



What Do Preschool Teachers Understand About Children's Writing Transitions?

Author(s):[Noella Mackenzie](#) (presenting)

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Contribution

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If you live in a literate society, literacy skills are critical to success at school and in life more generally. A person will be considered literate if they can interpret and create messages using a range of meaning making modes (oral, written-linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial) in "different cultural, social or domain specific situations" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 1). The written-linguistic mode is still often used on its own (e.g. this proposal), although it is also often combined with one or other of the modes listed above. Approaches to the teaching of writing have changed over time, reflecting shifts in theoretical models and perspectives of teaching and learning. While the process of learning to write begins when we are quite young, it is understood that writing is a process that we continue to develop over a life time.

In this paper, writing will be discussed as a transition experienced by young children as they move from *sign creation* to *sign use*. Children's drawings are an example of *sign creation*, while use of a written-linguistic mode is an example of *sign use*. In a world of multimodal texts and multiple modes the written-linguistic mode remains an important mode of meaning making. If teachers encourage and value sign creation, they can build a bridge between children's current systems of meaning making and the new system of writing (Mackenzie, 2011). "In this way writing becomes a parallel means of meaning making rather than a replacement" (Mackenzie, 2011, p. 338) for sign creation processes like drawing.

Most Australian children learn to write in the written-linguistic mode during the period of time that includes the year before they start school and the first year of school (between ages 4 and 6). Therefore their writing transition often coincides with their transition to school. Further complexities may be created by what happens in the home, although this was not the focus of the study.

From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), learning takes place because of interactions between children and other children, children and adults, adults and other adults (e.g. teachers and parents), children and objects, and children and symbols within an environment. The interactions that promote learning may be further understood by reference to the work of Lev Vygotsky (1997). Children construct knowledge within social contexts, and language is central to mental development. Adults' ideas therefore "mediate what and how the child will learn; they act as a filter in a sense, determining which ideas" (Bodrova and Leong 2007, p. 9) the child will learn. How adults "respond and what they value helps to form children's attitudes towards writing and determine the paths their learning journeys will follow" (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 189). In this paper, the adult under discussion is the preschool teacher.

Method

The study discussed here was part of a programme of research which focused on young writers, their preschool teachers and the teaching/learning processes that support the learning to write journey. In 2010, the research included an investigation of preschool teachers' attitudes, beliefs and understandings of how to support emergent writers. While preschool is not compulsory in Australia, many children attend preschool for between 1 and 3 days per week, in the year prior to starting school. Data were gathered from preschool teachers (early childhood educators) (N=23) in preschools and long day care facilities over the course of the study. Through the study I examined how the preschool, including the proximal processes or forms of interaction evident within this environment, supported young writers; considered how that may be different to the more formal school environment; and examined some of the possible issues for young writers as they transition from sign creation to sign use while also transitioning from one environment to another. In this paper I discuss the data which were provided by the preschool teachers. Data were gathered by the researcher through open ended interviews. These were transcribed and returned to the participants for comment and clarification prior to analysis. Patterns of response were identified through a content analysis approach.

Expected Outcomes

A mismatch was identified between what happens in preschool and school classrooms in regard to beliefs about how children should learn to write (Lynch 2009), expected standards, curricula, assessment processes (Kagan et al. 2006) and pedagogical approaches to writing in the two settings. This mismatch could create a discontinuity or uncomfortable transition for young writers when they begin school.

The participants did not see themselves as teachers of writing or of literacies more generally. Participants encouraged children to explore writing in the preschool environment, when and how they wished but there were no expectations that they would reach any specific writing standards before leaving preschool, although being able to write their own name was desirable. While participants discussed encouraging drawing as art, they did not see drawing as a form of communication or meaning making. They understood writing as a formal communication process which some children begin before starting school but most learn at school. They claimed little understanding of how writing (sign use), was taught in schools, nor did they know what was expected from children when they started school.

While most children adapt quickly to the social demands of school (Einarsdóttir, 2006) an unsuccessful transition into school literacy may lead to 'frustration, avoidance and an ongoing negative attitude towards school literacy' (Mackenzie, Hemmings and Kay, 2011, p. 284). The study findings suggest that "preschool teachers see their role as providing opportunities for children to explore writing through play, but not to proactively seek or initiate opportunities to interact with them in ways that might assist them to move along the writing continuum" (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 97). As a consequence children's transitions from sign creation only, to a combination of sign creation and sign use may be unnecessarily difficult and opportunities for spontaneous teaching missed.

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Author Information

Noella Mackenzie (presenting)
Charles Sturt University
Faculty of Education
Albury