

Young Children Composing Then and Now: Recent Research on Emergent Literacy

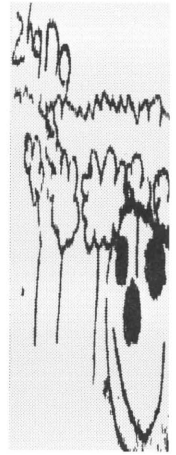
Nancy A. Mavrogenes

501 South St., Geneva, IL 60134

Visible Language XXI, 2 (Spring 1987)

Nancy A. Mavrogenes, pp. 111-137

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This study traces the development of composition in the elementary school from the nineteenth century to the present. Evolving slowly from an emphasis on copying and correctness, writing by young children is seen today as a crucial component of emerging literacy. Researchers are observing preschoolers and kindergartners as they write, interviewing them and their parents, and giving them special tasks and tests in order to find out what they know about print and how they should be instructed in composition. The focus is on process rather than product and from "inside out" rather than "outside in." The recent research is reviewed as to what young children know about reading and writing, how their writing develops, how they learn, and how to develop their writing capacities. The recommendation is to allow young children to write freely and to emphasize meaning, not mechanics. The advantages of young children composing are summarized, and the schools' traditional neglect of composition at the preschool and primary levels is examined. Finally, suggestions are made for improving the situation and encouraging the writing skills of young children as they emerge into literate users of their language.

Writing is said to be the best and most excellent ... teacher of oratory; and not without reason, ... since all the arguments relating to the subject on which we write ... will present themselves, and occur to us, while we examine and contemplate it in the full light of our intellect; and all the thought and words which are the most expressive of their kind must of necessity come under and submit to the keenness of our judgment while writing; and a fair arrangement and collocation of the words is effected by writing

(Cicero *De Oratore* Book I, xxxiii, 55 B.C., in Monroe, 1902).

Children, you are engaged in recording what happens out(side) of you. Its advantage is to make you feel and remember what effect all outward events, and your action on what is outward, may have on your inward state of mind. I hope you will soon write the thoughts and feelings that come up from your soul about these things

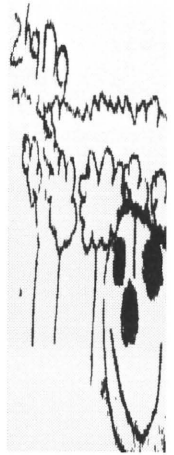
(Bronson Alcott in the 1830s directing his students to begin each day with journal writing, quoted in Jackson, 1986, p. 602).

The study of composition should be commenced at a very early age, as soon, indeed, as the learner can read and write with tolerable accuracy

(Pinneo, 1864, preface).

Proficiency in athletics does not come by studying rules printed in books devoted to athletic sports or by listening to lectures on throwing curves and the like, but by practice. ... It is only through similar, daily, and incessant practice that the degree of facility in writing the mother tongue is acquired, which always enables the student or adult to use it as a tool in his work. This is the crux of school composition. Nothing but plenty of writing, and particularly nonformal or extemporaneous writing, as in the daily work of the school under a moderate tension of criticism, will transmute the pupils' specific skill into formal skill

(The Harvard Committee on Composition, 1892, quoted in Jackson, 1986, p. 605).



The Nineteenth Century Throughout the centuries, the rare few have understood the varied virtues of composition, even for young children. However, as early as the mid 1800s professional educators (county school superintendents, elementary language arts specialists, and Henry Barnard, the first U.S. Commissioner of Education) were deploring the fact that composition was the most neglected and most faultily conducted branch of education in the common schools (Jackson, 1986). Instruction for “composing” consisted solely of copying the teacher’s words or other models and working endlessly on handwriting, spelling, and grammar exercises (Burrows, 1977). Elementary teachers had only meager resources available and very little formal training (Jackson, 1986). The nineteenth century approach to teaching went back to Plato and Aristotle: knowledge is inborn, from these basic inborn truths one deduces particular knowledge, and mental exercise is the means by which this process is activated. Therefore, the same old curriculum was taught by rote learning and memorization in the name of mental discipline or faculty psychology (Mossman, 1924; Rugg, 1926).

At the same time, humanistic forces were also on the move in education. Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Johann Herbart in Europe had all turned education to focus on the child, not the curriculum. Their ideas had been brought back to the United States from the mid-eighteenth century on, through their books, by Americans who had studied abroad, and by immigrants from Europe who came to this country. Herbartianism, particularly, in the 1890s offered teachers and teacher educators practical ideas on the psychology of learning and the nature of children. Verbalizing or expression was seen as important for children as a means of organizing subject matter through comparison, contrast, and generalization. According to the Herbartians, writing should be used throughout instruction so that children could consolidate their thinking (Mavrogenes, 1985, pp. 53-54, 59-60). In addition, from 1837 on, when he became secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann had been promoting whole-word reading in order to bring meaning and interest into education (Hodges, this issue).

Other ideas were taking root around the turn of the century. Freudian

psychology was replacing the concept of the “sinful child” with the concept of the “sensual child” and the development of a healthy personality (Elkind, 1986). The Child Study Movement was stressing the importance of the child. John Dewey and Francis Parker, by connecting school with real life, were laying the foundations of Progressive Education (Cremin, 1964). For Parker, writing was an important means of expression which the child should undertake as soon as possible after entering school. Conditions of learning should be natural like those in learning to speak, writing should be taught as thought, and all writing should be read by the pupils (Parker, 1884, 1894). Dewey considered the first step of written expression, at the earliest stages of the child’s growth in school, as the incidental use of written symbols as forms of social expression — as a way to share interesting experiences (Mayhew and Edwards, 1966).

