



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

Supporting Young Writers in Preschool:
A Framework for Understanding
Early Writing Development

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QUESTIONS FROM MARCH 25, 2013 FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

- Q:** Would you encourage preschool teachers to create an early literacy corner or a writing center, or do you think it's more helpful to have writing implements and opportunities throughout the classroom? Do you have strong feelings either way, or have you seen them done well?
- A:** I think this is a great question. When you think about writing in most classrooms, if preschool teachers are including writing, most of the time it will be in an early writing center or during a writing workshop time. And while that is good and I would encourage, definitely, having a writing center and encouraging children to go there, I do believe that integrating writing throughout all aspects of the day—whether it is centers or when they're journaling, during your morning message, during science—the more you can integrate writing into what you're doing, the better it's going to be for children in terms of their literacy learning. Because when I think of early writing, I don't think of just writing in a bubble. I think of how it connects with their knowledge of print, and their knowledge of sound, and how that comes together—and how actively they are making hypotheses about how print works. So I definitely would recommend that writing be integrated into multiple areas throughout the day.
- Q:** The connection between being a writer and being a scientist, is lovely to think about and it's really true when you think about how children are learning early writing. How important is it to differentiate between upper and lowercase letters for young children?
- A:** I think there are two things here. When we think about alphabet knowledge, we have to keep in mind that their writing might not represent everything that they understand. So Marie Clay put it well when she said that the children's eyes might perceive more than their hands can produce. Preschool children are dealing with fine motor issues; their fine motor skills are growing. So when we think about what they're producing, I personally don't get hung up on upper or lowercase. In fact, children will begin producing uppercase first, probably because it's most distinctive. The lowercase letters, there's a lot that you can confuse, like Ps and Bs. You'll notice from your own classrooms and being around children that they use space on a page in different ways than we do and they experiment with it. Instead of getting hung up on upper versus lowercase, I would say allow them to explore what they're doing, and understand that it will be a lot of uppercase. I think that's perfectly fine, because as they enter kindergarten and first grade, they'll have to confine their writing more and more, and they'll have to produce conventional forms more and more. So in preschool, I often recommend

that they're not required to use lined paper, for example, that it's a blank paper, and that you're accepting representations that they're producing. But that's not to say that practicing lowercase is bad, or that you wouldn't want them to end up writing their name in upper and lowercase letters, because that's the conventional spelling.

Q: We had quite a few questions just about that topic of lined paper and if that should be used in preschool, and it sounds like providing a variety of papers but also letting them be writing on the blank page is important for preschoolers' development. What about tracing letters? Would you encourage that they trace their names, or is it copying their names? How would you suggest scaffolding name-writing?

A: Let me back up about the paper. Having lined paper is not bad, it's just that the blank paper will allow them to write more freely and explore the space more freely. And it may not be necessary to confine their writing to the lines right now. Tracing and copying are really commonly used in preschool classrooms. When I see the writing going on, there is a lot of tracing and copying. And I think you have to know what purpose you're doing it for. So if the goal is to build children's literacy development, and not alphabet knowledge, then tracing and copying might help with that. But [tracing and copying], especially tracing, is really helping them with that mechanical aspect of writing or their handwriting. In terms of developing their literacy learning, if they're tracing or copying you might want to point out the letters that they're making, because that will help them. This is not to say that there isn't a place for tracing and copying, there is, but I think it's knowing why you're doing what you're doing that's important.

Q: It's almost counterintuitive that we sometimes have larger crayons and larger pencils for the smaller hands. So can you speak to that? What would you want to see in terms of writing implements for children three to five?

A: That's a really interesting point. This has to do with the mechanical aspects of writing, and I think the reason for the chunkier pen or pencils are because they don't have control, the fine motor control, to grip and to use the smaller pencil. I do recommend a variety of implements—from markers, pens, pencils, chalk, and using their fingers as well—to make the letters in sand or shaving cream, or something like that. All of that I include as writing. Included in writing are using letter tiles as well. There's many ways to make the writing, so to speak, but I would include a variety—that they would see both in their normal lives. They get excited about it, one, but secondly, they have the opportunity to just explore with a variety of implements.

