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Writing Project
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Teaching Students through the Stages of Emergent Writing

What is Emergent Writing?

If you were to walk into an early childhood classroom, primarily preschool through first grade you would see many different examples of writing. One student may have nothing but scribbles on his or her page, one may have drawings and another student may have several complete sentences. To a passerby the student with scribbles or simple pictures may not be “writing”, but in fact scribbles and drawings are both part of a young student's writing experience. Scribbles, pictures, random lettering and strung together letters to form words are all different forms of emergent writing.

In the article *Emergent Name-Writing Abilities of Preschool-Age Children with Language Impairment* it reads “The broad construct of emergent writing includes the physical marks young children make on paper, the meaning that children attribute to these markings, and the social context in which the writing takes place (Clay, 1975; Rowe, 2008). At first, these early writings are “readable” only by their authors, as children use drawings, scribbles, letter-like forms, and random letters to represent meaning” (Cabell, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2009) Simply put, any markings a child puts on paper with the intention of sharing with others or communicating is a form of emergent writing.

Emergent writing began gaining attention in the late 1970's and early 1980's with Elizabeth Sulzby leading the way. Sulzby spent a lot of time observing students in

classrooms, “ ..we found a range of development, from writing via scribble to drawing to writing with fully readable mixes of invented and conventional spelling” (Sulzby, 1992). Based on these observations Sulzby and her peers started the BRDKAWL study. BRDKAWL was the first of several studies that led Sulzby and her peers to “conclude that children write with many forms prior to developing a concept close to the adult concept..” (Sulzby, 1992). From these studies stages of emergent writing were identified and Sulzby noted six important concepts about emergent writing:

First, when given a supportive context, be it home or school, young children composed connected written discourse using emergent forms long before they hold conventional ideas about writing. Second, they move from emergent forms and understanding to become conventional writers with conventional concepts about writing. Third, writing is as social as well as an individual act. Fourth, writing development from emergent to conventional understanding have been documented in the U.S. across sociocultural groups and in many other countries using different writing systems. Fifth, writing development always includes reading development, so we can speak of a child as becoming “conventionally literate”. Sixth, children’s writing has been seen flourishing in classrooms with practices that encourage children to write and read “their own ways”; teachers in these classrooms are using knowledge about child development under rubrics such as whole language, language experience, emergent literacy, shared reading and writing, process writing and “kindergarten writing” (Sulzby, 1992).

The Seven Stages of Emergent Writing

There are seven stages of emergent writing. These seven stages include scribbling, mock handwriting or wavy scribble, mock letters, invented spelling, approximated (phonetic spelling), and conventional spelling. Research has shown that all children around the world move through different stages of emergent writing, “Research has shown that children’s scribbles and emergent writing take on the characteristics of the printed language in their culture. Scribble writing in Arabic and Hebrew for example,

looks very different from scribbles in English (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984 as cited in Barclay, & Hutingger, Project ELIPSS).

Scribbling is the first stage in emergent writing. Scribbling is just as it sounds, random marks on a paper, “with the first exploration using a marking tool for a purpose other than drawing” (Barclay, & Hutingger, Project ELIPSS). Mock handwriting or wavy scribble is the second stage. Mock handwriting strokes are wavy lines made on the paper often resembling adult cursive. Mock lettering is the third stage of emergent writing and is when children make shapes and forms that often resemble the alphabetic system within the child’s culture. The fourth stage of emergent writing is conventional letters. In this stage children begin to include letters that are found in the alphabet. Invented spelling is the fifth stage. Children are in the invented spelling stage when they begin to string letters together to form words. These words often do not form real words, but that is the intent behind them. The sixth stage of emergent writing is approximated (phonetic) spelling where children use sounds and letters to create words. The final stage of emergent writing is conventional spelling where students begin to spell and write words correctly. (Barclay, & Hutingger, Project ELIPSS).

It is important to note that children do not always make a clear move from one stage of emergent writing to the next and that at times children may appear to be in two different stages at one time or to bounce back and forth between two stages, “As children experiment with different forms of writing for different purposes, they often mix earlier and later developing forms, especially when writing stories (Cabell, Justice, Zucker, McGinty, 2009). Sulzby writes, “They [children] move back and forth across these forms in composing text, often using multiple forms for a given composition” (1992). Children

may begin to sound out words on paper and still use scribbles and drawings on the same page to help convey what they are trying to communicate. There is not a clear line or transition that takes place from one stage to the next. The stages often blur together until the child reaches conventional writing.