The Early Twentieth Century **D**uring the early twentieth century change came slowly. In 1912, at the second convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), an elementary section first met to decry “The Reign of Red Ink.” What little writing was taught in elementary schools was chiefly from the point of view of correction of errors, not enjoyment or mental growth (Hook, 1986). Although much writing research was conducted in the 1920s under the stimulus of the scientific/measurement movement in education, it consisted primarily of counting: length and number of sentences, number of words, and number of different words (Burrows, 1977).

Influenced by Dewey and Parker and reflecting the views of teachers who chaired active committees of the NCTE, Hatfield’s *An Experience Curriculum in English* in 1935 recommended that writing about personal experiences begin in first grade. Experiences in observing, imagining, and reflecting would support such writing (Burrows, 1977). Researchers of the time — Alois Legrun in Germany and Gertrude Hildreth in the U.S., for instance — were not merely counting but were beginning to describe and categorize children’s writing. They found a developmental sequence in this writing and also that young children have some knowledge about writing. L.B. Ames and F. L. Ilg carried this type of work into the 1940s (DeFord, 1980; Goodman, 1985).

An important force in education in the first half of the twentieth century has been behaviorism, which replaced mental discipline with habit formation in the theory of learning (Hodges, this issue). This theory of child development emphasized mastery of small steps at a time, lists of skills written in “behavioral” terms and organized in

sequences from simple to more complex, with rewards or good marks for mastery of the skills. Writing became divided into discrete behaviors such as “recognizes upper and lower case letters,” “prints name,” “demonstrates left to right progression,” and “writes upper and lower case letters” (Hatch and Freeman, 1986). However, more holistic points of view connected with young children were also finding expression. Researchers such as Lou LaBrant, Mildred Templin, Dora V. Smith, and Dorothea A. McCarthy were from the 1920s to the 1950s finding that infants’ language incorporates purpose and meaning, thus underscoring the significance of a child’s earliest language (Loban, 1986). In the 1950s Elsa Barnouw and Arthur Swan portrayed writing as a way of expressing oneself either by arranging letters in a design or writing ideas (Dyson, 1985a). In 1957 an elementary teacher who had been an important part of *An Experience Curriculum* even became president of NCTE (Hogan, 1986).



The 1960s In October 1957 the Russians launched their first Sputnik, an event which focused extensive criticism on American education. One result for the field of English was the organization of the national research project called Project English and the inclusion of English in the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Project English, which explored curriculum development, linked children’s writing to emulation of literary models (Burrows, 1977), gave a greater role to linguistics, fostered greater use of the inductive method, and became the prototype for federally sponsored programs in the teaching of English. The summer institutes created under the NDEA led to little or no experimenting with new ways of teaching. Neither of these initiatives had a revolutionary effect on the teaching of composition (Jenkins, 1986).

However, other changes were occurring in the 1960s which affected all of education. The civil rights movement of that era focused attention on the unequal schooling of minorities and the poor preparation of those groups for school. Academic education during the early years assumed great importance and led to the concept of the “competent infant.” Jerome Bruner and Benjamin Bloom provided the foundation for this concept by claiming that children can learn any subject matter at any age and that children attain half their intellectual ability by the age of four. At the same time social and economic forces were creating changes. Divorce rates were rising and more women were entering the work force leading to pressure for more early childhood care. All these conditions, reinforced by the prevalent theory of behaviorism, resulted in the first grade curriculum being pushed back to kindergarten

or earlier, a phenomenon still plaguing the schools and preventing young children's natural development (Elkind, 1986; Hatch and Freeman, 1986).

In the area of composition, the outpouring of federal funds after Sputnik did lead to some interesting developments. Ruth Strickland (1962), Roy O'Donnell (1967), Walter Loban (1976), and Kellogg Hunt (1965) began to collect children's language, focusing on the syntactic complexity of sentences as defined by Hunt's famous "T-unit," an independent clause with all of its modifiers. Their studies revealed growth in children's oral and written language productivity and complexity and added to knowledge about the wide range of capabilities in writing. They were, however, still quantitative rather than qualitative and did not yet provide detailed accounts of children's behavior as they write (Burrows, 1977; Loban, 1986; Whiteman, 1980). But this kind of research, along with the important work of Noam Chomsky in generative and transformational grammar, did lead to the downfall of traditional grammar in connection with the teaching of written composition (Smith, 1986).

In addition, the Anglo-American Seminar at Dartmouth in 1966 encouraged a freer atmosphere for writing (Burrows, 1977) and was a forerunner to the process approaches that began with the 1970s. Interest was also increasing in linguistics, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology with its models of teaching as interactive, process-oriented, and developmental. Vygotsky and Piaget were being translated and reinterpreted (Squire, 1986). Piaget's premise was that children build up knowledge through interaction with their environment, constantly constructing and reinventing their own organization of knowledge, testing hypotheses and generating new rules (Clay, 1982; Teale, 1982). Vygotsky saw writing as social interaction, resulting from children's experiences in their everyday environment, and also as a direct link with children's ability to symbolize, beginning with first-order symbolism wherein representations of meaning arbitrarily denote objects or events (Dyson, 1982a; Hayes and Cherrington, 1985; Teale, 1982). Dolores Durkin's case studies of children who learn to read and write before they enter school reinforced the developmental nature of literacy and saw children's independent writing as crucial to such attainment (Dyson, 1982b; Long et al., 1982). The acquisition of writing was beginning to be seen from "inside out," not from "outside in," with the active learner the focus of interest (Ferreiro, 1978).

