

FROM SCRIBBLES TO STORIES SUPPORTING WRITING DEVELOPMENT

by Deborah Diffily





s. Frasier says goodbye to the last child leaving her new class of 5-year-olds. As she sorts the papers children have left in the library center, she thinks back

to earlier in the day.

She had read *Fox in Sox* by Dr. Seuss to the whole class and afterward gathered four children in the library center to discuss the story. After talking with them, she asked the children to “write” about their favorite part of the story.

Andy began to scribble at once. Terry drew a face with eyes and mouth. Henry made a series of squiggles and to one side wrote the letters “H N R Y.” Millicent looked at the others for a moment. Then she frowned and said, “I don’t know how.”

Ms. Frasier smiles. She knows that each child is at a different stage in writing development. Filing the papers in the children’s individual folders, she begins thinking of activities to encourage each child’s writing development.



Young children, like the ones in this example, have different beliefs about writing. What they believe is based on their previous experiences related to reading and writing. Some children have been read to every night of their lives. Their reading and writing attempts have been encouraged and supported by important adults in their lives. These are eager writers.

Many children, like Millicent, think that writing is something only adults do. They are convinced they cannot write and do not want to try. Some children have never had access to writing materials. Others have been told that their attempts to write are “just scribble-scrabble.” These children are reluctant writers.

Young children produce different work samples when they are asked to write. Children with less experience in writing, like Andy and Terry, tend to scribble or draw pictures to represent what they want to write. Children who have had more experience and support for their writing attempts, like Henry, may be writing their own names and other short words that are important to them.

Teachers can expect to see several stages of writing in a kindergarten class. These stages are described below, with writing samples from 5-year-old children. At each stage, teachers can provide specific activities to encourage further development.

Writing stages

During each stage of writing, young children are approximating what they perceive as adult writing. Teachers need to recognize these approximations as “real” writing and value them.

While some writing stages will almost always be used before others, these stages do not necessarily build upon one another. Young children will scribble before they use developmental spelling. They will use a single letter to represent one word before they hear and write vowel sounds in the middle of words.

However, not all children move systematically through the stages explained below. Some children skip stages. Other children may appear to regress in their writing when, in reality, they are simply returning to a comfort zone of writing. (This is especially true when children are worried, anxious, or stressed.)

These stages can help teachers gain a better understanding of children’s attempts at writing. Teachers can use the stages as a framework for describing children’s writing and assessing their progress over time.

Scribbling. Young children may scribble on a piece of paper. If they believe they are writing, then it is a legitimate phase of writing. Often children “read” what they have just written. Teachers need to encourage this writing behavior because it is an approximation of writing. Many children at this stage scribble from left to right across the page. This is a higher level than random scribbling.

Children need to feel their writing is valued by others.

Build a Word Wall

A Word Wall is an ongoing display in the classroom. Letters are posted on a bulletin board or chalkboard. The teacher combines the letters to form words. Each week a few new words are added to the Word Wall and used to teach spelling, reading and writing strategies, letter-sound correspondence, and more. Typically teachers post high frequency words (*was, said, and there*, for example) that children use in their writing. While the teacher uses the Word Wall for instruction, children refer to it to find the conventional spelling of words.

Drawing. Children may also draw and “read” their drawings as a form of communication. A child may draw an unrecognizable form and read “I played in the home center today with my friends.” Or a child may draw a tree-like form and read, “This says remember to take me to the park.”

Invented letters. Many, but not all, young children make up their own letters. What may look like random marks to an adult may be a child’s approximation of writing. Writing invented letters indicates that a child has knowledge about writing.

Random letters. As children become more aware of the alphabet, they often begin writing letters, in long strings, repeating particular letters. Children are most likely to repeat letters that are in their names or other letters that are important to them for different reasons. At this stage, there is no relationship between the letters children write and what they “read” as the message of the writing.

Copying words. As children become more aware of words in their environment, they often begin copying words they see on a regular basis. Some

children copy center signs, words posted around the classroom as labels, Word Wall words, or charts transcribed by the teacher and hung on the classroom walls. Children may or may not be able to read the words that they write.

Developmental spelling. This spelling takes many forms, but it is directly related to the sounds a child hears within words. At the beginning of this stage, children typically write one letter to represent one word, or perhaps one syllable.

Later, children may represent a word by the first and last letter sounds. As children’s writing continues to mature, they hear and write the sounds of some vowels and most consonants. A typical progression through the stage of developmental spelling is as follows:

- One letter to represent each word (or syllable). Example: “D” for “dog.”
- Initial consonant sound to represent each word (or syllable). Example: “BB” for “baseball.”
- Initial and final consonant sounds. Example: “CT” for “cat.”
- Several consonant sounds per word: “TRK” for “truck.”
- Some vowels. Example: “Ic Crem” for “ice cream.”



