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## Early writing in the kindergarten classroom

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## Early writing in the kindergarten classroom

### Abstract

Learning to read and learning to write are related processes which deal with printed symbols (Hall, Moretz, & Statom, 1986). In 1980 Glenda Bissex published *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Write and Read*. Bissex chose to focus on how her child treated himself as a writer. In her observation of her son she found that reading was integrally involved in his becoming a writer. When children write they read their own texts and they consequently monitor their production. A dynamic relationship exists between writing and reading because each influences the other in the course of development (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Sulzby, 1985). The two processes tend to be coordinated in their development.

EARLY WRITING IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

A Research Paper

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by

Agnes Grevstad Hjelle

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Learning to read and learning to write are related processes which deal with printed symbols (Hall, Moretz, & Statom, 1986). In 1980 Glenda Bissex published GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Write and Read. Bissex chose to focus on how her child treated himself as a writer. In her observation of her son she found that reading was integrally involved in his becoming a writer. When children write they read their own texts and they consequently monitor their production. A dynamic relationship exists between writing and reading because each influences the other in the course of development (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Sulzby, 1985). The two processes tend to be coordinated in their development.

Bissex (1980) recorded the following notation in her journal when her son Paul was five and a half years old:

Paul wrote and posted this sign over his workbench-desk: DO NAT DSTRB GNYS AT WRK. [sic] (p. 203)

Bissex writes

The GNYS (genius) at work is our human capacity for language. DO NAT DSTRB [sic] is a caution to observe how it works, for the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children learn. (p. 203)

## Historical Background

An historical look at kindergarten curriculum since the 1920s reveals that several forces have influenced early childhood education. One of these was the growth in use of commercial reading readiness activities and materials in the classroom. These materials have often replaced freer, more unstructured activities. Researchers have pointed to the 1920s, a time when massive numbers of children were failing initial reading instruction as a time which initiated the popularity and growth of commercialized reading readiness programs (Durkin, 1974).

A second force beginning in the 1920s and 1930s and extending into the 1940s and '50s, was the maturation philosophy influenced by the ideas of Arnold Gesell. Basically, Gesell (1925) viewed development as being controlled by maturation. This approach proposed that mental processes, necessary for reading, would unfold automatically at a certain point in development. Such a view of the teaching of reading was labeled by Durkin (1978) as the "measurement and testing movement" (p. 149).

Mabel Morphett and Carleton Washburne conducted a test in 1928-29 that has had lasting effects on the education of young children for many years. In September, 1928 they tested 141 first grade children in the Winnetka, Illinois schools. The children were given tests three times over the period of one school year. Morphett and Washburn

concluded that "it pays to postpone beginning reading until a child has attained a mental age of six years and six months." (p. 501)

A shift away from the maturation approach and toward the notion that reading readiness is the product of environment occurred during the late 1950s and the 1960s. Durkin (1968) supported this when she wrote:

The literature still shows some remnants of the maturational concept of readiness, but as a whole, articles and books are now dominated by the opposite conception highlighting the contribution of environmental factors. Or to put the characterization of the current scene in the framework of the nature-nurture debate, today the spotlight happens to be on nurture.... (p. 48)

Two of the main reasons for the shift include the launching of Sputnik by the Russians in 1957 and the publication of The Process of Education in 1960 (Durkin, 1974). Because of Sputnik, a commission for educational investigation was appointed. A result of the commission, and the self-evaluation that ensued was the general decision to make the curriculum more rigorous and to begin instruction as early as possible (Durkin, 1974). Bruner (1960) lent support for extending the teaching of subjects downward in the grades. His statement in The Process of Education, "We begin with the hypothesis that any subject



can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development."

(p. 33) The interpretation of that hypothesis led educators to place more emphasis on getting children ready to read as soon as possible rather than merely waiting for maturation to occur.

The reading readiness program which became so firmly entrenched during the 1960s remains prevalent in the 1980s. Every major publisher of a basal reader has a readiness level for its program. These reading readiness programs have largely remained the same throughout the years (Teale, & Sulzby 1986).

The idea of reading readiness, as outlined in the publisher's materials, affects people's thinking about literacy development in two significant ways. First, it leads them to conceptualize the early childhood period (and the behaviors of the child during this period) as precursor to real reading or writing. This implies that only after the child has mastered the various subskills of reading readiness does the real part begin .

Second, and closely related, it tells teachers and parents that learning to read and write begins in a school-like setting where specific skills can be taught. Thus, materials designed for use with young children either in home, school, or school-like settings are molded on formal, sequenced, direct instruction (Teale, & Sulzby 1986).

In the 1980s another force influencing early childhood education became evident. That force emphasized the importance of early writing. The research of Chomsky (1979), Clay (1982), Graves (1978), and Read (1975) document that to understand reading one must understand writing. Donald Graves (1978) has observed that in research and teaching, less attention has been paid to writing than to reading, and the writing development of preschool children in particular has been neglected.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document that early writing for preschoolers is a developmentally appropriate activity. There is currently a concern that the view of literacy which permeates the literature, curricula, and evaluative instruments should be changed in order to improve instruction during the children's first experiences with school (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

The need for this change was expressed at a meeting of the National Academy of Education's Commission on Reading (1985):

Preschool and kindergarten reading readiness programs should focus on reading, writing, and oral language. Knowledge of letters and their sounds, words, stories and question asking and answering are related to learning to read, but there is little evidence that

such activities as coloring, cutting with a scissors, or discriminating shapes (except the shapes of letters) promote reading development. (p.14)

This study, therefore, synthesized the literature to investigate research regarding early writing for preschoolers. In this study dealing with early writing, the following questions were asked:

1) How can children be taught to write who don't know how to spell?

