

Writing Their Words

Strategies for Supporting Young Authors

Karyn W. Tunks and Rebecca M. Giles

FOUR-YEAR-OLD HALEY charges into the classroom with her backpack and lunch box flailing behind. Her coat is on inside out. One pigtail is intact, but the other withers under a too-loose elastic band. “What a morning!” she declares loudly, bumping into several children while on the way to her cubby.

As the other children get settled into the daily routine, Ms. Smith, Haley’s teacher, asks Haley to tell her about her morning. Haley narrates the details of oversleeping and hunting for misplaced shoes, and Ms. Smith records the words on paper. Finally, Haley concludes with a triumphant “The end!”

Ms. Smith reads the entire story back to Haley, pointing to each word as she reads: “‘I had a super-crazy morning today . . .’” Haley says with amazement, “Hey! My story is funny! Can I show it to my mommy?” Ms. Smith hands the paper to Haley, who draws a picture at the bottom of the page. Afterward, Haley’s teacher slips the illustrated story into a page protector so a proud Haley can take it home to read to her family.

Young children enter preschool programs and formal schooling with varied knowledge about writing. Some children may be exposed to writing every day through

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Photos courtesy of the authors.



observing family members make lists, compose on the computer, or do homework. Others may know little about why or how people write. Regardless of their knowledge level, young children can benefit from having their stories written down and then shared with others. Teachers can show children that their personal experiences and stories have value by preserving them through writing. Here we highlight two strategies for supporting young writers: taking dictation and translating “kid writing.”

Taking dictation

Adults take dictation when they listen to and write down children’s oral stories before the children can write on their own (even unconventionally). The benefits of dictation are well documented (Temple et al. 1993; Calkins 1994; Tunks & Giles 2007). Taking dictation while children tell stories is pivotal to introducing the purpose of writing and the functions of printed language.

Through dictation children learn the general purpose of writing, become aware of the speech-to-text connection



(what you say, you can write), gain basic knowledge of sound-symbol relationships, and are introduced to conventions of print, including capitalization and punctuation. Morrow (2005) suggests that when taking dictation, the adult should (1) write legibly using standard spelling; (2) sit so that the child can watch as his words are written down; (3) read the dictation back to the child while she tracks the print; and (4) encourage the child to “read”/retell his story to others.

Adults taking dictation should write the child’s words as they are spoken, including dialect and vocabulary (Morrow 2005). This preserves the spoken language and aids emergent readers when they attempt to read back what has been written. Using quotation marks will indicate to others that dictation was taken verbatim. This strategy also works well for older children who are dual language learners, because they are creating their own text to read about familiar subject matter. When dual language learners tell stories using English and their home language, their English-language skills grow (Gunning 2003). Children gain ownership of the story and their language by illustrating the story after hearing it.

Teachers can prepare with pencil and paper to take dictation in varied contexts during the school day, including impromptu and planned occasions. Like Haley in the opening vignette, children come to school with immediate life experiences that they want to share.

Teachers can also plan specific times to take children’s dictation. Planned dictation often happens each morning when children create a Morning Message based on their shared experiences. The children take turns contributing thoughts for the message, and the teacher writes them, noting children’s names next to their statements. Because the text is generated by the children, it is easier for them to review what is written (Ashton-Warner 1963). Using a pointer, the teacher can indicate each word as it is being read aloud by the class. Children enjoy copying the teacher’s behavior as well.

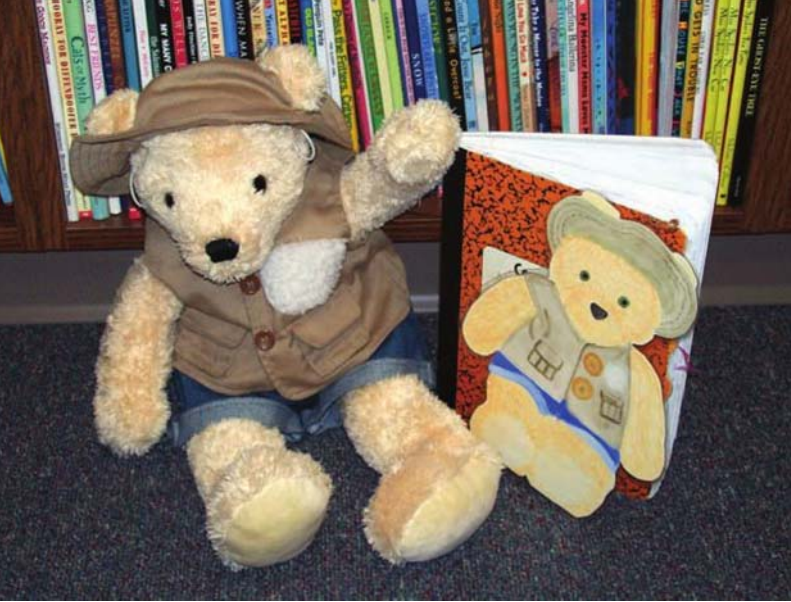
When the morning message is written on chart paper, as opposed to a dry erase board, teachers can save it and review it later with the children. Children will enjoy flipping back through the pages to find their contributions to the message. Other planned dictation times include during group discussions after field trips or other special events and in learning centers during choice time, when teachers write down children’s descriptions of what they are playing, building, or creating. Outdoor play offers another opportunity as children’s imaginations are fully engaged.