Emergent writing is a developmental task, meaning that just as children will walk and talk when they are ready; children will begin writing and will move through the stages of emergent writing as they are ready. So the question to be answered is; how do you “teach” a child to write if he or she is not developmentally ready for it? The simple answer is you don’t, but that is not the correct answer. You may not be able to “teach” a child to write if they are not ready to but there are things that can be done to foster writing development.

How Adults Can Help Foster Emergent Writing

There are two groups of adults that can help shape a child’s writing development; the adults within the home and educators outside the home. Sulzby writes “..when given a supportive context, be it home or school, young children compose connected written discourse using emergent forms long before they hold conventional ideas about writing” (1992). Both parents and teacher play an important role in helping children begin writing and move through the differing stages of emergent writing.

What Parents Can Do

It has been said time and time again that parents are a child’s first teacher and this saying holds true when it come to writing, “Parents can play a key role in foster positive learning opportunities that have in important impact on their child’s emergent literacy skill development prior to school entry” (Ehri and Roberts 2006;Saracho 1997 as cited in

Neumann, Hood, Neumann, 2009). So what can parents do to help foster emergent writing skills? One main thing parents can do to help foster emergent writing skills is provide their child with writing tools for play; crayons, markers, pencils, different kinds of paper, magnetic letters, etc. Next, parents need to write with their children or have their children see them write in many different forms. Ideas include asking your child to help you write out the grocery list, help fill out a greeting card, take a message for someone, or write a story together about a topic of interest to the child. In the article *The Scaffolding of Emergent Literacy Skills in the Home Environment: A Case Study* the authors write, “Recently, joint writing activities have also been found to be more effective than storybook reading in facilitating the development of emergent literacy skills in young children (Aram and Biron 2004; Ritchey 2008 as cited in Neumann, Hood, Neumann, 2009). Seeing and doing writing with a parent is the best way for parents to help their children begin to write.

Besides providing children with writing tools and the parent writing with the child it is very important that parents encourage and praise children when writing is attempted. It is equally important that parents never critique or pick apart young children’s writing. It is important for parents to remember that writing is developmental and needs to be practiced and experimented with in order to improve and move through the stages of development. If a child feels threatened or judged they will be less likely to take risks and be more likely to turn away from writing.

What Educators Can Do

The Classroom Teacher

Educators also play a huge role in fostering emergent writing in young children. Like parents there are many things that educators can do to help foster emergent writing. One the most basic things a teacher can do includes providing students with ample writing supplies including crayons, markers, pencils, a variety of paper, stamps, etc.. These items should not just be placed in a “writing center” but in several areas throughout the room. Klenk writes “Children with access to literacy supplies also experiment with writing in their play (Isenberg & Jacobm 1983; Morrow, 1990; Moss, 1986; Schrader, 1989; Vukelich, 1990; Klenk,). By doing this children may create grocery lists, a menu, make signs, write letters and much in their play (2001) .

It is also important for educators to know where their students are in the writing stages. In any class you could have students in all of the seven stages of emergent writing. One of the first things any educator should do before beginning lessons is determine where your students are in the stages of writing. In order to determine where students are in the writing stages a teacher needs to observe their students in many different types of writing situations. Zecker writes, “In order to observe children’s development in writing, it is important to engage them in a variety of writing experiences” (1999). Once a teacher has an idea where the children in the class are in the writing stages they can begin creating lessons that scaffold the learning of all students.

The Administrator

In the article *Emergent writing in the kindergarten classroom* by Kathleen Muzevich, Muzevich writes, “Elementary principals and supervisors can do much to encourage and help kindergarten teachers embrace and implement an emergent literacy perspective by attending to the elements listed below” (1999). Muzivich provides

administrators with a list of criteria that they should be looking for when visiting early childhood classrooms to ensure a strong emergent literacy environment exist. This list includes:

- Evidence of a print-rich environment
- Well stocked writing center which all students use regularly
- Other centers supplied with materials to encourage reading and writing
- Students engaged in daily writing activities for a variety of purposes
- Children involved in daily shared writing or interactive writing
- Students engaged in various oral phonemic awareness activities
- Students encouraged to listen for sounds in words they write
- Correct upper and lower case manuscript letter formation presented without the teacher using a formal handwriting series.