Q: What do you think about writing on iPads? So we're seeing more and more tablets in preschool classrooms. What's your thought on that?

A: Yeah, that's interesting. We will be seeing that more and more as the time goes by. I think that you have to think about the purpose. And if the purpose is helping children grow in their literacy, and they're using the iPad to put letters together, I think that simulates writing the same as a writing implement would. [It's] another way to get writing into the classroom in a way that is meaningful to children's everyday experiences. If they're typing in letters, I would encourage that it's closely supervised, and that they would be in at least the beginning of salient sounds stage where they're actually writing with letters and connecting letters with sounds. But I think that the use of the iPad or tablet with their finger is a great use of it and would serve similar kinds of purposes.

Q: Understanding that children see their names as a picture, how do we encourage preoperational children to break the sounds apart in their name? Or do we treat the name-writing separately, or differently, than some of the other emergent writing they might do? You were talking about Mr. Miller, and helping the little girl understand the different sounds in "Pennsylvania." That might be different than when they're writing their names, correct?

A: Yes. I think that name-writing is very special. It presents a special opportunity. You're right in saying that name-writing develops differently, but it's not completely unconnected. Although a child will be able to write their full name, like we saw in Aaron, and may not be able to connect sounds, it is still correlated or connected with being able to write your full name. It's still connected with other literacy skills. Children who are able to write their full name, for example, also have better print knowledge, and some studies show that they have better sound knowledge. It's all correlated. It is true that you want to offer other writing opportunities. Children love to write their name and, in classrooms, name-writing is sometimes the only writing opportunity that's offered to children. And name-writing is also the first stable string of writing children generally produce that looks conventional.

I think it's important that we keep encouraging name-writing, because it's important to children. And I would use name-writing as a way to improve children's literacy learning, by using it as a springboard for learning about letters and sounds. You can use children's own names and point out the letters to them, or you can use other children's names and point out letters and sounds that are alike. Dorit Aram and colleagues from Israel have done just that. They've used letter names, beginning sounds in Hebrew, and used pictures of children. Connect them with their names, and play games like that with their names, so that children are connecting the initial sound of children's names with the writing.

Q: I remember seeing a Head Start teacher who used to have a magic envelope. She'd put children's name cards that she had written out at the beginning of the year and laminated them, and they would do so many fun things with that. She would put them all in the magic envelope where it would obscure the rest of their name, [and then] pull it out one letter at a time and talk about the sound that the letter made and ask—"Whose name do you think it might be?" If there were a lot of children's names who started with "S" for example, she would pull it out one letter at a time. It was really fun for them to play games with that, and think about that letter and how many kids had that letter in their name. Then you'd have to wait for the next letter to really know if it was going to be Steven or Sheila, for example. That was a fun way to get children to play with their names and the sounds.

One last question: this will be all we have time for, but I think this is really important because I don't think we want folks to leave today thinking that they should be working a lot on correctly forming letters with preschoolers. Would you agree that it's more important to focus on the process of writing and orthographics rather than actual handwriting, the mechanics, and correctly forming letters at the preschool age?

A: Absolutely. I agree that it's important to focus on children's orthographic knowledge like we focused on here, because children's fine motor skills are just developing. And if we focus exclusively on the mechanics of letter formation, they're going to get that as they continue to go through school. However, now is the opportunity to really capitalize on children's interests, what they actively want to explore, by improving their literacy through helping them with their orthographic writing. In addition, if we focus so heavily on mechanics, children may feel like they have to get everything correct, as the adult puts it, or conventional. And then they get the message that they really can't commit anything to paper unless it's perfect to an adult. That's something that I try to combat, and also that many teachers ask me about. If a child doesn't want to write anything because he feels like he'll be wrong, you have to first change that feeling in the child, and encourage them and praise them for what they are producing, so that they can then feel free to explore and move forward.



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