Writing the Way to Reading:

How Opportunities to Write in Early Childhood

Support Reading Development

Katharine Miller

Vanderbilt University

Summer 2016

**Abstract**

This capstone examines the possibilities of writing instruction to support the reading development of young children in late preschool through early first grade who are just beginning to understand the alphabetic principle. The NELP Report (2008) and prominent theories of reading development are analyzed to identify the instructional needs of beginning readers. Writing is then examined as a tool to deliver meaningful reading instruction in the elements of self-identity as a “doer” of literacy, decoding, and concepts about print. Recommendations are made for writing instruction that supports reading development in late preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms. Common questions of type of writing task, the use of copying and tracing, independent vs. shared writing, and invented vs. conventional spelling are discussed. Finally, writing is examined as an assessment tool for planning meaningful early literacy instruction. In closing, recommendations are made for next steps toward effectively implementing writing instruction as a tool to meet the instructional needs of young literacy learners just beginning to understand the alphabetic principle.

**Introduction**

The Common Core State Standards, first implemented in Nashville’s public schools in the 2011-2012 school year, have made a significant impact on the field of education. Now, five years after their introduction, there is still much conflict and debate over the standards as teachers work to adapt to the new expectations, materials, and overall methods of instruction that have come along with their implementation. No matter the side of the debate one stands on, it is undeniable that these standards have influenced and are very much alive in today’s classrooms. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012), in reflecting on the Common Core State Standards, note that the standards’ emphasis on writing beginning as early as kindergarten is one of their key, standout features. Calkins et al. (2012) write, “the message is this: Kindergarteners can write. They can not only invent their own spellings and write with fluency and power, but also write long, well-developed, shapely texts” (p.108). This increased focus on writing has received much pushback from educators, especially in the younger grades, who fear that their students are not ready for such high writing expectations, which include writing to inform, express opinions, and narrate events (Common Core, 2015).

However, many scholars argue that the traditionally held view of children not being ready to write until they have begun to read is simply not evidence-based (Allington, 2013; Clay, 1975; Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Gentry 2006; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Schickendanz, 1999). In fact, work has shown that writing and reading development support one another and develop iteratively (Clay, 1975; Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Gentry, 2006; Rowe, 2015; Tolchinsky, 2006). This capstone focuses on the implications of viewing young children as capable writers as related to reading development. Specifically, I argue that when we acknowledge the ability of young children to write, we open up writing as an avenue through which to further develop and strengthen reading skills. This work will begin by exploring the instructional needs of beginning readers. I will then examine the relationship between writing and reading and explain how writing can be used as a tool to support early reading development. Next, I will make recommendations for what developmentally appropriate writing instruction that supports reading development might look like in general education preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms. Finally, writing will be examined as a tool for assessing the literacy development of young children.

**Early Literacy Development**

Emergent literacy theory and research has shown that young children read and write in their own way long before their reading and writing looks and sounds like conventional reading and writing (Clay, 1975; Gentry, 2006; Harste et al., 1984; Ray & Glover, 2008; Rowe, 2015; Schickendanz, 1999; Tolchinsky, 2006). In other words, literacy development is a journey, with the beginning phases of that journey not closely resembling the ending phases. In fact, at first glance, early reading and writing may not look so much like reading and writing at all. For example, a child may look at the printed word “cat” and say, “The family went for a walk and then to McDonalds and then they sang a song.” Or a child, upon being asked to write his name, might scribble in circular motions filling the whole page with unidentifiable marks. Nonetheless, these are the early stages of literacy development and hold great value in the long-term journey (Harste et al., 1984; Rowe, 2015; Tolchinsky, 2006). Indeed, research has shown that young children are systematic literacy thinkers, and that their reading and writing approximations hold a great deal of thought behind them (Harste et al., 1984; Rowe, 2015; Tolchinsky, 2006). Tolchinsky (2006) writes, “children’s errors do not indicate ‘ignorance’; rather, they reflect a different kind of reasoning” (p. 93). Goodman (1995) has noted the same regarding analyzing children’s reading errors, or “miscues,” noting again that children’s unconventional reading is not random, but reflects the way they are currently thinking about decoding. Gentry (2006) uses the metaphor of tadpole and frog to argue that we, as early childhood educators, need to value these early phases of development just as much as the ending phases because of where they lead- to conventional, strong, mature readers and writers. While a tadpole may not look very much like a frog, in order to grow into a frog, he must first go through being a tadpole (Gentry, 2006). Ray and Glover (2008) add to this idea, stating that as early childhood educators we have the responsibility to validate, celebrate, and nurture early literacy development. They refer to this practice throughout their work as accepting young children as “members of the literacy club.” The authors cite Smith (1998) as coining this idea of a “literacy club” with both expert and novice members, explaining that there is great power in viewing young children as true readers and writers; albeit readers and writers who lack proficiency due to a lack of experience (as cited in Ray and Glover, 2008, p.6).

