The Routledge International Handbook of early Literacy Education
A Contemporary Guide to Literacy Teaching and Interventions in a Global Context
Natalia Kucirkova, Catherine E. Snow, Vibeke Grøver, Catherine McBride

The value of writing in early childhood

Publication details
Deborah Wells Rowe
Published online on: 27 Mar 2017

Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
PART III

Research findings and future directions

The final third of this volume focuses on various aspects of literacy scaffolding that can enrich young children’s learning. There is a long and exciting tradition of literacy researchers adapting traditional reading and writing activities in ways that optimize them. Results of typical storybook reading, word recognition and writing activities have all been refined in ways informed by past research interventions. This collection of chapters highlights such traditions, bringing in examples from different cultures to emphasize the variability of such approaches and their appropriateness to many places around the world.

In parallel to theoretical models of literacy learning and debates about the extent to which such models are universal or specific to a particular activity, context, script or region, consumers of research and reviews of literacy studies also seek practical ideas about how to improve children’s literacy learning. What can parents do? What can teachers do? How can adults help children to learn to read and write efficiently, both for typically developing children and also for those who might have a particular learning difficulty that makes literacy learning more arduous?

The thematically defined chapters in Part III address critical issues in current research, many of which have already been touched upon in Parts I and II. These chapters outline research-endorsed practices designed to support early reading and writing skills, with examples drawn from home, school and community contexts. A number of the chapters offer evidence of literacy-focused interventions targeting the specific skills required to become a proficient reader and writer, such as phonological sensitivity, vocabulary and narrative skills. Other chapters consider how specific language practices might foster the development of such skills in children. More specifically, there is an interest in how vocabulary skills are supported in shared book reading and narrative skills in drama-based interventions or in discussions with parents and teachers. The common perspective underlying all this research is that the quality of the verbal interaction children participate in impacts their reading and writing by supporting their oral language learning. Although schools constitute an important context for learning to read and write in most countries around the world, the chapters in this section remind us that children’s literacy skills are also fostered by the informal learning opportunities offered in everyday encounters in non-school settings. Finally, several chapters examine interventions that target specific populations, such as children with language learning difficulties, thus extending the information available
Research findings and future directions

in Part II about early literacy provision for children in need of special care and research attention in various regions around the world.

Deborah Wells Rowe begins this section by focusing on writing, including invented spelling, name writing and broader writing of connected text. Rowe highlights the value of collaborative writing between adults and children and shows how, when caregivers scaffold the writing of children, children’s writing and sometimes their reading skills tend to improve. From the sociocultural perspective, fostering an ethos of writing in the classroom and at home, with an understanding that writing is a communicative activity, is beneficial for children. At the same time, a focus on individual word writing can sometimes be useful as well. When children make use of their phonological skills to analyse the sequence of sounds in words, they make an important transition in the writing process over time.

Ulla Richardson and Lea Nieminen highlight the importance of phonological sensitivity for alphabetic language word recognition in their chapter. When children are able to break words down into smaller segments, including syllables, rimes and phonemes, this facilitates their word reading. Mapping speech sounds on to individual letters or other segments (sometimes called grain sizes, Ziegler and Goswami, 2005) such as rimes (ough, eigh, ign) is a key task in learning to read in many alphabetic languages. The authors highlight cross-cultural evidence for this and then introduce GraphoGame, an important tool accessible via cell phone (mobile technology) or computer, which has been used across several languages to teach and reinforce understanding of the connection between speech sounds and graphemes in children.

Monique Sénéchal highlights all the ways in which shared book reading is helpful for children, and one way in which it is not (facilitating word recognition in text). Sénéchal specifies the conditions under which shared book reading is most effective and explains why. The review shows that, for example, there are more studies demonstrating that shared book reading improves breadth of vocabulary knowledge than depth of vocabulary knowledge, though results are promising in both aspects. It is also interesting to note that shared book reading has been demonstrated to be effective in stimulating children’s vocabulary development in a range of linguistic and social environments worldwide.

The theme of vocabulary development is further pursued in Vibeke Grøver’s chapter, with a detailed examination of the optimal conditions for children’s vocabulary learning. Though children may learn new words from mere exposure inside or outside of book reading, vocabulary instruction is most efficient if words are embedded in a meaningful and engaging discourse, in which children are invited to participate to identify their meaning and use them for the purpose of communication.