2) How can children be taught to write who don't know how to print?

3) How do messages get written by preschoolers?

4) How do messages get read by preschoolers?

5) What is the preschool teacher's role in providing materials, planning, and implementing an early writing program?

#### Need for the Study

A review of the literature revealed that there were some concerns and questions regarding the mechanics of early writing in the kindergarten classroom (Graves, 1985, Hall, 1986, Harste & Burke, 1980). Because of these concerns, assumptions, which were previously held about the readiness of preschoolers, must be reconsidered.

### Definition of Terms

1. Early writing It begins with the active process of writing rather than the (usually) more passive process of reading. It stresses creation first, followed by correctness later. It uses student "errors" (they are not so labeled) as a means of learning about the inconsistencies of English spelling. It begins on the very first day of school and is part of every school day thereafter. It's known simply as "early writing".
2. Reading readiness program A set of basic skills thought to be prerequisite to reading which can be taught in a logical sequence. Children's progress throughout this hierarchy of readiness and reading skills monitored by periodic formal testing.
3. Literacy development An umbrella term to refer to a child's development as writer/reader. Listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities (as aspects of language-both oral and written) develop concurrently and interrelatedly, rather than sequentially.
4. Preschoolers Children between the ages of three and seven. A kindergarten child is considered a preschooler.
5. Environmental print The print one would find in the environment.

6. Language experience approach or LEA Use of a language experience story to teach expository prose structure to students. In it, the students dictate a story to their teacher. This shared story becomes the basis for vocabulary and reading comprehension exercises.
7. Handwriting Using the hand to manipulate a writing tool so that symbols are constructed.
8. Perception Perception in this paper as defined by Gibson and Levin (1975) "is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places and events in the world around us." (p. 13)

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Spelling

The first question asked in this study was the following: How can you teach children to write who don't know how to spell? After gathering in-class observations and anecdotal records from teachers, Anne Forester (1980) suggested that the evidence points to a conclusion that children progress through a number of stages in learning to spell. Forester contrasts and compares a child's initial oral language communication stages with a child's initial spelling or writing stages provided in Appendix A. In both cases children vary in length of time they spend at the various levels. Overlap occurs between stages and even regressions are common. Learning is not a linear process, but one of gradual synthesis and integration (Forester, 1980).

It is important to note that children experiment with writing by scribbling, by drawing letter-like forms, by incorporating writing into pictures, and by using letters in a nonsystematic way (which is not spelling, invented or other wise) before they begin using invented spelling. These experimentations should be accepted and encouraged.

Teachers should not try to hurry children beyond this stage, to force them to move into the more readable invented spelling stage (Richgels, 1987).

Linguists Carol Chomsky (1971) and Charles Read (1975) have done preliminary studies of spontaneous spelling by preschoolers and concluded that indeed writing is an appropriate and engrossing prereading activity for children. The following are strategies that Read observed:

1. The use of single letters to represent the sound of the full letter name P or PL for people--MAD for made--FRN for friend--LFNT for elephant.
2. Omission of nasal sounds before consonants. The m in bumpy--MOSTR for monster--SK for sink.
3. The use of one letter particularly L, R, M, or N to stand for a whole syllable. TABL for table--GRIF for giraffe--NHR for nature.
4. The use of a rather sophisticated set of linguistic criteria for deciding which vowel letter to use when the child had not yet learned the spelling of the short vowel sounds. Children seemed to be sensitive to phonetic relationships between vowel sounds, and also to how vowel sounds are made in the mouth. Feel and fill are related and be spelled FEL--so would fail and fell. (One added observation Read made with children who had immature speech patterns--WF for with.)

Children themselves, at some point, begin to use letters in a systematic though non-conventional way to represent speech sounds. Rhea Paul (1976) studied children at different levels of reading readiness in her classroom constructed four basic stages to which spelling seemed to conform. Interestingly enough, she found that children very skilled in reading readiness were not necessarily the best or most interested spellers.

The most elementary stage of spelling seemed to involve writing the first letter or phoneme of each word or syllable. For a child at this stage, TB would be toybox; F would be Friday. This child wouldn't feel it necessary to segment the word any further.

In the second stage, children would add the final phoneme of the word or syllable, while still omitting the short vowel sounds, as in HL for hill, GRS for grass. At this stage vowels that say their own name, such as TE for tea or BOT for boat are likely to appear.

The third stage was evident when children began to separate short vowel sounds from surrounding consonants and attempted to represent them in their spelling. Paul found that when children wanted to spell a short-vowel sound they seemed to give the vowels that were formed similarly in the mouth equal value and to use them interchangeably as a sort of marker. They might use the same vowel to represent several different sounds in the same sentence, such as



DORRDY WOTAR for dirty water. As a group, they used a variety of vowels to represent each vowel sound. Even at this early stage when there had been no formal teaching of vowel sounds and in fact the word "vowel" had not yet been mentioned in school, Paul (1976) found that children already seemed to recognize that vowel letters functioned differently from consonants; consequently, they used them in a different way.

In the fourth stage of spelling, which was exhibited mostly by children who were reading, spelling moved closer to standard forms. Sight vocabulary words such as was, saw and house were spelled correctly. Diagraphs such as sh, ch, and th began to appear and stories tend to be a little longer because each word did not have to be laboriously encoded. These children already have some words in their spelling vocabulary.

