Writing Empowering Literacy

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Each child’s accomplishments, no matter how small, are celebrated. I acknowledge what the child can do and support his/her efforts to try new things at the appropriate ability level. I help the child understand that writing can make things happen. I try to find the child’s unique interests and show how writing can be useful.

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Writing activities are an essential part of quality literacy practices in early care and education settings. As children communicate through writing, they learn important concepts about books and other forms of print in the world around them, including writing and alphabet systems. Writing, like speaking and the creative arts, allows children to actively express themselves and communicate with others.

Young children best understand and appreciate writing when it is part of a meaningful social context (Morrow & Rand 1991; Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999)—for example, when they make a sign to post on a structure they are building in the block area. Early care and education teachers can provide opportunities for children to write by (a) organizing the classroom environment to encourage writing in multiple areas or learning centers, (b) supporting writing through adult-child engagement, and (c) building strong home-school links for writing interaction, like take-home journals used in school and at home. When planning writing opportunities for children, teachers should keep in mind that

1. Children understand writing differently from adults and have confidence in themselves as writers.
2. The interconnections of writing and drawing support children’s active writing exploration.
3. A writing-friendly environment integrates writing into multiple activities and supports broader literacy development that includes experiences with expressive language and book reading.

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Children’s confidence in both their writing ability and their print knowledge helps them develop a solid literacy foundation.
4. Sensitive adult support encourages writing development.
5. Writing activities support the home-school connection.

Children understand writing differently from adults

Young children brim with self-confidence about their abilities to write, yet have a more restricted idea about writing than adults. For example,

Adult: Write a red ball.
Child (age four) writes something.
Adult: What does it say?
Child: You didn’t tell me that I would have to read.

(Tolchinsky 2003, 72)

Young children acquire initial knowledge about writing by interacting with family members and other significant individuals, often by pretending to write in different forms for different purposes (Heath 1983; McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth 1986; Gadsen 1993). For example, children may scribble, a common form of early writing, to communicate a message or make a list, as they notice adults and older siblings writing in these ways (McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth 1986). Tolchinsky (2003) observed that four-year-olds make longer, undifferentiated scribbles when asked to write a sentence instead of a single word. As children begin to grasp the concept of the alphabet, they may request adults to read their wavy lines (McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth 1986).

Writing is an important part of a child’s literacy development. Pretend writing should be as meaningful to young children as pretend reading, so that there will be no fear of writing later on. Writing should be a natural, enjoyable, successful part of play.

— Sheila R. Levine

Even though young children comprehend the link between reading and writing differently from adults, when exposed to a literacy-rich environment, they can build a rudimentary understanding that written words carry meaning. For example, before they can read, children as young as three know we can read certain letter strings, like BOOK, whereas others, like TTTT, are unreadable. Young children also reliably classify BOOK as a word and 8965 as a number (Tolchinsky 2003).

Children’s confidence in both their writing ability and their print knowledge helps them develop a solid literacy foundation. When children first protest that they do not know how to write, like the four-year-old quoted earlier, they have become aware of the difficulty of the task (Teale & Sulzby 1986; Clay 1988; Brenneman et al. 1996). As they gain experience in reading and writing, young children begin, albeit in uneven steps, to shift their definitions of writing to the one that adults understand.

As their writing becomes more conventional, three-, four-, and five-year-olds demonstrate knowledge of numerous emergent writing principles (Clay 1988). For example, the child who wrote this sample recognizes that letters recur, and that words of letters are generated from a limited number of letters. Other early writing behaviors include making strings of letters or letterlike forms and writing words or text using invented spelling; children learn spelling conventions long after they begin formal writing and spelling instruction in the early primary grades (Bissex 1980; Teale & Sulzby 1986; Dyson 1989; Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill 1994).

The interconnections of writing and drawing support active writing exploration

Children often combine art and writing in the same product—for example, drawings and paintings as part of a thank-you letter to the firefighter who visited the classroom. To assess understanding of writing conventions and knowledge of speech sounds, teachers can examine the changes in the types of writing principles children use in their drawing and writing.

In learning to write there is a time when children combine drawing with writing. When children are writing, their scribbles, letterlike forms, or letters may be all over the page or strung together. When they are writing they are usually speaking their words out loud.

— Sheila R. Levine

Young children do not reliably differentiate drawing from writing until around age four (Levin & Bus 2003). However, some three-year-olds do distinguish print from
drawing in very basic ways (Brenneman et al. 1996). For example, when asked to draw, they produce unique types of scribbles not resembling letters, and they use more colors, fill in outlines of objects, and rotate their paper more. In contrast, when asked to write, they form letters or symbols that look like letters.

Four-year-olds are more knowledgeable; they are more consistent in writing in lines and from left to right. They continue to use devices such as color, placement, and number to assist in communicating meaning through their written work. For example, when asked to write sun, they might produce a scribble in yellow at the top of the page; when asked to write three flowers, they might produce three distinct scribbled lines to convey the meaning of three (Levin & Bus 2003).