The chapter by Wendy Mages considers how to support narrative skills through drama-based interventions. The author focuses on four different ways to encourage children’s storytelling and other narrative skills. Such skills can be either in oral or written form and are often facilitated in the context of formal educational settings. Wages’ summary of literature shows that while some interventions can be used effectively with children aged three to six years, many more, particularly those focused on writing skills, extend to primary/elementary school-aged children.

Allyssa McCabe’s chapter explores narratives in younger children, with a particular focus on how children reflect on and represent their own personal stories. Children’s narratives appear to be enhanced by the input that parents and sometimes teachers give via in-depth discussions about their lives. Narrative practice facilitates a progressive development of children’s own story-telling skills. Such patterns are similar across cultures, though the styles of narratives can differ substantially. For example, Japanese children show a preference...
producing their narratives in sets of three stanzas and Chinese and Taiwanese children downplay evaluation when they tell stories – patterns that are different from European and US children.

The importance of narratives is further highlighted in the next chapter by Kathy Short, Maria Acevedo, Dorea Kleker and Lauren Pangle. These authors put forward the concept of ‘storying’ and specify the many ways in which it is beneficial for children’s learning. For instance, through storying, children can make sense of their own lives, introduce their own experiences and vocabulary, and learn from one another. Drawing on the funds of knowledge perspective (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and using the narrative inquiry methodology, Short and colleagues outline how children’s engagement in storying in the classroom can provide authentic opportunities for communicating their ideas to peers and adults.

In the following chapter, K. S. Richard Wong presents an overview of various types of literacy-related interventions that are helpful for stimulating early oral language skills. The focus in this chapter is on different possible sources of intervention for young children. Dialogic reading, one type of shared book reading, is highlighted, as are some effective classroom-based programmes (e.g. Opening the World of Learning). Some of these interventions can work well with children with language difficulties, either when such children are supported individually or in classroom settings. Many variables can, of course, influence how the interventions are related to child outcomes, including the nature of such difficulties (particularly receptive vs. expressive vocabulary), children’s motivation and previous experiences of success or failure, and techniques used for interventions by parents, teachers and clinicians. Overall, the data show that there is reason for considerable optimism about the effectiveness of classroom interventions for children’s oral language skills.

While most of the chapters in this section deal with literacy in the child’s first language, the chapter by Jim Anderson, Ann Anderson and Harini Rajagopal brings to the fore the need for programmes that would acknowledge and promote bilingual family literacy. Many of the ideas discussed in previous chapters, including scaffolding of writing, phonological awareness and oral language skills development through shared book reading, are revisited in this chapter, with a focus on the ways in which families can support their children with literacy skills in both a first and a second language (where the second language is English). Results of such programmes have been relatively promising. Interestingly, in some studies, a stronger focus on first language skills also seems to transfer to English as a second language.

Victoria Purcell-Gates extends the Anderson et al. chapter by highlighting more precisely the role of parents in promoting literacy at home. While acknowledging big differences in cultural perspectives around the world, Purcell-Gates focuses on how various kinds of shared reading materials can stimulate children to understand the role of literacy in their world. Beyond this, parents lay the foundation for children’s broad learning, word recognition and narrative skills with many varied interactions with their children. All together, these resources and practices contribute, as Purcell-Gates writes in her chapter, to the ‘patterned ways that reading and writing are used within the home as a type of culture’.

Taken together, this section of the handbook broadens and deepens our view of literacy development, with a rich collection of strongly argued and evidence-based research papers. Literacy learning means many things to many people, and these chapters reflect the various ways in which literacy is researched and conceptualized by leading researchers in the field. We are fortunate to have these complementary summaries as frameworks for both the theoretical and practical aspects of literacy learning around the world. Cultural and linguistic factors may influence the precise ways in which these are implemented (for example, invented spelling is likely not as useful or fruitful in young Chinese children as in children learning

249
Research findings and future directions

an alphabetic orthography), but overall these reviews are applicable globally. This collection of chapters thus highlights the importance of learning and teaching both for oral and printed word recognition and for broader comprehension and composition skills in language and in print.

