (Bear and Templeton, 1998; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998).

Defining Early Childhood Writing

It is useful to think of writing during the preschool years as involving three different dimensions:

- Composing—putting ideas into written form
- Spelling—encoding the words being written into letters
- Handwriting—forming the letters according to conventions

The most important aspect of young children's writing is composing, using writing to convey meaning (e.g., Roberts and Wibbens, in press). Attempting to encode words by spelling is also significant for young children because of its connection to phonological awareness development and letter knowledge. Though handwriting has often been emphasized during preschool in the past, children who have been encouraged to compose and employ emergent spelling typically develop good letter formation in the process of writing (Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis, 1989) and thus handwriting should not be a focus of preschool instruction.

Composing

Long before preschoolers can recognize or form letters on a page, those who have been exposed to authentic writing in their lives can compose text and demonstrate an emerging understanding of the intentionality, or purposefulness, of written texts (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984). As they explore composing meaningful texts in the form of scribbles, letter strings, and emergent spelling, preschoolers may also compose orally, elaborating on their ideas and thereby adding significance to their written work (e.g., Dyson, 2001). Preschoolers' personal interests also appear to affect their compositions; some compose to communicate and interact with others, some to explore new ideas, and still others to explore the act of writing itself (Rowe and Neitzel, 2010).

Spelling

Like composing, spelling is a developmental process. Children who do not yet grasp the alphabetic principle (understanding that sounds can be represented by letters) may compose through scribbles or letter strings that bear no obvious relationship to the sounds in words being represented. As children develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge, they begin to employ inventive spelling by segmenting and then representing the sounds they hear with symbols (Read, 1971; Richgels, 2002). Because inventive spelling and reading share the underlying skill of phonemic awareness, researchers have observed that the use of inventive spelling supports children's word learning (e.g., Richgels, 1995). Teachers can learn a great deal about the developing phonological awareness and letter knowledge of their students by examining the children's early attempts at spelling (e.g., Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, and Templeton, 2009; Templeton and Morris, 2000). Regardless of their spelling ability, however, preschoolers can successfully convey meaning through writing.

What Are the Stages of Writing Development in Preschool?

A preschool child's writing develops over time with experience with print. There are six common stages of early writing development:

1. Drawing
2. Scribbling
3. Letter-like forms
4. Letter strings and mock linear writing
5. Invented spelling
6. Conventional spelling (not commonly encountered in preschool)

Stages 1-3. Early in the preschool years, children can demonstrate an awareness that their written marks and drawings are intentional and convey meaning (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984) and that the marks they use for writing differ from what they consider to be drawing (Brenneman, Massey, Machado, and Gelman, 1996; Lancaster, 2001). Many children then move to writing through scribbles. Scribbles may be used much like print—for example, children may make them from left to right and top to bottom on a page and even “read” them to adults or peers. Over time, undifferentiated scribbles typically become more letter-like forms—combinations of lines, circles, and curves that may or may not be actual letters.

Stages 4-6. Eventually, children's writing is composed mostly of actual letters. At first, children may only write memorized words, such as DAD or MOM, use the letters in their name, and create strings of seemingly random letters. However, even at this stage, before children have developed the alphabetic principle, they commonly attend to the concepts they are recording (e.g., Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Rowe, 2008). For example, a child might record many letters to represent larger things (e.g., a bear) and comparatively fewer letters to represent smaller things (e.g., an ant). Children might also hypothesize that letters represent syllables as opposed to individual sounds,



spelling “I liked seeing the panda bear” with eight letters. With continued literacy opportunities in school and at home, children come to understand that letters represent sounds (phonemes), leading them at first to clearly represent the most salient sound or sounds they can isolate in a word, typically the initial and sometimes the final sound(s) – for example, using BZ for “bugs.” Once both children and adults can read the child’s written work, the child has developed into a conventional writer (Sulzby, 1992). It is important to recognize that children do not necessarily progress through each of the six stages in a linear fashion. Rather, a young child may employ strategies typical of different stages at any one point, perhaps scribbling in one form or function of writing, using her name in another, and writing with invented spelling in yet another (Sulzby, 1992; Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis, 1989).

How Do We Foster Growth in Preschoolers’ Writing?

Research supports multiple strategies for fostering preschoolers’ writing, including the following:

Stock the Classroom with a Wide Variety of Materials for Reading and Writing

Exposing children to written texts every day—through read-alouds, the classroom print environment (e.g., labels, posters, books), and classroom activities (e.g., reading children’s names, reading notes from parents and teachers)—is fundamental to fostering growth in preschoolers’ writing.