Chomsky (1979), Paul (1976), and Read (1975) all concluded that inventive spelling does not develop bad habits. Children do not continue to use their own spelling rather than learn the standard spelling for a word. Children seldom invent several spellings for the same word. As soon as children learned the standard spelling for a word, they would spontaneously substitute it for their word.

Invented spelling seems to work like many other activities in which young children involve themselves.

Just as at first they often are more concerned with spreading the paint or smearing the paste than with what the final picture looks like, it is the act of figuring a word out that intrigues children far more than the conclusions they come to (Atkins, 1984). They may write one letter several times in succession simply because they continue saying the sound to themselves and forget that they have already written it down. In many cases children cannot read back what they have just written and almost none can read it back the next day. The product--the way they actually decide to spell the word--appears to be subordinate to the thinking process that leads to the decision (Schickendanz, 1986).

An important advantage of the technique seems to be that it gives children the opportunity to write independently long before they are ready for a formal reading or spelling program. It also involves children in listening carefully and thinking about sounds in a very purposeful way. In this regard Paul (1976) concluded that invented spelling, allowing children to write on their own in the early stages, encourages active involvement and careful thinking about spelling and rather than impeding good spelling, it encourages good spelling.

### Handwriting

The second question proposed in this study was the

following: How can you teach children to write who don't know how to print? One of the roadblocks to early writing in kindergarten classrooms comes from teachers who are more interested in the product (handwriting), rather than the process. Also teachers report several concerns which include: motor control, the use of the writing instrument, speed, tendency to horizontal or vertical movement, constriction of space or size, and letter formation.

Lucy Calkins (1986) has found that children who come from homes without books, whose parents do not read or take the time to listen will still know more than one would suspect. Long before children can identify a handful of letters they can begin writing.

Goodman and Goodman (1979), Goodall (1984), and Mason (1980), support the position that children learn to comprehend the purpose of print before they understand the nature of written language. They write of children learning to organize the print in their environment by constructing theories about print from different experiences. These experiences consist primarily of seeing print in the environment, putting pencil to paper, looking at books and magazines, receiving birthday cards, noting logos on fast food restaurants, cereal boxes and TV commercials. Surrounded by a world full of print and literate language activities of their parents, children come to use print themselves (Taylor, 1982).

Maria Clay (1975) in her book What Did I Write? made a study of children's writing between the ages of three and seven. What one child discovers about print at age four years another equally intelligent child may not learn until six years. She also found a wide range of abilities in children's writings.

Current textbooks in educational psychology published today usually include a discussion of Jean Piaget's theory of child development. These books almost always state that the importance of his theory lies in the developmental stages that Piaget found and in the fact that children cannot be expected to understand certain concepts before they reach a given developmental level. Kamii, (1983) has noted that some educators have interpreted Piaget's theory to mean that mental processes necessary for reading follow a lock step hierarchical set of steps. Presenting his theory in this way is like referring to a child as an empty vessel. The old notion of the child as an empty vessel that requires filling has not stood the test of time (Kamii, 1983). Young children teach themselves a great deal. Their talents include following a moving object, reacting to sound and light, and imitation of adults from the time they are newborns (Berger, 1986).

If we follow these self-activated infant learners into early childhood, we will get a glimpse of some of the other things they have taught themselves. Within a time period of

48 to 60 months, children have used and coordinated their physical, intellectual and sensory equipment with remarkable results (Balaban, 1980). They have, in fact, played a major role in teaching themselves, among a host of achievements, to talk, to walk, to differentiate the strange from the familiar, and to distinguish cause from effect (Balaban, 1980).

By the time most children are five, they have perceptual, cognitive and language capabilities that will facilitate their ability to both read and write. According to Eleanor Gibson and Harry Levin (1975) perceptual learning is the foundation upon which one uses to learn to read and write. Perceptual learning is described by Gibson and Levin as a highly active process by which persons extract relevant information from their environment. By means of perception, a person screens the environment for information about things as well as events. Meaning is rooted in such learning even before a child is even able to talk (Gibson, & Levin). It is from this sort of learning that children acquire the ability to familiarize themselves with distinctive features of things and people.

Brittain (1979) showed that children as young as three can not only differentiate between drawings or pictures and written symbols, but in their own drawings they make the "writing" smaller. Furthermore, children who were making recognizable objects in drawing were also making

recognizable letters. Brittain contends that, contrary to popular belief, it is not muscle control or coordination that is the prime factor in handwriting, but rather the ability to form concepts and to draw recognizable objects that appear to be most basic to this skill (Brittain, 1979).

Clay (1975) collected children's handwriting samples from two different types of school situations. In the first type an informalized approach was used which did not stress separate lessons for handwriting, while in the second group separate lessons were stressed. In the informal approach, children learned to print by doing certain activities. These included the following activities:

- 1) They drew pictures and the teacher wrote dictated captions.
- 2) They traced over the teachers script.
- 3) They copied captions
- 4) They copied words around the room.
- 5) They remembered words forms and wrote them independently.
- 5) They invented word forms.

The teacher gave an occasional lesson on letter formation, perhaps once a week, and gave daily individual guidance in letter formation. In schools that did have lessons in handwriting in addition to daily write-a-story activities,

the pupils did not appear to differ significantly from those in other schools in the skills they gained (Clay, 1975).