The 1970s **T**he 1970s brought an "explosion of knowledge about young children's involvement in constructing their own writing sys-

tems” (Goodman, 1985, p.6). Charles Read’s investigations of preschoolers’ invented spellings revealed that children as young as three have formed logical abstract principles which reflect an underlying linguistic competence (Hiebert, 1981; Long et al., 1982; King and Rentel, 1979; Sulzby and Teale, 1985). Carol Chomsky (1979) saw such spellings as closely connected with reading proficiency. Kenneth Goodman (1969) and Frank Smith (1971) also based their psycholinguistic theory of reading on the innate knowledge a child has of language. Marie Clay (1975) studied children’s first explorations of the conventions of writing and found certain principles utilized in these productions of print: concepts such as directionality, recurrence, and message. Donald Graves presented a detailed case study of writing at the second-grade level, focusing particularly on one boy who revealed “a complex and illuminating picture of writing growth, both cognitive and affective” (Burrows, 1977, p. 39).



Evidence was accumulating that preschoolers have some knowledge of letter names, some understanding of what reading involves, and some ability to give meaning to print (Hiebert, 1981). Early scribbling began to be seen as a natural beginning to both writing and reading (Dyson, 1982a). By the late 1970s and early 1980s the acquisition of written language was understood as a complex process involving learning of writing’s perceptual features, symbolic nature, structural characteristics, discursive procedures, sociocognitive nature, and functional properties (Dyson, 1982b). Writing was seen as involving more than forming letters — the need for sustained talk as a prelude to writing and representation of story structure in memory, for instance (King and Rentel, 1979). Strides were being made in examining the processes and components of writing and in defining its many variables and developmental stages (Burrows, 1977; Calkins, 1983).

Current Research in Composition **T**oday more research on composition is going on in American universities than ever before (Burrows, 1977). Since 1980 this research has become more relevant to classroom practice, with more collaboration between teachers and researchers. Government education agencies, too, are beginning to pay increased attention to writing instruction. Writing programs were first funded in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1980, and state departments of education are starting to give more emphasis to writing instruction in their curriculum guidelines. Some commercial publishers also are beginning to reflect current research on teaching writing (Shaw, 1985).

This “current writing revolution ... emphasizes that writing shares

many characteristics of the social, playful, and expressive activities of early childhood” (Dyson, 1985a, p. 13). It describes child behavior in a holistic way, asking what, how, when, and why young children write and how the nature of their behavior changes. It sees writing as exploratory play which enables children to understand how writing works and the way that graphics relate to spoken messages (Dyson, 1985a). Finding out what young children know about language is difficult because it is often hidden. Researchers must infer what children know from what they do (Read, 1980). They must devise specially constructed tasks and tests, observe and listen to children as they write, interview children and their parents, and focus on the *process* instead of the product. In such a manner recent researchers have found out a great deal about emergent literacy, about young children and composition.

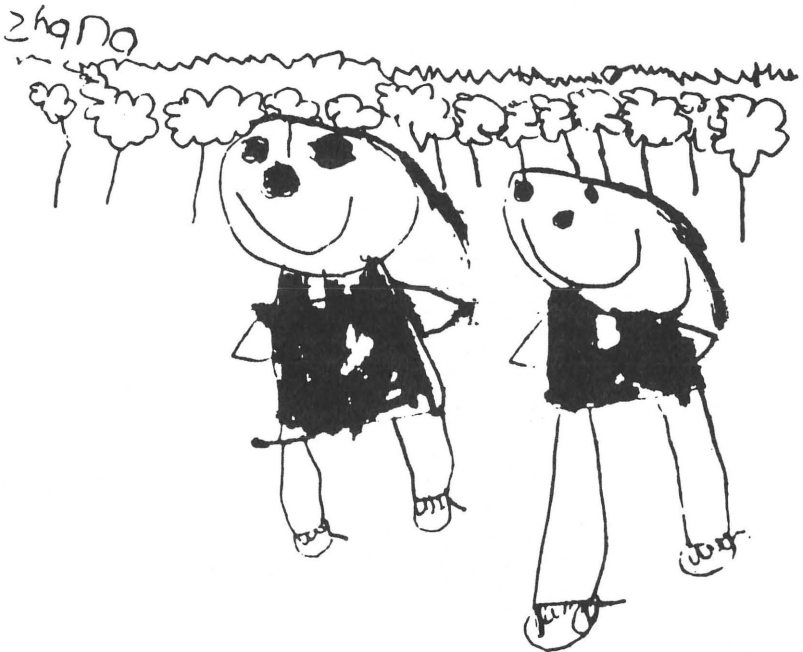
What Young Children Know About Print **F**irst of all, young children are able to use their environment to make sense of writing, to understand that a “McDonald’s” sign identifies its premises. Sometimes in this process they make word-to-word correspondences between written and spoken language and sometimes they make meaningful errors (Hiebert, 1978). In her review of recent research projects, Yetta Goodman (1986) found that sixty percent of the subjects from age three through kindergarten could read environmental print when it was embedded in context. In the case of three-year-olds, almost all were able to identify names of common objects with full contextual support and almost three-quarters of their responses identified print as the source of the message (Long et al., 1982). Young children also understand the purposes of print and expect it to be meaningful, realizing that writing is functional and purposeful and that it communicates ideas and feelings (Klein and Schickedanz, 1980; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). They know what books are, that they are to be read, and how to turn pages (Goodman, 1986), although three-year-olds do not have the concept of letters and words in regard to books (Long et al., 1982). Young children even have some metalinguistic awareness about written language, that is, they can talk about language and how it works (Goodman, 1986).

In addition, preschoolers from both illiterate and highly literate families have some knowledge of what reading and writing involve: linearity, directionality, spacing, sequencing, patterns, forms, repetitions, uniformity of size and shape (Clay, 1982; DeFord, 1980; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). They play with pencils and felt-tip markers, writing on scraps of paper or the wall, not necessarily producing perfect letters or words but always seriously expressing meaning

(Goodman, 1986). Even many three-year-olds can write letters or symbol-like forms, can differentiate writing from drawing, and can recognize their own names (Long et al., 1982). Preschoolers are aware of print, associating letters with things and people (Hiebert, 1981). Most of all, they are eager to write, wanting to act like grown-ups or older children, to make sense of their ideas, and to communicate with others (Dyson, 1985a; Hipple, 1985; Ward, 1985).

