Writing in the Preschool Classroom: The Emergent Writer

Lisa Walsh

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Writing in the Preschool Classroom: The Emergent Writer

by

Lisa Walsh

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts, English

To be conferred January 2012

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

English Department

Certified by:

Dr. Marietta Morrissey
Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

(date)

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Emily J. Islas, Thesis Sponsor

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of how preschoolers write, what preschool writing looks like, and how teachers can better position themselves to create strong and engaged writers. Intended to provide busy preschool teachers with real-world solutions, this thesis will focus on the research that points to best practices in the classroom and discuss what works and what doesn’t. While discussing the common challenges in preschool literacy, this thesis will discuss how home involvement greatly affects writing literacy and will therefore suggest ways in which to better engage and train parents. Current theories of literacy development are also explored through the framework of the preschool writer. A discussion of Universal Preschool and the merits of a public system available to all children will conclude this thesis.
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Introduction

If you are a baseball fan, like our family, and watch a lot of players who people consider good hitters, you may hear things like “what a natural,” “he’s just good,” “he just knows how to do it.” When our three-year-old took a major interest in baseball, an obsessive interest in baseball, my husband was in our backyard with him every night in the summer, sweating and pitching ball after ball. Like many other parents, we had that conversation, as we watched him go from a plastic bat, to a wooden bat, finally to a metal bat: is this a phase? Is he really any good? We wondered, do all kids deceive their parents this way with an obsessive interest in something, making us think that he might really have some hidden, innate talent? We watched him dink the ball, finally get some hits, then legitimate homeruns, with my husband actually measuring them, to our family’s “homerun” regulations, to be sure. From the moment our son woke in the morning until he went to bed at night, he lived and sweat baseball, running the bases, swinging the bat and memorizing the nuances of each Yankee player’s batting stance. He learned his letters and numbers, in part, because he wanted to know that Jeter was number 2 and was spelled “J-E-T-E-R” (even though the Yankees NEVER have their last names on their uniform, this is very important to know). My husband, the knower of every New York sports statistic known to humans, began sharing these tidbits with my son, and, by
proximity, with me. “Did you know that Jeter grew up in Michigan, where it is very cold in the winter and, so, his dad made their garage just like their backyard and would throw him baseballs so he could still hit every day? Yup, he would hit every day, no matter what the weather!” My son’s eyes lit up, imagining our own garage being converted into his very own indoor batting cage. I shook my head no before the question was ever even asked. Then, my husband started teaching history, “Did you know Mickey Mantle’s dad would pitch 100 balls to the right side of the plate and his grandpa would pitch 100 balls to the left? Every day!” My son’s reaction was always the same: awe. I even started reading Derek Jeter biographies, in search of the answers I was seeking, this chicken-or-the-egg theory. I often wondered who was more enthusiastic; my son, who waited in the driveway for his dad’s car to turn in, already wearing full baseball attire and cleats, or my husband, who, after twelve hours of work would run upstairs like an adolescent to change into his “play” clothes and pitch until well after dark.

This leads me to the connection between baseball and writing and my earlier observation that good hitters are simply naturally good. There is a common misconception, I believe, that people who can cook, who are good athletes, who are talented musicians, etc. are oftentimes regarded as naturals. They are just good! They just are! But the truth is, I believe, and as I hope to persuade readers of this thesis, they are not. People like Derek Jeter spend most of their days practicing to be good. People like Eli Manning of the New York Giants admit to watching thousands of hours of tape of his own work and that of other teams when he is not working on his own skills. People who are good spent most of their youth with people who either truly loved the game or
desperately wanted them to succeed at it. This is where my husband and I completely disagree about talented athletes, for he wants to believe that Derek Jeter was born to be the world’s most talented short-stop, able to do that pirouette-like turn and throw that every sports fan sees on Sports Center highlights. While I cannot deny that there may be people in the world who are simply born gifted, I would say that most of the people walking around and contributing to society today are not merely sitting on their hands all day and just showing up at game time, magically being good. They are those that spend most of the time working toward their goal. Like baseball, cooking, playing the violin, and millions of other things worthy of doing, writing is one of those things. Whether it is the hard work that Derek Jeter put into his game or his natural born ability that made him want to put the hard work into the game, we cannot know. The facts that we do know are these: Derek Jeter is good and he practiced a lot. We can assume that the practice that he put into his game had an effect on the outcome.

We can logically apply this Derek Jeter argument to writing development. What further helps my argument, as I hope to pick up on throughout this thesis, is that most athletes start their athletic careers at a young age and that participation in sports has some life-affirming affect on their lives. This, too, is how writing can affect young writers. If, at an early age, we can get children to feel the effect of writing and see how it can profoundly affect and change their lives, they will work harder at becoming better writers. Lucy Calkins says, “Ninety percent of children come to school believing they can write. This shouldn’t be a surprise; children believe they can sweep the floor, too, long before they actually can. They believe they can be pilots, chefs, and parents and clowns
and animal trainers and teachers…” (62). She’s right. My son believes that if he does exactly what Derek Jeter did that he can be Derek Jeter. Sometimes I think he thinks he can be better than Derek Jeter. This confidence, this total belief in the self, this will to never self-doubt and try, try, try is what comes only from the very young who have yet to be beaten down by failure and by life. This is the age I want to focus on because it is the very seed of hope. It’s the beginning of it all. My son truly believes he can have it all. He’s never been told that he can’t. Why should we tell him otherwise? Someday he may be the next Derek Jeter! Or, maybe, he thinks, even better. But the problem is just this: children, preschoolers often and especially, have this overwhelming feeling of confidence. It’s only when they start to interact with adults, parents, teachers, and those who “know better” when their confidence starts to erode. They suddenly don’t know what they thought they did, or they simply learn that they truly don’t know all they thought they did. I have seen this happen in my own pre-school where I have served as director for over seven years, and I’m certain I’ll see it soon with my own children. This thesis is an exploration of those moments between that resounding confidence and what happens next, what teachers wring their hands and hearts over and what, if anything, can be done to maintain that momentary delight in the possible. Writing can be that bridge for children, just as sports can pull kids back from trouble, from despair, and uncertainty, so, too, writing can be that outlet. An exercise of the brain and heart, writing’s payoff can be just as great as hitting homeruns and dunking baskets. But what we have to do and what has been missing in so many preschool classes is allowing children to write from the moment they can pick up any writing object. I’ve seen preschool and toddler parents in my school raise their eyebrows when we discuss writing. They smirk at the thought that
their children can even begin to convey messages at this point in their lives. Or perhaps
they are smirking at the idea that their children have any meaningful messages to convey.
But why should this age group be excluded from the writing process when it is at this age
that they are their most confident selves? Now that I have a second child, he has literally
held a bat from the moment he was strong enough to hold it, perhaps four months old. It’s
a small bat, but it’s a bat. This, too, should be our mindset with writing. Let them “do”
writing. Small writing, big writing, whatever writing they can do.

Prior to my work with pre-school children, I worked in the university writing
center and taught basic writing, and in these capacities I worked with many struggling
college writers. I have seen the problems struggling writers face with composing their
thoughts clearly and in an organized manner, with compiling an essay with basic
grammar competence, and feeling an overall lack of confidence in their writing skills. In
what I have seen as a tutor, very few have enjoyed writing and even fewer have written
for the sake of writing. Typically, for these students, journaling, keeping a diary, or
freewriting is something only done when assigned. Writing is agony. Over the last ten
years, however, I have been dealing primarily with preschool writers who bring with
them no prior writing baggage. Yet, they have brought to me a whole new intriguing set
of challenges. Preschoolers approach writing as a task that can bring them into a new and
secret, “big people” society and, as such, approach it with energy and enthusiasm. An
interesting juxtaposition, these two different age-groups have led me to wonder where the
enthusiasm stops and the foot-dragging, painful procrastination of some college writers
starts. Where is this line and how does it start? Can a stronger base of writing
“instruction,” a term I’m using very loosely, at the preschool level and a focus throughout the primary levels help to thwart some of the problems I saw at the college writing center? As Peter Elbow says in the introduction to Everyone Can Write, “Most people have had bad experience with writing. They have come to dislike it or fear it and usually avoid it. Few people write by choice” (XIV). If everyone can write and learn to enjoy writing, and I believe they can at the very least learn to use writing as a tool if not come to enjoy writing, how can pleasurable writing be taught from the start? Peter Elbow defines “hopeful truths” as the abilities to write without too much struggle, to figure out what is truly meant, to write it down clearly on paper, and to make a connection with the reader (xiv, introduction). But preschool-aged children are just starting in school, entering a classroom for the first time. They have had no bad experiences with writing or some have no experiences at all. This is the very opportunity to seize young writers-- before most people would even define them as writers at all—and plant within them not only the skills needed to be strong writers, but to be confident and well-“spoken” writers as well. I would argue that writing is the most essential skill to be learned, one that is relied upon in every other academic subject as well as almost every career path. The opportunities to do so are there. In my present position of daycare director, we have children in our care for nearly twelve hours a day. With such a long day, we have the power, sadly even more so than parents, to influence the way children feel about reading and writing. Yet, I don’t think that we as a school, I as a director, and, perhaps, the nation’s educational preschool system as a whole, have enough systems in place to ensure a strong enough foundation for reading and writing success. How can this be? The stage is set for success. We have the fancy classrooms, the child-sized tables, readily-available supplies, and certainly we
have the children in our care. We definitely have the time. Yet, I feel that some pieces of the puzzle are missing. This thesis explores those missing pieces and attempts to set forth the plan in place, helping both me and my teachers gain a clearer picture as to what the research says is best for our preschool writers.

What Pre-School Literacy Might Look Like

To understand literacy from a historical perspective, William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby discuss the child development maturationalist philosophies of Arnold Gesell. He believed that children could and would only progress cognitively or with motor development when neural ripening had occurred. According to this philosophy, it was useless to provide reading or writing background or instruction until a child had reached a certain developmental age, roughly five or six, or when the child is fully ready to pick up a book and read. This was a bit of a “wait and see” mentality, which assumed that nothing could be done to help a child to be a better reader or writer and that it served no purpose to lay any groundwork (ix, introduction). Gesell’s perspective has been challenged by and replaced by an emergent view of literacy, one that views children as learning to read and write from birth onward; however, I will later discuss that our country’s education policies have not moved much beyond Gesell’s “wait and see” approach. If, as is stated over and over again in many studies, so much cognitive development is happening from ages zero to five just by children talking to adults, walking around the grocery store, and seeing street signs on the corner, as I will later
discuss, a unified system of literacy-rich preschool where children from every socio-economic level are included would have far-reaching impact. I wonder now, as I reflect on my experience with struggling college writers, if a universal Preschool system, such as I will discuss, could have changed the course for many of these college writers sitting in writing centers today.