In order to properly support these novice readers and writers, we must first understand early literacy development. Marie Clay (1975), famous for being one of the first researchers to take a deep interest in the capabilities of young literacy learners, notes, “as the child discovers that speaking (with which he is familiar) can be conveyed by print he must set himself the task of understanding many arbitrary conventions which we as adults accept so readily” (p.2). To paraphrase, while young children are capable literacy learners, becoming a proficient member of the “literacy club” is a complex task. Therefore,before moving into recommendations for instruction, let us first examine the instructional needs of young literacy learners.

**National Early Literacy Panel Report**

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) released a report in 2008 synthesizing early literacy research and making recommendations for policy and practice. The panel found alphabet knowledge (letter and sound correspondence), phonological awareness (the awareness of and ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds within spoken language such as words, syllables, and phonemes), and writing (including printing letters and one’s name) to be among the conventional early literacy skills that have a strong relationship to later literacy ability (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, p. vii). Concepts about print (including left to right directionality, front to back of text directionality, and author and illustrator roles) were also moderately related to later literacy ability (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, p. viii).

**Theories of Reading Development**

These findings of the NELP are in alignment with cognitive theories of literacy learning. Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky & Seidenberg, (2001) take the perspective that to become a proficient reader, one must become a proficient decoder. This involves understanding concepts of print, including concept of a word in text and the 1:1 correspondence between spoken and written language. Rayner et al. (2001) write that these are difficult concepts for children to understand, as they are so different from rules of oral language. One cannot “see” the boundaries between words in spoken language. Additionally, children tend to confuse a word’s form with its meaning. As Rayner et al. (2001) explain, “Many preschool children appear to confuse the name with the object it refers to, referring to *snake* as a long word and *caterpillar* as a short one, for example.” (p. 35).

Rayner et al. (2001) go on to explain the importance of phonological awareness and the alphabetic principle. The authors write, “phonological awareness is the strongest predictor of early reading skill” (Rayner et al., 2001, p. 38). This is because, in order to map letters/letter combinations to sounds, children must understand that oral language can be broken into component sounds. “Bottom-up” reading theorists argue that decoding instruction must be explicit and that children need to be directly taught the alphabetic principle (Rayner et al., 2001). Indeed, Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl (1998) found through an in-depth analysis of phonics instruction that explicit and systematic instruction leads to greater reading success. Perfetti’s (1988) verbal efficiency theory acknowledges that while text is processed on many levels, cognitive resources are limited. Therefore, it is important that lower-level, word decoding processes are strengthened and automatized to free up cognitive resources for more complex processes such as higher-level comprehension (Perfetti, 1988).

SEDL, a non-profit education research, development, and dissemination organization, has created a cognitive framework for learning to read. The framework is similar to the theory of reading proposed by Rayner et al. (2001) in that it separates the elements into oral language comprehension and decoding-focused domains of knowledge (SEDL, 2015). In the decoding realm falls cipher knowledge (spelling-pronunciation relations), lexical knowledge (words known by sight), phoneme awareness (recognition of individual sounds in words), alphabetic principle (phoneme-grapheme correspondence), letter knowledge (thorough familiarity with English alphabet), and concepts about print (SEDL, 2015). These component skills are all important for young children to gain an understanding of and master on their way to becoming proficient readers.