The Development of the Writing Process **A**s children actively and naturally experiment with language, they gradually become aware of symbols, sounds, and meanings. At first they may see print as drawing, forming letters to directly represent people or objects, with no idea of representing speech (Dyson, 1985b; Ferreiro, 1978). They may scribble, either randomly or guiding the lines into certain patterns which gradually acquire the characteristics of print in order to be read (Dyson, 1982a). Children may first form letters and decide later on a message, exhibiting a growing awareness of the alphabetic nature of the writing system (Dyson, 1985b). Sometimes single letters represent words, or random letters are strung together with or without spaces separating them (Wiseman and Watson, 1980).

Figure 1.



Names or numbers may be written over and over again, labels around the room copied, beginning consonants followed by random letters (Dyson, 1981; Hipple, 1985; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). In time spaces are put between words, some punctuation is used (correctly or incorrectly), idiosyncratic spellings are invented to represent speech sounds with letters. These invented spellings are different from traditional spelling but they contain common patterns and are remarkably phonetic (Dyson, 1985b; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). By this time content and language are becoming more sophisticated and children are sharing their work with classmates and showing interest in their neighbors' writing (Hipple, 1985).

The writing of the kindergartners in figures 1-6 portrays this developmental writing process. Figure 1 by Zhana, an advanced four-year-old just entering kindergarten, reveals that this girl has internalized the knowledge that writing is continuous, repetitious, and composed of forms of uniform size and shape. Both the "scribbling" and the row of flowers are carefully formed in terms of these discoveries. Shreeta, another four-year-old at the beginning of kindergarten, has in figure 2 differentiated between drawing and writing. She has also formulated a very rudimentary story in connection with her "writing": "This is a lady. The lady is cutting the pumpkin. These are cats, dogs, and squirrels." Figures 1 and 2 are from government-funded all-day kindergartens for educationally disadvantaged children in a large Midwestern city.

Figures 3 and 4 are from the same city mid-year in a kindergarten

Figure 2.

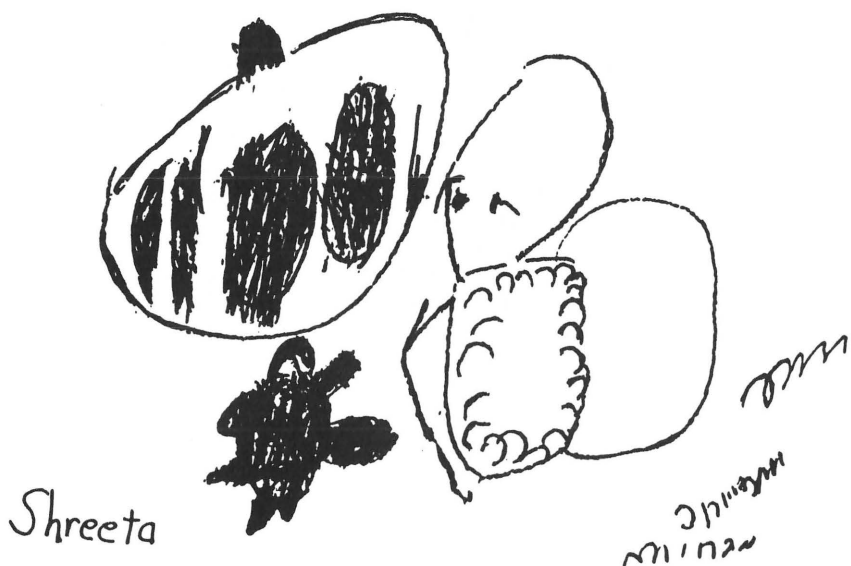
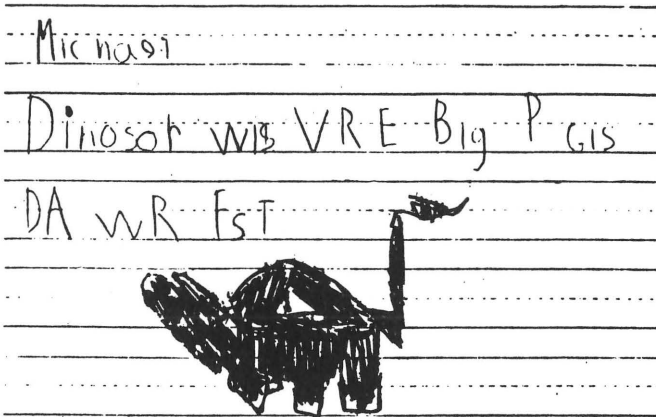
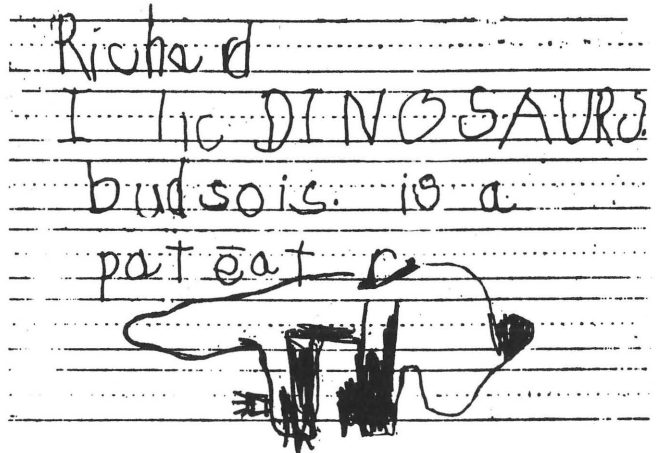