Conventionally spelled words. Children begin to write more fluently as they move away from sounding out each word they write. As they become aware of how adults spell words, they begin incorporating these words into their own writing. Each week, more conventionally spelled words are found among the words they write using developmental spelling.

As children become fluent with developmental spelling, teachers use different strategies to move children into using conventionally spelled words. Some children seem to do this naturally. Most need extra visual support. Word Walls and personal dictionaries help provide that support.

Supporting children's writing

All literacy experiences are beneficial to children, but not all children learn the same thing from the same activity.

During writing routines, children learn that writing is an important way of communicating. As they observe their teacher writing, they develop concepts of print. Teachers can write children's names as an attendance procedure or have them sign up to work in a particular learning center. These simple routines encourage children to write every day in ways they see as important.

During reading routines, children begin to internalize concepts of print that, in turn, are used in their writing. When a teacher points out the title, author, illustrator, and capital letters at the beginning of people's names and at the beginning of sentences, children eventually begin incorporating these into their writing.

While large-group reading and writing routines enhance children's writing development, young writers also need individual instruction to support their progress from one stage of writing to the next. What teachers say and do as they work with individual children is important.

Children need to feel their writing is valued by others. Teachers need to balance acknowledging and supporting children's current writing stage with gently encouraging them to take the next step in writing.

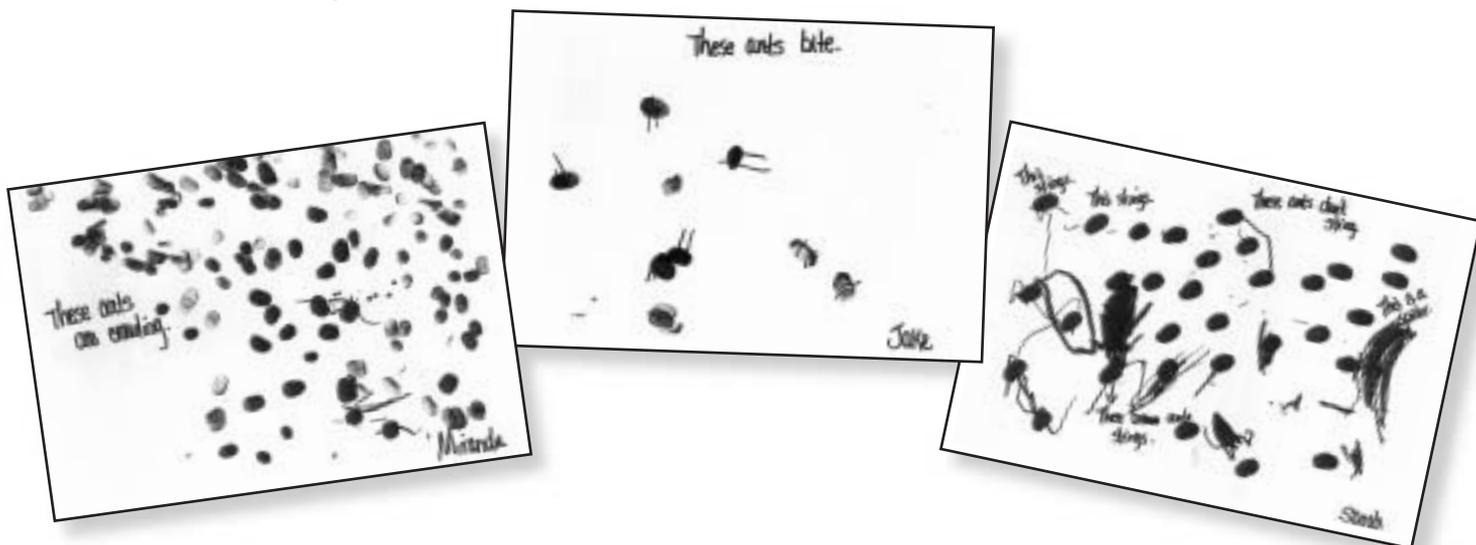
At every stage of writing, teachers can show that writing is valued by encouraging a child to "read" it to someone: "Andrea, will you read what you have written to Billy and Anna?" The child might also read it to another teacher, the whole class, visitors to the classroom, or family members, for example. The teacher also shows that writing is valued by posting writing samples from every child in the classroom.

Tips on what to say

Under each stage of writing listed below are a few suggestions of what adults—or older children—can say and do to support young children's progress in writing.

If a child is scribbling:

- Involve the child in making signs for the classroom. For example, Ms. Adams asks Darriel to watch her as she writes, "Darriel's Cubbie." Then she asks him to decorate the sign and tape the sign to his cubbie.