However, top-down theorists remind us that it is important not to get so wrapped up in any one of these component skills that we forget the ultimate purpose of reading as a meaning-making experience. Goodman’s (1995) voice echoes, “readers learn to read by reading,” (p. 7) asserting that we must give young children time to experience what it means to put all of these components together and attempt to decode meaning from print. Cambourne (1995) writes on this idea as he proposes his *Educationally relevant theory of literacy learning*, noting that learners must have opportunities to authentically engage in and try performing the skill they are working to master in order to advance in their development.

Socio-cultural theories of learning emphasize the need for a learner to take on the identity of “someone who does” whatever the skill is they are trying to learn (Driscoll, 2005). In this sense, it would be important for a young literacy learner to see him/herself as a reader and writer. Cambourne’s (1995) theory of literacy learning echoes this idea, emphasizing welcoming and accepting young readers and writers who are only capable of reading and writing approximations as true readers and writers. Rowe (2013) reviewed trends in research on young children’s literacy learning and found that children who were given time to engage in reading and writing in early childhood settings indeed were involved in experimenting with social roles and taking on new identities as readers and writers (p.431).

To summarize, beginning readers need:

* a firm understanding of concepts of print including the conventions of left to right, top-down, front to back directionality, concept of word in text, and 1:1 correspondence between spoken and written language
* strong phonological awareness including phonemic awareness
* thorough familiarity with the letters of the English alphabet
* a firm grasp of the alphabetic principle, including phoneme-grapheme correspondence
* a working lexical knowledge, meaning a growing mental lexicon of words that are recognized automatically, by sight
* time to authentically engage in and practice reading for meaning
* a sense of self as a “doer” of literacy

**Relations to Writing**

While research has shown that even a child’s earliest scribbles across a page hold great significance and insight into his development as a literacy learner, the scope of this paper will focus on readers and writers approximately 4-7 years old (late PreK- early 1st grade) who are in what Gentry (2006) calls the late “Level 1”- early “Level 3” phases of literacy development (p. 159-175). These children have some knowledge of alphabetic principle. While they may not have mastered and know how to use the English orthography, they do understand that in the English language we use alphabetic letters to decode and encode spoken words through print (Gentry, 2006). The remainder of this capstone will focus on how writing instruction can be used as a method to enhance these beginning readers’ understanding of the alphabetic principle, decoding skills, concepts of print, and sense of self as a “doer” of literacy.

Before continuing, I want to emphasize that I do not argue writing instruction as the *only* vehicle through which to grow strong readers. Rather, I advocate for writing instruction to be more widely used and recognized as one ingredient within a larger, full plate of literacy instruction. Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) write extensively on this topic. They conclude that while reading and writing do share a wealth of common knowledge and cognitive processes, ultimately we must keep in mind that they are not identical (or even strictly reverse) processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Separate instruction in each individual literacy practice is necessary. However, they are closely correlated and “may be taught more effectively or efficiently together rather than delaying writing instruction until reading development is completed” (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000, p. 42). As Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) note, research has shown that writing tends to be placed on the backburner and de-emphasized due to pressure to focus on reading-based, decoding skills. I hope to shed some light on the ways in which, when writing is brought back into the forefront and prioritized within literacy curriculum, reading skills are actually strengthened along with writing skills. Synthesizing across literature, potential of early writing experiences to support early reading development stands out in three main areas- image of self as a “doer” of literacy, decoding skills, and concepts about print.

**Image of Self as Someone who “Does” Literacy**

Encoding and decoding a permanent message in print through an alphabetic system is a very complex concept for young children to understand. When introducing children to the world of literacy, Tolchinsky (2006) notes that children may actually understand writing better than reading as it leaves visible traces on the paper. In other words, the child can see and feel the act of leaving a message behind by making marks on a page (Tolchinsky, 2006). The International Reading Association (IRA) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1998) echo this idea, explaining that writing activities allow children to see firsthand the communicative purpose of literacy. This knowledge that readers and writers share messages with one another is an example of the shared metaknowledge between reading and writing that Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) refer to. If a child tries his hand at leaving behind a message through print, he can better understand that there is an intended meaning to be extracted from the print he is directed to read.