Preschoolers approach the tasks of writing and drawing differently. For instance, a child may always scribble words going from left to right but when drawing, begin by placing a picture in the middle of the page. This serves as more evidence that children are aware of print before receiving formal instructions (Schicke-danz & Casbergue 2004). Their different approaches to writing and drawing—writing from left to right but drawing in various directions—underscore the importance of children’s regular and active involvement with print. For example, teachers can make available paper and markers in all learning centers or ask children as young as three to “make your mark” on a white board as a way of signing in to begin the day.

One way to help children connect speaking, reading, drawing, and writing as forms of communication is to offer to take dictation: “Tell me about your painting, and I will write your words on the paper.” The teacher can act as the child’s scribe to label drawings, communicate a message, or document oral stories. Teachers can help children learn that writing differs from drawing by encouraging children to choose the exact spot on the paper to write (or dictate) their names: “Would you like me to write your name at the top, near the green grass, or at the bottom, next to the red sky, or somewhere else?”

A writing-friendly environment supports broader literacy development

Successful early literacy writing programs support children’s phonological awareness, examine the functions of print through play, and connect reading with writing in everyday experiences and environments (Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999; Strickland et al. 2002). Children learn to write through meaningful activities to accomplish social and personal goals (McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth 1986). For example, children might write their names on a chart to indicate which classroom job they want to do.
Interestingly, Burns and Stechuk (2004) observe that teachers’ professional development focusing on literacy promotes a much greater use of books and other print materials (as well as toys for sociodramatic play) than writing materials. Future studies may determine why. The importance of writing warrants a closer look at how it can be meaningfully integrated into all early childhood activities and learning centers so children can write their observations of fish swimming in the aquarium, record how many acorns they collected on the playground, and make traffic signs to use on the roads created in the block area.

As preschoolers discover that writing helps them understand and control the environment and communicate with others, their interest in writing increases (NAEYC & IRA 1998; Neuman 1998). Children best learn the joy and power of writing when it is integrated into various themes and by writing for varying purposes (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2000).

A well-stocked writing center is an excellent place to start developing a writing-friendly classroom. Children can visit the writing center when they want to write or when they are looking for writing supplies. The writing center becomes a hub of literacy activities. In addition to the items on Sheila’s list (see “Writing Materials for Centers”), writing media might include various textures and weights of paper and envelopes as well as a picture dictionary. Children can create literacy products—books, letters (mail), cards, and envelopes—using stamps with rotating letters and numbers, staples, hole punches, and tape. An alphabet strip mounted on the table or hung on the wall at children’s eye level provides easy access to letter models.

A writing-friendly environment features many types of writing around the room (environmental print), including print and text generated by adults and children alike. Indeed, it is essential that children’s written work be displayed and used throughout the room and program. Post children’s dictations; put child-created books in the library center to be used throughout the room and program. Post children’s dictations; put child-created books in the library center to be read and reread; display children’s signed artwork.

A print-rich classroom includes labels for objects, maps, and charts and a daily schedule listing activities and times. To increase use of print, also post words that children may want to copy, such as the names of classmates. An abundance of print, however, is not enough to make print meaningful. Teachers who engage children in conversations and focused activities draw their attention to writing in the environment. As teachers model how print can keep materials organized, clarify the schedule, and send and receive important messages, children learn to use and produce writing on their own (Nixon & Topping 2001).

Environmental print should reflect the interests and home languages of the classroom community (see “Environmental Print in Children’s Home Languages”). Teachers should rotate print and products as new projects develop and as children’s interests and classroom themes emerge and change.
To encourage children to write, teachers can post sign-up sheets for attendance and turn-taking activities or take classroom polls (“My favorite fruit is _____”) (Hutinger et al. 1998). For example, turn taking can easily be managed if the dramatic play area is set up as a restaurant and a sign-up sheet serves as a reservation list. Children who want to play in the center make a reservation by signing their names. Those who have had their turn then read (or seek assistance to read) the names of the next restaurant players. Such a strategy emphasizes the function of writing and gives children an opportunity to use writing to fulfill a real purpose (McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth 1986).

Dramatic play is ideal for writing experiences (which, in a restaurant scenario, might include writing menus, taking orders, writing up the check). Other excellent play themes that incorporate writing include a bakery (recipes, signs announcing what items are available and times the store is open), a medical office (patient charts, prescription pads, appointment cards), and a post office (letters, cards, envelopes, mailboxes). Some form of writing can be incorporated naturally into the flow of most kinds of dramatic play. When young children plan and communicate through writing, such as during pretend play, they develop both literacy and cognitive skills (Dyson 1989; Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999; Bodrova & Leong 2001).

Technology can be a powerful tool for supporting writing development. Working together on a computer activity promotes peer interaction, communication, phonemic awareness, and writing in a meaningful context (Burns, Goin, & Donlon 1990; Hutinger et al. 1998). Children are often gratified by the conventional look of their computer-printed writing. In addition, learning to use the keyboard and mouse builds confidence and technical agility. Computers can be adapted with larger switches and keys for use by children who may have difficulty manipulating writing tools such as pencils and crayons.