- Encourage the child to dictate a sentence or two about drawings. “Collette, tell me about this,” says Ms. Adams, pointing to the child’s drawing. “I petted the sheep at the petting zoo,” says Collette. The teacher repeats the words one at a time and writes them, making sure Collette is listening: “I...petted...the...sheep...at...the...petting...zoo.”

If a child is drawing:

- Ask if the child wants you to label one object on a drawing. For example, when Ignacio draws the typical grass-house-sun, the teacher might say, “That is a beautiful sun. You used the orange marker to make it look so hot. I wonder if you would like me to write the word *sun* under your sun?” If the child says no, the teacher respects that decision. If the child agrees, the teacher proceeds. “Let’s see, /s/ /s/, I need to write an ‘s’ (write ‘s’), /u/ /u/, that is a ‘u’ (write ‘u’), /n/ /n/, that is an ‘n’ (write ‘n’). Now there is the word *sun* under your sun. Can you read the word with me? /s/ /u/ /n/.”
- Talk with the child about the difference between drawing and writing.
- Continue taking dictation from the child.

If a child is writing invented letters:

- Take dictation from the child, saying the letter names as you write the words.
- Make remarks about one or two letters during each dictation session with the child. For example, Jennifer dictates, “My momma takes me to the store.” The teacher might comment, “Look what you did. Your words have five m’s: /m/, my, /m/ mom /m/.../m/ ma, /m/, me. Let me see you put your lips together like mine: /m/ /m/. Every time your lips come together like that and you hear that /m/ sound, you know to write an ‘m.’ Here, watch me write one more ‘m.’ I’ll bet you can write one too. Do you want to try?”
- Sing the ABC song with the child two or three times a day. Use an alphabet book to point to the letters as the child sings them.

- Involve the child in activities that use letters of the alphabet in a variety of forms—magnetic letters, alphabet blocks, alphabet cards posted on the wall, alphabet books—along with their peers.
- Continue taking dictation from the child.

If a child is writing random letters:

- Acknowledge the letters a child writes. For example, “Wow, look at all those ‘T’s’. Your name starts with a ‘T.’ So does Tony’s (another child in the class). Let’s show all your ‘T’s’ to Tony. Do you think that would be a good idea?”
- Value the child’s random letters as true writing: “Will you read your story to me?”
- Continue taking dictation from the child.

If a child is copying words:

- Acknowledge the words a child writes. For example, “You’ve written a lot of words here. Will you read what you’ve written to me? Where did you find this word?”
- Continue taking dictation from the child.

If a child is writing using developmental spelling:

- Offer support at whatever level the child is writing. For example, if Marcie is just beginning to hear and write letter sounds, emphasize the beginning letter sound of each word. You might ask, “What would you like to write today?” Marcie answers, “My dog licks me.” You respond: “Okay, you can write, ‘My dog licks me.’ I’ll help you sound it out: m/m/m/m/i/, what letter makes that /m/ sound? ‘M,’ that’s right. Okay, leave a space so we know that’s a word. Now listen, /d/d/d/d/o/g/. What



do you hear at the beginning of /d/d/d/d/o/g/? That’s right, it’s a ‘d.’ You are getting so good at this. Okay, leave a space and get ready for the next word, /l/l/l/l/i/c/k/s/. That’s right, ‘licks’ starts with an ‘l.’ Leave a space and I’ll say the last word in your sentence, /m/m/m/m/e/. Good, that’s it. Let’s read your sentence together: ‘My...dog... licks...me.’ Now will you read it to me?”

- Continue taking dictation from the child.

Offer support at whatever level the child is writing.

If a child is beginning to spell words conventionally:

- Point out a word the child uses often but is still spelling phonetically. For example, Kenny writes “wuz” for “was.” Ask Kenny to copy that word, “was,” from the Word Wall into his personal dictionary.
- Refer to a specific resource for the conventional spelling of a word the child uses often in a piece of writing. For example, in writing a story about a spider, Tamika consistently writes “spidr.” Ask her to find a copy of Eric Carle’s *The Very Busy Spider*, and edit her story using the adult spelling of “spider.”

Compiling a personal dictionary

Teachers often put together 24-page blank books which children set up as their own personal dictionaries. The children put one letter on each page and decorate the book to their liking. During writing time, children can ask for the correct spelling of particular words. The teacher writes those words on an index card, then the child copies those words onto the appropriate page of the dictionary. Children often refer to their dictionaries because the words in the dictionaries are important to them.

Children learn to write in stages. By knowing these stages, teachers can describe where children are in their writing development and offer activities to individual children that will enhance their writing. Teachers can also use the stages to assess a child's progress over time and share that progress with parents.

Resources

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