Ray and Glover (2008) echo this idea of the importance of children seeing themselves as full-fledged members of the “literacy club.” The authors state that teachers must simultaneously hold in mind both that a child is a writer and reader and that he/she is a young child (i.e. who is 4/5/6/7). It is in balancing these beliefs and giving young children the opportunity to actively and authentically engage in literacy through writing that children come to understand their power as a writer and build a sense of agency in their own growth as literate people (Harste et al., 1984; Ray & Glover, 2008; Schickendanz, 1999). Cambourne (1995) agrees with this position as evidenced by his discussion regarding expectations for learners. He notes that when the expectation communicated to students is that they are capable of the learning task set before them, they are more likely to succeed (Cambourne, 1995). So, when we give children paper and pencil, call them an author, and expect them to take an active part in our literate world, we communicate to them that they are capable and enhance their success. Rowe (2013) concludes, “learning to write involves much more than adding new skills to children’s cognitive repertoires. It requires that children take on new cultural identities and affects their sense of self in profound ways” (p. 432).

Ray and Glover (2008) add that writing may be a less intimidating avenue into literacy than reading exercises, as writing tends to be viewed as more of an “invitation” to create as children know how rather than the “expectation” to get someone else’s message right that comes with reading (Bomer, 2006, as cited in Ray & Glover, 2008, p. 13). Engaging in anything as a novice is highly intimidating. Ray and Glover (2008) explain that asking young children to take the risk of writing and creating their own messages is one developmentally appropriate avenue through which to prompt them to engage with literacy. Aligned with a cognitivist perspective of learning theory, Ray and Cleaveland (2004) explain that young children are used to interacting with and exploring their world with their sense of touch and by creating things. Therefore, creating meaning through writing is a wonderful place for them to explore literacy (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). In summary, writing activities offer a developmentally appropriate invitation for children to take on the role of “doers” of literacy.

**Decoding Skills**

As discussed previously, a firm understanding of the alphabetic principle, including that spoken words can be broken into phonemes, which are then encoded through graphemes (letters) is a strong predictor of success with later decoding-based reading skills (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Rayner et al., 2001; SEDL, 2015). Stahl et. al. (1998) note that whether one is a top-down, meaning-based advocate or bottom-up, decoding-based advocate, all acknowledge that the ability to decode is an essential characteristic of a strong reader. Morris, Bloodgood, and Perney (2003) note, “letter knowledge and phoneme awareness seem to drive reading development in the early stages” (p. 95). Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) consider these skills to be “graphophonics” skills within the “universal text attributes” shared knowledge of reading and writing (p. 40).

Clay (1975) explains with a cognitive perspective why writing is a beneficial exercise for strengthening decoding skills. She notes that writing allows a child the chance to engage in “manipulating the units of written language” (Clay, 1975, p. 2) and does not allow for ignoring details. Clay (1975) writes, “In the child’s early contact with written language, writing behaviours seem to play the role of organizers of reading behaviours [. . .] it does appear to help the child come to grips with learning to attend to the significant details of written language” (p. 3). Bloodgood (1999) states, “When children finally integrate these three strands of literacy awareness- alphabet, phonology, and sense of word in print- they have within their grasp the tools to read effectively” (p. 346). Twenty-five years earlier, Clay (1975) was advocating that writing prompts children to do just that, as they must work word-by-word, sound-by-sound, and record graphemes as they go along encoding their message.

Several authors remind us that spelling ability is very closely related to decoding ability (Gentry, 2006; Moats, 2005; Schickendanz, 1999). Moats (2005) cites the work of Ehri (2000) in explaining, “research has shown that learning to spell and learning to read rely on much of the same underlying knowledge” (p. 12). Again, the focus of this capstone is on children ages 4-7 who are just beginning to understand the alphabetic code and that we use a system of graphemes representing phonemes to encode and decode meaning. Using what they understand about this system through writing allows children a chance to put their knowledge to use as they experiment with and strengthen their understanding of this alphabetic code (Allington, 2013; Gentry, 2006; Moats, 2005; Richgels, 2013; Williams, 2009**)**. Moats (2005) states that for young children, “spelling can be approached as an exploration of language and then applied to various writing exercises” (p. 22).

