Learning to write is a major challenge for children entering school and supporting this process is an equally major challenge for the teachers of our youngest school students. Moreover, early success with school literacy often leads to future success and a positive attitude towards school literacy and school in general, while a poor beginning can lead to frustration, avoidance and a negative attitude. However, when children begin formal schooling two worlds (prior to school and school) come together and this coming together is a complex process. Children entering Australian schools come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds with varied home and community experiences and many ways of making meaning. Some children enter schools with experiences that are closely matched to the pedagogy and practice of school, while others do not. Teachers are also diverse, coming to the teaching of early literacy with different qualifications, levels of experience, beliefs and understandings of how children learn. In this paper I will discuss some of the findings of the first and second phases of a long term study exploring the teaching and learning of writing in the first six months of formal schooling conducted in Australia in 2007.
Becoming a writer: kindergarten teachers and students learning together?

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Abstract
Learning to write is a major challenge for children entering school and supporting this process is an equally major challenge for the teachers of our youngest school students. Moreover, early success with school literacy often leads to future success and a positive attitude towards school literacy and school in general, while a poor beginning can lead to frustration, avoidance and a negative attitude. However, when children begin formal schooling two worlds (prior to school and school) come together and this coming together is a complex process. Children entering Australian schools come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds with varied home and community experiences and many ways of making meaning. Some children enter schools with experiences that are closely matched to the pedagogy and practice of school, while others do not. Teachers are also diverse, coming to the teaching of early literacy with different qualifications, levels of experience, beliefs and understandings of how children learn.

In this paper I will discuss some of the findings of the first and second phases of a long term study exploring the teaching and learning of writing in the first six months of formal schooling conducted in Australia in 2007.

Introduction
The research discussed in this paper aimed to learn from teachers and children, identifying and examining strategies teachers used for both engaging the interest of children and attempting to support writing development in the first six months of formal schooling and the outcomes of these strategies. Data informing this paper includes writing samples and a teacher survey. The data provide evidence to suggest that while different teachers claim to approach the teaching of writing differently and measure success differently this is not
necessarily the case. The following questions will be used to structure the body of the paper and some tentative findings will be shared.

1. What do teachers say about the teaching of writing to kindergarten children?
2. What do teachers identify as indications of successful writing development when analysing writing samples of students in kindergarten?
3. How do teachers build on students’ prior-to-school language and experiences?
4. Do teachers encourage children to use their drawings as a means to develop their written messages?

Before moving into the body of the paper I will provide a brief background to the study context and discuss some of the literature informing the study. Neither the methodology nor theoretical framework for the study will be discussed in any detail in this paper as these are discussed elsewhere (Mackenzie, 2008).

**Background and context to study**

The first year of formal schooling in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, is referred to as Kindergarten. Children in NSW usually start Kindergarten between 4 1/2 and 5 ½ years of age although they may be a little older. Children may or may not have attended pre-school or childcare prior to school. The author/researcher gathered data from children and teachers across the first six months of Kindergarten in 2007. The teacher survey which consisted of 40 attitude statements (using a 5 point Likert Scale) and a sample of a Kindergarten child’s writing for analysis (see Figure 1, below) were completed by 89 kindergarten teachers from regional NSW schools late in 2007.

Figure 1: Writing sample for analysis from teacher survey
School, the kindergarten classroom and the role of the teacher

Teaching and learning by their very nature take place within a number of cultural situations: the historical culture of teaching; the culture of the education system (employer); the culture of the school, and the culture that develops within the individual classroom (Mackenzie, 2004). In an educational setting or organization, it is the role and responsibility of the educational leaders to establish and maintain the conditions necessary for reflection, critical analysis and experimentation (Duignan & McPherson, 1991). Leaders are able to greatly influence organizational culture by embedding their own assumptions in the ongoing life of organizations through ‘what they pay attention to and reward’ and ‘through the ways they allocate resources’ (Schein, 1992, p. 252). The educational setting or organization in the study discussed in this paper is that of the school and more specifically the kindergarten classroom with kindergarten teachers fulfilling a leadership role. Kindergarten teachers introduce their neophyte students to the culture of school through the rules and routines they introduce into their kindergarten classroom. Children learn how to ‘do’ school, and in particular what is ‘valued’ and ‘rewarded’ through daily interaction with their very first and possibly most important teacher.

