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Pre-Kindergartners

Learn To Write

A "Play on Words"

"Ms. Holt, Ms. Holt, help me! I want to write this letter to Ms. Knight." Taryn ran up to Karen Holt, her teacher, to ask how to write the student teacher's name.

Karen began spelling out loud: "K."

Taryn's surprise was evident as she reminded Karen, "Her name is Ms. Night."

Karen explained, "The 'K' in Ms. Knight's name doesn't 'say' anything, Taryn."

Taryn was intrigued. "So that means if the 'K' made a noise, then Ms. Knight's name would be 'Kuh-night'!"

For those of us accustomed to dealing with English spelling and its silent letters, Ms. Knight with that silent "K" isn't too confusing. Four-year-old Taryn was surprised, although her knowledge of the sounds of letters might be considered precocious and unusual for a child her age. In fact, some early childhood educators (Elkind, 2007; Jones & Cooper, 2006; Rothstein, Wilder, & Jacobsen, 2007) might worry about the kind of school experiences Taryn had been exposed to in this classroom. Elkind, in particular, would advise delaying formal, teacher-directed instruction in pre-kindergarten.

In an era when academic demands are escalating, many early childhood professionals find themselves defending a child-centered approach to teaching young children (Bergen, 2002; Ede, 2006; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Until the 1980s, early childhood education focused more on readiness than on formal instruction (Teale & Yokota, 2000). Tyre (2006) writes, "In the last decade, the earliest years of schooling have become less like a trip to 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' and more like SAT prep" (p. 36). Rosemarie Truglio, VP of education and research for "Sesame Street," contributes to Tyre's article that "people want children to be ready to read in kindergarten, so that pressure is now being passed down to preschool and day-care centers" (p. 44).

This article addresses ways teachers can support young children's understanding and use of writing as they discover literacy through play. The authors describe Karen's classroom, her teaching, and individual children's discoveries about writing. We will discuss our conclusions regarding the relationship between children's play and their evolving awareness of the 'writerly life' (Calkins, 1994, p. 28).

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We have been working for several years on a project to clarify our beliefs about play and learning. Jane, the principal investigator, was delighted to find that the children in Karen's pre-kindergarten class learned in child-centered ways. When Jane first came to the classroom, Karen told the children that Dr. Perlmutter taught people who were going to be teachers and that Karen worked with her. She told them that Dr. Perlmutter would be visiting often and wanted to see what they were doing. The children went about their work and play, and Jane became a comfortable participant-observer.

Jane was interested in examining how these 4-year-olds engaged intellectually in a meaningful writing process. She spent one day a week in Karen's class for several semesters as a participant-observer and filled many legal pads with field notes. Jane's notes indicate that children *do* learn a great deal about writing as they play.

How Do Children Become Literate?

Becoming literate requires that children figure out the complex relationship between what people say and hear and the squiggles they put on paper. Before they "join the club" of readers and writers (Smith, 1987), children need to pay attention to the functions of print—the ways that people use reading and writing. Children need to see people writing notes on the calendar to remind them of important events, writing grocery lists, and reading instructions for putting together and operating the lawn mower or baking an apple pie. They need to see people taking phone messages, writing thank-you letters, and sending e-mail messages. Seeing all these things allows children to understand that people read and write, because reading and writing are useful activities that have real purposes in authentic contexts (Calkins, 1994; Campbell, 2004).

Phonological Sensitivity. Some children come to school already playing with words and sounds, while others are mystified whenever teachers ask them to tell whether two words sound the same or different. Children need the opportunity to verbally manipulate sounds and understand rhymes. These abilities to process sounds constitute phonological sensitivity (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004). Some researchers contend that phonemic awareness, as in sounding out each phoneme, is a vital precursor to literacy (Chall, 1967). Others find no evidence for this contention (Moustafa, 2000). After reviewing both theories, Moustafa proposed that children

develop phonemic awareness *as* they become literate.