Many authors have reported on the benefits of practicing phonics through writing. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) write in their discussion of strong phonics instruction in the *Put Reading First* booklet of the Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, “most programs of systematic phonics instruction also include materials for use in practicing writing. For example, children might have activity sheets on which they write the letters and letter combinations they are learning, and then combine these into words, sentences, messages, and their own stories” (p.15). One program of early literacy instruction, *Talk, write, and read* capitalizes on the reading and writing connection by having students write invented spellings of missing words in picture books and then, with adult support, read the text, including their own writing (Richgels, 2013). Allington (2013) also notes that writing is a productive place for students to see how letter-sound relationships work as they stretch out sounds in words they want to write and use their knowledge of the alphabetic code to record those phonemes. He notes that this practice likely is so successful in supporting reading because it allows students to practice decoding skills within a motivating context- that is, writing their own message (Allington, 2013, p. 522).

Ray and Glover (2008) note that when used to its full potential, writing development often outpaces reading development as children invent spellings for words more complex than those they would decode in text. Gentry (2006) explains, “early writers use knowledge about sounds, letters, syllables, words, word parts like onsets and rimes, and phonics patterns, so early writing *advances* reading” (p. xiii). Research has supported these claims. Aram and Biron (2004) conducted a study that compared literacy outcomes for groups of 3-5 year olds engaged in either shared reading instruction or shared writing instruction. While all students made gains, the shared writing group outperformed the shared reading group on word reading, word writing, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and orthographic awareness (Aram & Biron, 2004, p.18). In summary, writing offers a rich opportunity for young children to strengthen phonics knowledge that can be applied to decoding skills in their early reading development.

**Concepts of Print**

Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) consider concepts of print as overlapping text format between reading and writing. Clay (1975) warns of difficulties many children have with understanding basic concepts of print including left-to-right and top-down directionality. Authors have also noted the challenges of children’s understanding of concept of word within text (Rayner et al., 2001). Similar to the previous discussion of alphabetic principle, writing gives children a place to experiment with and apply these concepts of print as they work to communicate personally meaningful messages (Clay, 1975; Harste et al., 1984; Schickendanz, 1999).

Furthermore, writing invites children to experiment with larger-scale concepts of print including genre and text structure (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Harste et al., 1984). Ray and Glover (2008) note the importance of children being invited to write for both functional purposes (i.e., creating lists, signs, and informative notes) and compositional purposes (i.e., newsletters, opinion pieces, poetry, and stories). This allows children to see the depth and breadth of many forms of writing and to talk and think deeply about these text forms (Ray and Glover, 2008, p. 24-28). The IRA and NAEYC (1998) agree, noting, “writing challenges children to actively think about print” (p. 205) in ways including different written forms, syntactic patterns, and themes.

**Writing With Young Learners**

Many teachers of young children report that writing is an area in which they lack expertise regarding methods of instruction (Culham, 2015). Indeed, research has shown that teachers of young children are much better at “assigning” writing rather than “instructing” writing (Rowe, 2015). After exploring all of the affordances of writing on reading instruction, this section seeks to shed some light on where to begin in writing with 4-7 year olds; that is, how to invite them to the writing task and move them forward toward conventional writing with the goal of continuing to support reading development.

An important note regarding the methods I present here is that the focus will be on the abovementioned areas in which writing can be used to support reading instruction. Ray and Glover (2008) do an excellent job of explaining the many reasons why writing instruction is valuable in and of itself for helping students grow as *writers.* I do not mean to contradict these ideas in any way. Seeing oneself as a writer who is able to communicate his/her ideas through print is essential, even for our youngest learners. However, that is not the focus of my work here. For the purpose of this capstone, I seek to explore the ways in which writing supports the reading development of 4-7-year-olds who are just beginning to understand and apply the alphabetic principle. Additionally, while many of these ideas could be adapted and used in 1:1 parent-child or tutoring settings, I am coming from the perspective of an early childhood educator presenting to other early childhood educators working in general education classroom settings. These ideas will shape the information I present moving forward.

**Overall Classroom Environment and Format of Instruction**

In surveying many early childhood teachers, it has been found that, especially in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, writing materials are provided, but often in a “center” where students can choose whether or not to engage with them (Gerde et al., 2015; Rowe, 2015). This is significant because it shows that writing is present in early childhood classrooms as an option, but not as an essential, core element of the curriculum (Gerde et al., 2015; Rowe, 2015).

