

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

**Key Focus:** Literacy

**Observation:** After drawing self-portraits, you ask children to write their name on their paper. Most children write one letter (often the first letter of their name), like Barbara. A few children write two or three letters, like Charlie. Some children's writing resembles scribbles rather than letters, like Yvette.

Barbara Jones:



Yvette:



Charlie David:



Two months later, you conduct the same activity to compare how the children's writing has progressed. You notice the following when children are writing their names on their work: Most children can write their name, although the letters may be out of order, backwards, or missing (for example Barbara). A few children write their first name and the first letter of their last name, like Charlie. A few children can write the first letter of their name (like Yvette). Two children are still not writing any letters.

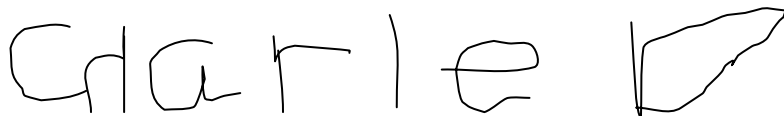
Barbara:



Yvette:



Charlie:



**Reflecting on the Documentation:**

*\*Participants may quickly shift from reflecting on the documentation to interpreting the observation or suggesting strategies for extending learning. Remind participants to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the documentation technique.*

**Ask:** How does collecting children's writing samples help give you insight into children's knowledge of letters and concepts about print?

**Sample Responses:** By looking at children's writing, it is easier to identify which letters children are able to form, the directionality of the letters and their ability to write from left to right.

Interpretation of  
the Observation:

*\*Remind participants that in their interpretation they are looking for patterns, critical incidents, or errors. It is important to stick to the data.*

**Ask:** What do we know about the children's ability to write their names in the fall?

**Sample Responses:** Barbara writes the first letter in her name, forming it legibly (that is, writes a recognizable B). Yvette is in the "scribble" phase and seems to understand that a name is more than a picture. To Yvette, "writing" looks like scribbles. Charlie is perhaps the most developed of all the children in the fall for whom we have samples. He is able to distinguish multiple letters of his name, although they are not written left to right.

**Ask:** Is this what you would expect for four-year-olds at the beginning of the school year? How would you know?

**Sample Responses:** The best places to look are in a child development textbook or handbook, an early childhood development website, or an assessment tool that provides information about the ages at which you would expect different behavior. There is an expected sequence associated with developing writing skills. For example, first a child might draw pictures. The child might then try to include scribbles or shapes with drawings, intimating the child's knowledge that writing is different from pictures. As a next step, the child might then include random letters of his or her name repetitively throughout the page. Children often associate their entire name with the first letter of their name. As children develop knowledge of more letters of their names, they might string them together, either in order or haphazardly throughout the page, finally writing the full name.

**Ask:** Compare each child's writing development from the beginning of the year to now.

**Sample Responses:** Barbara grows tremendously and is now writing from left to right with multiple letters of her name including "B." "A." and "R". She uses both capital and lower-cases letters, although some of her letters are written backwards. Yvette appears to know that her name begins with "Y" and that there are multiple letters in a name. Charlie writes almost his entire first name legibly and includes the first letter of his last name. The orientation on the "h" is reversed.

**Ask:** Is this what you would expect for four-year-olds?

**Sample Responses:** You would expect to see growth in name writing over the course of two months, and each of these children has demonstrated just that. You would not necessarily expect 4-year olds to write their names like adults, but rather begin to master the letters, sequence of letters, and direction of their name.

Relating Your Observation to the Child Outcomes Framework:

*\*Although participants can defend other interpretations, there should be general consensus that this observation demonstrates:*

**2D4 (Literacy/ Early Writing):** Progresses from using scribbles, shapes, or pictures to represent ideas, to using letter-like symbols, to copying or writing familiar words such as their own name.

**2E4 (Literacy/ Alphabet Knowledge):** Knows that letters of the alphabet are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.

**2C3 (Literacy/ Print Awareness & Concepts):** Demonstrates increasing awareness of concepts of print, such as that reading in English moves from top to bottom and from left to right, that speech can be written down, and that print conveys a message.

**8B3 (Physical Health and Development/ Fine Motor Skills):** Progresses in abilities to use writing, drawing, and art tools including pencils, markers, chalk, paint brushes, and various types of technology.

Next steps for large group instruction:

*\*Help participants make connections between what they learn from the assessment and the next steps they want to take in instruction. If suggestions for instruction extend activities to new areas of learning, ask participants to consider what aspects of children's progress they would assess and how they would do so during those extension activities.*

**Ask:** What would you recommend that the teacher do next for the class as a whole?

*\*Responses will vary but might include:*

Teachers might develop more activities that routinely promote natural name recognition and writing throughout the day. For example: asking children to sign in every morning, putting cards with children's names where they are supposed to sit at circle, singing songs that spell children's names, setting up centers where children can match names to students' pictures, or letters to names. Make name puzzles for children.

Next steps for individualized instruction:

*Note: It is important here to stress that the goal is not for every child to write his or her name perfectly, but rather to help a child move from one stage to the next. Capital letters are easier for children than lower case letters. Letters with diagonal lines (such as Y and V) are more difficult for children.*

**Ask:** What activities would you provide for children who can write multiple letters of their name, can write the first letter of their name, or cannot write any letters of their name? What would you suggest for children who show interest in their last name, or who write their name out of order or missing letters?

*\* Responses will vary but might include:*

- For children like Charlie who can write multiple letters of their name, you might work with the child to think about capital and lower case letters and the differences between the two. If there is a

problem with orientation of the letters (backwards letters) you may want to keep a model (a card with his or her name on it) close by or prompt the child verbally (“first draw the line down and then make a hump”).

- For a child like Barbara in the fall, who can write only the first letter of her name, you might try introducing the second letter by having her practice writing it and identifying it in other people’s names or in other words. Provide a model for her to trace with her finger or pencil before trying to write herself. Encourage children to make the letters of their names in sand, trace their names with a flashlight, or stamp the letters of their names with letter stamps.
- A good start for these children is to have them think about what names are—through identification and games—and give them just the first letter of their names to trace or practice. You may prompt verbally as suggested for Charlie (“a line down, another line down and then connect in the middle for ‘H’”). Type the letters of their name on the computer to learn the sequence. Encourage more fine motor practice. Offer other opportunities to draw shapes and lines with a variety of writing implements. Form play dough into a line and place it over the letters to form a name. Maybe make a “name road” for them to run a toy car over. Assure that the child has the hand strength and arm stability to hold the pen or pencil well (to build these skills, use play dough or pegboards, string beads, play with beanbags, water plants with spray bottles, draw with sidewalk chalk, or paint).
- For children who show interest in learning about their last name you might try to help them develop the letters that they are missing.
- For out-of-order letters or missing letters, you might develop name puzzles, where children have the opportunity to mix and match the letters of their names, but come to one final solution that is in the correct order.

**Additional Notes:** The more opportunities children have to use writing tools (for example, crayons, pens, markers, and chalk), the more comfortable they will be in using these tools. Support both their fine motor development and their knowledge of the sequence of letters in their name. They can learn the sequence and names of the letters even if they are not yet able to plan the movements to copy the letters.

For information on fine motor development in 3- to 6-year-old children, visit <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002013.htm>

For tools to assess emergent reading and writing, check out the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory website:

<http://www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/llap/EmergentReader.pdf>

See also the Annotated Bibliography in these materials.