Relevant Instruction. Some researchers believe that having teachers break down the steps to reading and writing and then teaching those skills in isolation does not help build early literacy (Jones & Cooper, 2006; Neuman, 2006). Teaching "A" one week, "B" the next, then "C" after that doesn't provide a meaningful context for learning. Children learn better when they focus on letters that they encounter in their environments, especially the letters they find in their names. Meaning comes when they encounter environmental print (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) and from the activities in which children are engaged, while the print, usually a logo (e.g., McDonald's, Lego, Wal-Mart), is present in their environment. They recognize the logos and eventually understand what they represent (Horner, 2005).

In general, 4-year-olds do not learn to read first and write later. Experts believe that writing can precede reading or develop at the same time (Montessori, 1960/1966; Teal & Yokota, 2000). Children's beginning efforts at writing support their initial forays into the reading process (Elbow, 2004). Both processes, reading and writing, involve active construction of understanding. Children make meaning by taking what they see and hear and connecting it to what they already understand.

Although these connections are not necessarily developed as a result of teacher-directed activity, adults can play an active role in supporting children's constructions. Children hardly ever develop understanding just because an adult has told them something (Elkind, 2007), even though what adults say, do, and provide for children has the potential to scaffold their understand-

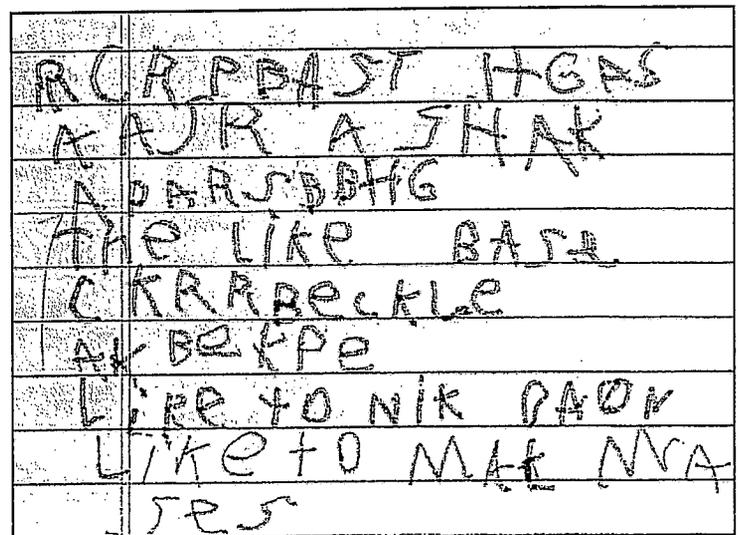


Figure 1
Excerpt from notepad: Observations written in a list format

ing in powerful ways (Vygotsky, 1978). When children see grown-ups writing, most are eager to write themselves. The first words they want to write are usually their own names. As Karen, their pre-kindergarten teacher, subsequently led these 4-year-olds in letter and word investigations in the context of classroom writing, many of them quickly became interested in writing their friends' names, as well as family members' names. As Campbell (2004) notes, and as Karen discovered in her own teaching, children's names are probably the single most *powerful* tool for teaching reading and writing in a preschool classroom.

Karen's Pre-kindergarten Classroom

In this article, we describe Karen's pre-kindergarten classroom. Her class was held in a public school in rural western North Carolina and funded through Title One. The 16 children in the class shared a homogenous cultural background. Many of them had deep Appalachian roots. Half were boys and half were girls. The socioeconomic mix ranged from working class to middle class.

Here are some things Karen and the children did *not* do. In her classroom, 4-year-old children never passively completed worksheets. She did not use a "letter of the week" approach. Her children did not sit and "practice" writing the alphabet, their names, or numbers as isolated activities. Over the course of the year, however, these 4-year-olds learned to write their names *and* those of their classmates. Some of these children were actually reading independently before the end of the school year.

In Karen's room, taking roll in the morning was a ritual that both built community and introduced children to most of the letters of the alphabet. Every morning during circle time, the helper for the day sat in a special chair beside the teacher. The helper clutched a set of laminated name cards, one for each person in the room. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Holt whispered the names into the helper's ear. As the year progressed, the children recognized and read their friends' names. As each name was called, the helper greeted the child and they exchanged "good mornings." When the helper came to her name, she stopped, and Karen helped her spell her name. The name was then written on the chalkboard, and the children and their teacher talked about the letters they saw.