Many authors advocate setting aside a core writing time and making writing a priority in the classroom all year long through a writer’s workshop (Calkins, Hohne, & Robb, 2014; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Ray & Glover, 2008). This does not mean that writing materials should not be available in centers/”free choice” time, but rather that writing should also be a routine part of each and every child’s day (Harste et al., 1984; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003; Rowe, 2015). Ray and Cleaveland (2004) write on the importance of building excitement for writing workshop from the very first day of school to help children build their sense of self as someone who “does” writing. These authors discuss presenting writing workshop as a special time that the children will get to “make things” each day and slowly work into the routines throughout the first several weeks of the school year (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).

Ray and Cleaveland (2004) state that children in kindergarten should have at least 45 minutes of uninterrupted writing time (plus/minus a bit for preK and 1st) each day. This will include whole group, small group, and individual instructional time as well as independent writing time (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). The common questions below will delve into what this block of time will look like a little more closely; i.e. what the children and teacher are doing at this time. It is important to recognize that Ray and Cleaveland (2004) note that teachers should be familiarizing and talking with their students about the conventions of language all day long- during read-alouds, guided reading, word study, and any other time during the day when there is a teachable moment (and there will be many!). In other words, to be successful, writing workshop must take place within a print-rich and language-rich classroom. The protected 45 minutes of writing workshop is about giving the time for and guiding young writers in applying what they know about literacy to their own work (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).

Ray and Glover (2008) write that the materials provided should be relatively simple- pens, pencils, markers, paper (can be stapled into little books), and alphabet strips for reference. For more advanced writers who have a stronger grasp of the alphabetic principle and/or some sight words, a word wall may be made available for their reference (Williams, 2009). Ray and Cleaveland (2004) note that you might invite students to find a comfortable place around the room to work- writing doesn’t have to happen at the desk. However, it is important that students build up stamina for writing and that they remain in one place working for the duration of the workshop (aside from coming to a small group/individual conference or gathering needed materials) (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). To summarize, young children ages 4-7 need to be writing routinely each day (approximately 45 minutes), in a comfortable, print-rich environment, with a variety of writing materials and resources at the ready.

**Writing Tasks**

Ray and Cleaveland (2004) present writer’s workshop as a time for children to experiment with and put into practice what they understand about writing. This means that they should have the opportunity to approximate the forms of writing they are familiar with and have seen in authentic contexts (Cambourne, 1995; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Ray & Glover, 2008).Ray and Glover (2008) advocate inviting children to make picture books, as these will likely be most familiar to them. They note that teachers can introduce a variety of genres through picture books and engage children in author studies where they read many books by the same author and watch interviews with them about their craft (Ray & Glover, 2008). Students can then try creating similar work and build an identity as one who does the same work as Eric Carle or Mem Fox, for example (Ray & Glover, 2008). Furthermore, Kissel and Miller (2015) write on the importance of providing authentic, open-ended writing experiences, stating that writer’s workshop should give students power to share about the happenings in their own worlds. Mature writers write about what is important and meaningful to them- young writers should be no different. Additionally, children should be invited to engage in more functional purposes of writing including making lists and writing about exciting observations (a science experiment or a classroom pet, perhaps) so that they can see all the different functions and possibilities of print (Ray & Glover, 2008; Roskos et al., 2003).