Early literacy and the role of drawing

Contemporary understandings of literacy learning suggest that literacy is a “social, cultural, moral and political practice through which knowledge (and consequently ‘control’ or ‘power’) can be accessed and interpreted” (Kennedy & Ridgway, 2005, p. 43). Access to and apprenticeship into institutions, resources and texts is considered to have more impact upon students’ success with literacy learning than individual skill deficit (Kennedy & Ridgway, 2005 with reference to Luke & Freebody, 1999). However, pedagogies responsive to socio-cultural perspectives on literacy are not common in Australian early childhood settings (Kennedy & Ridgway, 2005) nor perhaps school settings. Children who enter school with the kind of conversational language valued by the school and the metalanguage associated with school literacy are at an advantage, as they easily respond to the expectations of the school and the teacher (McNaughton, 2002). Another group of children enter school with ‘prior to school experiences’ that may have not prepared them so well for the school environment. These children are disadvantaged unless the teacher is able to build upon their ‘prior to school learning’ and develop programs which effectively build a bridge between home and school literacy.

More recently the work of Baghban (2007), Levin & Bus (2003), Kennedy & Ridgeway (2005) have also identified important links between drawing and writing. Some literature suggests that young children do not clearly distinguish writing from drawing, suggesting that drawing may be a necessary part of early writing. Drawings may also act as a bridge between a child’s home/community experiences and school by providing opportunities for meaningful conversations.

Findings and Discussion

*What do teachers say about the teaching of writing to kindergarten children?*

Responses to the survey suggest that kindergarten teachers are generally confident in their ability to teach literacy to the range of children in their classes although only a little over half of the respondents in this study felt confident supporting children with language development problems. The survey data also suggest that kindergarten teachers appear to agree in many ways about the best ways to approach literacy and language instruction but disagree on others (see Table 1 below for examples).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some items most teachers agreed on</th>
<th>SA/A</th>
<th>SD/D</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten students need daily whole class lessons which focus on writing (1)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten children need regular small group lessons which focus on writing strategies (13)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint construction of writing (adults and children together) should be a feature of the kindergarten writing program (15)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten children should have opportunities to write their own stories every day (28)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching children about print conventions (punctuation, full stops, spaces, capital letters) should begin early in kindergarten (22)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching sight words should be a priority in a kindergarten writing program (7)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some items that teachers didn’t agree on</th>
<th>SA/A</th>
<th>SD/D</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the metalanguage of school literacy is not a priority in the first half of Kindergarten (38)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing habits of neatness in Kindergarten will promote writing development (21)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing their own ideas and meanings is the major purpose for writing in Kindergarten (35)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared language experiences are more important for students writing than individual experiences (11)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching correct spelling should be a priority in a kindergarten writing program (4)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, SD = Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, NS = Not Sure

Table 1: What teachers agree or disagree on in relation to instruction in early writing.
What do teachers identify as indications of successful writing development when analysing writing samples of students in kindergarten?

It would appear from the survey data that teachers identify control of writing conventions (spacing, punctuation, spelling, use of space on the page, letter formation) as indicators of writing development based upon their 100% agreement with item 22 (see Table 1) and their analysis of a sample of student writing in early Kindergarten (see Figure 1, above). All teachers who analysed the writing sample identified the child’s use of print conventions when discussing the strengths of the writing and 97.6% also identified print conventions when identifying what the student needed to learn (see Table 2 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified by survey respondents</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print conventions only</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions and picture</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions and meaning/message</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions + meaning/message and picture</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning/message only</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Writing sample analysis

The actual message was only discussed by 18% of respondents in regard to the student’s strengths and as a need by 26%. This contradicts the responses to survey item 35 which related to the purpose of writing in kindergarten to which 58% of respondents were in agreement: *Expressing their own ideas is the major purpose of writing.* The following writing sample selected by one of the teachers from one of the focus children in June (after 4 ½ months at school) also shows, by the teacher’s marking, (ticks or check marks) what is valued by this teacher: correct spelling, correct letter formation, correct parts of words. No comment or feedback (in a written form) is provided to the child in regard to the message itself. This sample is representative of the many samples provided to the researcher.
Figure 2: Writing sample 1

How do teachers build on students’ prior-to-school language and experiences?