Sometimes, the teacher helped the children reinforce the special letters in someone's name kinesthetically. When Cole was the helper, the children made O's with their mouths and arms. They made L's with their fingers and arms. Often, children commented on the fact that the helper's name had some of the same letters they have in *their* names. The letters in an individual's name

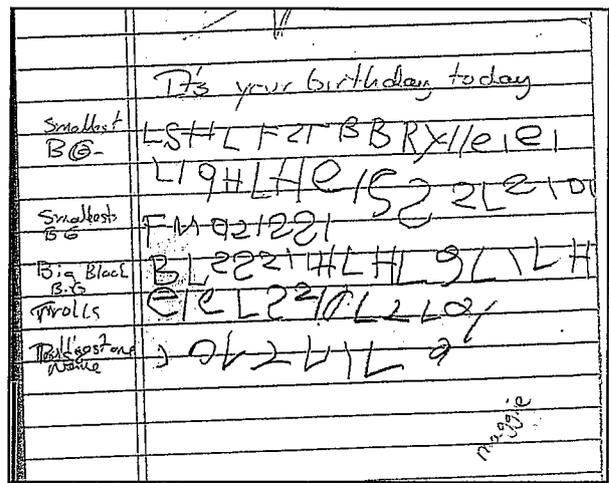


Figure 2
Excerpt from notepad: Maggie's notes on
The Three Billy Goats Gruff

seemed to be "owned" by that individual. Those whose names started alike had special bonds.

Center time provided multiple opportunities to play with language and literacy. A favorite informal center activity was *pretending* to be "helper" and calling roll. The helper's name remained on the chalkboard all day and children were free to write underneath or beside it. They often sat in the teacher's chair and called out to a classmate. For example, a child might call out "Good morning, Natasha!" across the room, to which Natasha would respond with a cheery "Good morning!" Often, two children played teacher and helper. Pretend teacher play is literacy practice, and play in this class often provided a context for writing. Other researchers have noted that adding literacy props to children's play adds depth to the play experience (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Perlmutter & Laminack, 1993).

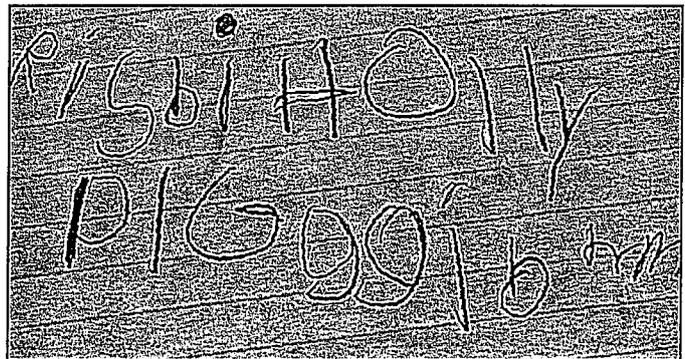


Figure 3
Excerpt from notepad: Writing in response to
Farm Animal Anchor Chart

Names of family members were often learned after children's own names and names of friends. During center time, Julie was excited to notice that her brother's name began with the same letter as a classmate's. Children often used the name cards from circle time to aid in their writing during Center Time. This was child-initiated play activity. Another stack of name cards was available in the writing center for children to use when copying names.

One morning, Jane sat at a table with several girls at the writing center. They were curious about the letters they wrote. Being able to write other people's names was a high-status skill. Bianka showed them that she could write her brother's name. Holly laboriously copied "Mrs. Holt" from the name card. All were impressed that "Holly" and "Holt" began with the same letter. Makayla pointed out an "r" at the end of someone's name. Bianka wrote Makayla's name, as Makayla dictated it letter by letter. Ashley wrote quietly. The mood at the table was both social and serious. They seemed to be playing school while in school. After a stretch of hard work, they complimented each other, saying "Good job!" They sounded like teachers.