References


This chapter reviews research describing what children learn through early writing experiences from birth to age six. Component skills studies show that writing words using invented spelling is positively related to reading sub-skills (e.g. phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge), and to later independent reading, writing and spelling. Writing longer texts requires children to orchestrate transcription skills such as handwriting and invented spelling, and is also related to children’s developing oral language skills. Sociocultural research shows that children begin building foundational understandings about writing by age two. Play provides important opportunities, motivation and shared contexts for writing. Across the preschool years, children form and test progressively more sophisticated hypotheses about writing processes and genre features. Through emergent writing, children form identities as writers, metacognitively reflect on writing processes and text features, and learn about the social uses of print. Although empirical research builds a strong case for the importance of writing in early childhood, many preschoolers have few opportunities to compose their own texts using emergent writing. I argue that the dissemination of research-based information on early writing development and supportive preschool writing contexts should be given high priority in educational efforts directed at parents, caregivers and teachers of young children.

The value of writing in early childhood

Today, researchers and educators have access to almost a half century of research describing young children’s explorations of writing in alphabetic languages. Beginning in the 1970s, seminal work conducted from an emergent literacy perspective (e.g. Harste et al., 1984; Teale and Sulzby, 1986) established that, very early in life, children in literate societies begin to learn about writing through informal observation and playful participation in writing events with caregivers and peers. An extensive body of research supports the notion that preschoolers’ unconventional ‘scribbles’ are not random, but, instead, are organized by the child’s developing hypotheses about print. Further, research supports the contention that early writing experiences are an important venue for children’s construction of understandings about print uses in social situations.
My goal in this chapter is to review contemporary research for evidence describing what children learn through early writing experiences from birth to age six. While acknowledging foundational twentieth-century research, I primarily focus on studies of young children’s writing in alphabetic languages published between 2000 and the present. Given space limitations, I have further narrowed my focus to studies of children learning to write in one language. Readers are directed to other sources (e.g. Reyes, 2012) for reviews of research on emergent bi-literacy. First, I review research exploring the component skills making up young children’s early writing performances and their concurrent and longitudinal relationships to reading and writing. Then, I follow the sociocultural turn to review studies exploring what young children learn as they compose their own messages in home, community and classroom events, and how their writing is shaped by the sociocultural practices in which writing is embedded.

The state of early writing instruction in the United States

Despite researchers’ almost universal agreement that young children build foundational understandings about print through their early explorations of writing, this research has had less impact than might be expected in the USA. Several recent studies (Gerde et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015) conducted in US preschools have shown that while children have access to writing materials, relatively little time is devoted to writing. Teacher scaffolding of children’s writing occurs infrequently and typically involves low-level supports such as reminding children to put their names on their papers or writing letters for children to copy. Teacher modelling most often occurs without explicit explanations of writing processes.

Researchers have hypothesized several possible causes for this research–practice disconnect. One possibility is that the emphasis on beginning reading in curricular materials and US education policy may have pushed writing to the margins of curricular priorities. Another possibility is that some early childhood teachers may lack knowledge about emergent literacy processes and the kinds of teaching strategies that support early writing (Gerde et al., 2015). Whatever the reason for past practice, US policy-makers have recently foregrounded writing as central to college and career readiness (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). However, despite this new attention to writing in elementary and secondary classrooms, preschool writing remains largely unaddressed.

Writing development in early childhood

What does writing look like in early childhood? Which kinds of unconventional marks count as writing? Answers to these questions are foundational to any appraisal of the importance of writing experiences in early childhood. Contemporary researchers have suggested that emergent literacy ‘involves the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing’ (Connor et al., 2006: 689). Collectively, emergent literacy research has challenged the notion that conventional handwriting and spelling are the watershed criteria for identifying the beginnings of writing. Instead, Goodman (1986) has defined reading and writing as ‘human interaction with print when the reader and writer believe that they are making sense of and through written language’ (p. 6). From this perspective, researchers view young children’s unconventional scribbles as the beginnings of writing as well as windows on children’s current understandings of print.
The value of writing in early childhood