Also important is stocking the classroom—and a writing center in particular—with a wide variety of available writing materials, such as the following:

- Magnetic letters
- Markers
- Crayons
- Colored pencils
- Computers
- Various sizes and types of paper (e.g., construction, plain, lined, chart)
- Chalk, dry erase, or magnetic writing boards
- Alphabet stamps

Provide Ample Opportunities to Write Throughout the Room and Day

Children need multiple opportunities throughout the room and day to engage in writing (Clark and Kragler, 2005). Children can write letters home to parents, draft an informational piece on their class trip to the zoo, and make a list of all the reasons they appreciate the winter. They might write the names on their creations in the block area. They might draw and write about what they are observing in the science center. They might engage with the teacher in whole-class shared writing about their class trip to the zoo, and small-group writing about the preschool vegetable garden for a class display. As mentioned earlier, young children tend to have different purposes for approaching writing (Rowe and Neitzel, 2010). Because of that, preschool teachers who offer a wide variety of writing opportunities throughout the day enable children to explore the act of writing in ways suited to their personal interests.

Genre knowledge (knowledge of the purposes and forms of written language, such as labels and fairy tales) is an important part of literacy learning (Duke and Purcell-Gates, 2003), and the differences in preschoolers’ texts suggests that they acquire this knowledge by having many opportunities to write for different purposes/in different genres (Chapman, 2002; Rowe, 2008). One of our favorite examples of this comes from a three-year-old who scribble-wrote two texts: one had a column of short scribbles, and the other had long scribbles across the page. The child identified the former as a shopping list and the latter as a story (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1983). When preschool teachers provide students with opportunities to write throughout the classroom and the day, they enable children to explore different genres. They may write letters to their parents in the writing center, make grocery lists in the dramatic play center, label objects they created in the block center, write an informational piece about their class mineral collection, and compose a story during whole-class shared writing.

Provide Opportunities for Real-World Writing

Many of the experiences preschoolers have with writing should involve writing in a real genre for an actual purpose and to a genuine audience. In the primary grades, these kinds of authentic writing experiences have been shown to highly correlate with students' growth in writing (Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau, 2007). Furthermore, preschoolers have been shown to employ strategies to monitor their understanding when presented with authentic learning opportunities (Neuman and Roskos, 1997).

What might authenticity during writing look like? It could occur during whole-class instruction, small-group activities, or individual format. Preschoolers might:

- Write a "Please Save" sign at the block center to ask that others do not destroy their creation.
- Write a letter during whole-group shared writing time to the preschool director or school principal thanking her for visiting to see the class performance of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*.
- Label the room with pictures and words so that visitors can find things quickly during Open House.
- Compose a recipe for making ants on a log (raisins on peanut butter or cream cheese in celery) to take home to a family member after seeing the process modeled in class.

Children can also engage in "real-world" writing as part of their classroom play activities. Neuman and Roskos (1997) created dramatic play centers modeled after real-world settings such as a restaurant, included many literacy artifacts (e.g., an order pad, a menu), and modeled how to use those materials in an authentic manner. For example, after teaching about the post office through field trips, read-alouds, and children's exploration of the new play center materials (e.g., a mailbag, envelopes, stamps), the researchers and teachers role-played several scenarios that might happen at a real post office. In their subsequent observations of children at the center, Neuman and Roskos saw children engage in a wide range of literacy activities during play, including writing for authentic, albeit pretend, reasons. This suggests that play environments can be enriched to promote writing development.

Scaffold Students' Writing

Following Vygotskian theory, children learn most effectively when they receive instruction in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978); just beyond what children can do independently, this zone is a space where adults and classmates can help children's emergent skills develop further (e.g., Bodrova and Leong, 1998, 2006). This help, or scaffolding, is temporary, meant to support children as they acquire a new skill or strategy, but only for as much as and as long as it is needed. In her study of two-year-old preschoolers, Rowe (2008b) found that children learned the principle of intentionality of texts when adults scaffolded their writing attempts through joint participation in writing tasks. For example, by asking a child whether her marks were a drawing or writing, the adult at the writing table supported the child's emerging understanding that print is distinct from drawings. The children and adults in Rowe's study collaboratively negotiated the intentions of their written texts through discussion and interactions at the writing table, thereby supporting, or scaffolding, children's emerging understanding of print.

Similarly, Bodrova and colleagues (1999) observed that kindergarten children developed concept of word, used more writing conventions, increased the complexity of their written message, and increased their use of inventive spelling when teachers utilized a Scaffolded Writing approach. This method involves helping children plan their written message by writing a line to represent each spoken word (Bodrova and Leong, 2006). After the child repeats her message while finger pointing, she attempts to employ emergent spelling to record the message word by word/line by line. Regardless of children's current writing development, teachers can scaffold their students' writing by using their knowledge of what children do well and what skills are likely next steps for them.