### Developmental Stages of the Early Writer

The third question of this study asked: How do messages get written by preschoolers? At first when a very young child uses a pencil or crayon to draw or write, an adult will think of it as scribbling. Vygotsky (1986) suggests that these early scribbles actually have their origin in the actions and the gestures the child uses to indicate meaning, and that they might be viewed as gesturing with pencil. Just as they imitate grown-ups driving a car or cooking dinner, in their play, children also "play" at writing and create patterns with the symbols and signs they know. Just as children learn spoken language by using it in the habitual and repetitive actions of daily life where spoken language and action are intertwined, in literate cultures, such as ours, children acquire considerable knowledge about written language and how it is used from everyday experiences (Halliday, 1973). Scribbling then, is the top rung of the ladder as children organize print in their environment and learn generalized communication strategies (Vygotsky, 1986).

DeFord (1980) compared and contrasted a child's scribbling and oral language. Examples of this comparison are given in Appendix B. At this point the child's control

of written language is not much different from the babbling. "Ba-ba" may be a response to everything said just as scribbling may signify whatever the child intends at the moment. Just as the baby's babbling reveals definite intonation patterns and the intent to communicate, so pretend writing (scribbling) is the child's way of beginning his/her efforts to communicate in writing. Not all young children who produce writing scribbles or other forms of print can read their messages. Other children, however, seem to know that print is meant to be read and attempt to read their writing (Schickendanz, 1986).

For the first two years of life, when children scribble on paper, they do so for the joy of movement or for the visually satisfying marks that appear (Clay, 1975). By the age of three or so, however, they often draw "wavy lines" (like a string of cursive m's) or a series of small circle or vertical lines in deliberate imitation of adult writing (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982). These marks indicate that children have developed two concepts: 1) They have some notion as to what writing is. 2) Their initial conceptualization of writing is general rather than specific--they see writing as a whole and not as individual words or letters (Atkins, 1984).

Somewhere between three and five years of age, children begin to vary their patterns and move from imitation to creation (Ferreiro, & Teberosky, 1982). They



create a mixture of real letters, mock letters, and innovative symbols. At this stage they expect adults to be able to read what they write. Now the basic function of writing is set. When the children make the distinction between what is "drawing" and what is "writing", many rules that govern our use of written language rapidly follow. It is a signal that children now are making the following discoveries: 1) They are noting the finer features of writing, noting shapes and specific letters. 2) They are developing an early concept of sign--the realization that symbol stands for some thing. 3) They are recognizing that there is variation in written language (Vukelich, and Golden, 1984).

Clay (1975) has provided teachers with seven principles that tell why and how children experiment with the writing system. The seven principles Clay identified in kindergarten children are listed below:

- 1) **Generating Principle:** Children combine or arrange elements in a variety of ways to extend their statements.
- 2) **Directional Principle:** Children start at the top left, moves left to right across the word or line, and then return down left to locate the next starting point. Sometimes the directional principle is combined with the next principle.
- 3) **Spacing Principle:** Children leave blank spaces between words.

- 4) Inventory Principle: Children list known letters, words, or phrases, either across or down the page.
- 5) Copying Principle: Children copy print available about the room.
- 6) Recurring Principle: Children continue to repeat the same figure or letter.
- 7) Flexibility Principle: Children create a variety of new symbols by repositioning or decorating the standard forms.

By playing around with writing (draw, trace, copy and even invent letter forms of their own) children refine and enlarge these concepts. They talk about what they are doing and give their writing voice (Graves, 1983). They want their voice to be heard on the page and so they make the transition from speech to print. When children are observed as they create with pen and paper, and as we listen to the variety of sound effects that accompany them, there is no doubt that early writing is a play activity.

Writing, however, is not speech (Graves, & Stuart, 1985). It takes on the same guise as speech and uses the same material--words, information, order and organization. But, when we write, we supply everything in silence. We speak to an unseen audience that may or may not read our words.

When a child speaks, he/she is not alone. Speech can be very rapid and run together (example: "I dunno" for "I

don't know"). Persons of all ages can produce more words orally and in a shorter time than they can in writing (Taylor, & Vawter, 1978).

Since the human voice is such an elementary part of writing, each writer must come to terms with the transition from speech to print. Teachers who understand the place of speech in writing know what to look for in the writer's voice (Sulzby, 1980).

### Children's Voice

The fourth question asks: How do messages get read by preschoolers? Despite the volume of research that has recently been conducted on the mechanics of early process writing, the area that has not received much research is the area of children's voice in the creation of story (Applebee, 1987).

In classrooms that emphasize the writing process as well as the product, observers have noted the following: First, children are treated much more individually when working on their writing. Secondly, early writing allows children to express their own individuality. Through their writings, teachers get to know and understand their students better than they would have without writing (Hubbard, 1988).

Children's drawing and independent writing are valuable parts of the early childhood curriculum in their own right, but it is the blending or linking of drawing and

dictation that is of primary interest. Prior to 1980, educators and researchers tended to talk about each kind of symbol separately. One need only go to the card catalog of any university library to see the listings in the study of children's language, with equal offerings in the study of children's art. But when young children sit together around a table, the teacher will most likely see drawing, talking, movement, and quite possibly singing and writing as well (Dyson, 1981). From this perspective, drawing is important because it helps children freeze the action so that they can plan and organize their dictated or written text.

When children draw, they are not simply communicating about their experiences they are solving visual problems as well. The problems they solve influence the nature of the texts they create (Hubbard, 1988).