Contemporary research has documented both developmental progressions and variation in children’s writing and the understandings it reveals. Puranik and Lonigan’s (2011) study of three- to five-year-olds’ writing supported the contention that children first learn universal features of writing characteristic of all alphabetic languages such as linearity and segmentation and then later construct understandings of language-specific features such as directional patterns and the shapes of symbols. Many studies of writing in alphabetic languages have described a general progression in the forms children use for writing, moving from undifferentiated scribbles toward more conventional forms that approximate alphabet letters (e.g. Sulzby, 1985). In a recent study, Rowe and Wilson (2015) confirmed earlier work showing that children move from global to more specific and conventional understandings of writing forms, directional patterns, message content and speech–print matching. Findings also confirmed previous work showing age-related variability as well as differences in trajectories that included temporary ‘regressions’ from more to less sophisticated writing forms.

Contemporary studies of early childhood writing build on an extensive research base describing the major waypoints, patterns of variability and expected directions of travel along some common developmental paths for writing forms, directionality, intentionality and message content. This research is important because it establishes that, during the preschool years, writing serves as a venue for children’s construction and testing of hypotheses about print processes and social uses.

Component skills research

Researchers working from psychological perspectives have often adopted a simple view of writing (Juel, 2006) that holds that written language involves transcribing spoken language into print, and that writing development occurs in a bottom-up fashion with transcription skills such as handwriting and spelling supporting later development of ideational and discourse processes. Since, in this model, low-level transcription skills are assumed to precede and free up attentional resources for high-level processes such as planning content (Berninger et al., 2002), considerable attention has been devoted to understanding the skills young children need to spell and write words. An important line of early writing research has used a component skills approach to study the contributions of cognitive and linguistic skills (e.g. phonological awareness, letter identification, receptive or expressive vocabulary) and foundational literacy knowledge (e.g. concepts about print, letter names) to children’s early writing and reading. This research has most often measured children’s language and literacy skills outside the writing act and then studied their concurrent or longitudinal relationship to a carefully controlled writing or reading performance, usually name writing, writing letters, spelling dictated words, or standard decoding and comprehension tasks. Only a few studies have examined the predictive relations between component skills and children’s writing of longer texts. This research has modelled hypothesized relationships between component sub-skills and young children’s writing (as indexed by word writing). Below, I review contemporary studies from this line of work, focusing on the value of engaging children in writing experiences in the years between birth and age seven.

Home-based writing

Contemporary research has confirmed and extended our understanding of the importance of writing in early childhood by exploring the predictive relations between children’s home writing experiences and literacy outcomes. For example, working in the United Kingdom,
Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) found that the amount of home writing at age five was one of several home background variables correlated with writing at school entry and remained the only home background variable with a statistically significant relationship to writing at age seven.

Component skills studies have also explored the nature and longitudinal effects of parental support for writing in early childhood. Two kinds of parental support during writing were positively related to later measures of children’s spelling, comprehension, decoding and phonological awareness: grapho-phonemic supports (inventing spellings by segmenting words and applying letter–sound correspondence) and print supports (handwriting support for forming letters) (Aram and Levin, 2004; Skibbe et al., 2013).

Overall, contemporary research shows children, whose parents engaged them in rich writing events (i.e. events where parents helped children invent spellings by explaining orthographic principles as they segmented words into sounds, used letter–sound correspondence to select letters and then helped children gain independence in necessary handwriting skills), had better skills in segmenting and blending sounds, reading words, comprehending what they read and inventing spellings for words when measured one to two years later. These relationships appear to hold for both younger and older preschoolers in the three- to five-year-old age range, and across several different alphabetic languages.

Name writing

Puranik and Lonigan (2011) have pointed out that a large proportion of existing work on early writing has focused on children’s name writing. Name writing is of great personal importance to children. The given name is often the first word a child learns to write. Name writing provides initial opportunities for print learning, as evidenced by research showing that children’s pre-phonological spellings often rely heavily on name letters to spell other words (Treiman et al., 2001). Additionally, name writing is significantly related to letter knowledge (e.g. Bloodgood, 1999). However, contemporary research also shows that children may approach name writing differently from other words (e.g. Puranik and Lonigan, 2012). Children may learn their names as a well-practised string, while using strategies such as letter–sound correspondence to spell other words (Levin and Ehri, 2009). As a result, name writing is frequently more conventional than the child’s writing of other words and messages (Levin et al., 2005). Overall, contemporary research suggests that while name writing is associated with emergent literacy skills and can provide authentic opportunities for print learning, children may approach the task of writing their names differently than writing other words and messages.