Model and Provide Models of Good Writing

Children learn the art of writing by observing the models around them. Teachers can model good writing in the classroom by:

- Using quality literature in a variety of genres to serve as a model of how effective authors write.
- Demonstrating through think-alouds their own writing process, for example as they brainstorm interesting things they learned on a field trip, add details after visualizing that part of the field trip, identify the initial sounds in words they are writing by saying them slowly, and use the classroom alphabet chart to assist in choosing which letter to write.
- Modeling how to label drawings at the writing center.
- Writing on a chart paper or dry erase board in front of the class and with varying degrees of contribution from the children—sometimes referred to as modeled writing, shared writing, interactive writing, and/or guided writing (Craig, 2003; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996; Gibson, 2008; Pinnell and McCarrier, 1994)—to highlight skills such as composing an idea, listening to sounds, or writing from left to right.
- Writing in front of, and along with, children every day for real-world purposes and audiences.

Recording Oral Dictation as a Means of Early Writing

Oral dictation, the act of transcribing what a child says orally into conventional print while the child watches, is one method of showing young children purposes of writing (e.g., Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis, 1989). By recording a child's words, teachers demonstrate that what we speak can be written on paper, in addition to modeling sound-symbol relationships and print conventions (Tunks and Giles, 2009). When using oral dictation, teachers record so that the child can observe the writing process. Teachers should also read the writing back to the child and point to the words as they do so. We have read dictated texts from young children that are touching, thought provoking, and just plain entertaining. Oral dictation provides one important means for young children to convey their many gifts.

The DLM Early Childhood Express

Writing is a central component of *The DLM Early Childhood Express*[®]. The program has a Writer's Center every week, with several specific writing activities suggested. These activities include giving oral dictation, labeling signs and other materials for classroom use, completing sentence frames, and a variety of activities that combine writing with children's drawing. For example, one Writer's Center activity early in the year is "My Roles Chart." Children identify roles they play in the classroom and contribute to a "My Roles" chart by illustrating the roles they play and dictating labels naming the roles. Another activity involves children in drawing a picture and completing an accompanying sentence frame: they draw a picture of themselves doing something they are good at and complete the frame "I am good at _____." Of course, children's contributions at any stage of writing development are accepted. Some children may complete the frame using scribble writing or writing in letter-like forms. Others might use invented spelling to complete the frame. Indeed, children will advance through stages of writing development as a result of regular teacher-supported experiences in the Writer's Center and plenty of opportunities for independent practice.

Writing opportunities are integrated into other centers as well. For example, in the Math and Science Center, children draw and label pictures in their plant journals to show what they notice about seeds. In another Math and Science center activity, children label parts of their body. The program encourages teachers to incorporate writing into every Center and classroom area.

In *The DLM Early Childhood Express*, there is also daily, shared writing during "Recap the Day." This involves the teacher and children reviewing some of the material from that day. For example, one day the recap is:

Recap the Day. Say: *Today we talked about how plants, animals, and people grow and change. What is one important thing you want to remember?* Record answers on chart paper. Share the pen by having children write letters and words they know.

Recording answers on chart paper provides an opportunity for teachers to model writing for children, and sharing the pen offers a chance to scaffold children's own writing. There are opportunities for explicit teaching about writing and writing conventions, as in this Recap the Day:

Recap the Day. Say: *Let's quickly retell how people grow.* Write and ask: *What are we first?* Have children dictate other sentences for you to write. As you write their responses, point out the way you write from left to right and leave spaces between words.

Recap the Day provides an important forum for helping children develop as writers.

Good books also provide models of good writing. *The DLM Early Childhood Express* is centered on two sets of carefully selected, high quality books for each of the six themes in the program. Big Book/Little Book sets provide 24 titles across the eight thematic units, including one big book for sharing during the read-aloud and regular-sized copies of the same book that children can use in small-group or independent follow-up activities. These titles include many award winners and are available in audio format so children can experience well-crafted stories in a variety of ways. The Concept Big Books provide lively and well-structured examples of informational texts supplemented with realistic photographs. The Concept Big Books are used during large-group Literacy Time to ensure that children experience content information about each of the themes. All of these pieces of literature are available in both English and Spanish. These books are selected as materials that will both provide engaging models of writing and inspire all children to become writers.

