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Are You A Reader? Are You A Writer?: Answers From Kindergarten Students

Deborah Diffily

This study was based on interviews with kindergarten students and their teachers from two classrooms in a large, urban elementary school. Classroom observations by the researcher were also used to describe the physical environment created by each teacher and the organization of each teacher's instruction. The purpose of the study was to compare students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers and to determine if there were significant differences between the two classes. These particular classrooms were selected because of the differences in classroom teacher philosophy and actual teaching practice. One classroom could be described as traditionally academic and the other as developmentally appropriate. For the purpose of this study, a traditionally academic kindergarten classroom focuses on formal instruction in academic skills to all students while a developmentally appropriate classroom emphasizes attention to the different needs, interests, and developmental levels of the students (Bredekamp, 1987).

Developmentally appropriate practice is generally regarded by early childhood experts as the best approach for

teaching young children. Specific to language and literacy development, appropriate practice:

provides many opportunities to see how reading and writing are useful before they are instructed in letter names, sounds, and word identification. Basic skills develop when they are meaningful to children. An abundance of these types of activities is provided to develop language and literacy through meaningful experience: listening to and reading stories and poems; taking field trips; dictating stories; seeing classroom charts and other print in use; participating in dramatic play and other experiences requiring communication; talking informally with other children and adults; and experimenting with writing by drawing, copying, and inventing their own spelling (Bredenkamp, 1987, p. 55).

This view of literacy reflects an evolving perspective on reading and writing which began to appear in professional literature in the mid-1970's. Reading readiness concepts gave way to new ideas and new terminology. Experts began to understand how young children developed concepts about reading and writing long before the beginning of formal instruction. To describe how young children developed literacy concepts, new terms were coined. Phrases such as *concepts about print, literacy before schooling, print awareness, and concept of author* began to appear in the professional literature. Since the time of that paradigm shift, a general term, *emergent literacy*, has been accepted as the term to describe the view of how young children develop as readers and writers (Sulzby and Teale, 1991).

Within the emergent literacy philosophy, reading and writing are viewed as interrelated skills which are supportive of each other, rather than as separate skills which develop sequentially. Experts now believe that children are learning to

read and write from birth. Prior to this paradigm shift, educators believed that students learned reading and writing by moving through workbooks and other commercial materials designed to "get them ready" to read. The theory of emergent literacy asserts that children actively construct their understanding of reading and writing through independent exploration and through informal interactions with parents, child-care givers, and other literate people (Teale, 1986).

The teacher plays an active and important role in helping children become conventional readers and writers (Routman, 1988; Hyde, 1990). Teachers must provide the physical environment to support young children's literacy-related explorations. They must also provide the psychological environment in which children's early attempts at reading and writing are honored and supported. Teachers must model the behaviors of a literate individual. Children learn from activities that are meaningful to them and from those which they are allowed to initiate. Thus, the responsibility of early childhood teachers is evident: to meet the needs of the young learner and to provide a variety of opportunities for literacy development (Black, Puckett & Bell, 1991). Many of the activities teachers should provide are listed in the earlier definition of appropriate practice for literacy development.

Additional classroom activities for facilitating emergent literacy behaviors in young children are those which help them develop a concept of author (Rowe and Harste, 1986). In studies of how children develop as writers, the need for children to view themselves as authors within a community of authors has been documented (Graves and Hansen, 1983; Calkins, 1986). When students' attempts at writing are honored by adults, they become more willing to risk writing at their own level. When they are able to share their writing orally with classmates and hear others question and respond

to their writing, they begin to view themselves as authors who want to write and share their writings. When children are able to take self-produced books home to share with friends and family, they are motivated to create even more. Two primary ways to help children view themselves as authors are the Author's Chair (Graves and Hansen, 1983) and an active publishing program (Harste and Burke, 1985; Morrow, 1993).

Despite the availability of research on developmentally appropriate practice, emergent literacy, and how teachers can best help young children develop literacy behaviors, not all early childhood teachers believe in or use these methods. A comparison of two classrooms follows. In the first class, the teacher does not yet accept the concepts of emergent literacy. In the second classroom, the teacher does.

The classrooms

Much can be learned about a teacher's educational philosophies by observing the classroom environment itself. Both classrooms in this study were colorful and had child-sized furniture and math manipulatives, but were otherwise dissimilar.