Word writing and invented spelling

Researchers have also conducted studies of the predictive relationships between young children’s word writing (using invented spelling) and literacy sub-skills including phonological awareness, letter knowledge, handwriting, word reading and oral language skills. Most research studying connections between word writing and invented spelling has been conducted with four- and five-year-olds who have initial levels of conventional alphabet knowledge and are beginning to explore letter–sound relationships.

Results are consistent in finding a bidirectional, predictive relationship between children’s phonological awareness and their ability to invent spellings for words dictated to them by researchers. Phonological awareness has been found to make a unique and significant contribution to children’s ability to invent spellings for words (e.g. Puranik et al., 2011) and
The value of writing in early childhood

children’s level of writing predicts their phonological awareness scores (Vernon et al., 2004). Letter writing and alphabet knowledge also have been shown to make unique and significant contributions to children’s word-writing scores (Puranik et al., 2011).

To further explore the causal relations between these component skills and word writing, and to test scaffolding approaches that might have practical significance for instruction, researchers have conducted experimental studies comparing different ways of engaging children in writing words using inventing spelling. Recent studies found that the most effective manner of supporting invented spelling included: adult scaffolding of phoneme segmentation, use of letter–sound knowledge and letter writing along with additional context-specific explanations of the alphabetic principle (Levin and Aram, 2013) or feedback on the target words’ conventional spellings (Ouellette and Sénéchal, 2008).

These findings are consistent with outcomes of the US National Early Literacy Panel’s (NELP) (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008) meta-analysis aimed at determining which preschool skills and abilities predict later reading, writing and spelling in grade one and beyond. Results showed that writing/name writing was one of six variables consistently identified as a moderate predictor of children’s later decoding, reading comprehension and spelling. As in the studies reviewed here, phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge were also shown to be moderate predictors of later spelling (word writing). Finally, measures of spelling and invented spelling in kindergarten or earlier were strong predictors of both decoding and spelling measured in grade one and beyond.

Overall, both contemporary studies and the NELP meta-analysis support the conclusion that writing experiences that support four- and five-year-olds in inventing spellings for words and draw children’s attention to the ways letters represent sounds in words lead to better performance on code-focused writing/reading measures. Children who have opportunities to explore how the print system works in the context of writing appear to be connecting key literacy sub-skills related to beginning reading.

Text writing

Though research framed by the simple view of writing (Juel, 2006) acknowledges that writing involves both generating and encoding messages, only a few studies conducted from a component skills perspective have required young children to generate their own messages or to compose texts longer than a word. Two related studies (Kim et al., 2011; Puranik and AlOtaiba, 2012) have examined the component skills that contribute to kindergarteners’ ability to write longer texts – in this case, a personal narrative about children’s kindergarten experiences. Consistent with findings for older students (Graham et al., 2000), these studies found that mastery of transcription skills was an important ingredient in writing development. At the end of kindergarten, the number of words and ideas children included in their texts was related to their ability to write letters fluently and to spell words. Kim and colleagues (2011) found that oral language measures were also uniquely related to end-of-kindergarten writing of personal narratives. This finding suggests that oral language skills are foundational for writing connected texts because children must generate ideas and express them with language, as well as focus on encoding messages in print.

Comparing contributions of early writing and storybook reading

Given these findings, researchers have been interested in comparing the outcomes of preschoolers’ joint writing experiences with those provided by adult–child storybook reading.
Deborah Wells Rowe

– the preschool literacy activity most frequently recommended to caregivers and early childhood teachers (e.g. US Department of Education, 2003) and discussed in more detail in this volume by Monique Sénéchal.

Aram and Biron (2004) directly compared literacy outcomes of preschool instruction focused on either joint reading or joint writing, with a control group receiving the usual preschool instruction. Both the reading and writing intervention groups made significant progress on receptive vocabulary and listening comprehension, with no significant differences between groups. However, the joint writing group outperformed the reading and control groups on word reading, word writing, letter knowledge, phonological awareness and orthographic awareness.