Just as famous artists are noted for different repetitious periods in their artistic endeavors, observers of young children's drawings have noted children's repetitions as they explore particular themes (Smith, 1983). Similar repetition has been noted in children's writing (Graves, 1983). Although repetitious may at times prevent the child from exploring new ideas, it is generally an avenue to experimentation and growth (Gardener, Wolf and Smith, 1982).

Not all children use drawing materials in the same way. As children mature and gain experience, they learn new and more complex ways of manipulating crayons, paint and art materials. Children often choose from their repertoires those strategies that will help them reach their goals (Franklin, 1973). They have different ways of using drawing. Wolf and Gardener (1977) in researching children's play refer to children as patterners and dramatists. Patterners are primarily interested in exploring the graphic qualities of art materials. Patterners may draw a design rather than represent anything in particular, or they may work toward depicting a scene rich in design.

Dramatists, on the other hand, seem much more interested in talking than in using simple drawing. In other words, dramatists may use drawing simply to serve as a prop for the talked about experience. Although capable of drawing basic forms for people, vehicles and houses, some children may seldom do so when they write stories. Their pictures may look like those of a child in the prerepresentational stages of drawing. They concentrate on what might be called two dimensional dramatic play using simple patches of color to stand for places and objects as they dramatize action-packed adventures while drawing. While they talk they record everything right on top of each other (seldom depicting the characters in the story

carrying out the action) choosing to concentrate on the actions themselves. Often, however, dramatists will summarize rather than relive the drama that unfolds during the drawing and talking (Wolf, & Gardener, 1977).

King (1980) and Sulzby (1980) found evidence that, for children reared in a literate culture, even the telling of the story for a listener or dictating the story for a scribe are differentiable. King (1980) speaks of children's writings as sounding "written" as opposed to "spoken". Sulzby (1980) found that a large number of children do make a differentiation between telling and dictating a story. They tend to adopt the telling of a story toward an interpersonal mode of communicating like conversation. They tend to adapt dictation toward the constraints of handwriting. She found that children lower in reading abilities, for their own compositions, adapt more toward conversation and children higher in reading abilities adapt more toward handwritten composition.

Sulzby (1981) further categorizes children's voice in rereading their attempts into seven developmental stages:

1. Essentially a refusal to do the task was the lowest category.

2. The category in which the child produces primitive attempts at handwritten composition or dictation, but the production cannot be called a story is next. The dictation

is either treated as a one conversational turn like, "I dunno" or the child only answers to a teacher's question.

3. The child is able to dictate a story without prompting from the scribe. In handwritten attempts, the child does clearly attempt to write a story, not just isolated words or symbols. The writing may be scribble or other non letter forms or may be only a brief start that the child gives up on in fatigue. When the child does attempt to reread, s/he does not look at print. For the dictation s/he may claim "I can't read."

4. The child dictates a story or whole composition and writes at least part of an intended whole. The child will attempt to reread but his/her eyes will not be on the print. The nature of the utterances during the "rereading" indicate that the story is not stable in memory even though it is similar to the original dictated story.

5. The child indicates an understanding of story stability. The child's rereading from writing may either be what the child said during writing or stable with the dictated told story.

6. The child's eyes are on print, but there is evidence that the child isn't tracking the print accurately. The story recited in rereading is stable with the original.

7. This is the level of independent reading. The child's eyes are on print and the print is actually tracked.

#### Components of an Early Writing Program

This paper has dealt with the child's developmental stages in early writing communication. The final question deals with the teacher's responsibility and asks: What is the preschool teacher's role in providing materials, planning, and implementing an early writing program?

Policy statements such as the IRA Position Statement, Literacy Development and Pre-first Grade (1986), and the NAEYC statement, Good Teaching Practices for 4-and 5-year olds (1986), build upon research and recommends that teachers act as reader/writer role models, read regularly to children, encourage and respond to children's first attempts at reading and writing, and provide time for children's independent reading and writing (IRA, & NAEYC, 1986).

A model program that has built its basic structure on the research findings and policy recommendations of the IRA and NAEYC is the the Kindergarten Emergent Literacy Program implemented in three schools in south Texas (Martinez, & Teale, 1987). Whereas it isn't the attempt of this graduate paper to offer a single blueprint for a successful kindergarten writing program, the major components from the



Texas program do offer a beginning point for those who want to develop an early writing program in their own school.

Classrooms have been organized so that children live in a rich written language setting. Environmental print is abundant and a library in each of the classrooms follows guidelines provided by Morrow (1985). Each day the teachers read stories in large and small group settings involving the children in follow-up activities such as drama, art and music. Children visit the library to look at books or pretend read their favorite stories (Martinez & Teale).

Writing is a valuable part of children's lives (Sulzby, & Teale, 1985), and therefore the program gives children opportunity to become writers through the teacher's encouragement to explore directly both the forms and functions of written language. The children visit a writing center every day where they write or do pretend writing on teacher assigned topics or those of their own choosing.

In implementing the Texas program, the classroom teachers stressed the need for initiating this center on the very first day of school as a way of establishing it as a part of the daily activities of life in the classroom and also helping children to alleviate initial reluctance to write. On the first day of school children "seem to accept the request to write as simply one more event in a day full

of strange experiences." (Martinez & Teale, p. 445) From the first day and throughout the year teachers encourage students to "view themselves as writers" (Calkins, 1986). Not everyone will be able to read what they've written; however, some children will tell the essence of their writing to others as if they were reading it.