This thesis will also serve to focus more pointedly on the research behind the techniques being used in many preschool classrooms today and to draw implications about how early exposure to print can be indicative of later success with reading and writing skills. I will focus on techniques and activities that can readily be used by preschool teachers to motivate young children to want to write. In this thesis, I will draw on *The Beginning of Writing* by Charles Temple and colleagues to discuss early childhood writing patterns, including children who are encouraged to use invented spelling verses those who are forced to write and spell using more traditional methods and what longitudinal effects this has on their desire to write. For example, Temple et al find that children who come to school less advanced than average, and with fewer books at home, made long-term gains through pedagogy of invented spelling (11). I will define invented spelling, discuss the benefits and possible gains from using it and what challenges teachers may face. I will then again call for a more uniform system of preschool, with a logical and standard curriculum, across the nation, which would better prepare students for the challenges ahead.

A first step in understanding pre-school literacy is to see the importance of play as a tool for learning. Incorporating play into literacy activities has been shown to to make a
dynamic impact on children’s attitudes towards writing. As Jodi Welsch discusses, children who are provided with multiple literacy opportunities throughout the day become more comfortable with the writing process and more comfortable with simply writing more. “Research indicates that play around stories may encourage the development of critical comprehension skills while simultaneously developing students’ love of stories and their abilities to connect to books on a personal level” (138). As Welsch goes on to explain, for someone who is comfortable using their imagination through story-telling and dress-up, “a pencil is no longer a writing implement but is mentally transformed into a magic wand, and the waving of the ‘wand’ and casting of the spells depend on an abstract idea” (138). In the same context, a writer who is comfortable writing more is likely to have more confidence doing so and is likely to be more comfortable with revisions, multiple drafts, feedback, and will likely find her voice more easily than someone who agonizes over every word, writing and rewriting each sentence as she goes.

Further discussion of literacy through play reveals that the usage of props and familiar stories engages children and allows them to take control over the story and make it their own. As Welsch discusses one preschool teacher read *The Three Little Pigs* to her students, but used props such as sponges to represent bricks, a tent, hair for the wolf, and pencils as building materials. After reading the story and discussing it, the teacher put these props in a center area and allowed the children to explore. During this time they were observed and found that they reenacted the book, asserting their own agency over the characters and changing the story to serve their own purposes. Other students
extended the story, adding additional elements. What is interesting about this is that
children use pretend play to exercise control over situations. They can change the story,
make it more like their life or, in some cases, not at all like their real life. They can make
silly stories scary or scary stories happy. “The pretend world is a place where preschool
students have a great deal of control... When pretending, students translate their
perceptions of the real world into the actions that create and define the world of play”
(138). As paradoxical as this sounds, as Welsch states, this type of pretend play can better
help children understand their own world. The playing out of pretend helps them better
understand their own reality and is the framework for creativity that will later grow on
paper. “One of the most complex forms of play, symbolic or pretend play, requires
students to use mental representations to change the meanings of actions and objects”
(138). Such substitutions require creative muscle and allow students to deeply interact
with the text as they engage with it and play around with the characters, scenes, and
scenarios. One can easily see how the beginnings of storymaking can start right here with
just a few simple tools. This is the very beginning of storytelling. While they are acting it
out now with the use of props, later on this will translate to a story on the page. The
flexibility the students used earlier on to change the story and make it more or less like
their lives will also help them when developing stories for creative writing. Children are
infamous for storytelling, and also for their ability to change small details, often to their
parents’ dismay. This is actually a skill that parents should encourage.

**Literacy Theories**
It’s hard for parents to conceptualize writing when you add “preschool” to the term. Traditionally, writing is supposed to be composed of a clearly defined messaged—a message one adult writes to another. When considering children and the subject of writing, it is important to discuss the term writing as it applies to this age group. While it may look much different from traditional “adult” writing, the writing of young children can be just as meaningful. Scribbles, marks, the beginning shapes of the alphabet, as well as traditional letters are all components of emergent writing because they hold meaning for the writer and are the beginning of communication. These marks are important because they show that the child has an understanding of symbols that can be shared and interpreted by others. According to the findings of Anne Haas Dyson, children often use the terms “write” and “draw” synonymously: “Contrary to popular belief, writing may not begin as speech written down. The differentiation of writing from drawing and its precise connection with language is not necessarily a step preceding, but a gradual process occurring during and through first attempts to represent experience” (22). As Lucy Calkins discusses in The Art of Teaching Writing, drawing is like a pathway to writing because children can easily get their thoughts down on paper using a visual representation without being encumbered by rules that are more challenging to them. Calkins writes about a child, Chris, who moves back and forth from drawing to writing, weaving between writing and drawing to remind himself of what it was he wanted to say.

When he writes, Chris is like a newborn foal; he stands on shaky legs. When he does not have a visual memory of a word, he sounds it out:

‘Fighting.’…Meanwhile, he’s forgotten what he wanted to write. What a
relief it must be to return to the drawing, to darken his brother’s fist! As he carefully fills in his hand, Chris remembers what he wanted to write, so he returns to print. Back and forth he switches, from drawing to writing, then back to writing again, moving from the relief and stability of one medium to the challenge of the other (85).

What is remarkable about Chris is that he doesn’t give up when he has forgotten what it is that he wants to say. He doesn’t throw down his pencil and walk away or raise his hand and ask for help. He returns to his drawing and concentrates on what he was doing and the thought returns to him. This shows the power of Chris’s drawings to him. He has used it as a bit of a crutch to remind him of what he had going on in his thoughts. When his thoughts return, he returns to writing. As Calkins states, “the drawings are far more important to Chris than the writing; the drawings take up most of the time and most of his paper, and they convey most of his story” (84). But this will be true for only part of the time he spends as an emerging writer. The goal for him is to use drawings as a method of expression until he no longer needs to rely on them. Calkins estimates that for most first to second graders, drawings should no longer be needed as an essential part of the writing process and could become an unnecessary crutch. She stresses that the use of pictures can easily become a habit and estimates this timeframe as a good age to start weaning children off the routine of drawing first. “In time, children learn to create autonomous, explicit texts, but during their early forays into writing, they often embed much of their meaning in the picture rather than in the text” (85). Calkins tells a story about a colleague who was working with a kindergarten teacher who had a child she had just about given
up on. She was working very hard with a child but the child seemed to be getting nowhere. The teacher was willing to accept his drawings, but said that the child continued to draw the same thing over and over again. The drawing appeared to be meaningless. Calkins’ colleague looked at the child’s work and at first glance, seemed to agree. Each page of the book was the same, depicting a square-shaped man, except for the last which had a drawing of a flower. The colleague finally asked the boy to discuss the book with her and to narrate what was happening on each page. The following is the boy’s description of his book:

'Once upon a time Mr. Toastman wanted to make a flower,’ he said, ‘so he got a seed.’ The boy showed her page one, with Mr. Toastman and the seed. ‘You can’t see the seed,’ he explained. Then, on page two, Mr. Toastman got some dirt (and sure enough, there was a smudge on his hand), and on page three, he got some more dirt (a bigger smudge). The book ends with the seed growing into a flower (67).

What does this child’s book demonstrate? While his teacher’s goals were alphabetic and phonemic awareness, which she feared Chris hadn’t achieved, she was also blind to what other valuable literacy skills he had acquired. He is aware of subtleties of a story, a beginning, middle, and end. He has grown the anticipation of his story line, making his reader wonder—what will happen next? This child clearly feels like he is a writer, and he is one! As Calkins says, “Because more information is embedded in the pictures than in the print, drawing provides a horizon and leads the children into the writing. In a sense, our goal at this stage is to help children’s writing catch up with their drawing” (88). This
child already possesses a sense of stories and can recreate his own. His writing ability will certainly catch up because he is already interested in what it takes to make a story. The teacher’s concerns—demonstrating alphabetic principals and sound correlations—will be addressed naturally as long as the boy continues to find interest in telling a story. As long as he continues to have a desire to communicate a message, the skills will catch up. What I find humorous is that he told the same story over and over again in a number of books. Perhaps this repetition can be attributed to his teacher’s misunderstanding of the story the first few times. Once understood, he may have felt able to move on to another story or another skill!

Just as children use drawing as a means of expression, writing, too, can be used the same way. As James Britton discusses in *Language and Learning*, language is a means by which we attempt to recreate our experiences. It provides us with a means by which to understand and systematically order our ideas and events of our lives (21). Writing, even for very small children, can do the same thing by restoring order and understanding to the chaos in their lives. Britton goes on to explain that classification and order is necessary for learning and growth. By classifying, children come to understand how language works. As a young baby, the sound “ba” might represent all food, but as the baby grows he or she starts to drill down the classification and become more specific. The same thing, too, happens when children start to learn letters, words, and sentences. As they become more sophisticated and aware, they learn that putting sounds together can change the word. Classification becomes a means of ordering the word and understanding what goes where. Babies come equipped with their own set of rules, and
adults, who oftentimes don’t understand these rules, think that no rule applies. I often think of my own son who was just learning to speak and called his cat “Ka,” then suddenly started to call his grandparents “Ka.” We thought he was just starting to call everything “Ka” and disregarded it. Then, he saw his first snowfall and went to the window and got so excited and kept repeating “Ka! Ka!” Hours later we realized, all of these things were white: his cat had white fur, his grandparents both had white hair and the snow that was falling was white. All looked soft and his word for all became “Ka.” He had put it together in his mind what made the most sense and came up with his own rule based on ordering. As he became more sophisticated, and with some correction, these quickly became reclassified into other groups with greater success. As adults we are often quick to disregard what we don’t understand or what does not conform to traditional ordering processes, simply thinking that the child hasn’t yet caught on. But children often have a different logic and a unique perspective. If we choose to pay enough attention, young children’s ideas of ordering can be seen to be highly sophisticated and clever, even if unexpected.