The first classroom contained many examples of commercially prepared materials. Alphabet cards and charts, months of the year, days of the week, and pictures with descriptions of African-American leaders covered all available wall space. Student work in the form of spelling tests which had grades of 85% or better were displayed on cabinet doors. On the wall outside the classroom were 22 identical shapes of the state of Texas which had been outlined in glitter. A large computer-generated sign and die-cut shapes of Texas were included in the display. Math manipulatives and toys were in baskets on one shelf in the room. A home living center was

in one corner of the room and a listening center with a variety of musical tapes was in another corner. Four tables were spaced throughout the room. Six child-sized chairs were pushed under each table.

The second classroom was organized by labelled centers. A double-deck reading/listening center was in one corner of the room with both levels filled with pillows. This center was located adjacent to the writing center which had a typewriter, a variety of paper and markers, pencils, and crayons. A book center was filled with a variety of books. A dramatic play center depicting a grocery store was set up nearby. Student-made signs provided labels for this center and a collection of empty boxes and canned food served as props. There was a math center with a variety of manipulatives; a science center with gerbils, plants, magnets, smelling jars, science specimens borrowed from a local museum and several books about spiders; an art center with tempera paints, watercolors, and clay; a block center with unit blocks, and a games/puzzles center which included puzzles, pattern blocks, cards, and teacher-made games. Class-made books, group experience charts, word banks, student-made signs, individual students' stories, drawings, and paintings were displayed throughout the classroom.

The teachers

The first teacher described her philosophy as traditional. She believes in large group instruction, daily phonics lessons, and workbooks. The other teacher described her teaching practice as "striving toward developmentally appropriate practice." She believes in providing a print-rich environment for children, in reading to her students several times each day with numerous opportunities for extending literature, in modeling writing, and in encouraging students to write daily.

The first teacher stressed academics and group recitation. Every morning the children began their day sitting in straight rows on the floor, reciting the alphabet, letters, sounds, and words that began with all the letters, e.g., "A, ah, apple, B, buh, ball ..." Their morning work was organized by "rotating centers." Groups of five to six children worked at tables and changed tables at 25- to 30-minute intervals when directed by the teacher. Daily activities usually involved worksheets relating to the letter of the week, numerals, or addition problems. Children copied capital and lower case letters, assigned spelling words, and sentences related to their unit topic. Art work usually involved coloring, cutting, and gluing an assigned pattern onto construction paper. Work was assigned to students by the teacher, except on Fridays when the students were allowed to have "game day," meaning they could choose their activities. The teacher spent her time at one of the rotating centers, called the teacher table. During her half-hour with each group of children who rotated to her table, the teacher worked on specific skills, typically phonics or computation.

Children in this classroom sat in chairs at the four tables to complete their assigned work. Worksheets were arranged in the center of each table for children at these tables. During the researcher observation, students worked consistently and very quietly, only occasionally whispering to other children seated near them.

The second teacher stressed emergent literacy behaviors and the understanding of number concepts. Mornings began with shared reading and planning morning work. After a group meeting, students were allowed to complete the two or three assignments in any order they wished. The first part of the morning, children came to the teacher to get their "word for the day," a practice the teacher explained as being based on

Sylvia Ashton Warner's key word vocabulary approach. She spent a few moments with each child, talking about their day, and working on letter recognition, phonemic awareness, or conventions of writing depending on each child's needs. During that activity, other children worked in centers and on morning assignments. All centers in the classroom were open to the children as they chose their work. After the "word for the day" activity, the teacher moved through different centers, sometimes observing, sometimes assisting students with their work. At times, she called small groups of children to a particular place in the room to work together. Children worked in small groups, in pairs, or individually as they chose. As they chose, students gathered at tables or on the floor. Children talked among themselves most of the time.

The students

The sample of subjects for this study was 38 children from two kindergarten classes in the same elementary school located in a large southwestern city. In the first classroom, there were 19 students, 11 girls and 8 boys; 18 African-Americans and one Hispanic. In the second classroom, there were also 19 children, 9 girls and 10 boys; 18 African-Americans and one Hispanic. In the first class, 10 students could be described as coming from low socioeconomic (SES) homes, defined by qualifying for the school district's free lunch program. Fifteen children in the second classroom could be considered low SES by the same definition. School district policy mandated that children entering kindergarten must be five years of age on or before September 1. Thus, in April of their kindergarten year when students were interviewed, their ages ranged from five years, eight months, to six years, six months.

Student interviews

Each child was interviewed individually, using a semi-structured interview instrument developed by Dr. Robert Nistler (1989). He developed this questionnaire as part of his dissertation research and used it to determine what concepts of authorship were revealed in the oral and written language of children engaged in bookmaking tasks. Nistler examined how these concepts differed for good readers in first, third, and fifth grade. The interview of each kindergarten student in this study was audio-taped and transcribed for easier analysis of data.