For children needing help in getting started, the teacher could model some of the ways kindergartners write or show writing samples produced by other five and six year olds. Some of the samples may use scribbles and drawing, others random letters or invented spellings. In modeling or showing examples of the variety of writing systems, it would be important for teachers not to mislead children about the re-reading of these samples. It would be inappropriate to initiate the reading of children's scribble writing by saying "this says..." Rather, the teacher might use the phrase "the child reads it as ...". In addition, children can be asked to write it their own way. Martinex and Teale (1987) listed some phrases used by teachers in south Texas in getting children started as authors. "It doesn't have to be like grown-up writing," and "Write it the 5-year-old way".

In each of the Emergent Literacy Program classrooms the writing center is a daily activity. At the beginning of the year, the teacher places only unlined paper, crayons and pencils in the center. "The use of unlined paper is

especially important because unlike lined paper it does not implicitly signal how it should be used. Hence, the children are freer to write in ways that are developmentally appropriate" (Martinez & Teale p.446). Later in the year other kinds of paper and writing instruments are introduced.

At the writing center, children write on personally chosen topics as well as teacher assigned topics. Researchers have found that type of writing task can make a difference on the quality of children's writing and even on the strategies that they employ. Involving children in a variety of types of writing tasks appears to be especially important in light of Sulzby's research which indicates that many five year olds use different writing strategies to accomplish different tasks. For example, a child might use invented spelling in writing a list, but choose to scribble when writing a complex story (Sulzby, & Teale, 1985).

Of equal import is the planning teachers put into the prewriting experience. Novel experiences such as creative dramatics, selections from children's literature or hands-on experiences such as cooking tends to be motivating to children's writing. Topics that allow children to draw on personal experiences tend to result in longer and better formed stories (Martinez & Teale).

Initially, the adult role in the writing center can first be seen as a prewriting facilitator. They guide children's writing efforts by encouraging children to think about what they want to say before beginning to write. Secondly, the adult can serve as an aid while the children are writing. Frequently a child who has begun to attempt to spell words will request a correct spelling. The adult in the center then generally encourages the child to do the best that they can or to spell it like it sounds. "Do it the kindergarten way" is a phrase used in the North Winneshiek kindergarten room.

One of the presenters at the 1987 Early Reading Conference at the University of Northern Iowa, Denise Dole/Tallakson (April, 1987), was asked a question about spelling words for kindergartners. Dole/Tallakson used the phrase "welfare line" in response to the question. She was using it parenthetically referring to the long line of children which will form if the teacher gives children the idea that words can only be spelled the adult way.

Dole/Tallakson cautioned teachers to in-service older students or parent volunteers who work as scribes for children writing down their dictated stories, to be aware of this important guideline in early writing. The in-service would also have to include how the adult acts as a recorder, recording only what the child says and not an edited adult version of what the child says. "Recording of

a child's writing is critical: as part of the child's writing folder, it provides a record of oral and written language development over the course of the school year." (Martinez & Teale, p.447)

A separate sheet of paper should be used in a written interpretation of children's writing. This sheet of paper is later attached to the child's story. Writing on the child's story may be interpreted by the child as the "real" writing (emphasis, mine), giving their story less importance in their own mind. This is not to say that a teacher's labeling of a child's picture does not have its place during other times in the kindergarten curriculum. An effective use of this method would be in the compiling of class books illustrated and written by the children (Kinney, 1985).

The adult at the writing center also serves as an audience for children's writing. After writing, the child is always asked to "read" to the adult what has been written no matter what form of writing (scribble, drawing, conventional) that they have used (Sulzby, 1985). The adult thereby acts as an audience on the very day that the child has written the story providing the child with a real purpose for writing. The adult, at this time, can offer valuable feedback to the child on both content and form. The feedback tends not only to have an impact on the writer's subsequent efforts, but, if overheard by other

children, may also affect other children's learning (Martinez & Teale).

Of equal import is the learning children get from each other. The children are encouraged by their teachers to interact at the writing center, discuss and read each others writing. In addition, children's writing should be displayed throughout the room so that they can read what their classmates have written. In Price Lab School, teachers have made good use of clothes lines and clothes pins. Children in the Lab School can hang and display their own stories and retrieve them during the course of the day to edit or add to the content. The teacher puts the completed stories in an individual's writing folder (one for each student) at the end of the day so that there will be room for new stories the next day on the clothes line. The writing folders become a store-house of information for the teacher, who dates all material and keeps to check for progress, to make plans to individualize instruction, or to share with parents at conference time. Teachers themselves determine what writing samples they choose to keep for record purposes and what stories to send home. Samples from the writing folders could also be sent onto the first grade teacher or kept in the permanent record folder, depending on school policy.

A final role of the teacher would be to encourage writing beyond the writing center. Occurring concurrently

with individual story writing would be the language experience story. This form of writing is also known by its initials LEA. LEA has several advantages for use with young children to informally teach text structure. Kinney (1985) refers to text structure as an important aid in helping children's reading comprehension. Text structure is the way a text is organized, the pattern used to arrange the information such as descriptive, compare/contrast or sequential patterns. Mini lessons on such things as punctuation, capitalization and quotations marks can be dealt with as they come up in the content of the dictated story (Calkins, 1986). In addition, the teacher can plan for such occurrences in the materials he/she selects to use as motivational prewriting activities. Tom Wolpert, keynote speaker at the 1985 Early Reading Conference at the University of Northern Iowa, spoke and demonstrated the Wolpert Method now published by Random House as an example of preplanning on the part of teachers using the language experience story (April, 1985).