Much like Britton’s approach, Lucy Calkins discusses encouraging children to write in the same context as parents encourage children to talk. When she makes this analogy between talk and writing in this way, teaching emergent writing becomes more manageable and imaginable. As she says, parents easily immerse their babies in talk, using cooing and silly words to get their children to respond to them. They see neither harm nor fear of failure in any attempts the baby makes and further delight in any sounds with which the child responds. “We saturate babies in the cadences, sounds, rhythms, and
purposes of spoken languages” (55). She goes on to further explain that we pretend, if not fully expect, that our babies are complete participants of our language, asking them questions, waiting for a response, pretending that they have given a response, even laughing and delighting in the responses that we have imagined for them. As she says, we don’t give a second thought to errors:

We don’t worry that the child will fixate on bad habits, that she’ll say ‘baa baa’ instead of banana for the rest of her life. We don’t say, “Shh. Don’t talk until you know the right word.’ We don’t say, ‘Wait. First you must learn all the components of sounds. You’ve mastered the /b/ sound, now let’s work on the /n/ /n/. Can you say nan?’ Instead, when our child says ‘baa baa,’ we see through her error to what she is trying to say, and, we produce the fruit for her. ‘Banana?’ You want a banana?” we say cheerfully. ‘Here you go.’ And so our children learn to talk. They talk without workbooks, homework lessons, curriculum guides, tests, or assignments (56).

What Calkins is really discussing is oral language acquisition through immersion. Children learn to speak by hearing their parents speak to them and to each other. They hear questions being asked, answered, and by hearing people speak to each other. But immersion in writing is a much more difficult task. As Calkins goes on to suggest, writing is everywhere, but parents need to be more purposeful in their demonstration of the widespread use and importance of writing than merely speaking about it can accomplish. “Just as we talk to and around children, we’ll want to write often in the
presence of children” (56). Calkins suggests involving children in everyday household tasks such as shopping lists, thank you letters, to-do reminders, notes to teachers and friends, and writing checks and bills (56). She reminds us that writing is all around us in tasks that we perform without realizing it. ‘Watching us, children learn that that letters begins with ‘Dear’ and that addresses begin with a person’s name; they learn that we read and write from left to right, and that there are spaces in between words. They learn about purposes, occasions, and materials for writing” (57). It takes just an extra moment to involve children in these tasks, but they are simple and require no fancy computer software. They are simply immersion in everyday life and the writing that is all around us.

Calkins makes this sound very easy: “The wonderful thing is that, when allowed and encouraged to participate in meaningful ways in their language-rich worlds, young children are amazingly capable language learners. By the time children are five years old, they already know an average of ten thousand vocabulary worlds. That means they learned an average of twenty new vocabulary words a day!” (72). While these statistics vary, certainly based on socioeconomic level and class, the fact remains that children at the preschool level are learning new vocabulary at rapid rates. Calkins point, however, is at this age inclusion into normal everyday literacy activities can heighten preschoolers’ ability to soak-up that which is already around them. “We can help that immersion to happen not only by reading and writing with our students (and our sons and daughters) but also by playfully fooling around with sounds and letters” (72). Through rhyming and singing and silly word play, Calkins encourages parents to interact with their
preschoolers and babies and engage them in language order to foster this literacy development. Immersion does sound easy, getting children is involved in those tasks already being done. The harder part is convincing the parent that the involvement is worth it and has a far-reaching pay-off.

This pay-off can be explained by looking at Elizabeth Sulzby’s identification of the stages of emergent writing in which children are attempting to convey meaning, regardless of whether or not others can interpret it. As children move through each stage, from scribbling, to drawing and eventually moving onto alphabetic representation, their goal is to convey a representation of their experience as well as those things that interest them. “Children as young as two begin to make written marks and organize them in a form of early writing. After several years of experimentation, these marks and scribbles become mock letters and, finally, recognizable print” (Logue et al 217). As Sulzby defines, the term conventional writing refers to that which can be understood by a typical literate person who can read it without interpretation. As children move from emergent writing, defined as scribbles and marks or a combination or interpretation of alphabetic letters, to more conventional writing, they start to understand how different symbol systems work. Whether through a picture of their family, with “labels” underneath or a letter to a friend, children are attempting to create meaning and messages while exploring how symbols can be shared. “With regard to drawing as one form of symbolic representation, it has been argued that the ability to create symbols allows humans to become familiar with their environment and communicate their knowledge” (Wu 70). Children are hard-wired to develop these abilities, though of course support is crucial:
At about age two, children enter the preoperational stage, (as defined by Piaget); during this period, they notice print around them. Letters and words appear everywhere—in books and newspaper, on street signs and commercial establishments, on television and the computer...Children show evidence that symbols are meaningful to them when they pick up a crayon, marker, or pencil and begin to scribble. They attempt to make sense of the print they observe (Warner).

As is nearly always the case with children, the movement from one stage of emergent writing to the next is nearly never fluid or exact. Because they are in the process of making meaning through symbolic representation, as well as learning the formality of writing, there is a great overlap of the seven stages Sulzby describes. “In contrast to the Piagetian view...literacy is not acquired in a neat, universal sequence. Children are learning about letters, sounds, words, and production, and comprehension of written language simultaneously and in various orders” (Sulzby 53). The acquisition of language, especially for a young child, sounds a bit like the oncoming of a freight train, with so much noise and movement coming right at a child. It is no wonder that children make many mistakes when they attempt to use language! In The Beginnings of Writing, Temple et al furthers Sulzby’s stages by discussing Marie Clay’s study of graphic principles. According to Temple, “All of these principles must be learned by children before it can be said they write. And many of them may be seen emerging in children’s scribbles before anyone notices that they are trying to produce writing” (23). Of these seven principles, it is the recurring principle that focuses on children’s understanding that
all writing uses the same shapes again and again. However, most interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, children focus first to the whole of language, and do not incrementally master each step of writing. “Rather than learning to write by mastering first the parts (letters) and then building up to the whole (written lines), it appears that children attend first to the whole and only much later to the parts” (Temple 20). Temple goes on to explain that this type of perceptual learning is based on the environment (22). Thus, from Temple, Calkins and Sulzby we see that the emergent writer’s development is not linear, and rigid notions of “first this, then that,” are not only inaccurate but potentially damaging.

Challenges to Literacy: Inequality and Lack of Good Care

While research on emergent literacy provides strong guidance on what preschool instructional goals should looks like, perhaps one of the largest challenges to preschool literacy right now is that there is no standard for preschool instruction, and, therefore, no universal curriculum for preschool-aged students. Varying levels of care from in-home care to center-based daycares provide students with a broad range of academic preparation. Because now only eight states—Florida, West Virginia, New York, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Georgia and Oklahoma--provide free or subsidized Universal Pre-Kindergarten services, preschool is almost always fee-based and parents are at the mercy of what they can afford (National Institute Early Education Research). “While some care
in excellent, the majority is mediocre, and some is so poor that is can actually harm children’s development as emergent writers (and no doubt in other ways as well). Indeed, research has indicated that children from middle-class families are more likely than those from high-or low-income families to attend child care centers of poor quality (Whitebrook, Howes and Phillips) While lower-income families qualify for subsidized care and wealthier families can afford good care, middle income families must settle for whatever is in that they can find and afford.

Sadly, a child’s first teacher has minimal qualifications for hire. Training, even in daycare centers considered high-quality, is inconsistent. The administrators of center-based preschools are often forced to keep costs down and urged to hire staff with lower or even no higher education degrees. These individuals often have little experience with curriculum and effective literacy techniques. The focus is often on the bottom-line and keeping costs under control as opposed to what is really going on in the classroom. Lower-waged staff results in high turnover rates, leading to less overall learning in the classroom. The classroom door becomes a revolving one where no trust is established between teacher and student and the real work of learning does not even begin. Parents who can afford it are often choosing higher-cost daycare centers, believing that they are investing in their child’s education. Yet, because of a lack of regulation, even in higher-cost daycare, there is no guarantee that the quality of instruction will be higher.

Challenges to Literacy: Grammar and the Preschool Writer
In my experience, the most often asked questions from parents revolve around grammar and spelling concerns. From my days as a graduate student and college writing educator, I can recall many discussions over the use of grammar and how it should be taught and not taught. These same insights about limiting grammatical focus to appropriate, contextualized moments in the instructional writing process to the use of grammar and “correctness” apply to children who are just acquiring writing skills. As Temple discusses,

When process-writing approaches and the practice of invented spelling were widely introduced in schools a dozen years ago, many teachers worried that children, if permitted to write words and letters incorrectly, would surely ‘overlearn’ or memorize these incorrect forms and be sidetracked from normal progress toward learning the correct forms. It was much better, many teachers thought, not to allow children to do any writing until they had been explicitly taught the correct ways to make letters, spell words, craft sentences, and arrange them on the page (10).

The term invented spelling, also called developmental or transitional spelling, refers to children being encouraged to write using what they know about letters and letter sounds in order to attempt to sound out and write as best they can. Researchers who have studied invented spellers at length have disagreed about the specific stages children pass through, but all agree that there is a progression development where children attempt to use marks, scribbles, then letters and words to make meaning and communicate ideas.
In “Invented Spelling: Guidelines for Parents,” Kolodziej and Columbia cite several researchers who identify five stages in spelling development. The first is the prephonetic where symbols, letters, and marks are used, but do not necessarily following any sound representation. The second is the semi-phonetic stage where phonetics correspond with some of the sounds, generally beginning and ending sounds. The third stage is the phonetic stage. I like to call this the “texting” stage, where things are spelled the way they sound, but with shortcuts, such as “u r fun.” The fourth stage is the transitional stage, where spelling patterns can be easily recognized “the week befor the geogr fare” (the week before the geography fair). The last is the conventional stage, where the majority of words are correctly spelled and typical spelling rules are followed (214). It is generally agreed upon that “allowing” children within these stages of development to play with spelling is not harmful and will not ingrain in them the “wrong” spelling of words, which is a fear of many preschool teacher and parent alike (Kolodziej and Columbia, Temple). Perhaps worse than fearing the child will learn the wrong spelling is the fear that others will judge parenting or teaching abilities based on children’s inventively spelled documents.