**Teacher support for writing development**

Sensitive adult support is crucial to writing development. Teachers unlock literacy development through modeling and scaffolding and by balancing adult guidance and child autonomy. Scaffolding is when teachers temporarily provide extended guidance on a task, then quickly back off as the child learns and no longer needs the extended guidance. Clearly children can perform in more conventional and complex ways with the aid of an adult then without. For instance, a three-year-old may need an adult to help guide her hand if she wants to print the first letter of her name. However, scaffolding is provided only when requested and always in a manner sensitive to the child’s interests and understanding so that the child’s capacity and motivation to write can grow.

Too much guidance and structure can inhibit children’s motivation and independence, if used when children understand the writing task they want to accomplish and are aware of their own writing skills (Gutman & Sulzby 2000). Preschool children who are still learning to identify readable text sometimes become frustrated and oppositional when parents suggest ways to make their writing more readable. However, children who write somewhat independently seek—and even insist on—adult help in producing a more conventional product (DeBaryshe, Buell, & Binder 1996).

Encouraging young children to “write” in the way that they want to write increases their motivation and allows them to focus on the message they want to convey.

**Scaffolded Writing**

The Tools of the Mind Scaffolded Writing Method (TOM-SW), based on Vygotsky’s work (1978), was developed for use in the United States by Bodrova and Leong (2001). The early writing method focuses on (1) connecting with children, (2) challenging them to take new steps without frightening or frustrating them, and (3) supporting their efforts to internalize the writing lessons.

A set of specific TOM-SW procedures helps young children make the association between oral and written language. Teachers gradually teach children that spoken sounds and words can be linked to scratches and symbols on paper.

Writing occurs under the drawing in a section separated by a solid line (see example). Children learn the technique of writing lines as place holders for the words they want to write, writing the words as best they know how. They then observe the teacher, who writes underneath these place-holding lines the words the child dictates (this is mainly for rereading the message—not a correction of what the child writes). Lines for words with many sounds are long; lines for words with fewer sounds are short. Notice in the example that a short line indicates where to write I and a relatively long line is provided for the word KMPTR (computer). The child rereads these “word lines” with the teacher’s help.
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focus on the message they want to convey (Burns & Casbergue 1992).

One of the best ways to align with the child’s needs, balancing guidance with autonomy, is through scaffolded writing (see “Scaffolded Writing,” p. 16) (Bodrova & Leong 2001). In this approach, teachers provide children with support and guidance (scaffolding) to develop their understanding of the function and conventions of writing in several ways. The method is particularly effective with preschoolers. Children get direct experience with making and executing a plan, an everyday function of writing. The teacher’s directed instructions and guidance about how to represent the children’s thoughts on paper in writing decrease as the children learn the task. As new complexities are added, such as asking a child to write a longer line for words with many sounds and a shorter line for words with fewer sounds, the teacher again offers assistance. Generally, young children are most successful when teachers provide structure and instruction about a new aspect of writing. Once the concept is introduced, the teacher then steps back to allow children the freedom to incorporate and master the new skills.

Writing activities support the home-school connection

Children’s literacy skills grow when they see the important adults in their lives write purposefully, both at home and in the early childhood classroom. Every day teachers write messages home and make notes about daily events. They can invite families to share these messages and write their responses with children.

Teachers can send home journals documenting children’s play and developmental milestones or sharing anecdotes from the day’s activities. Parents (and children) in turn can write in the journal, sharing their observations with the teacher and other children.

In addition, teachers can encourage families to include children in everyday writing tasks, such as making a grocery list or a chart of household chores. Teachers can also create specific activities to encourage writing at home. For instance, children can take home for a sleepover a classroom mascot (perhaps a teddy bear) in a backpack equipped with a journal and crayons, pencils, or markers. The child and family can tell about the mascot’s overnight activities, using drawing, symbols, photos, or audio recordings. Encouraging families to write in their home language in the journal acknowledges that bilingual children better understand the concepts of print when they can maintain literacy skills in both languages (Bialystok 1997). Many schools have access to translators. If not, the teacher may find a community member who knows the child’s home language and English and can help in this process.

Upon the journal’s return to the classroom, it is important for the teacher to read aloud to the child, or have the child read, the entry documenting the previous night’s visit. This affirms not only the importance of literacy but also the value that home life holds for the teacher and program. If the child chooses, the teacher can take dictation to augment the journal entry (Epstein 2002).

Participation by all children in writing projects advances classroom cohesion and fosters home-school connections. Drawing children’s attention to written communications between home and school reaffirms the importance and meaning of writing.

Conclusion

Writing involves more than merely learning and using meaningful symbols and codes (Dyson 1989); it supports communication and promotes social, emotional, and cognitive development. Preschoolers approach the tasks of writing and drawing differently than do adults; for example, adults understand that writing can be read and children do not necessarily think that their writing is something they can read. Preschoolers gain new perspectives and understandings rapidly. Children are aware of print before being formally taught its conventions, but for their understanding to grow, they need regular and meaningful interactions with print. Encouraging children to write and express themselves connects writing to speaking, listening, and reading. Literacy skills are key to the development of well-rounded individuals who can fully participate in civil society and culture. The ability to write provides a powerful tool for mastery, self-expression, and self-determination. Writing is truly an empowering entry into and element of early literacy.
References


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