Names were used to identify children's work. Unattended, young children will often lay their pictures or drawings down and leave them. When the process is more important than the product, a child may not even recognize his or her own work a day later. In a busy classroom, keeping up with who made what can be challenging. One early lesson in Karen's classroom was learning to put a name in the upper left-hand corner of a picture so that the picture could be taken home, once completed. Thus, Karen provided an authentic need for writing one's name.

The easel provided an excellent opportunity for impromptu instruction in writing. At the easel, Karen tailored her writing lesson to the child's skill level. If the child could already write his or her name, Karen's lesson might focus on capital and lowercase letters, letter formation, or the direction in which we write. If the child could not write his or her name, Karen said each letter in the child's name as she wrote it on the page. Some children wanted to copy what the teacher had written, while other children watched the process several times before attempting to write themselves. These quick, informal lessons were direct instruction that was relevant to what children were doing. They saw the purpose for the lesson. They learned and remembered what they were told because they needed to know. Vygotsky (1978) would recognize this sequence of events as being within the child's zone of proximal development.

Names also were used around the room in such places as cubbies. Take-home books, toothbrushes,

and backpacks were labeled with children's names. Children practiced reading and writing their names as they wrote on the sign-in sheet every morning. Lists of all the children's names were copied and displayed in different parts of the room for easy reference.

Children Go Through Stages in Writing

There are definite stages in the initial writing process (Lindfors, 1991; Schickedanz, 1999). Children's first attempts at "writing" often consist of cursive-like scribbles and then small letter-like shapes. Many very young children make small vertical lines to write their names. First letters often wobble. Some letter-like strings march fairly evenly across the page, while others take a downhill slant. When children are able to produce some letter approximations, their writing changes from strictly scribbles to a combination of scribbles and letters. As children learn more letters, they include them in their writing.

Letter names can be used to aid in invented spelling (Lindfors, 1991; Read, 1975), as writers begin to understand that print and sound are related. Graves (1983) observed that children who have learned the names of about six consonants are able "to compose" (p. 184). One letter may stand for an entire word and, later, a syllable. As children become more aware of how print works and of more attributes of English, such as the different sounds that vowels may represent, they incorporate this knowledge into their writing, as it more closely approximates standard forms in spelling and in structure. These stages were observed among Karen's writers, with some interesting exceptions.

In this class, strings of letters and letter-like shapes gave way to lists of people's names. Writing a name is a very controlled, careful activity that takes concentration. Grace took Jane's pad and, with great deliberation, wrote all the names of her family members. She used recognizable letters. Grace took her time, as she strove for accuracy. The children had seen many demonstrations of names in written form. Writing a grocery list was much more quickly accomplished than copying someone's name. Children dashed off "pretend writing" with a flair, ignoring most letter shapes. When playing, accuracy in writing was not as critical. Children often played out the functions of writing without the form (Halliday, 1973, 1975).

Even those 4-year-olds who could write names sometimes resorted to scribbling if they wanted to write a lot. Maggie was a competent name writer, but she obviously had seen people produce pages of text quickly. One day, Jane approached Maggie, who had filled a page with wavy lines. She inquired if Maggie was writing a letter or a story. Maggie paused, thought for a moment, and explained that she had written a letter. Then she hurried off to find her friend Jazmine,

telling her, "I write you a letter!" Perhaps with Jane's suggestion, Maggie had newly categorized her lengthy piece of writing as a letter.

Such interactions seemed to indicate that children in this classroom moved back and forth between more formally described stages, depending on their intention (pretend in centers or real writing of names). Bergen (2002) discusses the development of "pretense, receptive and expressive language, and mental representation" as being closely related. Perhaps these examples serve to show that the relationship often depends on purpose.

Writing Serves Many Purposes

The children included writing as part of pretend situations that mirrored those from real life. Several children wrote grocery lists. Children playing in the blocks area often made signs. One sign read "No Bad Guys." Another day, the girls posted a "No Boys Allowed" sign. The writing of notes and signs seemed to help relieve some of the writers' anxieties about potentially dangerous situations. When bad weather had been in the news, several concerned boys posted signs warning us of flash floods. Ben wrote a note about a volcano that he said was going to erupt soon near the dramatic play camping area.