Figure 3.



dinosaur was very big because they were fast

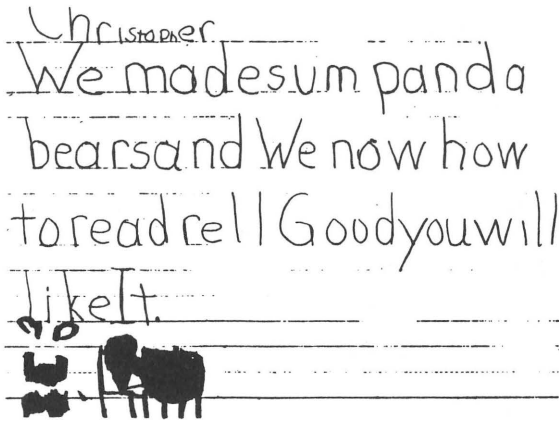
Figure 4.



I like dinosaurs brontosaurus is a plant eater

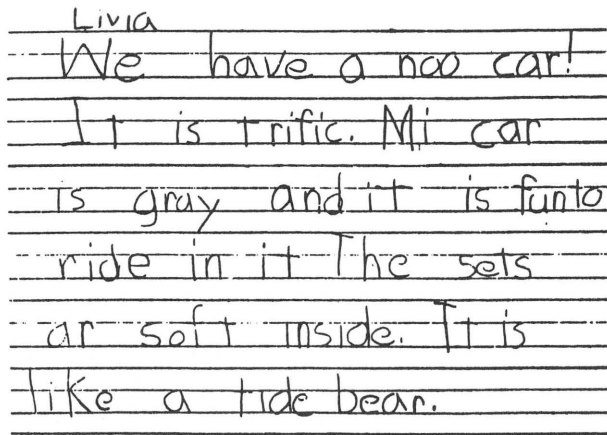
class composed of children from a slightly higher socioeconomic level. This class wrote freely once a week. Both boys are beginning to spell phonetically; they are understanding the relationship between speech and print to a degree that the girls have not yet reached. They also have reasonably good control of letter forms. Richard (figure 4) is even experimenting with periods, getting one right and one wrong. Figures 5 and 6 are from the end of the year in this same class. Christopher's spelling and letter forms are good (figure 5), but he has not yet learned to put spaces between words nor to use periods except at the end of the

Figure 5.



We made some panda bears and we know how to read real good you will like it.

Figure 6.

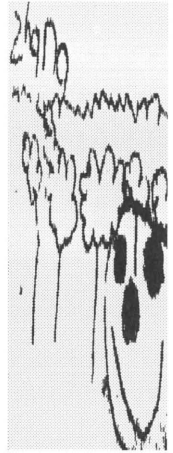


The seats are soft inside. It is like a teddy bear.

whole. Livia, on the other hand, is well on her way to becoming an interesting and fluent writer (figure 6). Her spelling is good in all five sentences, she understands the use of periods and exclamation points, and her simile shows a mind extending itself to comparisons.

This developmental process, as the research (Ferreiro, 1978; Goodman, 1986) and these figures indicate, seems to be a universal phenomenon, true of all socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic groups. Lower-class children might develop more slowly but they follow the same pattern. Another point to make is that the evolution of young

children's writing is not always linear or predictable. Reversions or regressions can take place for any child if an old rule interferes with adult-like performance, if a previously mastered element is temporarily lost while a new element is being added, or if a high emotional content is affecting the writing (Donnelly and Stevens, 1980; Hipple, 1985). Regressions, in fact, can often signal growth in a new and different area (Harste and Burke, 1980). Also, there may be individual differences between children, who can approach writing and develop their skills in markedly different ways. One child might be creative and metaphorical, dealing more with feelings than thoughts; another might be strictly logical and move forward in a straight line instead of in circles with occasional regressions (Donnelly and Stevens, 1980; Hiebert, 1981). In general, however, in a kindergarten where children are allowed to write freely and regularly, growth will be demonstrated: compositions will grow longer, spelling and punctuation will more closely resemble adult conventions, greater referential cohesion will appear, content and language will become more sophisticated and more complex (Donnelly and Stevens, 1980; Hipple, 1985). A final point about this developmental process is that talking is an integral part of beginning writing. It exchanges ideas, elaborates on meaning, seeks information, helps in evaluation, assists in the encoding of words, and gives vent to feelings of exhilaration or frustration (Dyson, 1981; Smith, 1981).



How Children Learn **C**hildren do not seem to gain information about print in a uniform, linear sequence” (Hiebert, 1981, p. 256). They do not investigate a single piece of new information until it is exhausted, but repeatedly cycle through the pieces, learning new things with each encounter and continually returning to old pieces (Clem and Feathers, 1986). Literacy learning goes on in all areas at once; children learn in a holistic manner about written language’s purposes, processes, and graphic details, although all children may not attend equally to all aspects (Dyson, 1984). Just as they learn to talk, children observe print in their environments and see people using this print for various purposes. They see the alphabet on television; they thumb through books and magazines; they receive (or see family members receive) birthday cards, invitations, and letters; they notice signs in the streets and in stores; they see family members use writing to make lists, fill out checks, or fulfill school assignments (Clay, 1982; Harste and Burke, 1980; Hiebert, 1981; Mason, 1980). They experiment and begin putting pencils to paper themselves. “As hypotheses are formulated and rejected or accepted, children discover more effective ways to discriminate and remember letters and words” (Mason, 1980, p. 222).