Overall, research suggests that early childhood experiences focusing on the grapho-phonemic code in the context of writing meaningful words can have beneficial effects on both writing and vocabulary knowledge. Writing is a multidimensional activity that includes both meaning- and code-focused processes that require children to consider the context of writing, the meaning to be represented and how to encode the message with print. Contemporary research suggests that when children engage with adults in joint writing for meaningful purposes, their learning opportunities are extended beyond those available in shared book reading.

Conclusions: component skills and early childhood writing

Contemporary studies conducted from a component skills perspective have focused on identifying the skills young children use as they write, and on predictive relationships between preschool writing experiences and later reading and writing. The research reviewed above supports the following conclusions about the importance of writing in early childhood:

1 Writing at home with parental support for invented spelling and letter writing is related to positive reading and writing outcomes when children enter school.
2 Name writing, one of the most common early childhood writing activities, is related to key literacy sub-skills, but also appears to be learned differently from children’s composing of other messages. Name writing may not be a good indicator of children’s strategies for composing their own messages.
3 Writing words using invented spelling is an opportunity to connect key literacy sub-skills (e.g. phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge) that are positively related to later writing, and to beginning reading.
4 Writing longer spans of connected text (phrases, sentences and paragraphs) requires children to orchestrate transcription skills such as letter writing and invented spelling, but is also related to children’s developing oral language skills such as vocabulary.
5 Shared writing with adults presents opportunities for learning that complement and extend other early literacy activities, such as shared book reading.

Sociocultural studies

In the sections that follow, I review contemporary research conducted from sociocultural perspectives to further address the question of what children can learn through early explorations of writing. Researchers studying the beginnings of writing from sociocultural perspectives (e.g. Dyson, 2003; Gee, 2003) have assumed that learning to write not only involves encoding print on the page, but also learning how to participate with others in local
The value of writing in early childhood

literacy events. Participation in writing events requires young children to take up writing roles and employ socio-cognitive writing processes (e.g. idea generation, encoding, revision) appropriate for accomplishing local literacy practices. Learning to write is shaped by the social interactions, linguistic resources, cultural materials, roles and identities available in the everyday events in which children participate as writers.

Studies conducted from these perspectives have often used qualitative methods to record early writing interactions in authentic contexts where children interact with others as they write their own messages. Rather than keeping the context for writing in the background, researchers have examined the ways that children’s writing is shaped by the wide variety of local literacy practices in which children participate. Themes emerging from this research are described next.

**Foundational understandings about writing**

While most studies of early writing have been conducted with older preschoolers, a few researchers have focused on describing foundational understanding that one- to three-year-olds form in their initial explorations of writing. These studies (Lancaster, 2007; Rowe, 2008a) have shown that beginning writers learn intentionality (i.e. understanding that marks represent linguistic messages) over time as adults draw their attention to their marks and negotiate how they can be read. Children in this age group also learn other foundational ‘social contracts’, about the material features of texts and expected relations between people and texts (Rowe, 2008b).

Summing up, contemporary research suggests that children begin to learn foundational ideas about writing as they interact with adults around their texts. Adults demonstrate socially valued message types and ways of using texts in these interactions, and guide children’s participation as writers. In the contexts observed to date, most of this teaching occurred implicitly as part of ongoing interaction and many of the foundational principles were so taken for granted by adults that they were not conscious targets for instruction (Rowe, 2008a). In these early writing interactions, children learn social contracts for participating as writers that are not taught as part of formal instruction.

**Writing forms and processes**

Contemporary studies confirm earlier work showing that, as children write their own messages, they construct personal hypotheses about print forms and conventions (Whitmore et al., 2004). Rowe and Wilson’s (2015) cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses have shown that two- to five-year-olds’ writing forms, directional patterns, message content and speech/print matching become progressively more conventional over time.

Researchers have also observed the beginnings of important writing processes such as idea generation, genre organization and revision in preschoolers’ writing. Ray and Glover (2008) report that three- and four-year-olds displayed emergent forms of these key writing processes as they chose topics, developed their messages, used narrative or information genre features, and revised their texts by adding, moving or removing information. Similarly, Kissel and colleagues (2011) found that four-year-olds revised their work to respond to audience interests.