**Tasks with scope.** Genishi and Dyson (2009) advocate the use of writing activities with young children because they are “tasks with scope.” In their words, tasks with scope are “tasks that allow children to participate in different ways with different resources [. . .] among such tasks are drawing pictures, dictating stories, and engaging in various kinds of official (teacher-governed) and unofficial (child-governed) writing activities” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p.82). These authors explain that children come to school settings with unique backgrounds due to culture and home experiences. Therefore, each child brings with him/her a unique knowledge about different forms of literacy and print. “Tasks with scope” are tasks that invite multiple entry points and leave room for these diverse backgrounds to influence learning positively (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). The IRA and NAEYC (1998) write, “young children especially need to be engaged in experiences that make academic content meaningful and build on prior learning” (p. 197). One child may be extremely familiar with radio shows and feel comfortable writing a radio script. Another child may watch her dad read the newspaper every morning and want to write a newspaper. Yet another child may attend church services and see Grandma reference the song hymnals. He may want to write song lyrics. Genishi and Dyson (2009) explain that all of these ideas make the literacy environment all the richer. Each child should feel free to engage in the writing activity that is meaningful to him and then be encouraged to share with classmates, broadening everyone’s print repertoire (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Calkins et al. (2014) and Ray and Glover (2008) see writing as a “task with scope” for another reason. Not only will children ages 4-7 be diverse in what they know regarding genre and form of print, but they will also have diverse understandings of conventions of print. These authors both speak of “instructing the writer and not the writing” (Calkins et al., p. 69; Ray & Glover, p. 179). The IRA and the NAEYC (1998) write that it is not uncommon for kindergarten classrooms to represent children with a 5-year range in conventional literacy skills. Writing tasks are open-ended and allow students to bring their knowledge regarding conventions of print to the paper. Ray and Cleaveland (2004) explain that young children should be encouraged to write no matter how conventional. In fact, they state if a child is reluctant, you might invite him to “pretend” to write to get him going (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). Once a child shows us where he is in his understanding of conventions of print (this process will be discussed in more detail later), we can plan instruction to move him forward along the continuum to conventional writing, one step at a time- the right step for him/her (Calkins et al., 2014; Ray & Glover, 2008). Clay (1975) also makes note of this as she states that because literacy is so complex, there is not one specific developmental path that students will take. Rather, we need to meet children where they are and guide them toward convention from there. As writing is a “task with scope,” it lends itself nicely to this differentiation. Students can each engage in writing in their own way and teachers can provide “just right” instruction based on each child’s needs.

**Copying and Tracing?**

Many teachers question the practice of copying as a format of writing instruction. The answer to this question is not a straightforward yes or no. Rather, as discussed above regarding writing being a “task with scope,” it depends on what the teacher wants children to learn from engaging in the writing task.

When a child copies or traces adult writing, he/she references the modeled conventional writing and tries to make his/her writing look exactly the same. There are some benefits to this. The child is pushed to notice and mimic left to right directionality, spacing between words, spell sight words conventionally, and mimic proper letter formation (Clay, 1975). However, as Clay (1975) warns, the child will only learn these things if he/she knows something about them already. If not, the child might just start copying/tracing from a random point in the model and work out from there. The child may not be practicing proper strokes for letter formation or know why there are spaces between certain letters and just use them in the copy “because that’s what the teacher did.” If the child doesn’t know what the writing says, it may not matter that the sight words are spelled conventionally; they are just more random series of letters to mimic (Clay, 1975). So, the message regarding using copying and tracing to teach conventions of print is to proceed with caution- make sure the task is understood and that the students are noticing the intended conventions (Clay, 1975).

Clay (1975) and Ray and Glover (2008) both warn of another problem with copying. Sometimes, when children are asked to copy too often, it becomes laborious, tedious, boring, and can send the message that children are not really writers- they’re just copiers who aren’t as good at writing as adults. When children are given the freedom to compose for themselves, they are pushed to really think about all that goes in to the act of composing (Clay, 1975; Harste et al., 1984). Additionally, they are much more likely see themselves as composers- people who are capable of using print to share a message and/or create something new (Ray & Glover, 2008).

Gentry (2006) advocates for the use of adult underwriting (conventionally writing a child’s intended message underneath his/her writing) as a substitute to copying. He explains that this allows the child to freely compose, but then shows a model of conventional writing for a message the child understands (Gentry, 2006). Ray and Glover (2008), on the other hand, discourage this practice, warning that this may also send the message that the child’s writing “isn’t good enough.” Gentry (2006) argues that it’s all in how you present it to the child. He says to use the terms “kid writing” and “adult writing,” celebrating kid writing and reminding children that while they’re working toward “adult writing” they’re currently kids and it’s alright that their writing doesn’t look like adult writing (Gentry, 2006). The authors agree that what’s most important is that the child is writing, enjoys writing, and is consistently receiving thoughtful, intentional instruction that moves him closer to convention (Gentry, 2006; Ray & Glover, 2008). The format of writing that achieves this goal will vary based on the individual child and the specific instructional goals.