Interview results and discussion

Virtually all students were eager to be interviewed. Students in the second classroom had been interviewed on audio tape several times throughout the year. Only two students in the first classroom appeared reluctant to answer questions while being taped. Both of these interviews were postponed until another day when the students asked to be interviewed. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher replayed the tape so the students could hear themselves. If for no other reason, this aspect of the interview process motivated the students to participate in the interviews. Typical of children who are five- and six-year-olds, many of the questions were answered with few words and little elaboration.

Following the question, "Are you an author?," there were follow-up questions. If the child responded positively, the researcher asked, "What makes an author?" In the first classroom, one student did not know; another student said, "when I be happy." In the second classroom 14 said that they were authors because they wrote stories or books or drew pictures. Two children answered that reading books made them authors and one child said that he would be an author when he grew up. The nineteen interview questions and student answers are shown on Table 1.

Table 1
Interview Questions and Answers

Interview Questions	Answers from Classroom One	Answers from Classroom Two
1. Does anyone at home read to you?	14 yes; 9 no	16 yes; 3 no
2. Some days or every day?	5 everyday; 9 some days	4 everyday; 11 some days
3. Does anyone at school read to you?	14 yes, their teacher 5 no	19 yes, their teacher
4. Some days or everyday?	9 some days; 6 everyday	1 some days; 18 everyday
5. Are you a reader?	12 yes; 7 no	19 yes
6. Do you have some favorite books?	18 yes; 1 no	19 yes
7. Can you name some of them?	10 mentioned title or authors; 8 mentioned subject areas like horse, tree, Ninja Turtles	18 name specific titles or authors; 1 no answer
8. Do you know what an author is?	18 no; 1 yes	15 yes, 4 no
9. What does an author do?	The one child responded positively to question 8 said that authors swim. The other students said, "I don't know."	15 answered that authors wrote stories. Of the four who said no to the previous question, three said authors wrote stories.
10. Are you an author?	2 believed they were; 17 did not	17 believed they were; 2 did not
11. Can you write?	16 yes; 3 no	All 19 said they could write.
12. Why do you write?	Answers varied.**	Answers varied.**
13. Where do you write?	Answers varied.**	Answers varied.**
14. When do you write?	Answers varied.**	Answers varied.**
15. What is your writing like at home?	Answers varied.**	Answers varied.**
16. What is your writing like at school?	Answers varied.**	Answers varied.**
17. Who reads what you write?	Most students said their teacher read what they wrote. Some mentioned family members.	All students said their teacher read their writing. 3 said they read what they wrote.
18. Who makes decisions about your writing?	This question confused most children. Those who did answer tended to say, "momma" or "my teacher."	This question also confused students. Those who did answer said, "my teacher."
19. Can you give me some examples of those decisions?	Again, this question was beyond their level. Almost all who did answer said, "I don't know."***	Almost all students shrugged their shoulders or said, "I don't know."***

** See Interview Results and Discussion for further comments from students.

Answers to the why, where, and when questions varied significantly among students in both classrooms. Children in the first classroom tended to say that they wrote to learn or to get good grades. One child answered that she wrote because she liked to and "because reading and writing are educational!" This student had transferred from a different school less than two weeks before the interviews. On investigation, it was learned that her previous teacher described her own classroom as developmentally appropriate. More than two-thirds of the students in the second classroom said they wrote because they liked to or they wanted to write stories. One child answered, "'cause I write like my friends," which indicates the social nature of writing in this classroom. Another child answered, "'cause we be having (sic) to write a story every day."

In answer to where they wrote, several students in both classrooms said that they wrote at home and at school. The most popular answer in the second classroom was "at the writing center."

In both classrooms, some children said they wrote when the teacher told them to or "when it's time to write." In the second classroom, children tended to give more extensive answers, e.g., "today and tomorrow and ever (sic) single day," "after I illustrate the paper," or "Saturday, Friday, Thursday ..."

Answers to the questions about writing at home and at school varied from student to student; however, students in the first classroom tended to give answers that related to handwriting. Only two children in this class indicated they wrote stories at home. Three mentioned writing stories at school. Seven children said they did "homework," wrote spelling words, or ABC's at home; ten mentioned this type of writing at school. Almost all children in the second classroom mentioned writing stories and/or sounding out words at home and at school.

Conclusions

The views these children have of themselves as readers and writers are very different. Children in the first classroom generally defined writing as the handwriting skill of forming letters or as copying teacher-given words and sentences. Virtually all the children in the second classroom saw themselves as authors, writing stories, despite the fact that some students were still in the early writing stage of using random letters to represent text.