Overall, contemporary research confirms that when children have opportunities to compose their own texts and to use them for social purposes, they form and test progressively more sophisticated hypotheses about print forms and conventions. They also begin to learn
about key writing processes including topic selection, idea generation, genre-specific text organization and revision.

Metacognitive awareness

Research suggests that children become consciously aware of both writing processes and meanings as they engage in writing (Dyson, 2003). Jacobs (2004) found that kindergarteners’ metacognition about writing grew with more experience. Ghiso (2010) reported that children’s writing provided teachers and children with a meaningful context for explicit discussion of writing features such as genre, structure, revision, grammar and conventions. Overall, research suggests that as children talk about their writing, they have meaningful opportunities to metacognitively reflect on the writing processes, genre structures and language used in their texts.

Writing purposes and associated genres

When young children write in their classrooms and homes, they participate in literacy events that are as diverse as those settings. Through participation in local writing events, young children begin to construct knowledge of the social uses and textual genres associated with home and school literacy practices. Developmental research on children’s writing of information reports and stories (Donovan and Smolkin, 2002) has shown that children construct emergent understandings of expository and narrative text structures. Children’s stories and information reports become more developed and conventional with experience and instruction. Recent work by Ghiso (2013) has shown that the genre-related structure of children’s texts also depends on the degree to which adults encourage young writers to structure their texts around conventional frames. Overall, contemporary research extends and confirms seminal work (e.g. Harste et al., 1984) showing that, through writing, young children construct knowledge about the organizational structures, lexical choices and social purposes associated with different genres.

Writing and play

For many contemporary researchers, play is no longer seen as a context for writing, but instead as a part of the process of ‘doing’ writing. Wohlwend (2008), for example, has argued that play is a powerful form of multimodal meaning making – a form of literacy in its own right. Lysaker et al. (2010) found that five- and six-year-olds spontaneously used playful ways of participating in writing activities including singing and chanting, expressions of strong emotion, pretend play and fantasy. They concluded that connecting school writing with play created an energized and personally meaningful environment that sustained children’s writing, provided authentic reasons for revision, and valued imagination and pretending as ways of learning and knowing.

Overall, contemporary research suggests that playful approaches to writing may be especially important for preschoolers. For this age group, play can provide opportunities, motivation and a shared context for writing. Children appear to use play as means of linking school writing activities to their personal experiences, and as an arena for trying out ways of using writing to accomplish social goals.
The value of writing in early childhood

Culturally and personally relevant writing

A number of researchers have studied writing activities designed to publicly value the out-of-school experiences of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and encourage them to use their cultural knowledge and heritage languages as resources for school writing. For example, Rowe and Miller (2016) invited four-year-olds to use digital cameras to take their own photos in home and community spaces, and then to use touchscreen tablets to write texts to accompany the photos. Results showed that children were able to use emergent writing on the tablet’s touchscreen to create captions for their photos, and then to use the tablet’s audio-recording tool to record dual-language narrations for their e-books. Children’s use of both their languages increased when family and community members helped record multilingual demonstration books including all the children’s languages.

In another study, Martínez-Álvarez and her colleagues (2012) invited six-year-old Spanish–English emergent bilinguals to take cameras home and then to write stories and comics based on the photos using both page-based and digital tools. Results showed that children who participated in composing activities grounded in their own experiences outperformed a control group on end-of-year measures of text length, text complexity and richness of imagery. Student interviews indicated that children valued opportunities to include their family and community experiences in their school writing, and analysis of their texts showed that they portrayed aspects of their personal and cultural identities.

Though these studies explicitly invited children to create texts that foregrounded their home and community experiences, Dyson (2003) has shown that six-year-olds draw on home and community funds of knowledge regardless of the writing topic. Dyson’s research shows that young writers use recontextualization processes to select and remix textual material from both inside and outside school.

Overall, contemporary research has shown that young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds showed high levels of engagement, improved language and writing, and increased self-esteem when they had opportunities to integrate family stories and community experiences into their schoolwork (Bernhard et al., 2006). Researchers have concluded that activities that explicitly valued children’s cultural experiences supported their participation as writers. However, research has also shown that children necessarily draw on and recontextualize cultural resources during writing, even when the writing activity does not overtly foreground home and community experiences.