References

- Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Johnston, F., and Templeton, S. (2009). *Words Their Way: Letter and Picture Sorts for Emergent Spellers* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Allyn and Bacon/Merrill.
- Bear, D. and Templeton, S. (1998). "Explorations in developmental spelling: Foundations for learning and teaching phonics, spelling, and vocabulary," *The Reading Teacher*, 52, pp. 222-242.
- Brenneman, K., Massey, C., Machado, S. F., and Gelman, R. (1996). "Young children's plans differ for writing and drawing," *Cognitive Development*, 11, pp. 397-419.
- Bodrova, E. and Leong, D. J. (1998). "Scaffolding emergent writing in the zone of proximal development," *Literacy Teaching and Learning*, 3, pp. 1-18.
- Bodrova, E., Leong, D. J., Gregory, K., and Edgerton, S. (1999). *Scaffolded writing—a successful strategy for promoting children's writing in kindergarten*. Paper presented at the NAEYC Annual Conference, New Orleans.
- Bodrova, E. and Leong, D. J. (2006). "Vygotskian perspectives on teaching and learning early literacy," In D. Dickinson and S. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (2nd ed.), New York: Guilford, pp. 243-256.
- Chapman, M. L. (2002). "A longitudinal case study of curriculum genres, K-3," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27, pp. 21-44.
- Clark, P. and Kragler, S. (2005). "The impact of including writing materials in early childhood classrooms on the early literacy development of children from low-income families," *Early Child Development and Care*, 175, pp. 285-301.
- Craig, S. A. (2003): IRA Outstanding Dissertation Award for 2003: "The effects of an adapted interactive writing intervention on kindergarten children's phonological awareness, spelling, and early reading development," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38, pp. 438-440.
- Dixon, M., Stuart, M., and Masterson, J. (2002). "The relationship between phonological awareness and the development of orthographic representations," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15, pp. 295-316.
- Duke, N. K. and Purcell-Gates, V. (2003). "Genres at home and at school: Bridging the known to the new," *The Reading Teacher*, 57, pp. 30-37.





- Dyson, A. H. (2001). "Writing and children's symbolic repertoires: Development unhinged," In S. Neuman and D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, New York: Guilford, pp. 126-141.
- Ehri, L. and Roberts, T. (2006). "The roots of learning to read and write: Acquisition of letters and phonemic awareness," In D. Dickinson and S. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (2nd ed.), New York: Guilford, pp. 113-131.
- Ferreiro, E. and Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy Before Schooling*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Fountas, I. and Pinnell, G. (1996). *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gibson, S. A. (2008). "An effective framework for primary-grade guided writing instruction," *The Reading Teacher*, 62, pp. 324-334.
- Harste, J. C., Woodward, V. A., and Burke, C. L. (1984). *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lancaster, L. (2001). "Staring at the page: The functions of gaze in a young child's interpretation of symbolic forms," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 1, pp. 131-152.
- Lonigan, C. J., Schatschneider, C., and Westberg, L., with the National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). "Identification of children's skills and abilities linked to later outcomes in reading, writing, and spelling," In *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*, Louisville, KY: National Center for Family Literacy, pp. 55-106.
- Neuman, S. and Roskos, K. (1997). "Literacy knowledge in practice: Contexts of participation for young writers and readers," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 32, pp. 10-32.
- Pinnell, G. S. and McCarrier, A. (1994). "Interactive writing: A transition tool for assisting children in learning to read and write," In E. Hiebert and B. Taylor (Eds.), *Getting Reading Right from the Start: Effective Early Literacy Interventions*, Needham, MA: Allyn and Bacon, pp. 149-170.
- Purcell-Gates, V., Duke, N. K., and Martineau, J. A. (2007). "Learning to read and write genre-specific text: Roles of authentic experience and explicit teaching," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, pp. 8-45.
- Read, C. (1971). "Preschool children's knowledge of English phonology," *Harvard Educational Review*, 41, pp. 1-34.
- Richgels, D. J. (1995). "Invented spelling ability and printed word learning in kindergarten," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30, pp. 96-109.
- Richgels, D. J. (2002). "Invented spelling, phonemic awareness, and reading and writing instruction," In S. Neuman and D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, New York: Guilford, pp. 142-158.
- Rowe, D. W. (2008a). "Social contracts for writing: Negotiating shared understandings about text in the preschool years," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, pp. 66-95.
- Rowe, D. W. (2008b). "The social construction of intentionality: Two-year-olds' and adults' participation at a preschool writing center," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 42, pp. 387-434.
- Rowe, D. W. and Neitzel, C. (2010). "Interest and agency in 2- and 3-year-olds' participation in emergent writing," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45, pp. 169-195.
- Roberts, K. and Wibbens, E. (in press). "Writing first: What research says about writing instruction in the primary grades," In G. Troia (Ed.). *Writing research in classroom practice: Applications for teacher professional development*. New York: Guilford.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., and Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Sulzby, E. (1992). "Research directions: Transitions from emergent to conventional writing," *Language Arts*, 69, pp. 290-297.



1-800-334-7344 MHEonline.com

2 PENN PLAZA
NEW YORK, NEW YORK
10121-2298

The McGraw-Hill Companies

IN 10 M 7917 11/10