Between the ages of three and five knowledge increases significantly, with three to four being an especially active time for print-related learning (Goodman, 1986; Hiebert, 1981). “The child develops a model, a world view, rules about the features of written language in situational contexts. In other words, the child is developing a schema about these phenomena” (Goodman, 1986, p. 14). In this complex process children use all their cognitive and linguistic capacities. “In order to understand the writing system which society has forged for them children must reinvent writing and thereby make it their own” (Ferreiro, 1978, p. 39).

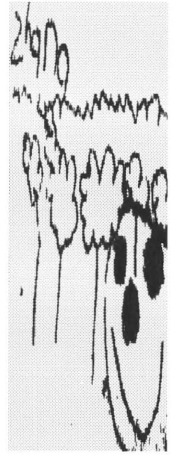
How To Develop Young Children’s Writing Capacities

What the researchers recommend in order to help young writers improve their composition skills is to teach reading and writing together, so that the two processes positively influence each other (Gambrell, 1985), and to begin such learning early, in kindergarten or even preschool, certainly by first grade (Friedman, 1985). Quiet talking should be encouraged while children write (Hipple, 1985). Tasks should be open-ended in order to encourage free writing and exploration. Even if the children cannot systematically encode their own messages, they are in free writing given opportunities to plan their messages and produce appropriate-appearing graphics (Dyson, 1984). In such writing children write however they are able. The concern is with meaning, not spelling or punctuation. As children read and write more, and have messages written to them, they will internalize the conventions (Dyson, 1985b; Gambrell, 1985; Milz, 1980; Wiseman and Watson, 1980), as figures 1-6 show.

Personal journals are particularly effective for language development and student interest. In these, children write about what’s happening to them and about class activities; sometimes they include fantasy and make up stories. They both communicate ideas and deal with their own feelings. If their names and the dates are placed on each page and all writing for each child collected in a folder, then progress can be shown to both the children themselves and their parents (Clay, 1982; Hipple, 1985; Ward, 1985; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). Teachers can respond to these journals in writing, thereby concretely conveying the idea that writing is communication and also along the way developing personal relationships with the students (Gambrell, 1985; Milz, 1980).

As children become more proficient writers and are regularly read to, they form story schemata and begin writing and “publishing” stories for class members to read. If they are asked, teachers spell words and

demonstrate how to form letters (Klein and Schickedanz, 1980). Mailboxes in the room encourage letter writing by both students and teachers (Milz, 1980). When teachers answer children's letters and journals, they may be learning to write along with their students, always writing functionally and with a purpose, being patient and flexible in order to follow the children's leads, sensitive to personal and emotional issues, interested in children's writing activities and responsive to them. Sometimes teachers should model writing for the children by means of language experience activities, writing captions for pictures, recording events on a calendar, constructing lists with the children (Hipple, 1985; Klein and Schickedanz, 1980; Rhodes, 1981; Smith, 1981; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). After she had read and reread nursery rhymes to her class, one teacher had the children then write these out. As they did so, they began talking about writing and noticing their neighbor's work, wondering why their word for "mother" had two letters and another child's had five (Hall, 1985).



A crucial component for young children's writing is a willing supportive audience, composed of teacher, aide, classmates, parents, siblings, or community members (DeFord, 1980; Golden, 1980; Smith, 1981). Even if the writing is only "scribbling," it is still called writing and read to an audience. If teachers are asked to read such writing, they might have to ask the authors to read it first and then read it back (Hipple, 1985; Rhodes, 1981). An author's chair has been used for all reading to the class — by teacher or students. After the volunteers have read their writing, the audience responds by clapping and saying what they like. After such praise has made the author feel good, then the class asks questions in order to improve logic or fill in gaps. Such an activity naturally incorporates all aspects of language — writing, reading, listening, and talking as well as critical thinking (Blackburn, 1984; Graves, 1983; Graves and Hansen, 1983; Hansen, 1983; Hipple, 1985; Hubbard, 1985). By sharing writing proudly and concentrating on meaning, children come to see the relationship between print and reading, and the concept of audience is made concrete.

Another crucial component for emergent literacy is a rich and meaningful print environment. Adult and child authored books must be everywhere in the classroom, not just neatly displayed for effect but readily available for use. Teachers must read to children every day and write to and along with the children. Letters to and from authors should be displayed. Labels, newspapers, and magazines should be around the classroom. Pens, pencils, felt-tip markers, crayons, and paper should be readily available at all times, not only for the writing period but also for children who are finished with assigned activities

(Anderson et al., 1985; Milz, 1980; Wiseman and Watson, 1980). Local authors and journalists might be asked to class to share their enjoyment of writing (Smith, 1981).

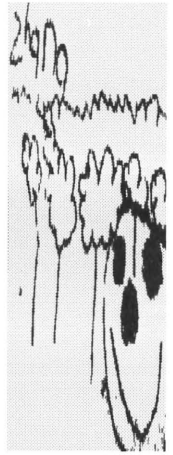
Advantages of Young Children Composing **T**he data from this recent research on emergent literacy show that knowing the names of letters and how to form them is only one kind of concept and skill which young children need to know in order to read and write.

These data suggest that instructional programs which concentrate on letter naming as the critical reading [and writing] readiness skill are employing an overly narrow emphasis, at best. Children's early print awareness incorporates a broad range of concepts and skills, and it is therefore not surprising that instruction which considers only one aspect of this process is not entirely successful (Hiebert, 1981, p. 256).