Language development was an area of concern for many of the teachers responding to the survey. While 97.8% suggested that a child’s language development had a major impact upon their writing development, only 52% of teachers felt confident supporting children with language development problems. Most teachers (93%) claim to prioritise making regular time to talk with each child individually, to encourage children to expand their ideas by talking to the teacher (98.8%) and to think ‘out loud’ or talk when they write (91%). These opportunities should allow the teacher to build on students’ prior to school language and experience.

Most survey respondents (95.5%) agreed that children should have the opportunity to write their own stories every day and a further 83% agreed that children’s home experiences were more important when developing literacy skills than shared in-school experiences. However, 41.5% did not see expressing their ideas and meanings as the major purpose for writing in kindergarten. These contradictions suggest some of the complexity of teaching writing in kindergarten. Teachers were almost unanimous (96.6%) in prioritising daily whole class lessons which focus on writing, and a further 88.7% prioritised regular small group lessons focused on writing. These teaching strategies would suggest shared and group topics rather
than children writing about their home experiences. When reviewing the samples of writing provided by the teachers it became obvious that children most often wrote about topics that were generated by the teachers or the group. Story ‘starters’ or ‘story stems’ provided by the teachers were very common and many of the samples provided were either the same or very similar (See figures 2 and 3).

Figure 3: Writing sample 2

Do teachers encourage children to use their drawings as a means to develop their written messages?

Four statements in the survey addressed the issue of drawing plus there was a drawing in the survey writing sample provided for analysis. Responses to these statements (see table 3 below) suggest that teachers agree that drawing pictures can help children to develop their ideas for writing (Items 2 and 36) although there is disagreement over whether or not drawing pictures is more important than discussing ideas with the teacher. Almost 63% of respondents suggest the role of drawings is to illustrate writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>SA/A</th>
<th>SD/D</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking children to draw pictures helps them develop their ideas for writing (2)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing pictures is not as important as discussing ideas with the teacher prior to writing (9)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten children should be encouraged to write first and then illustrate their writing if they wish to do so (29)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing pictures is a good way for children to develop their ideas and express their own meanings (36)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Survey responses relating to drawing

This suggests that children may not be encouraged to draw first in order to develop their ideas prior to writing. The samples provided to the researcher often included drawings but in discussions with teachers and student alike, writing was deemed more important than
drawing. Children could illustrate their writing if there was enough time available. One teacher admitted to encouraging children to illustrate their writing in order for her to have time to ‘mark’ children’s writing. In the following sample (Figure 4 below) the drawing which was completed after the writing suggests far more complexity than the writing itself which was written using the ‘story stem’ of ‘I like to go to . . .’ provided by the teacher. One wonders what the student may have written if the drawing had come first, followed by a discussion of what was happening in the drawing.

Figure 4: Writing Sample 3

**Conclusion**

Teachers are the educational leaders within their classroom contexts. The renewed *phonics* versus *whole language* debate and the politicisation of literacy teaching widely reported in the media appears to have impacted upon kindergarten teachers and their programs of learning. Language experience, vocabulary development, drawing and daily independent writing were once common in kindergarten classrooms but data gathered in the study discussed in this paper suggest that in many cases these have been replaced by a rush to learn letters, words and literacy conventions generally. Teachers claim to value children’s prior to school experiences and language but do not appear to encourage children to use their home and community experiences or strengths and interests as sources or purposes for writing. Children’s drawings are not being used as a means to develop their written messages but rather they are used as illustrations or extensions of the written word. Teaching the conventions of print (words, letters and punctuation) appears to be the highest priority for teachers when teaching writing to young children. Teachers identify correctness
in terms of writing conventions and neatness as indicators of successful writing development in the early stages of writing.

References


