



Reliability and validity of the Writing Resources and Interactions in Teaching Environments (WRITE) for preschool classrooms



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ABSTRACT

Young children's writing skills are a critical component of their literacy development and are predictive of later reading achievement. Although recent research and policy reports identify the importance of supporting children's writing in early childhood, little research exists on how early educational settings promote children's writing development. The present study was designed to (1) validate a new measure for examining teacher writing supports in preschool classrooms and (2) use the measure to examine teachers' writing practice and their relation to child outcomes in a diverse group of preschool classrooms ($N=68$). Psychometric analysis of the measure provided evidence of reliability, construct validity, and predictive validity for children's writing development in preschool. Observations included a comprehensive examination of the writing environment, environmental print, teacher modeling of writing, teacher scaffolding of child writing and independent child writing. Results indicated that teachers vary widely in their material and instructional supports of writing in preschool classrooms. In general, preschool teachers provided a variety of materials to support children's writing including a well-equipped writing center. Although many teachers were observed modeling or scaffolding writing, they used few strategies and those were typically characterized as low-level quality.

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Introduction

Young children's writing development is critical to children's literacy development and is related to later reading achievement (Hammill, 2004). Children's writing has been identified as one of six key predictors of later reading with consistent, moderate effects (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). Although only a small body of work focuses on the study of writing development, this work has identified young children's writing ability to predict other literacy skills including decoding (Bloodgood, 1999; Molfese et al., 2011), phonological awareness (Blair & Savage, 2006), and letter knowledge (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008) suggesting that writing may be a vital process for developing these other essential early literacy skills. Because writing skills do not develop naturally and children vary greatly in their writing skills at kindergarten entry (Welsch, Sullivan, & Justice, 2003), the ways in which early childhood educators support writing in the classroom appear to be important for understanding how children develop writing skills.

However, little research has examined how early childhood educators approach writing with young children.

This study had two goals. First, we aimed to develop a reliable and valid measure of teaching practices to support young children's writing skills. Second, we used the measure to evaluate teachers' writing practices and their relation to child outcomes. This study is the first, to date, to systematically observe preschool teachers' writing pedagogy across a range of early childhood education settings.

Defining writing

For this study, we utilized a broad definition of writing that captures both the multidimensional nature of early writing and a wide range of writing-like practices that teachers may employ to teach these skills. As articulated by Kaderavek, Cabell, and Justice (2009), early writing is considered to contain the following three dimensions: composition, handwriting, and spelling. Composition is how children engage in the writing process and generate their ideas for what to write. Teachers support these skills when they model the writing process, ask children to discuss what they will write, and offer opportunities to select the topic for writing or generating their own ideas for writing (Ray & Glover, 2008; Schickedanz

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& Casbergue, 2009). Handwriting is focused on letter formation. Teachers support these skills by offering a variety of tools for creating letter forms (e.g., stencils, word cards to copy) and by discussing letter shapes (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). Spelling is focused on orthography, recognizing that letters represent sounds and the ability to identify and write the sounds in words (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008). Teachers support these skills when they scaffold children by offering letter names to pair with the sounds children have generated, by asking about letters and letter sounds children hear as they write, or by encouraging invented spelling (Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013; Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012; Neuman et al., 2000).

As outlined, writing is a complex task requiring children to execute a variety of skills to be successful. For example, even for the simplest writing task, such as name writing, it requires the coordination of children's motor skills (handwriting) and letter knowledge (orthography) (Gerde, Skibbe, Bowles, & Martoccio, 2012; Son & Meisels, 2006). Furthermore, previous work demonstrates that children's writing does develop across preschool (Diamond et al., 2008) making it essential to identify how this growth may be related to the opportunities preschool teachers provide children to experience writing. Because teachers and the early childhood environments they create may contribute to children's development of these writing skills in multiple ways, we investigated a broad range of environmental and teacher supports. Specifically, we were interested in examining (1) how teachers set up environmental supports for children's writing, (2) how teachers model writing in their classrooms and scaffold children's writing attempts and understanding, and (3) young children's initiations of preschool writing interactions.