If children understand the writing system, they must be able to do more than name letters and utter sounds; they must actively construct the system (Wiseman and Watson, 1980). The kind of instruction recommended by these recent researchers — free writing with plenty of opportunity for individual exploration — makes provision for children doing just that. Young children allowed to write freely produce at the letter, word, and sentence levels and learn numerous principles: that the same elements can be repeated in word patterns; that these elements can change position, form, and order; that words move in a certain accepted direction; that messages can be made with different arrangements of known words and letters; that differences exist between the elements (Wiseman and Watson, 1980). Children writing freely learn the function of print, the organizational scaffolding of a story, the relationship between the text and their world, sound to spelling patterns, new language options, a range of writing forms, and how to select an idea to write about and then make that idea visible. They generate and test hypotheses and learn to orchestrate pragmatics (the rules of language relative to a particular context), semantics (saying what is meant), syntax (the smooth flow of the message), and graphics (representing the message) (Clay, 1982; Dyson, 1981; Harste and Burke, 1980). They learn to plan, revise, and consider their audience (Jaggar et al., 1986). As children themselves say, they learn to write by observing and participating in the writing process; then they practice, check, and begin writing again (Dinan and Dyson, 1980).

Free writing for young children has other advantages. Children's self-

concepts improve as they discover what they know and that they can communicate this. Teachers learn more about their students (Hipple, 1985). As they learn what their children know about writing, they can teach diagnostically and prescriptively. Teachers also will be exhilarated when they watch their children refine their budding language skills (Dinan and Dyson, 1980). Furthermore, children continue learning in the informal way they began long before entering school (Richgels, 1986). They are placed in control of their own learning and generate their own interest and enthusiasm. Their natural interest in and ability to explore their world is taken advantage of and developed (Clem and Feathers, 1986). Another benefit of free writing for young children has to do with the private speech that children engage in as they write. Research has shown that such “talking to oneself” helps facilitate thinking, integrate language with thought, and control actions. This talking peaks in children between the ages of four and seven (Berk, 1986). Because its importance is now understood, teachers should not discourage it but allow it, as this recent research on emergent literacy has suggested. Finally, learning to write through self-directed activities provides for natural learning in the same way that children learn to talk (Klein and Schickedanz, 1980). By experimenting and taking chances, children gradually understand conventional rules (Rhodes, 1981). As they learn how to form letters and convey meaning through writing, they come to understand how written language functions as a symbol system (Dyson, 1984).



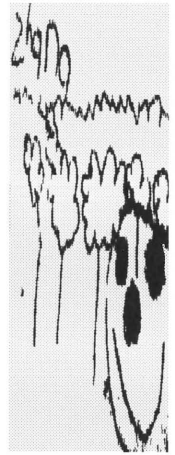
Teachers who allow young children to “write their own way,” instead of bringing the first grade curriculum down into kindergarten, will find their children learning in a developmentally appropriate manner. They will find that children’s writing supports their reading and oral language development (Clay, 1982). As children read and reread their writing, matching talk and text, they help their composition skills and also learn to read (Sulzby and Teale, 1985). As they explore writing, “through their own actions, children come to realize that the precise arrangement (writing) of the pieces (linguistic/graphic symbols) is necessary if the desired whole (the read message) is to be realized — that is, children establish connections between reading, writing, and language” (Dyson, 1982b, p. 838). One recent experimental group of urban kindergarteners who had been exposed to an encoding or writing approach to reading scored twenty percentile points higher than the control group on a standardized reading test (Martin, 1984).

Teachers must understand that children are born capable of writing at least as well as they talk (Smith, 1981). If they learn to write fluently by writing freely and to make their own discoveries about

written language, the teaching of writing will be greatly enhanced (Whiteman, 1980). The recent issuance of position papers by a host of professional organizations underscores the urgency of this kind of improvement. These groups have all incorporated the research on emergent literacy in their guidelines: the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Association for Childhood Education International, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children, and the Chicago AEYC Commission on Child Development and Elementary Schooling (International Reading Association, 1986; Sulzby and Teale, 1985).

Schools' Neglect of Writing Several recent observational studies have documented the kind of writing instruction that goes on in elementary schools. At the kindergarten level, one study reported that in twenty-eight hours of observing eight classes in a large Midwestern city, only one and a half hours of any kind of writing instruction was seen, and that was all copying — copying numbers, letters, names, or the “Morning Story” (Mavrogenes and Hagemann, 1986). Another study concluded that most of the forces affecting writing instruction at the elementary level impede, rather than aid, the efforts of teachers to teach writing. States do not require writing to be taught. State curriculum guidelines often give writing a low priority and offer only vague guidelines of little help to teachers planning a writing program. The commonly used national achievement tests measure only mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar, not composing. Language arts textbooks also predominantly address skills in mechanics; if there is a chapter on “writing,” it is placed last. Up until recently few graduate courses treated elementary composition. Relatively few articles in educational journals have dealt specifically with methods of teaching composition in the elementary school (Shaw, 1985).

Bridge and Hiebert (1985) conducted observations for three days in each of six classrooms in two schools and found that first, third, and fifth grade students spent an average of about fifteen percent of their time on some type of writing activity, with the percentages ranging from ten percent in first grade to twenty percent in third grade. This writing encompassed all subject areas and consisted mostly of transcription (copying), paraphrasing, and handwriting. Few assignments required students to write more than one sentence. Only one teacher provided students with some help in prewriting and revision.



Teachers reported that they most often required students to fill in blanks in workbooks, to copy from the board, to practice handwriting of individual letters and words, and to write spelling words and sentences. According to their ratings of their teacher education programs, teachers did not feel well prepared to teach writing. They also only rarely wrote themselves, and then they wrote lesson plans, lists, and letters. Language arts textbooks focused on copying and mechanics. Students seldom composed discourse-level texts, rarely wrote for a real audience, and were not stimulated to relate writing to ongoing activities in the classroom or in their lives. In short, a great gap was found between current writing instruction practices in elementary schools and the practices recommended by researchers.