The truth remains that “children do not internalize the incorrect spelling; instead, through the use of invented spelling, children actively engage in a problem-solving experience” (218). Invented spelling, instead it seems, allows children to use their mind as a puzzle, fitting in and rearranging letters to see what works best, eventually adapting to the correct spelling when they have moved through the developmental spelling stages. Educators would do well to first teach parents what invented spelling is and what value
incorrectly spelled words have. “Many parents have negative attitudes about invented spelling and convey these attitudes to their children by insisting that only correctly spelled be used in their writing” (Kolodziej and Columbia 215). Kolodziej and Columbia analogize writing development to speech development and offer as example the child who has just learned to call his bottle “baba.” A parent who has been waiting to hear her child’s first utterance would naturally be very excited that he has finally made this association and would see this as just the beginning of speech development. Kolodziej and Columbia go on to challenge teachers to tell anxious parents to liken this development to a child who has just started to be able to spell “horse” as “hrs”. All of the sounds components are present in the spelling of this word. Instead of causing a parent anxiety, the parent should, instead, view it as an important milestone in the progression of the child’s writing development (218). “Parents can take pride in their children’s spelling attempts (even if they are incorrectly spelled) because they understand that their children are on their way towards become conventional spellers. The educator can clearly show parents the developmental growth of their children by saving samples of students’ writing to document the growth” (218). When viewed as a progression, a step towards a larger goal, misspelled words should bring about the same joy as misspoken first words.

Similarly, Temple discusses the analogy of how children learn to speak: often babbling and using incorrect tense and form. This, he argues, does not impede the verbal language development of children, but instead adds to their fluency. “Children who are encouraged to write early using pretend writing and invented spelling learn to write more words correctly than children who are taught conventionally” (11). While Temple states
that encouragement of invented spelling over conventional spelling instruction does, in fact, help children to eventually learn correct spelling, not all research indicates that invented spelling is entirely positive in all ways. The research of Brasacchio, Kuhn, and Martin found no marginal gain in spelling ability but did find that invented spellers were more expressive in their writing because they had more words in their vocabulary to draw from (3). Their research showed that children were more willing to be creative and were less inhibited in their writing than those who had received more traditional spelling instruction. They write: "With these finding, teachers need to feel secure in allowing their students to use invented spelling as long as they continue working toward developing and using a balanced spelling program" (9). Dale Gill comes to similar findings in his study of second-grade children using two methods of spelling instruction. In the first, students are encouraged to sound out words in their journal and write them to the best of their ability. All spellings are accepted. In the second group, students are required to spell correctly for credit and must validate the correctness with the use of a dictionary or parent. He, too, found that there was no immediate improvement in the spelling of either group, but that the group who was encouraged to use invented spelling wrote significantly more than the other. As Kolodziej and Columbia have stressed in their article, "Guideline for Parents," the focus has to be on the message, not on the spelling. Only then can children truly concentrate on what it is she is trying to convey. "A hesitant writer who labors over spelling words will lose the reward of expressing new ideas. Students who are willing to risk being wrong by inventing their spelling have an easier time getting their ideas down" (qtd in Kolodziej and Columbia). Additionally, students who focus on the message and not the means of writing will write more fluently.
Ultimately, children who engage in the writing process in an environment with fewer constraints become more successful as writers because of their ability to independently explore and experiment with language (Gunning, 2003; Lutz, 2004; Vacca, et al., 2003).

The definition of successful may differ widely—even from teacher to teacher—depending on what they are looking for, but as Gill finds, “...this research would seem to indicate that the invented spellers may write longer manuscripts and may enjoy writing more but do not actually write at a significantly higher level...” (29).

The children in Gill’s study were in second grade, quite a bit older than the preschoolers who are the subject of this discussion. But the concept of invented spelling in one that can easily be brought to the preschool level. I wanted to look at this study because I wanted to see what kind of an impact instructional techniques can make long-term: kindergarten, second-grade, college. Preschool-aged children will not be writing the same kinds of manuscripts that second-graders will write, but they will be seeking out to spell words much in the same manner as second-graders. The response from their teachers is crucial to how the will feel about writing instruction. Children who are forced to erase their marks in order to make them correctly, or to make them darker or to keep them in the line, will certainly feel differently from children who are told encouragingly to do the best they can, are helped as they are needed and praised unabashedly, yet sincerely. Several years of erasing marks and correction or several years of being a praised writer can cause an irreversible fork in the road where a child’s first perceptions of writing are formed. Lucy Calkins strives to tailor her instruction to meet the individual
needs of the child, giving the child the skills he or she will need to accomplish tasks independently. “I am, therefore, pleased when an emergent writer writes a B or a BT to represent a boat. I know that if I want a child to be an independent and confident speller, my expectations need to be within grasp” (60). But Calkins states that it is impossible for emerging writers to be both independent and correct spellers. Her advice is to encourage children to listen for sounds in a method of stretching out the word in order to be able to hear all of the sound components, for example “trrrrreeeee”. “Some teachers describe what we are doing as stretching a word out like a rubber band, listening to its sounds. What I do not do it divide the word tree into separate staccato sounds, tah/tah rah rah ee ee/, because this creates spelling problems” (61).

But what about actual grammar instruction? Especially at the preschool level? As Britton discusses, the explicit teaching of grammar is useless for preschoolers, as children will soak up what knowledge they will need through exposure and contextualized language use. “The forms of speech we find acceptable will be adopted by children as they gain experience of them by listening and only as they are disposed (for one reason or another) and encouraged (by one means or another) to imitate what they have heard” (122-3). However, I think that the reality of preschool instruction is that there is a tendency to want to show the parents just how much the child has learned, causing “over-teaching” to occur. Instead of training the parents to know what is developmentally appropriate, the expectation is very high that children will have a storehouse of over-memorized information, which is, at this age, irrelevant.

Challenges to Literacy: Misunderstanding Emergent Writing
Both parents and teachers fall victim to a misunderstanding of the importance of early markings; these early markings are, in fact, evidence of emergent writing. These markings are often deemed scribbling, called messy, or scribble-scrabble because they do not properly represent alphabetic letters and are oftentimes thrown away. It is often misunderstood that students should know how to spell and write “properly” before being given the opportunity to write. But, how do children learn to write without being given the opportunity to do so? How does a pianist play piano without ever practicing a scale? Even a scribble in the simplest form serves a purpose in strengthening the fine motor skills on a preschooler’s developing hand and wrist. But these marks often have so much more meaning to the maker. If asked to read these marks, they often symbolize volumes, depict labels, or retell stories.

Upon understanding these challenges teachers and parents face, there are many solutions, which can be as easy as parents leaving out more writing implements to encourage writing. The next section will discuss ways in which both teachers and parents can work together to create a stronger literacy environment for preschool-aged children.

**Recommended Practice: Alphabet Books**

Alphabet books are those that focus on the preschool audience and focus on a specific letter and familiar objects that start with that letter. Their use is common in preschool classrooms and the theme of these books can vary widely; for example, an alphabet book could focus solely on transportation vehicles or community helpers. How effective are these books in encouraging pre-reading skills? Warner and Weiss argue that
the use of alphabet books to teach literacy can make a huge difference in the outcome of children’s independent reading. They argue that alphabet books are like the key to cracking the symbolic code of the alphabet (124). Enabling children to connect what they see in the book with what they already know, alphabet books provide children with the ability to use their own knowledge—which can be only the alphabet—and use that to draw conclusions about other words. Using illustrations and context clues can be extremely motivating for independent readers who want to use the classroom library by themselves. Because children usually favor repetition, the familiar words in alphabet books often become words that children choose to later write. Unlike other books which follow a plot-line, new readers often feel encouraged by alphabet books because they ask no more than to know the word.

But Ann Carlson takes an interesting viewpoint on alphabet books, which she calls concept books. She defines concept books as books for children under the age of five with no plot or characters which classify similar objects together. These books focus on colors, shapes, sizes, numbers and counting and the alphabet (1). Some concept books feature grouping of similar items together; one page may have familiar clothing: a raincoat, socks, pants and shoes. The next may have all farm animals. In this manner, children learn what items go together. They learn how to group objects. While certainly not every alphabet book functions in this way, many do feature ordering, grouping, and classification (I will later discuss the concept books that feature initial alphabet letters later on in this section). The first example of alphabet books illustrates to children the different features and attributes of objects. It enables them to see what is similar, that
animals, for example, share many attributes. One might wonder why this is important to learning to read and write. As Jerome Bruner discussed in his 1956 *A Study of Thinking*, categorizing is a means by which children can learn to reduce complexities. It is no longer necessary to relearn something once it has been learned. The next time it is seen, it can easily be recognized and recalled (2). “The learning and utilization of categories represents one of the most elementary and general forms of cognition by which man adjusts to his environment” (2). It is as if once a child learns that an animal goes into this group and people go in that group, the word can be stored away and not be worried about again. It becomes a part of her conceptual vocabulary—whether verbal, mental, or written—and can later be recalled as necessary. This is not to say that learning a concept is as simple as learning a word. This is what Bruner’s study challenged. Because concepts are abstract, they are much more complex than mere labeling. As Britton also believes, classification is necessary for growth and learning:

The main function of categorizing is to reduce the complexity of our environment. Using abstraction and defining attributes allows us to make grouping. The use of categories, in turn, reduces the necessity for constant learning, and the category becomes a tool for further use (2).

Carlson makes the case that children can benefit from concept books in that they can learn from grouping and ordering, but cautions against alphabet books with ineffectual designs. A common alphabet book design is one that has a picture for each letter of the alphabet. When done “correctly,” as Warner and Weiss have argued, these books can
encourage independent reading. Carlson warns, however, that these books are sometimes
designed not for children but for “museum curators, photographers, and illustrators to
display” (3). Specifically, the letter N represented by a nightingale, Y for youngsters,
and A for armchair, leaving children completely baffled or, worse, confused. Lastly, she
warns, the inclusion of digraphs (sh, ch) can further complicate the situation for emerging
readers.

Carlson’s strongest recommendation for concept books is based on Anat Ninio
and Jerome Bruner’s ritualized dialogue technique in which parents and children, in her
scenario, as young as eight months, use the book as a springboard for discussion. This
method is very similar to scaffolded writing, which will be discussed later, and is a turn­
taking game in which the parent evokes a discussion with the child. The following script
is from Bruner, translated by Carlson, and I present it here in full because I think it
explains this important method of ritualized dialogue:

1. The attention vocative: “Look!” This is the beginning of the dialogue where
the adults gets the child’s attention

2. The query: “What’s that?” This is the labeling question posed by the adult to
the child.

3. The label: “It’s a ____.” The child may provide the answer or, if necessary,
the adult will.

4. The feedback utterance: “Yes.” The adult will acknowledge the response and
either talk further about the label or continue to the next query. (6) (quoted in
Carlson Bruner)
Ritualized dialogue encourages communication between child and parent, instead of just imitation or repeating of what the parent said. It evokes the imagination of the child and actual conversation instead of mere repetition. As Carlson writes, “The child is learning how to talk about and interpret illustrations...She is also learning that written words carry meaning. And, most significantly, she is probably finding the verbal interaction with her parent highly enjoyable” (8).