One morning, two girls spent a long time going around the room and writing on small pieces of paper. They tucked the papers into different places all around the room. Karen asked them what they were doing. Initially, they were at a loss to explain. "We are paying . . ." they answered with hesitation; they knew about the activity but were not sure what it was called. Karen intuited, "Are you driving around paying bills?" "Yes!" they responded. They nodded again when Karen prompted, "Those are your checks to pay your bills?"

At one point, Karen brought in envelopes left over from a card shop. Several children were inspired to sit around a table and write on newsprint. They stuffed the messages into the envelopes for their families. Karen brought over small white boards and asked the children, "Who's in your family?" She then recorded the names the children gave her. She told the children that they needed to write the names on the envelopes so that people would know for whom the envelopes were intended. As Karen walked away from the table, the children continued working with a *new* purpose. Her brief yet timely intervention added to the children's understanding.

"Can I Write?"

Collecting data in Karen's room meant that Jane carried large and small legal pads around with her in the room when she wasn't actively involved in pretend

play. Karen commented that when Jane was in the room and taking notes, the children seemed to be more interested in writing themselves. The children often wanted to borrow Jane's writing pads, asking, "Can I write?" The children usually made left-to-right, even-size scribbles. Letters and letter-like shapes were intermingled. When Jane inquired about their writing on her pads, the children shared their interpretations of these marks. Examples of these vary in purpose. Some seemed to be observations (see Figure 1), while others were related to stories recently read aloud, such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (see Figure 2), or as a response to a group anchor chart from a farm animal study that focused on pigs (see Figure 3).

Most writing by 4-year-olds needs to be "read" by the writer to the audience. "Can you read it to me?" was the helpful phrase Jane used to find out that Maggie had written the names of all the Billy Goats and the Troll, as well as "It's your birthday today!" Not all of the children's messages were kind; some of their writing was scary. On the day when Cole and Hunter were monsters (and mean ones at that), Hunter brought Jane a piece of writing that said, "The devil's gonna get you!"

Writing in the Classroom and in the World

Every day in the classroom, the children absorbed writing concepts from varied sources. As time passed, they were more observant of the literate world around them. Their literacy worlds grew larger as they made connections. One little boy excitedly told Jane that he had noticed some signs on the road coming to school that "look just like the signs Mrs. Holt has." He had not noticed the signs on the road before playing with and creating signs in his classroom. His in-class writing experiences helped him connect to the writing in the larger world. The world in the classroom and the writing activities, both planned and spontaneous, empowered the children as writers, enabling their understanding of the power that writing holds in the world outside the classroom.

Purposeful Play Provides Contexts for Writing

Four-year-old Taryn's comments, as recorded at the beginning of this article, were not so precocious or unusual in this pre-kindergarten classroom setting. They were the result of her experiences with writing as she used it in imaginative play. Her learning to write "Knight" with a "K" came about because Karen explicitly helped her to that realization. Karen's informed perspective played a key role as she guided and supported the pre-kindergartners' use of writing in their purposeful play.

From her perspective, Karen considered these children to be competent and capable learners who would make connections between the writing employed by grown-ups and the writing they could themselves use in their play-full environment. Karen sometimes intervened so that the children's experiences with writing would broaden. Informally speaking, she met the 4-year-olds where they were and helped them enter the world of school as writers.

Developmentally Appropriate Classrooms Can Build Crucial Academic Foundations

In this article, we have discussed many examples of ways that children build their understanding of the functions of writing. These pre-kindergartners developed phonemic awareness through play with names. They associated the sounds of letters with the written symbols in joyful and playful ways. No worksheets were needed to build these crucial connections. No skill and drill was used. Every day, the children learned phonics as they discussed the sounds in the helper's name. Every day, they learned to differentiate sounds and rhymes when they sang and acted out energizers. They learned the purposes of writing as they made lists, wrote letters, put up signs, and practiced writing their names and their friends' names.

The role of the pre-kindergarten in children's academic preparation has long been debated. Some insist that young children can do formal academic work in pre-kindergarten, while others defend a "developmentally appropriate" stance. Our observations tell us that classrooms for young children can be developmentally appropriate and still lay crucial academic foundations.

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