Identity

For young children, participating in writing also involves important identity work. Adults play an important role in fostering children’s literate identities when they talk to them as if they were writers and name their unconventional marks as writing (Rowe, 2008a). Kissel and colleagues (2011) found that when four-year-olds were recognized for specific writing skills such as map-making, the children adjusted their writing practices to maintain and further develop their identities as writers.

Writing is also an arena where children develop their personal identities. Like older authors, children construct a composing voice (Dyson, 2010) that reflects their cultural experiences and personal interests. Compton-Lilly (2006) found that children’s literate identities were intimately connected to race, culture and gender. Children used writing as a means of constructing their affiliations with peers around popular culture and media interests that reflected their gendered and cultural identities.
Overall, contemporary research shows that, as children write, they have opportunities to form identities as the kinds of persons who can use writing for academic and social purposes. Children develop a writing voice that reflects their cultural, racial and gendered experiences, and use their literate identities to mediate their interactions with others.

Conclusions: sociocultural studies

Contemporary studies conducted from sociocultural perspectives have focused on describing what young children are learning about writing through social participation in local literacy events. Research supports the following conclusions about the importance of writing in early childhood:

1. As early as age two, children construct understandings about writing that are rarely taught directly, but are foundational for their participation as writers.
2. Through participation in writing events, children form and test progressively more sophisticated hypotheses about writing processes such as idea generation, encoding processes and revision.
3. Writing can encourage metacognitive reflection on writing processes and text features.
4. Children learn about social purposes for writing and construct emergent understandings of the genre features.
5. Play provides opportunities, motivation and shared contexts for writing. In play, children link school writing to personal and peer culture experiences, and try out writing roles and processes in a low-risk environment.
6. Children do important identity work as they engage as writers.
7. Children learn to re-contextualize culturally and personally meaningful content in their writing. Culturally relevant writing experiences foster high levels of engagement and motivation, as well as positive self-esteem.

Making the case for writing in early childhood

My goal in this chapter has been to provide empirical answers to basic questions about the value of engaging preschoolers in writing. Despite differences in research focus, theoretical framing, methodology, writing measures and writing activities, contemporary research converges on one conclusion: writing can provide powerful opportunities for literacy learning in early childhood. When children have opportunities to compose their own messages and when their emergent writing attempts are valued and supported, they begin forming foundational knowledge about writing processes and the use of writing as a mode of social discourse (Tolchinsky, 2015).

Research shows that children are careful observers of the world around them, and for many, print is a visible and important part of the environment. When they have access to writing tools, and are invited to participate as writers, they put their considerable skills as learners to work in noticing what writing looks like, how it is used to get things done in the world and what kinds of written messages they are likely to encounter in different places and social situations. In other words, ‘scribbling’ is important. It serves as a test bench for literacy learning. Emergent writing is the way children test out their current ideas about writing.
Writing provides an authentic opportunity for preschoolers to integrate what they are being taught about print (e.g. letter names and shapes, how to write their name) with their own observations. Through writing, preschoolers begin to construct their own understandings of print processes such as speech–print match, phoneme segmentation and letter–sound correspondence. Research shows that such early experiences with writing build a strong foundation for success in learning to read.

When children write as participants in authentic, meaningful activities, they not only learn about the technical aspects of encoding spoken words in print, but also how writing is used in social situations. As children begin to playfully take up their roles as writers in everyday experiences at home and school, they come to see themselves as writers. Both seminal and contemporary research show that, for young children, writing and play are linked. Children experiment with writing as part of dramatic play and participate in writing events playfully. In early childhood, play provides a meaningful context for children’s explorations of writing.

Though these empirical findings build a strong case for the importance of early childhood writing experiences, many preschoolers have few opportunities to compose their own texts using emergent forms of writing. It is not uncommon for US preschools (Gerde et al., 2015; Pelatti et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015) to limit young children’s writing to copying alphabet letters and writing their names. This disconnect between research and educational practice is a practical problem that deserves attention from researchers, curriculum developers and policy-makers. The dissemination of research-based information on early writing development and supportive preschool writing contexts should be given high priority in educational efforts directed at parents, caregivers and teachers of young children.

References


The value of writing in early childhood