Involving families

When families see their children’s enthusiasm for the dictated stories they bring home from school, many will follow the teacher’s example and write the child’s stories at home. Teachers can also suggest and create specific reasons for parents to take dictation for their child—for example, having a stuffed animal as a classroom mascot that travels home with a different child each day.

The mascot comes with a journal for recording the details of its visit with each family, such as places they went, games they played, or what they had for dinner. Accompanying instructions ask parents to write the events in the journal, as they are told by the child. Earlier journal entries provide models. When children return to school with the mascot, they can share the events recorded in the journal or the teacher can read the entry aloud to the class. This experience offers many valuable lessons, including reinforcing the purpose and function of writing.

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Teachers can also involve families by requesting information about their child for Student of the Week activities. When it was 4-year-old Jay's turn, he dictated the following autobiography to his mother, as she typed his words on the computer:

"My real name is Bryan Alan. My birthday is October 8th. I love my Kade, and my momma, and my daddy. I love everybody in my family. I like to play with Daddy and my cousins and Trey. I go to Granny and Pa's lake when it's a holiday. I play games and wrestle and jump in the water. My favorite book is *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and my favorite letter is R, and my favorite color is pink, and my favorite number is 8. My favorite thing to eat is a cereal bar."

Bryan "read" the autobiography from memory to the class, then displayed it on a bulletin board, along with favorite photos.

Translating kid writing

As children learn more about writing, they gain the confidence to experiment on their own, using different forms of unconventional print to convey their first written messages.

These spontaneous forms of writing are often called "kid writing" because they resemble the kind of writing done by a child rather than an adult. Sulzby (1985) refers to children's early approximations of writing as spontaneous forms of print—scribbles, drawings, print forms that look similar to letters, strings of letters unrelated to the intended message, familiar words that are spelled conventionally, and invented spelling in which children try to make sense of the sounds of their language. Children also incorporate print from their environment into their writing (Tunks & Giles 2006, 2007). They use various forms of writing interchangeably, depending on the content and purpose of writing. Each type of kid writing indicates a growing awareness of the function of print and should be celebrated as an accomplishment.

Adults show children that their messages are important and meaningful by listening as children "read" and by translating their writing. As children read their writing, a teacher can serve as a scribe, just as earlier the teacher took dictation for the stories children told. This is done through underwriting, a technique in which the adult writes the child's spoken words under (or sometimes just above) the child's writing. By providing a verbatim record of the child's message, underwriting translates the child's words.

It is important to write the story exactly as it is told so children can reread their message either from memory or by recognizing familiar words, or through a combination of both. By sharing their stories with others, children learn they play a critical role in getting their own thoughts on paper, a necessary concept for future writing development.

When their efforts are recognized by significant adults, such as parents and teachers, children are motivated to continue playing with print and eventually begin using more sophisticated forms of kid writing, such as invented spellings, and conventional spellings for familiar words (Sulzby 1992). This marks an important transition in writing that can be read by others. For example, Cain wrote,

we lrnd awr ABC and 123

which can easily be read as

We learned our ABCs and 123s.

When enough sounds are represented, children's invented spelling is readable, and an adult no longer needs to translate. In the meantime, adults need only provide intermittent underwriting—writing just the words that cannot be read. Words that can be read are designated by underlining. An example of using intermittent underwriting is,



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I wil b a cobou w l gro up.
[cowboy when]

Kid writing can also be used to perform specific classroom functions, such as writing one's name on an attendance sheet or an activity waiting list for signing up for snack, or contributing to a class-made book. Functional writing activities such as these reinforce children's confidence as writers and motivate them to write more.

Conclusion

Children benefit from opportunities to tell their stories and have them written by more proficient writers. These early experiences introduce and reinforce the purpose and function of writing. Taking children's dictation for oral stories and translating stories created through kid writing contribute to children's identity as writers.

Through these early literacy strategies, children quickly learn that putting their thoughts and stories into writing is a meaningful and useful way to communicate and share their thinking and ideas with others. Once children feel secure in their ability to communicate through writing, teachers can introduce additional strategies, such as questioning and discussion, that encourage young writers to explore topics of interest in more depth.

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