(Muzevich, 1999)

Muzevich also believes administrators can help with emergent writing skills by “encouraging attendance at professional conferences, memberships to professional organizations, and exposure to professional journals” (1999)

What I Will Do In My Classroom

In my classroom all the writing that takes place is emergent. Every year, not matter if I am teaching developmental kindergarten or traditional kindergarten I have several students in all the different stages of emergent writing and I always have students that are moving from one stage to the next. Writing is something that I have my students do everyday, but based on my research for this paper I realize I do not immerse my

students in writing enough, “Writing needs to be a central activity in kindergarten classrooms from the first day of school. It should occur throughout the day in conjunction with reading....Children should be encouraged to use writing in their play and have daily opportunities to share their writing with others.” (“Muzevich, 1999). Muzevich also writes, “Emergent literacy requires abundant writing in the kindergarten classroom..”(1999).

As a whole the early childhood team at the school I teach at believes in a play based learning environment for young students. One of the very first things I will do to help build on my students emergent writing is make more writing materials available thought out the whole classroom to use during play and not in just in the writing center or art area. *In Playing With Literacy in Preschool Classrooms* it says, “Children with access to literacy supplies also experiment with writing in their play (Isenberg & Jacob, 1983, Morrow, 1990, Moss, 1986, Schrader, 1989; Vukelich, 1990) and they learn to identify context-specific environmental print in their play centers (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Vukelich, 1994 as cited in Klenk, 2001). I will make sure that paper, pencils, crayons, makers and other writing materials are place in several locations in the classroom. Specific areas that I will include writing materials that I have not in the past include the block area, the book area and the science table. This will make is easier and more welcoming for students to use writing in a multitude of ways. In the block area they could create plans for what they want to build, in the book area they could write or draw about a story they read or had read to them and at the science table they could write the about the discoveries they made. Providing writing materials in other areas in the room not only provides the children will more opportunities to write but also will provide me

with more opportunities for authentic assessment of the students writing, “Observations of children engaged in play-based learning are often more valuable than those conducted under stressful or unreliable circumstances meant to document student learning, such as standardized test” (Klenk, 2001).

There are several other things I can do to help children move through the stages of emergent writing. These include a lot of modeled writing, cooperative learning groups where I pair children up with other children in different stages of writing and have them write together and creating a print rich environment. One of the major things I must concentrate on is creating lesson plans that meet the needs of all students and allow all students to feel success. In the article, *The Emergent Writing Process Of A Preschool Child* Cruikshank writes, “When planning instruction, care must be taken to ensure that children’s frustration thresholds are not crossed” (2001). As a teacher of writing I need to push my children to explore and take risks but also be careful not to push them so hard that they become frustrated and want to quit. I need to make sure that writing is enjoyable as well as educational.

I have found hundreds of activities that can be done to encourage emergent writing. Many of the activities that I will be doing in my classroom are based on Project ELIPSS. Project ELIPSS is a staff development system that contains six learning modules to help support educators in the literacy development of young children (Barclay, & Huntinger, Project ELIPSS) . Out of the six modules, one module is specifically focused on emergent writing.

Module Two: From Scribbling to "Real" Writing: Stages in Early Writing Development

Given their own writing materials and encouragement from adults, young children convey their curiosity and new ideas through drawing and through writing. Early marks, and scribbles evolve into readable symbols as children express their thoughts through drawings, words and

eventually stories. Writing is an area of personal growth that parents, grandparents, teachers and other interested adults can inspire in young children. In this module, the developmental stages of writing will be demonstrated, as will a variety of strategies, including technology, for promoting emergent writing. (Barclay, & Huntinger, Project ELIPSS)

Based on information I have gathered from Project ELIPSS I have created a chart of activities I can do to help my emergent writers. The chart is broken up into three levels. The purpose of this chart is to take the wonderful ideas I gathered from Project ELIPSS and have them in a ready to use, easy to read quick reference when I am lesson planning for the up coming year. The three different levels each build on the previous level and meet the various needs of many young writers.