Environmental supports for early writing

Considerable theoretical and professional literature exists on the role that early childhood classrooms play in children's writing development (Neuman et al., 2000; Ray & Glover, 2008; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Theoretically, writing develops within a social context in which adults model and use writing in a meaningful way with children (Vygotsky, 1978) and writing generally involves the social intent to communicate with others (Street, 2003). Within this social context, adults may provide environmental supports for young children's writing that may increase their exposure and opportunities to generate ideas and use writing in their play or practice writing letters and words. With regard to environmental design, teachers are encouraged to use environmental print to create print-rich early literacy environments that include: labels on toys or curriculum centers, posters with words, teacher created charts (e.g., child birthdays), word walls, and a posted alphabet (Gerde, Bingham, et al., 2012; Neuman et al., 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Additional environmental writing support recommendations for teachers include providing writing materials throughout classroom play areas, providing meaningful opportunities to write in the context of play (e.g., creating an office), creating a daily sign-in to encourage children to write their names, separating writing and art experiences, and supporting young children's writing attempts through adult modeling or scaffolding. These teaching practices are supported and reflected in position statements, practical texts, and the professional literature (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gerde, Bingham, et al., 2012; International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children (IRA/NAEYC, 1998; Neuman et al., 2000; Neuman, Roskos, Wright, & Lenhart, 2007; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009).

Despite the above recommendations, remarkably little research connects teachers' writing practices and children's access to writing materials to children's development of writing skills. The work that

does exist (Diamond et al., 2008) documents no relation between providing writing materials in the classroom and children's writing ability, indicating that providing materials is necessary but insufficient for supporting children's writing development. Although environmental print by itself may not significantly improve children's early literacy or writing skills, studies suggest that pairing environmental supports with teacher modeling or support does. For example, Neuman and Roskos (1993) found that redesigning Head Start classrooms to incorporate more literacy related play (e.g., office or post office dramatic play and additional opportunities to interact with print) and encouraging parent volunteers and teachers to increase children's involvement in these literacy-themed centers was significantly related to children's ability to read environmental print and label functional print items. In their study, children who were exposed to print rich literacy environments and had adults facilitate their interactions with such materials were able to read environmental print better than children who were simply exposed to the materials. These findings appear to be corroborated by Vukelich (1994) who found that exposure to print in meaningful contexts with adult mediation was an important contributor to children's ability to read environmental print. Importantly, Evans and Saint-Aubin (2005) document that children do not look at print unless adults draw children's attention to print, even when it is embedded in interesting illustrations. Hence, it appears that what teachers do with print and writing in early childhood settings is more important than simply providing children with materials or environmental supports.

Teacher modeling and scaffolding support

The notion that writing must be taught, or at least modeled for children, in order for them to develop writing skills is not new (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Because environments rich in writing materials alone appear insufficient for building children's writing skills (Diamond et al., 2008), researchers have looked to adult modeling and scaffolding as important mechanisms for how children develop writing skills. Although little empirical work exists on teachers' writing strategies and children's development of early writing skills beyond the few studies cited above, two lines of research provide insight into the role that adults play in mediating children's understanding of writing processes that contributes to their writing development.

The first line of research consists of qualitative studies describing adult practices. This work recognizes the teacher as an active facilitator in children's writing development (Graves, 2003). Teachers intentionally teach new writers about specific writing strategies and introduce new ideas for their writing process and composition (Calkins, 1994). For example, studies examining the process of writers' workshop find that writers develop writing skills when they discuss writing (both process and content) with other writers and by learning from experts who provide specific guidance and critique of their writing (Graves, 2003). Writers also learn through the study of mentor texts (Heard, 2002), like when teachers write a morning message and draw attention to their writing process (e.g., how they selected the words to write; use of capitalization) as well as the content of the text they wrote. Further, teachers support children's writing efforts when they offer suggestions for children's writing and respond to children's questions about writing (Graves & Hansen, 1983). Finally, teachers must recognize the intentionality of the writer, that is, the intent to communicate a message. It is critical to accept all forms of writing to convey meaning and offer scaffolds in incremental steps according to the current skill of the child (e.g., providing guidance as a child moves from picture-writing to letter writing, Kouvou, 2006; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011).

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