In the research I have seen on alphabet books, the best suggestion I found for classroom use was contextually-made concept books (Bradley and Jones 460). Those made with photos and pieces of information important to the class and children as a whole were largely successful and wildly popular with children. For example, taking pictures of the children and using their names as one of the letters and then using pieces of information relevant to their lives makes learning the alphabet and words easier and significantly more fun. This method also ensures that each word is adequate for the level of the children using the book, as Carlson advises. Bradley and Jones suggest using a Velcro system to minimize teacher work and also to allow a sorting system as well to enable the book to be used in different ways. For example, as the class moved from theme to theme a book can be customized with different words based on each theme, remaining fresh and new throughout the school year. Other suggestions are based on month or season, classroom centers (take-out menus for home-living centers, phonebooks for dramatic play center, etc.), or wherever students’ imaginations can take them.
Often lumped in with the term alphabet books or even picture books are books that neither logically fit these categories. Instead, they are books that contain repetition and, following a specific theme, can often be repeated by emerging readers by simply looking at picture cues. For example, many Eric Carle books contain this formula. Once a child has been read this book a few times, the sing-song pattern “Baby bear, baby bear, what do you see?”, repetition, and clues from the illustrations enable independence and help children predict elements of story. Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, while less repetitious, does provide the emergent reader a map of exactly what the caterpillar ate. For example, below the caterpillar ate one slice of chocolate cake, one ice cream cone, one pickle, and so one. The saavy preschooler starts to associate the picture with the word and can follow along with her finger while glancing at the pictures. Building on what most preschool children already know, the days of the week, Carle then walks them through with illustrations as demonstrated below.

The uniqueness of the shape of the pages of this book, as well as the tiny “chewed” holes is an attention-grabber for a preschooler, making a connection between the science of a caterpillar and the text on the page. As my son says over and over, almost each time he
reads me this book, “It’s like a real caterpillar ate the pages!” This design sparks interest and enthusiasm—and not just the first reading of the book but each and every time the book is read.

**Recommended Practice: Print-rich Classroom**

What are the benefits of a print-rich classroom? The characteristics of a print-rich classroom, as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is one where language and words are all around. Not only are objects labeled so that children can begin to make the connection between things and words, but one where language surrounds the child’s environment. According to NAEYC’s curriculum criteria, various types of writing materials should be found in each center area of a classroom. In addition, writing materials of all kinds should be available throughout the classroom. While an area should be dedicated to a writing center, there should also be opportunities for writing and reading in every other area as well. For example, in the dramatic play area pencils and papers for grocery-list making as well as telephone books and take-out menus can provide children the opportunity to connect with language. “If children are going to get curious enough about print to go to the trouble to figure out how it works, they must see lots of print around them, and many people making use of it (Temple 10). One of the biggest examples of this parents will notice may be with a STOP sign or a child’s favorite restaurant’s sign. In the child’s mind, it starts out as a symbol, perhaps signifying something delicious they like to eat, McDonalds, for example. But, as time goes on and with repeated exposure, the child will soon attend to the letters of the sign and pay attention to the fact that a STOP sign starts with an S. The same is true for
print around a classroom. Repeated exposure to print and positive associations will eventually start to make connections for the child. Without realizing it and without explicit reading instruction, the child will come to know the ART CENTER is labeled with the letters ART. It occurs in the same way that children learn to recognize their name well before they are said to be able to read. At our school children have nearly everything labeled with their name: their cubby, the hook for their jacket, etc. This is for the purpose of general organization and parent information, of course, but it also about providing a print-rich environment to support emergent writers. Even young toddlers begin to recognize their names and point not to their hook but to the label hanging next to it, often first recognizing their name long before any other word. As everything in the preschool classroom is labeled, her coat, her hat, her lunchbox, etc., it is no surprise that a child’s name is one of the first thing she both reads and writes, as it is easily the most exciting thing to see one owns name in print and be able to recognize it. Often a major source of pride, decoding one’s own name is a major step in the emergence of reading and writing development.

According to NAEYC, “children should be provided with the opportunity to write or dictate their own ideas” and “in writing the words and messages they are trying to communicate” (criteria 2.E.05). In addition to an environment rich in literacy, teachers also need a clear understanding of the importance of literacy in the classroom and what specific techniques will be effective at what stage of development. Justice et al conducted a study based on a technique called print-referencing during storybook reading. This method uses “verbal and non-verbal techniques to heighten children’s attention to, and
interest in, print within the storybook” (68). In print referencing, the teacher makes references, asks questions, and comments on specific aspects of the print in a book. “The print referencing technique is based on the premise that if children show greater attention to...print...they will learn about print more quickly” (68). Justice’s research shows that print-referencing is not a typical method that adults and teachers naturally use when reading stories, but is one that is easily taught to adult readers with great impact. “...repeated exposure to a print referencing style increased children’s knowledge of print. Subsequent studies have shown that this style of reading also has positive effects on the literacy development of typically developing children” (69).

Many of the techniques discussed thus far were relatively easy for me to incorporate into the curriculum and practice at my school. For example, labeling centers and providing children with center tags was something we could easily do center wide with little adjustment from the teachers. However, the biggest problem I faced with the accreditation and curriculum in my own school was teacher-preparedness and knowledge about how children learn to read and write. Jacqueline Lynch discusses this common obstacle and discusses how “researchers found that preschool teachers had an overwhelming uncertainty about the role of literacy in their programs and believed that their knowledge about early literacy development was limited” (192). Lynch found that many teachers were basing their classroom practices on their own experiences as students, or on trial and error, and not necessarily on what research showed was best. While the teachers in this study noted that they observed children being more interested in reading and writing than children in prior years at an earlier age, they were unsure how
to develop this interest and had “strong feelings of isolation” (196). Very few teachers in this study saw the need to introduce literacy as a means of play and saw the two as exclusive subjects: either you are playing or you are learning how to read. More importantly, many teachers lacked the knowledge that, for young children especially, not only must the child’s interest must be piqued but that literacy development must be tied to their social world. “In understanding literacy as a social practice, the focus has shifted from viewing language and literacy as a set of rules to using literacy in authentic events” (Lynch 192). As nothing is learned in isolation, the teaching of reading can be done implicitly through the use of play and other activities that children enjoy in the classroom. Especially for young children, there must be a clear context connecting their learning to their lives and drawing meaning to the new information.

The importance of contextualized learning was proven in an especially inventive way as Logue et al discuss the use of dancing in teaching children to learn to read and write. The impetus for their study was the question: “how does a teacher prompt active children to explore and develop writing skills?” (216). In their scenario, a teacher is attempting to get a preschool boy to explore writing with markers and stamps, but he responds that he has a “bad guy” to go catch. Logue et al found that busier children, oftentimes males, often enter kindergarten at a disadvantage because their “busy-ness” can prevent them from more formal sit-down instruction. The teachers noticed that at the “dance studio,” a specific dramatic play area in this preschool classroom, children were experimenting with dance routines, but found that they could not remember all of the steps involved. One of the children suggested that the teacher write down the steps and,
thus, their “Dance Project” was formed. The teacher helped the students use symbols to represent each dance move, such as “hop”, “plie”, etc. The teachers also put books about dance and placed them in the writing center, library and dance studio. While using symbols satisfied some children, others were ready to use the real alphabetic spelling and the teachers began writing the alphabetic spelling underneath the dance symbol. As their interest grew, the children came to the teachers wanting to know more and more about “traditional” spelling and “proper” writing. Children started to write dances for each other, even for children they typically did not interact with. Dances were read at circle time and children were able to showcase their dances. Children who were too shy to dance in front of others still wrote dances and asked others to “dance my dance.”

The Dance Project is interesting for many reasons, the first being that it is primarily directed by student interest. While many preschool classrooms are theme-based, the theme is rarely chosen by the class. The teachers saw what was interesting the students and let the project take form. Secondly, the problem of classroom disruption by the busiest children was completely eliminated and these busy children were able to be both physically active while interpreting the text they or their classmates had written. Perhaps most interesting to me, was that these young students quickly learned that writing, like dancing, is a process which requires working and re-working, as well as the consideration of the dancer/reader. For example, children took it upon themselves to revise their dances once they learned that “too many spin notations will make the dancer dizzy and unable to complete the dance, and too many exclamation points will tire the
dancer” (5). The students then learned the practice of revision and making their dance “danceable”, just as a writer must make her text “readable”. As Temple states,

Everything we know about children development reminds us that children’s perspectives are self-centered... It stands to reason, then, that precisely the kind of social experience young writers need is to write things however they can, share them with others, and come face-to-face with their audience’s lack of understanding (13).

Writing is, therefore, a highly social action, one that children eventually want to share with others and have them understand. This act of wanting to share is what leads them to more conventional writing, as Sulzby earlier defined. This desire to share their experience and make it into something beyond simply their own enjoyment led them to a wonderful, cooperative act of a group writing project. Sharing their writing and their dancing generated an activity that encompassed so much more than the original intent of simply dramatic play. It exemplified that when students are given the freedom to lead, projects can go in truly amazing directions. This project inspired the children to further their thinking by initiating questions of their teachers about traditional spelling and writing, encouraged a community-like feel of the classroom that was lacking before, and engaged children who were missing out on learning aspects because of their desire to be more active. Truly an across the curriculum activity, it seems that students and teachers alike learned a great deal.
After reading about the Dance Project, I thought about my own school and what kind of opposition I would face if we were to tell my teachers about what happened in this classroom. What these teachers developed didn’t cost money, but it asks teachers to lose some of their control, handing it over to the children. Teachers would have to suspend their normal theme and rearrange the current plans. It would force them to let the students be just a little bit in charge. It would pressure them to shift their perspective. It would be different, it might fail. If this situation came up on my school, would my teachers be so willing to participate? The teachers in the Dance Project wanted to “increase the likelihood that the most active children, as well as the compliant and more introverted children, would master the early literacy skills needed for later school success” (1). Clearly, by using movement and the interests of the children, this project was successful, but it was also a risk for the teachers. It is through teacher training that we can encourage teachers to take risks such as these. Even in a classroom where a Dance Project such as this didn’t provoke the same level of excitement, initially there is only a small time investment required to get the program going. It is the students, then, who decide the direction of the class. Teacher training at this level is extremely difficult, as people are coming from highly varied education levels, experience, and willingness to invest their time. In preschool, there is no prep period and in many schools whatever a teacher does outside the “normal” curriculum is at her own expense. Yet, perhaps that’s why training is essential for this age group. Bringing case studies, such as the Dance Project, to a staff meeting could leave a long-lasting impression on teachers, especially those who understand the value of keeping the attention of the “busy” children.
**Recommended Practice: Young Authors**