Project ELIPSS Writing Activity Ready Reference Chart

	Activity	Description	What it does
Level 1	Making a Writing Box	A take home box with various writing tools that children take home to use when they are not at school. The box will include a sheet with information for parents explaining the importance exploration of writing in the early years.	*Allow children to experiment with writing *work on fine motor skills *help families see the importance of early exploration of writing
	Set up a writing center	A location in the room where a few children can work on writing projects when they want to. This center will include various writing materials.	*encourage students to experiment with writing. *increase fine motor development *show children that I value writing
	“This says_____	Teacher shows children that there are numerous ways to write about something. The teacher demonstrates writing in scribbles, pictures, mock letters, and letter like forms as well as conventional writing. The teacher then explains to a write all of these forms are writing. The teacher will let children know that all of these forms of writing are acceptable and encouraged,	*shows children that their writing holds value *encourages children to write at their own level *shows children examples of all different forms of writing
Level 2	Language	The teacher watches as a student writes	*show the relationship

	Experience Activity- Individual Dictation	and then asks the student what he or she is writing. The teacher then writes down exactly what the child says. The teacher reads back what is recorded and then the student and teacher read what was recorded together. The teacher encourages the child to illustrate the writing and share with is or her peers.\	between written and spoken language *shows children their thoughts are valued *see conventional models of letters and words *shows children they can write what they say and say what they write
	Group Experience Stories	The class as a whole writes about an experience that all participated in such as a special event. The teacher writes down what the children remember and have to say about the special event. The teacher provides questions for students and then writes what is said.	*Children see that what is said can be written down *make a connection that letters make words and words make sentences *see that writing is a thinking process *shows children they can write what they say and say what they write
	Patterned Language Charts	Teacher creates large charts or posters with patterned sayings on them. These can be about a specific theme or about the class. The teacher reads the patterned charts to the class over and over and then the class begins reading with the teacher. Eventually some students may read the charts on their own	*See how letters are the same and different * Gain familiarity with basic sight words *Gain confidence in reading
Level 3	Share-an- Experience Book	From a common experience children illustrate pictures to go in a book. The teacher then writes down exactly what the child says about the picture. Children can also be encouraged to write about the picture.	*connected spoken words with written words *see what they say as a book
	Create A Card	After saving old greeting cards place them in the writing center for children to make their own greeting cards using the pictures form the old greeting card. Children are encouraged to add words and or pictures to make their own card for whoever they want. Children are encouraged to write	*Use emergent writing in a practical everyday activity. *Allows for creative expression and can be done by any child no matter what stage of

		messages in their cards.	writing he or she is on.
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Literacy is one of the most important areas taught in an early childhood classroom with writing being a major component of literacy. I always knew that writing was important but never felt fully prepared to teach it or help children develop in it. Before this class I did not know how best to foster the development of writing. Through my research on emergent writing I now feel better prepared and excited to help my emergent writer move through the stages with the ultimate goal of becoming conventional writers.

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Teaching Project Writers Memo

While writing this paper the primary reasons I made revisions were reading what I had written and feeling like I needed to add more. I also made revisions after reading more research and wanting to include it in my paper. The more I read about emergent writing the more I wanted to include in my paper. I found many wonderful quotes that I thought were very telling and I wanted to make sure they were added as well. Another reason I made revisions is from suggestions made from a co-worker. I asked the co-worker to read my paper and share ideas that she thought would make the paper better. Based on what she said I added more information where she suggested a deleted some things she felt were not of importance.

While writing this expository paper I was reminded how difficult it is to write a paper about something that someone else is going to judge. I kept asking myself “Am I doing this right?”, and wondering if I was writing the information the professor would be looking for. This caused me to step back and think about how I present expository writing to my students. I wondered if I give them clear enough directions and make sure they know what I want. I felt Professor Certo provided clear directions yet I was still questioning if I was doing what I was supposed to. In the future as a teacher I will be very aware of providing my students with clear direction in what I am looking for. I will also be sure to meet with students regularly during expository writing assignments to help and guide them. One of things that I have not done in the past when teaching expository writing is teaching kids how to organize the materials they are using. During this

assignment I realized if I would have been more organized with my research the writing of the paper itself would have been a lot easier.

The expository writing I did here is much more in depth than the expository writing I ask from my students, but essentially I teach the first step in the writing process. From this project I have come to realize that expository writing is a type of writing that children need to be exposed to young and often. I feel that early and often experience in expository writing will benefit students as the writing demands get harder. Expository writing in the kindergarten classroom will take a different form than in a college class. I will be more aware of writing expository writing as a whole group, reading expository writing, and allowing children the chance to do their own expository writing.

Upon completion of this paper I feel I have learned a great deal about emergent writing, I still have some unanswered questions. I would like to add a bit more information about Sulzby and the research she did in the late 1970s and 1980s on emergent writing. I would also have liked to have read more case studies that teachers and researchers have done in the area of emergent writing. Overall, I would say this writing this paper was very helpful to me as a writing teacher of young children both in regards to learning about emergent writing and learning about what I can do to help children when they are doing expository writing.