Writing opportunities also extend into other centers, such as the housekeeping area if the teacher deliberately introduces writing materials that the children can incorporate into their play (e.g., pads for taking orders when playing restaurant) (Martinez & Teale). Recent literature on this topic is rich with ideas to encourage

early writing in the kindergarten classroom (Dyson, 1988; Hubbard 1988; Richgels, 1987).



### CHAPTER 3

#### Conclusion

Writing plays a significant role in young children's literacy development (Calkins, 1986). The legacy of research in the language arts, however, is largely a one of reading research (Graves, 1978). As a result formal reading readiness programs with emphasis on workbooks and worksheets are well established in the kindergarten curriculum (Durkin, 1978).

Based on this fact and partly as a result of the traditional approach to the language arts ( which has it that listening precedes speaking which precedes reading which precedes writing) it appears that early writing is being overlooked in many kindergarten classrooms. This includes those in Northeast Iowa as well. Support for this statement can be seen in a recent Early Writing Survey distributed at the 1987 fall meeting of the Northeast Iowa Kindergarten Teachers Association. (Appendix C) Perhaps nowhere is the importance of the concept of emergent literacy more evident than with young children's writing. "Their writing is unconventional, but it is writing nonetheless" (Teale, & Sulzby 1986). Even the early "scribbles" of very young children exhibit the distinctive

features of the culturally elaborated writing system to which they are exposed (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward, 1984). Also, children distinguish between writing and drawing quite early on (Mason 1980), and although their spellings may not be correct according to adult standards, they are consistent and logical (Read, 1975; Henderson and Beers, 1980). Researchers are coming to realize the importance of early writing behaviors (Farr, 1984). Now there is a need for additional use of early writing programs such as the Emergent Literacy Program described in this paper (Martinex, & Teale, 1987).

Hopefully, what was begun in the kindergarten room at North Winneshiek School in the 1987-'88 school year as a result of the research and findings of this graduate paper, will continue. This researcher would encourage other early childhood educators who read the findings in the body of this paper to try to implement an early writing program in their kindergarten classrooms.

Practical situations which are the ones that correspond most to young children's natural activity are not only sufficient, but are also the best kinds of learning situations. In the course of trying to solve practical problems of print, children spend time reorganizing their levels of understanding. In real situations children develop multiple access routes to their knowledge. Learning to write in school need not, and

should not, be different from children's natural forms of learning about the world. We as teachers need only broaden and deepen their scope by opening points of the world that children may not on their own have thought about thinking about. (Appendix D)

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## Appendix A

## Learning to Spell by Spelling

Stages of Development

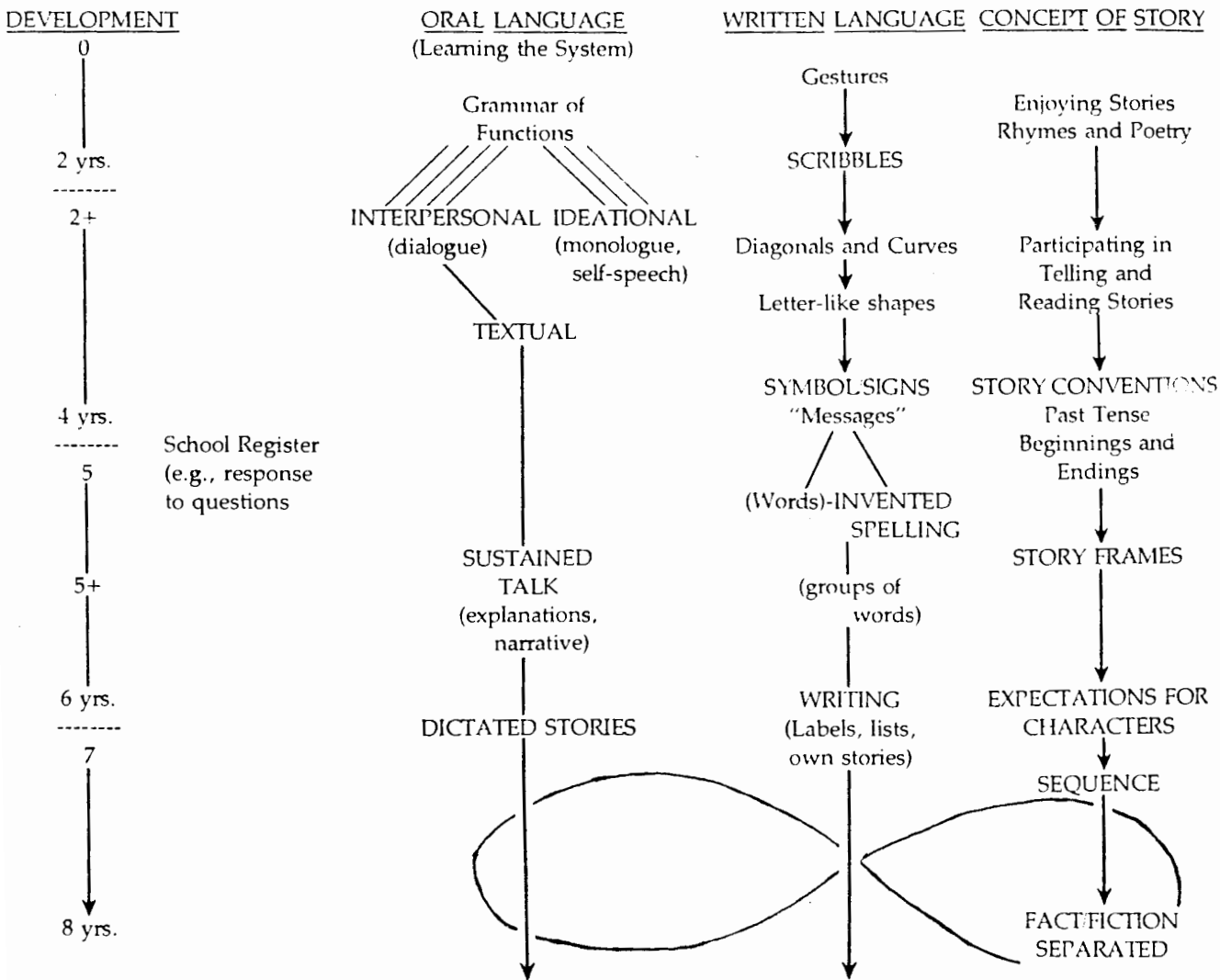
<u>Speaking</u>	<u>Writing-Spelling</u>
Babbling	Scribbling—Pretend writing
One-word sentences	One-letter spelling
Two- and three-word sentences	Two- and three-word sentences
Self-programming of simple rules (not necessarily conforming to adult rules)	Self-programming of simple rules (not necessarily conforming to adult rules)
Overgeneralization of acquired rules	Overgeneralization of acquired rules and patterns (phonetic spelling, transfer of spelling patterns from known words)
Adoption of more precise speech	Adoption of more accurate spelling