There is something very powerful about calling oneself an author. I believe that children who see themselves as writers have already jumped a hurdle by which so many adults are encumbered. Young Authors is a program that gives children confidence while helping them to sharpen and develop their writing (or, in this case pre-writing) skills. The concept of Young Authors has been around for awhile, and is one that resonated so deeply with me when I was a child that it made me want to pursue writing as a career. It is, however, usually reserved for children in grades four and higher, but could easily be modified for younger children through use of dictation. The concept of Young Authors is simply having children create a book and share it. Depending on their ability, children can tell their stories to their teacher, and either have their teacher help with spelling or fill in words or sentences. The children can be responsible for illustrating and the class can learn simple book-binding, just as older children do. After the completion of the books, there are many different avenues the teachers could take, such as simply ding a book sharing, even inviting the parents in to see what the children have published and having a reading. A more complex, and possibly more difficult, full-circle approach could be to invite a “real” author into the class to then read his or her own book. I recall our class going to The Young Authors conference. Upon doing several internet searches, I found Young Authors Conferences, with varying names, all over the country. The concept was the same: showing children that once they put pencil to paper they, too, are an author and have created meaningful writing just as published authors have done.
In her book *Raising Lifelong Learners*, Lucy Calkins gives great examples of impromptu lessons in authorship as she happens upon a child who has just drawn a picture of a spaceship blowing up. As he explains what is going on in the scene, a rescue plane is zooming in, she encourages him that he should write it down and that it will make a great and exciting book (65). He does and she further encourages him by getting him more paper and asking open-ended questions, such as "what will happen next?" She creates a book with the blank pages and he begins to fill in the blank pages with more illustrations and more lines of text. She gently leads him through the stages of book writing and formatting too, asking if he wants a title, if one illustration should go before the other, etc. Calkins assumes the children’s authorship for them and helps them assert it with enthusiasm. As she says,

> My goal is to help Tony become an avid and independent author of literature and to help him write more. I look forward to the day when Tony writes story without my intervention. I help him to grow toward this by demonstrating that I expect his story to continue, but turning the page and asking ‘What will happen next?’ and by recognizing that Tony needs to draw before he writes in order to develop his ideas. Somewhere in the midst of drawing, the next episode in his ongoing drama will occur to Tony (65).

Calkins asserts that even less willing children can be enticed by using drawing as a method of writing. Just as freewriting can loosen up a writer’s mind, similarly, drawing can help give younger children direction for what they want to write next. “Drawing, like
writing, can be a vehicle for thinking” (68). In addition to being a means of sorting out what they are thinking as they attempt to put it on paper, as Wu earlier discussed, “drawing encourages children’s symbolization with conventionally written symbols for providing children with opportunities for undertaking object correspondence which may take place in the form of a single object correspondence or a chain of object correspondence and paves a path for young children to transit from pure pictographic to ideographic writing” (Wu 76).

Lastly, if adults start to see children as writers, albeit young writers, we could quickly eliminate one of the biggest challenges to preschool writing: the non-believers. By demonstrating the imagination, natural story-telling ability, and thought-processes students have through writing and authorship, we can carve out the role of writer early and allow children to own this title.

**Recommended Practice: Parent Training for Literacy and Early Writing Training**

I have two opposing sentiments on the subject of parent training. The term sounds a bit like toilet training, and that’s probably why it’s a bit of a turn-off—both to me and to many parents. But the number one thing I heard as the director of a daycare center from parents was: “I didn’t know that. I wish kids came with a training manual” or something of the sort. I believe that parents want to know things, but many don’t have the time, and others don’t have the humility to ask the question or to ask the right questions. I think of my own family and could never see my husband at any sort of parent training course. He, like many parents, would rather be spending what little time he has in the
evenings with our son rather than learning about him. With this in mind as the reality of parents, I had found several articles which discuss ways of training parents. After initially discovering a term called “Write Night,” I have found many variations on how it is done, but the basic premise is the same (Virginia Association of Teachers of English, vate.org). Parents and students are invited into the school to compose their own book together. While some schools employed fancy software to create their stories, books, and illustrations, others used nothing more than construction paper, markers, pencils and whatever craft supplies found around the room. Older students and their parents simply used paper and pencil. While most of what I read had mostly to do with completely independent readers and writers, I can envision how this would be the perfect “training” opportunity for parents. With well-trained staff “eavesdropping” on child and parent interactions, teachers would get a good glimpse of what kind of exchanges are happening at home. Modeling appropriate responses and setting up realistic expectations for parents (for example, that all letters do not need to be perfectly formed) will illustrate to parents what writing looks like at this age. This type of workshop would encourage time together, as opposed to training time, which would be spent apart, as well as learning time for both parent and child. It is in this act of creation together that, as well as seeing other children of the same age, that parents will learn the reality of the stages of emergent writing. It isn’t necessary for letters to be perfect, for words to be spelled correctly each time. Through this activity, the message will be conveyed that the process of learning to write is a slow and fumbling one, yet with many small victories along the way.
Displaying the writing of emerging preschool writers may seem so obvious that one may neglect to mention it. But I will be honest in my admission that in our school, we were urged by the powers that be to not display work unless it was "perfect." Imagine how many papers were perfect and then imagine the explanation we had to find as to why only some papers were displayed! In the end, it was easier to only display the art. The thought process to some was that displaying "imperfect" writing was a reflection on imperfect teaching. Obviously someone wasn’t doing her job if the three-year-olds hadn’t learned to properly write their names! But in not displaying what was termed “imperfection” we did ourselves an even greater disservice by never showing parents what real three-year-old writing was supposed to look like. The Tennessee State Improvement Grant produced a Parent’s Guide to Early Writing Experience for Preschoolers, a handout which literally shows different types of preschool writing and identifies the stage in accordance with Elizabeth Sulzby’s stages of emergent writing. It gives tips for helping preschoolers to become better writers, such as modeling writing at home and pretend play, as well as what activities parents can do at home. It includes frequently asked questions, such as what if a child writes backwards and what if a child asks to read her writing. Lastly, it ends with suggested books and websites for further research and discussion. It is an extremely thorough and valuable tool that parents can refer to without having to read an entire book. This, in conjunction with seeing a lot of actual preschool writing, both of their own child and that of other children, can provide parents with a strong framework in emergent literacy.
The next phase of parent training hadn’t even occurred to me until I was well into this thesis, one that I had initially intended to be focused on preschool. But as the time it took me to complete this thesis grew, so did my younger son and as he approached the year mark, his interest in books intensified exponentially. While my friend’s one-year-olds were climbing the stairs to rip up the toilet paper, Owen was climbing ours to get to the bookcase in his room to read his favorite books. He eventually learned to close his door so he would be undisturbed. One night as I watched him drag over a stool to climb up to reach our junk drawer where all writing implements and paper are stored, I started to think about what was happening to Owen. I pretended to be busy at the sink and watched him grab his materials as he sat down on the kitchen floor and scribbled his heart out. When he was finished, he came over to me, tugged on my skirt, grunted, and showed me his work. He was beaming and so was I. Owen, like his brother, thought of himself as a writer—at the age of fourteen months. In retrospect, I think why shouldn’t he think of himself as one? Although the baby, his interests are often always ignored for his more vocal and active brother. But, the important fact remains that this is a home that values reading and writing. And without any extra effort, Owen understood that fact and adopted it, too. He adopted it in just the same way that he picks up his brother’s bats and balls and attempts to swing and throw. “It has been well documented that the home literacy environment (HLE) is associated with the development of letter knowledge, phonological sensitivity, oral language, and interest in literacy (Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan; Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrinini; Scarborough and Dobrich; Senechal and LeFevre; Weigel, Martin, and Bennett). However, most studies examining the relations of the HLE to literacy development have focused on HLEs provided to older preschoolers” (Burgess
445). As Burgess discusses, parents gives indirect cues as to their own expectations through their behaviors and activities. Called “literacy interface” (251) a parent demonstrates and places emphasis on his or her own values. He cites the example of a parent who reads for pleasure instead of watching television. Children come to learn the culture of their home. It should come, then, as no surprise as Owen sees his brother beg for another book each night, writing thank you cards and letters to his friends, and his mother and father turning pages of their own books that he, too, should want to be involved in the culture of his family. Yet, even I am surprised at a fourteen-month-old scrambling for his crayon and paper. But, what happens if this is not the culture of the family? Or if the family is too busy at night, as so many of my daycare families are? Are all children like Owen who will push and drag their way to find the tools they need? I’ve thought of sending home a book with the infants at night, with a big, blaring sticker that shouts: "READ ME TONIGHT BEFORE BED AND BRING ME BACK TOMORROW!" If the baby carries it home that night, will this be enough to ensure that one story is read before bed? Indeed, Pauline Davey Zeece supports this method, suggesting that a Book Bag significantly increases the odds that parent/child literacy engagement will occur.

She suggests creating a bag and stuffing it with several books based on a theme, depending on the age level of the children. The parents can then take the bag home and read at their leisure. This method is similar to a library, yet all of the work has been done. The parent neither has to choose the books nor drive to a separate location. Zeece’s article, “Books and Good Stuff: A Strategy for Building School to Home Literacy
Connections” offers teachers hands-on solutions, including why bags will help both student and teacher, but how to create and manage them. She also includes suggestions for themes as well as books she has used.

A resource for parents, the Reading is Fundamental website promotes a similar philosophy of home environment stimulation. What the website emphasizes is a study from Timothy Rasinski and Anthony Fredericks who conclude that the most important factor in home learning environments was income, not culture. Those from lower-income families were found to be taught in more rigid, skills-based formats, while those from middle-income families tended to provide more literacy materials and encouraged more independent literacy play. They also found that middle-income families were more comfortable with literacy play and less rigid-type lessons, encouraging things like having a chalkboard in the kitchen and having writing materials around the home. The RIF website, unfortunately did not go into further details, only neatly concluding that any time—whether skills-based or more creative—spent reading or writing is time well spent. But, this left me feeling dissatisfied, and I assumed that any parent reading this would feel this way, too. Upon further research of Rasinski and Fredericks, I found that their message to parents is to find ways that they can find activities with a lot of value, meaning those that will not require a huge time or monetary investment but that will give children the necessary skills and involve parents in meaningful and necessary ways. They acknowledge that parents may feel inundated with “try me!” type of philosophies and may not know which avenues to follow. Their main message is that education works best when schools and parents work together, finding ways that each can understand the
constraints and realities the other is working under. Educators may want to suggest to those parents who use social media, such as Facebook, to “like” RIF on the site. The website sends informative, blurb-type articles, to the parents newsfeed. While short enough to read quickly, the articles offer valuable information on encouraging children to read anything—such as comic books, magazines, or other non-traditional reading material—to spur interest and joy in reading.