Furthermore, states require course work in reading for elementary teachers but nothing in writing theory and practice. Teachers feel undertrained in writing. They do not know terms related to writing research, names of writing authorities, or names of professional writing journals (Walmsley, 1980). A recently reported analysis of sixty-one kindergarten report cards in the state of Ohio (Hatch and Freeman, 1986) revealed a strong academic emphasis in those classes, especially in the kinds of reading skills found in all basal series. Although there appeared to be some recognition of the importance of expressive oral language, expressive written language was evaluated in only one case and there was little awareness of a holistic language-centered approach to literacy. The theoretical orientation of most report cards was the old behaviorism, not more recent orientations which might reflect a developmental or interactive view.

Some reasons for such a state of writing instruction at the elementary level have already been implied: teaching toward tests which do not evaluate composition, the lack of emphasis on composition in textbooks, and the lack of training of teachers. In addition, it might be remembered that schools have been focusing on reading, where research has been fifty to one hundred years ahead of writing research (Whiteman, 1980). One possible cause for such a difference in a reading as opposed to a writing focus is that the field of writing has never had a "giant" of the stature of William S. Gray to professionalize it and bring it to the level of classroom teachers (Mavrogenes, 1985). Another reason for schools' neglect of writing might lie with the American public, as expressed by William Jenkins (1986, p. 556):

To a considerable degree, the absence of dramatic changes seems related to public attitudes toward teaching and schooling, which tend to insist that education be conservative, basically unchanged and unchanging, with a focus on

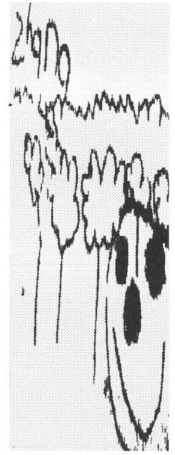
basic and practical skills. ...Society is not looking for radical and costly education innovations, and teachers, mindful of restricted budgets and declining school enrollments, often are more concerned with job security than with change.

The lack of change in writing instruction is unfortunate since the recent research has shown that the usual instruction is unnatural and contrary to children's developmental learning. Such instruction reflects basic misconceptions about the nature of writing and the manner in which proficient writers write. It provides for no feelings of pleasure, for no fluency, for no creation of thoughts or reflection or a possibility of revision (Smith, 1981). If writing instruction is only copying or filling in blanks, children then see writing as puzzle-solving, not problem-solving (Clay, 1982). This kind of writing holds no personal meaning; it becomes a mere mechanical task which is rewarded if it is neat and completed. The results are a focus on letter forms, not meaning or the referents represented, and eventually a loss of confidence and a reluctance to write (Dyson, 1984). The goal is error-free performance, not fluency or self-direction and self-discovery. The teacher is in control at all times, carefully pointing out all errors, assuming that children are unable to make their own decisions, positive that children know nothing about writing, making children doubt their abilities. "In no instance — and our data has been collected from high, middle, and low socioeconomic statuses, black and white, boys and girls, small town and urban inner-city — would the assumptions underlying [the usual school writing] instruction [be] appropriate ones from which to operate instructionally" (Harste and Burke, 1980).

What is Needed **V**arious kinds of suggestions have been made about what is needed to improve writing instruction for young children. Researchers have posed questions in new and extended areas. For instance, more information is needed about composing processes, developmental stages, and the effect of language variation on learning to write (Whiteman, 1980). Other profitable areas of investigation might be motivation for writing, the relation of oral language to writing (Burrows, 1977), writing and literacy in children younger than three and older than five or six (Hiebert, 1981), and writing within the growth of early symbolism across a variety of modes (Dyson, 1982a). Stotsky's review (1983) of research on reading/writing relationships makes numerous suggestions for further research, such as the traits of good readers/poor writers and poor readers/good writers, the changing relationships between reading and writing at various developmental levels, and better measures for lexical growth in writing. The fact

that Stotsky's review contains no studies at the kindergarten or preschool levels indicates a need, as Dyson (1982b) has noted. There must also be cooperation between researchers and teachers, for the latter foster literacy progress while researchers only observe and reflect on it (Dyson, 1982b).

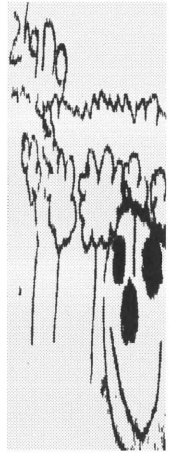
The sources for improvement go beyond researchers. States should require teachers at all levels to have credit hours in writing instruction, similar to the requirements for reading (Walmsly, 1980). Teachers must seek out such instruction, educate themselves by joining professional societies and reading professional journals, and develop their own programs based on what they learn. School districts and the academic community must demand appropriate textbook materials and refuse to purchase inappropriate ones (Shaw, 1985). Teacher educators must inform teachers about the recent research on emergent literacy at both the preservice and inservice levels and help them respect the ways that young children learn written language. School programs and approaches to the teaching of reading and writing must change (Goodman, 1986). Teachers must learn to observe their students and follow their leads, to see them "from inside out" instead of "from outside in," in Ferreiro's words (1978, p. 25). As the recent research has shown, if children are allowed to learn about writing in a rich and meaningful print environment, with varied opportunities for individual exploration and a willing and supportive audience, they will then plunge in and examine and investigate, exploring "writing as a means of learning about writing" (DeFord, 1980, p. 162). Not unimportantly, such learning will promote fluency and a positive attitude toward writing, as well as much practice, so that the kinds of problems that show up on the National Assessments of Educational Progress—"awkward" sentences and "incoherent" paragraphs—will begin to disappear and "national concern about the quality of writing in this country" will be alleviated (Whiteman, 1980, p. 150).



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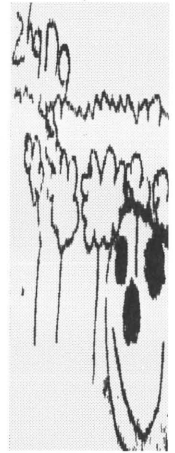
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