Usual Sequence of Acquisition

Consonants (beginning, final, median)  
 Blends (*ch, sh, bl, tr*, etc.) Morphologic markers (*ed, ing, 's*, etc.)  
 Words in frequent use (today, we, have, etc.)  
 Vowels

Appendix B

Resources Children Bring to Written Discourse



Northeast Iowa Kindergarten Teachers Early Writing Survey

1. If you are a self-contained classroom teacher, indicate what grade you teach Kindergarten (27).

a. If you teach language arts, indicate how many students you teach anywhere from 13 to 43

b. Experience level

<u>2</u> First year	<u>5</u> 5 - 10 years
<u>2</u> 1 - 5 years	<u>13</u> over 10 years

2. If you are an administrator, student teacher, or special needs teacher, indicate what your job description is at the present time \_\_\_\_\_.

a. If you teach language arts, indicate how many students you teach \_\_\_\_\_.

Indicate with an X the category that best describes how much time your schedule allows the following components in the language arts curriculum.

STORY TIME - teacher reading aloud stories to children

<u>27</u> Daily	_____ Once a quarter
_____ Once a week	_____ Once a semester
_____ Once a month	_____ Never

CHART STORY - group or experience story

<u>7</u> Daily	<u>1</u> Once a quarter
<u>11</u> Once a week	_____ Once a semester
<u>6</u> Once a month	<u>1</u> Never

one wrote in twice a month

EARLY WRITING - individual writing

<u>0</u> Daily	<u>3</u> Once a quarter
<u>11</u> Once a week	<u>2</u> Once a semester
<u>2</u> Once a month	<u>2</u> Never

Other comments: Three times a week; Haven't yet; intend to after first 9 weeks; Second semester, if they are ready; Eight teacher differentiated between first and second semester.

(over)

Would you be interested in learning more about early writing?

25 Yes

           No

If yes, indicate your first choice for learning about early writing.

11 Speakers at Northeast Iowa Kindergarten teachers meetings.

9 In-services through Keystone in your own school.

13 Professional day off to see early writing in process at Price Lab School, Cedar Falls.

           Handouts with bibliography to be read and circulated in your school

13 Graduate course work in early writing

12 NEITI, Calmar

4 UNI, Cedar Falls

1 AEA 7, Elkader

5 Nights (If so, what night? M(2);T(3);Th(1))

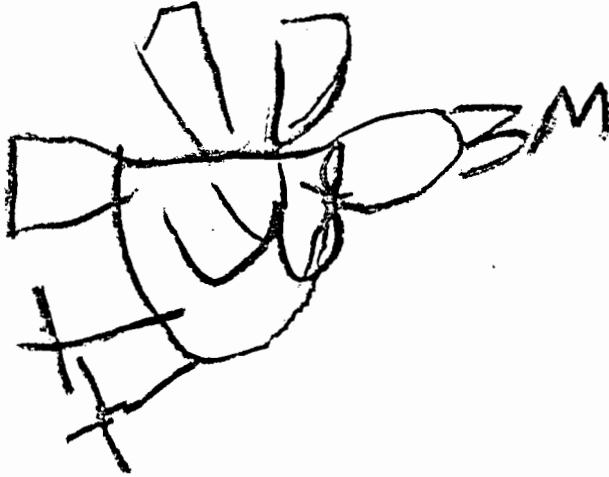
1 Saturdays (If so, how many? 2)

5 Summers (If so, what month? June (3))

Other? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

I love my home Washington D.C.  
because it's the White House.



## Bald Eagle Story

by John Crow, class of 2000

WAN I GWO UP  
I GNA BE GON  
TYLER



When I grow up I gona be a teacher.  
by Trisha Ryan, class of 2000