Recommended Practice: Book-Related Pretend Play

As earlier discussed, Jodi Welsch’s study on literacy through play is significant in contextually getting children to use literature as a tool while playing.

The concept of book-related pretend play can be defined as student-directed and initiated pretend play schemes and episodes in which students, through interactions with others, make object substitutions, integrate imaginary elements, or assume roles directly related to the characters, objects, actions, settings, language, and themes found in children’s literature (139).

Familiar literature is a backdrop and props are the foreground to make stories come alive. Once a book is read, children are encouraged to use props from the story and their imagination to retell, expand, or go in an completely different direction entirely. This makes the story come to life through the child’s own construction of meaning. In addition to the child’s retelling of the story, children gain a greater concept of components of a
story and what it means to tell a good story. They learn what audience is and how to adjust or revise their story to tell a better one. "The abstract nature of these episodes may contribute to students' comprehension skills later as readers" (139). I would argue that these skills are forming early writers as well, as children are quickly learning the process of composing and revising stories.

**Recommended Practice: Writing Centers**

To have a writing center in a preschool classroom, like a block center or dramatic play center, is commonplace. It is the materials and type of usage that this area gets that can make it more or less valuable to preschoolers. Teachers have a profound effect on the way in which writing centers can be utilized during the day. Some, with several sheets of paper and an old, nubby pencil become quickly dusty and rarely used. While those with ever-changing materials and exciting new components are looked at as the holy grail of centers, often competed for and rushed towards at free-play time. Those centers with stamp pads, stampers, varying marker and paper choices, as well as homemade books can become very popular. At my school a teacher made a mailbox out of an old cereal box, took her dad’s old blue work shirt and a hat that resembled a postal carrier’s hat and set out envelopes, stickers that she had cut with pinking shears to looks like stamps, and folded stationery that she had since she was a teenager. The children took turns writing letters to their classmates, to friends in other classes, to other teachers, and—best of all—to me! One child with an older sibling was told to remember that *principal* is always spelled with a “pal” at the end, like a friend. But the translation didn’t come through correctly to the three-year-old and I received a lot of mail that said “pal” on it.
A week later, the same teacher changed The Mailroom, as she called her writing center, to the Complaints Department because there had been a lot of "tattle-tailing" going on in the classroom. She encouraged one child to write down the report, exacting just what had taken place and helping the child to sort out what had gone on. Of course, there was no shortage of those who had complaints to tell. Children were also encouraged to write down their own complaints as well. I wrinkled my brow at this one as I imagined the drama that could possibly ensue. I imagined what sorts of complaints parents would have. Yet, I was pleased to find myself wrong. What happened, instead, was that the children actually stopped their complaining and "tattle-tailing" altogether and used writing to pen notes to each other. And they were not nasty, I'm-going-to-get-you-type-notes, either! The notes these children started to write were more cathartic. In working through their problems and misunderstandings, they perhaps began to see where they were wrong, too. A particular favorite note of mine said: "2 ken beld" [two can build] with the "ken" underlined for emphasis and had a picture of a girl, the one who filed the complaint, and another girl who apparently wanted to build, too. The first girl seemed to be admitting that, yes, it is possible for more than one person to build and an apology of sorts, too, in her admission. She was no longer complaining that someone dared build with her. She was admitting that she was wrong before and that she wanted someone to build with now. The Complaints Department closed soon, thereafter, giving way to the Compliments Department. In this way, writing is used as a tool and a means of getting across a message or working through a problem. This is not busy work nor is it circling the letter A on a worksheet. This center is using literacy for real life, everyday problems and solutions. In this sense, writing becomes so inherent, so second-nature to children
that when they have a problem, they turn to writing to help them work through it. I’d bet
money on the fact that when these children are older and face dilemmas later in life far
greater than building on the carpet, turning to a journal and writing will be one of the
ways in which they cope with uncertainty. Any variation of these centers can work just as
well for the students in the classroom. When children have something to say and are
encouraged to express it, they find the means to get it down, whether through pictures,
dictation by the teacher or a kindly friend. We once had a student who smuggled a pencil
and paper out the playground with him and was found passing it through the fence to the
kindergarten class. He wanted his brother’s help with a note he just had to have written.
The power of the word can be that strong, even in someone who cannot yet write.
Imagine what he will write when he can.

Universal Pre-School, Head Start Model

What is the solution? With such varying degrees of teacher-preparedness in
preschools and inconsistent use of curriculum, the pragmatic solution would be some
kind of Universal Preschool standard nation-wide. Holding preschools to the same
standards as elementary, middle, and high schools would ensure a higher level of
educational standards and accountability. But, is that possible in light of today’s
economy? With so many privatized daycare centers, how might regulations even be
monitored? And, lastly, does this type of early intervention work? I would hope that this
thesis has started the discussion in illustrating that writing instruction can’t come early enough and that a universal system is, indeed, the next logical step.

One such program already in process is Head Start. Head Start is a government program, operating since 1965, that supports families who are considered below the national poverty line. By taking a “whole-child” approach, it provides school readiness by offering educational services, medical and dental services, nutrition, and child development services. But does it work? The Head Start Impact Study Final Report that came out in January of 2010 shows mixed results and has been interpreted in a number of different ways, oftentimes being more of a political subject than being reviewed in terms of how the children actually fared. According to the report, which can be found on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website, “providing access to Head Start has a positive impact on children’s preschool experiences” (iv). In addition, Head Start access positively affects child’s school readiness, including letter-word identification, vocabulary, letter naming, spelling, pre-academic skills, color identification, hyperactive behavior, parent spanking, and parent reading to the child (iv). However, according to the report, these gains seemed to only last until the first grade. They did not seem to be long-lasting gains that helped the child throughout the primary grades. This, however, may be a commentary more on what happened after the child left Head Start than the actual Head Start program. If the school the child attended after the Head Start program did not keep up the same pace as the preschool did, how can Head Start be blamed? However, there is a general criticism of Head Start in the public because of its targeted population and that it does not offer services universally.
Even students who qualify for services based on income are not automatically selected because there simply are not enough resources (iv). States such as Georgia and Oklahoma, the first two to offer preschool services to every four-year-old child regardless of income, still only have 71 percent (Oklahoma) and 53 percent (Georgia) participation as of the 2008-2009 school year, even though they have both been offering it for over a decade. Is universal preschool the way to go? Is this the investment in America’s future that will pay off in generations to come? As we see school budgets being slashed, it’s hard to imagine where the money will come from to fund a huge program such as this. In 1994 President Bill Clinton signed the Educate America Act, which put into focus school readiness and highlighted the urgency of preschool. The three objectives were:

1. All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that will help prepare children for school;

2. Every parent in the United States will be a child’s first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent’s preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need; and

3. Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birth weight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems. (Pub. L. 103-227). [A Vision for Universal Preschool Education, 20) Zigler, Gilliam, Jones)
While no one can disagree with these goals, they are also immeasurable. Unless a government agent is going door-to-door each morning, how can we ensure that parents are acting as a child’s first teacher, armed with the appropriate resources, time, and financial resources necessary to complete this lofty goal? Children who do not experience preschool or who attend poor preschool environments are doomed from the start. Those children, unless provided with instruction at home, are likely to get left behind, especially if peers in their kindergarten classrooms had dissimilar experiences.

For students who start school significantly behind their peers, the readiness gap is never closed but tends to widen as they move through school (Lee and Burkam, 2002). That is, children who are not prepared for kindergarten may have a hard time mastering the curriculum so they won’t be ready for what will be taught in first grade and on and on. Indeed, school readiness has been shown to be predictive of virtually every education benchmark (e.g., achievement test scores, grade retention, special education placement, dropout, etc.). Thus, it is not an exaggeration to fear that lack of school readiness sets the stage for dismal educational trajectories and diminished lifelong outcomes (Lewitt and Baker, 1995) [A Vision for Universal Preschool Education 2].

Remediation—at any level—is not only harmful to the child’s self-esteem, but is an economic concern as well, often requiring smaller class sizes, and additional staff with specialized training. While it is far better to try to prevent a problem than trying to fix it, the same concern always returns. Budgetary constraints with our current K-12 system
seem to overshadow any hope of an expansion to universal preschool, despite any evidence that the earlier children are exposed to high-quality learning the better prepared they will be.

In contrast, Universal Preschool is a publically funded program available to preschool children, regardless of income level. The question that I want to discuss is not of budgetary concerns and measuring the long-terms gains versus the money spent, but simply, does it work? Will children who are exposed to a preschool setting earlier, rather than later, be at an advantage for developing necessary pre-writing skills and—perhaps most importantly—more easily develop a love for writing. With a basic philosophy of low student to teacher ratios and strict educational requirements for teachers, the research on Universal systems is generally favorable with most opposition stemming from questionable gains when related to the amount of money spent.

When I consider the recommended practices I have given, the addition of qualified and well-trained teachers and a consistent curriculum with developmentally appropriate practices for preschoolers, I think—how could a Universal system, cost aside, not be good? In his book, The Hurried Child, David Elkind does explain how a Universal system could be detrimental. He says,

Mastering the basics means acquiring an enormous number of rules and learning to apply them appropriately. Hurrying children academically, therefore, ignores the enormity of the task that children face in acquiring basic math and reading skills. We need to have a better appreciation of how awesome an intellectual
task learning the basics really is for children and give them the time they need to accomplish it well (105).

Elkind is against a universal system, insisting that we are fast-tracking students before they are ready. His thinking is more aligned with Arnold Gesell, referenced earlier, who believed in a maturationalist philosophy. Their belief is that students need to fully develop before formal instruction can occur.