These self-views may contribute significantly to the children's later learning experiences in language arts and, in fact, in other content areas. As Lilian Katz and Sylvia Chard discuss in their book *Engaging Young Minds: The Project Approach* (1989), there is more learning than knowledge and skills. Katz and Chard discuss the importance of the disposition to learn and feelings about learning. The children who view themselves as readers and authors are much more likely to pursue these activities, and therefore become more accomplished with each literacy-related experience. The children who view writing as teacher-directed word- and sentence-copying are much less likely to choose reading and writing activities for themselves, thus limiting their experiences.

Perhaps the most dramatic differences were in the students' answers to the questions regarding authorship. It should be noted that, through district-mandated learner objectives, both teachers were required to ensure that each student become acquainted with famous authors, yet only five students in the first classroom could even define "author." District learner objectives also mandated that each kindergarten student should use stories and personal experiences to generate topics about which to write and should learn to write significant information, yet few children from that class wrote anything other than what their teacher directed them to copy.

Clearly, decisions made at the district level are not always implemented in each classroom. Through learner objectives, district administrators agreed with and mandated activities complementary with the philosophies of emergent literacy. Yet the two teachers interpreted the objectives very differently.

While there may be other factors that contribute to the differences in student attitudes about reading and writing in these two classrooms, there are obvious differences in the teachers and the philosophies which guide classroom practices and decisions. Bill Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby believe teacher practices, even the physical set up of the classroom, can promote literacy behaviors in young children (Teale and Sulzby, 1989). Linda Lamme (1989) claims "the classroom atmosphere is a powerful determinant of the amount and kinds of writing attempted there."

While this study involves only two kindergarten classes the results may be dramatic enough to cause more traditional teachers to rethink the priorities they establish in their classrooms. The environment created by each teacher and the value they place on particular activities shape the attitudes and values of students. Teachers must ask themselves what dispositions and feelings they are helping develop within young children.

Making changes

The very nature of change is difficult. In one's personal life, beginning and maintaining a regular exercise regime is a hard change to make. Sticking to a diet is hard. Adjusting to new routines following a geographical move is hard. Just as those personal changes are not easy to make, professional changes are also challenging.

Teachers of young children who are currently using traditional academic instructional methods but want to begin making some changes need to remember that change is not easy. They can expect to feel uncomfortable at times. Changing classroom practice is a process. Teachers can, and probably should, implement changes over a period of time.

One of the easiest — and one of the most important — changes a teacher can make is adding more shared story times during the school day. Reading aloud to young children has a profound influence on children's reading and intellectual development (Lamme, 1985). Children should listen to a wide variety of quality children's literature several times each day.

Another fundamental change a teacher can make is related to the use of worksheets. While there is nothing fundamentally wrong with worksheets, right-wrong worksheets do not teach, they test. Too often, worksheets merely test isolated, unimportant skills (Marzollo, 1988). Teachers could slowly begin substituting shared reading times and large and small group discussions related to whatever skill they would have "taught" with a worksheet. Librarians and book store personnel can be consulted about particular children's books which might be used to teach specific skills. At the very least, these skills would be taught within a context.

Teachers can begin modeling writing in front of the entire class and in small groups so that children begin to view writing as a natural way of recording what is said and communicating important information. A specific time can be set aside every day for the teacher to write language experience stories, to list comments from students, or to record information for the class. A separate time could be set aside for children to write, at whatever writing stage they are capable of (Morrow, 1993, pp. 230-244).

Teachers can also change the physical environment to emphasize reading and writing as integral to daily life. For example, teachers could put a telephone and telephone book or cookbooks and index cards for recipe writing in the home center, art books in the art center, observation logs and factual books about classroom pets in the science center, and books related to shapes, colors, and patterns in the math center. Labels, signs, and teacher- and child-written charts are also ways to incorporate reading and writing into the classroom in ways that are meaningful to young children.

While change of any kind is not easy, there are many resources available to teachers who want their classroom practices to be more developmentally appropriate. Professional organizations for early childhood education, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Association of Childhood Education International, and for the field of reading, such as the International Reading Association, provide books, journals, and conferences that offer theoretical rationales and practical suggestions for classroom teachers. District administrators in the areas of early childhood and reading may be able to identify local teachers who are already implementing these concepts in their classrooms. Teachers wanting to make changes could visit these classrooms and talk with teachers who have already changed the way they teach reading and writing to young children. Reading about emergent literacy and talking with teachers who are teaching this way can provide important support for teachers who want to make changes of their own.

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