In his book *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*, he says simply, “Preschool is not a race” (83). I agree with both of Elkind’s statements. Children are gaining an amazing amount of information and they do need time to let it soak in. Like little sponges, they are constantly learning from everything around them and time is required for them to process what they have learned. What Elkind’s statements fail to acknowledge is that most of these children are in a care-based center anyway. And many of them are failing to provide developmentally appropriate practices, relying instead on worksheet-type activities for little minds. Other critics, like Dr. Raymond Moore, point out that the place for a child under eight years old is with a parent and that a parent alone should be the child’s teacher (3). What a lovely world it would be if this was possible—if parents had the luxury of spending all day with their children to teach them, if two incomes were not required by so many families or that single parents could bear this burden on their own. His statement is completely unrealistic as many parents neither have the ability, knowledge, or desire to provide their preschooler with a rich and compelling educational environment. Similarly, what would happen when children did start school at eight? They would then need to learn social skills, how to interact in a classroom environment, and
what the expectations are for a group setting, in addition to learning the basics of reading and writing. Lastly, I am not advocating a Universal program that completely removes a child from his home environment. The best schools work with families to create a well-rounded educational environment. What I am advocating is a system with a strong foundation of well-trained teachers who have experience with the preschool student and administrators who are focused on supporting their staff, not enrolling their schools and making money.

**Areas for Suggested Further Research**

When I set out to write this thesis, it was with the microcosm of my own preschool in mind: a daycare center where the average parent of two children easily pays upwards of $600 per week, not including the ancillary activities parents easily tack onto their bill. Parents willingly pay extra for additional private tutoring of phonics, math, Spanish, art, science, and music, even though our program boasts that these pieces are “included” in the daily program. Even in this affluent world, as an administrator, I find myself dealing with issues related to budget, managing labor costs, keeping supply costs down, and trying to find a way to balance the ideologies of my supervisors who want me to squeeze every last dime from parents while putting forth the appearance that we are all a happy “family.” Parents in my center are hard workers. One parent often spends more than twelve hours a day working outside the home, while the other—also working—works slightly less, only so that they can drop-off and pick-up at school. Other families employ a nanny for either drop-off or pick-up. Most parents have a post-secondary
education and clearly value education themselves, as evidenced by the additional money they spend on extra programming for their children. Yet, even in this environment we are lacking. We focus on reading, phonics, we talk about sounds, math, and numbers, but writing is something we wait on. We are a NAEYC-accredited center and yet I feel that our teachers don’t know enough about writing, aren’t strong enough writers themselves, and, perhaps worst of all, I don’t have the time in the work day to help them figure it out. If I feel these severe limitations are present in this environment with so many positive factors—the supplies, the positive parent attitudes about education, the children’s desire to learn, even the teacher’s willingness to teach—what happens in schools where there is no money, where the parents don’t care, or don’t have the time or money to invest in caring, and where the teachers don’t want to be there? It can feel overwhelming. I know that I often feel overwhelmed with the amount of things that need to be done in a day. When you look at a child and think of all the things you want this child to know before she leaves you to go out into the “real” world of school, it’s so easy to feel defeated by all of it—and I’m not even a classroom teacher. I think the crux of it lies with both running a business and educating children. It may seem strange for the administrator for a private, for-profit daycare center to make the case for universal preschool, to hand over the bulk of business to the state, but it is my hope that over the next decade our country sees the value in starting children off in the right direction from the start. I feel this way mostly because in my company, the way that it is run from above my head, children and profit should never be in the same sentence together. They don’t mix well. I’m not naïve enough to think that there isn’t a need for profit—obviously there is and it pays my salary and bonus as well—two things necessary to make my life possible. But the reality at
some for-profit, even highly respected centers, such as mine, is that training isn’t the highest priority. It’s money. It’s a fine line administrators have to walk: finding the right person with the right temperament to work with busy preschoolers. Administrators also have to have the right education, training, and experience. Parents also want to see a nice smile and a well-groomed person. This is the reality and if you don’t consider what the parent wants, they simply leave, taking with them the child you so desperately want to teach and the money higher-ups so desperately want you to keep. But, to find that person within the confines of a corporate budget, is sometimes impossible. At the end of the day, the profit should be what children have learned, how much they enjoy writing, reading, and being at school.

At the end of each day at my day care center, I ask every child who left my building: “Did you have a great day?” They almost always say yes. I then ask them what they learned. I do this for many reasons: my own curiosity, mostly, but also to illustrate to parents that we are not glorified babysitters. What we do in the course of twelve hours matters to us, matters to me and their child, and should ultimately matter to them. What astonishes me most is that every child of speaking age always has an answer—and usually a surprisingly good one! Even if it had nothing to do with the theme in their classroom or the teacher’s goal, they found something they learned. One day, four-year-old Caitlin told me that she learned that Eric is not, as apparently what was universally thought, a bucket dumper (the opposite of a” bucket filler,” someone who chooses to be helpful and fill your “bucket” with goodness), as he helped her when she fell down and skinned her knee in the afternoon. She later wrote about this in her journal and took me
back to her classroom to show me a picture of her on the ground, blood spurting from her knee and Eric, previously thought of as a “bucket dumper”, standing over her with an outstretched hand. The word “fend” [friend] over their heads told me everything I needed to know about their day. Yes, she had learned something. As had Eric. He had filled Caitlin’s bucket and erased his own title of “bucket dumper”. This is what learning is, this is the seed of hope that I want to nurture. These are the little writers of the world that I want to encourage. As Caitlin’s parents were standing over her, impatiently tapping their feet, each holding a twin in their arms, their dispositions slowly changed as they looked in her journal. They hadn’t realized Caitlin made the jump to writing so quickly. They looked at me in astonishment. “She can write?” her dad asked me, flipping through her journal. I didn’t have to answer as he was holding the proof.

What I gained most from the research I have done here was from Lucy Calkins, mother, teacher, and writer. Her knack for encouraging children and being their first advocate was inspiring. She made it all seem possible, what is an overwhelming and daunting task. Lucy Calkins put into words that which I have felt about writing all these years. “We need to make our truths beautiful. This is why early peoples inscribed their stories on stony caves with pictographs. It is why my closets are filled with boxes of musty old journals...It is why my four-year-old son, Evan, uses magic markers, pens, lipsticks, and pencils to leave his mark on bathroom, walls, and backs of old envelopes, on his brother’s charts and drawings” (8). It is as if humans are drawn to writing. It is as if it is a need as essential as air and water. It enables us to better understand what has happened to us, to change it around, to make it more or less dramatic, and to order our
chaos. But a tool that is so valuable and can impact life so significantly is not being shared equally with all young students. Too many students are having negative first experiences with writing and it affects their entire outlook. They never get to understand that writing can be more than just demonstrating what they do or do not know about spelling, grammar, and constructing sentences. It can convey their struggles, life experiences, and help them form their vision of themselves in ways they never could without working it out on paper. It sounds idealistic, but how can you not talk about ideals when you look at the faces of three and four year old children? Writing and children go hand-in-hand. They are both the possibility of anything. And this is why I am an advocate for any type of early learning program, regardless of the name—Head Start, Universal Pre-School, or otherwise. A child’s first experience with learning, so long as it is positive, can never be early enough. Early on in this thesis I discussed my work with students in the University Writing Center and was considering the connection between stronger emphasis on writing in preschool and less of a need for work with confidence building in college. I strongly believe that work at the preschool end will carry students through til college and beyond. An investment worth making, such an underscore could potentially change the direction of Writing Centers across college campuses. Instead of having to work on the basics, Writing Centers could really be there to serve what I believe is their real purpose, to help germinate discussion, assist students to think in new directions, and challenge their thinking while being a sounding board for ideas. The most interesting student sessions I had were ones where there was a back-and-forth of ideas, resounding with excitement and discussion. I do not mean to say that Writing Centers
will soon be a utopia full of students with sentences dripping from their pens, but I do believe that treating students as writers is the first step.

This leads me to areas of opportunity for further investigation. Research has been done about parental involvement in grammar and high school and the positive impact it makes on student performance, but little has been said about how preschoolers are impacted by their parent’s role. While Arnold et al discuss and stress the importance of the parents being the bridge between home and school, they, too, suggest that preschool parents have a laid back attitude about learning at this age. Parents assume that in time their child will learn everything he or she needs to learn with relatively little influence from outside factors. Further investigation into preschool and toddler parental involvement and the long-term gains students receive is essential to getting parents on the right track from the start. As more children are coming from daycare environments, research and tracking needs to be done on the types of learning environments students came from and what qualifications the teachers had. In my position within a daycare, I want to know that the decisions I make when choosing my staff are successful for children in the long-term. A longitudinal study might help those responsible for staffing of preschools and daycare centers to focus on specific requirements, helping them to make better choices when hiring staff.

Conclusion

A positive approach to education from the very beginning is imperative to get learning on the right track. Starting with preschool and forming a solid foundation will
ensure the success of students. But right now our students abilities are all over the place. This is due, in part, to the lack of regulation of preschool across the country. As it stands now, preschools can do whatever it is they wish with children, under the guise of learning. Yet, when writing is brought to the forefront of curriculum it can create change in children. It can be the gift that can change the course of their learning. Teachers have the ability to give preschoolers this gift by using innovative teaching methods and allowing children to express themselves in unconventional ways. But first, we must take the preschool student seriously. Though young in age, their ability is limitless and preschoolers must be provided with the proper tools, including teachers who are adequately trained and educated in the special needs of young students. Teachers must understand what tools will assist them, such as invented spelling, or using drawing in conjunction with writing, and for how long these methods will aid them. By encouraging their ideas and showing them how writing can be a tool by which their imagination can flourish, teachers have the ability to instill in children a long-lasting love of words and word play. Lastly, teachers and parents alike must make writing an integral part of life. By encouraging children to use writing themselves, such as grocery shopping list-making, or using a take-out menu to help order food, words become a necessity. We must not underestimate the power of preschool and preschool teachers to plant the seed of loving reading, poetry, writing, words, and word play. I believe that children who become comfortable with writing at the preschool level will not outgrow this love. Instead, throughout school it will continue to develop, with children developing rich and complex vocabularies and ideas, never being encumbered by miniscule points such as grammar or verb tense. But teachers can inspire something further still—more than just
familiarity and comfort in writing. They can inspire passion through writing and reading—an all-consuming love of reading and writing and words. They can teach children how books can send them around the world, to other families, and other lives. They can teach them how to mimic the writing styles of other authors, to find students’ own voices, and to get lost in words. This cannot happen through casual teaching, but only through active participation and purposeful planning in preschooler’s education. And it must start from day one, from the moment a preschooler walks through the door and puts pencil to paper and starts making her mark. What better time than now?


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