**Shared vs. Independent Writing**

Several of the kindergarten Common Core writing standards state that students should accomplish goals “with guidance and support from adults” or “participate in shared research and writing projects” (Common Core, 2015)**.** Questions remain, however, including how much of the load should be shared? What should the balance be between adult-driven and student-driven products? How much time should be given to work independently, without adult direction?

Lev Vygotsky wrote on what he called the “zone of proximal development,” which is the space between a skill a child can do independently on his own and what he can do with the help of more advanced others (Driscoll, 2005). Vygotsky believed the zone of proximal development was important because it revealed a child’s potential skills that had not yet been acquired, but that, with time and the right instructional experiences, would develop very soon (Driscoll, 2005). Driscoll (2005) quotes Vygotsky (1962) as stating, “the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it” (p. 104 as cited in Driscoll, 2005, p. 255). Vygotsky reminds educators, therefore, that learning is a very social process- that is, students need to see models of skills they are seeking to learn and have the support of more experienced others as they work toward the next steps in their development (Driscoll, 2005).

Putting these principles into practice is easier said than done. In a study of 68 classrooms serving four-year-olds conducted by Gerde, Bingham, and Pendergast (2015), it was found that only 40% of teachers modeled writing at some point during the day. While 79% of teachers provided a scaffold (some form of support) to students, most of these scaffolds were relatively low-level such as reminding children to put their name on their artwork or writing letters for children to copy (Gerde et al., 2015). Only 11.6% of all teachers engaged in some form of shared writing where teachers and children co-authored a piece of writing (Gerde et al., 2015). Rowe and Flushman (2013) write, “opportunities to write collaboratively with teachers and peers provide both demonstrations and easy access to the support children need to move forward with their texts” (p. 241). Therefore, this common practice of providing no adult support beyond a reminder to “put your name on the paper” is not maximizing the instructional potential of writing.

Ray and Cleaveland’s (2004) work proposes a workshop model for kindergarten-2nd grades that builds in time for children to write independently and build ownership of their work while also having plenty of adult and peer collaboration, support, and modeling. This is in alignment with Schickendanz’s (1999) assertion that teachers must balance the need for young writers to explore and experiment with text with the need to support children in moving forward toward conventionality (p.132). Ray and Glover (2008) have adapted the workshop model for working with preschool writers. Both are consistent with the work of Calkins et al. (2014), which spans kindergarten-8th grades. Synthesizing across all three of these texts, it is clear that the presence of an intentional, supportive, and responsive adult is key in making the writing workshop time effective. Ray and Cleveland (2004) recommend setting aside the first 10-15 minutes of the workshop time for a whole-group mini-lesson in which teachers are responding to needs of the whole class and leading the class in discussion of a model work. This model may come from a student in the class, a picture book, or the teacher’s own work. In order to keep this time discussion-based surrounding the ideas of “ what is the author doing with his writing to communicate his message?” and “how might I try this in my own writing?” they state that the model should be composed prior to the workshop time (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004, p.95).

Ray and Cleaveland (2004) note that modeling of the writing process should be embedded throughout the rest of the day. This would include the teacher modeling writing and thinking aloud to “make their writing and reading processes more understandable to young writers” (Rowe & Flushman, 2013, p. 241). They can model the thought and decision making that goes into writing from choosing a topic, planning conventions such as left to right directionality, capitalization and punctuating, spaces between words, and spelling by sound. They can also model adding an illustration to enhance their writing and reading back their text. Indeed, children need to see models of writing- but they also need to write! They need opportunities to put pen to paper and “test hypotheses about print” (Rowe, 2013, p. 424). Rowe and Flushman (2013) remind us that each time a child writes, it is an opportunity to try out and further develop his understanding of how our print system works.

As children are working on their individual pieces of writing, there are many opportunities for the teacher to work with individual students or small groups of students for writing conferences (Calkins et al., 2014; Ray & Glover, 2008). Clay (1975) advocates for this individualized work as she notes that not only will all students have individual needs, but that young children simply don’t have the cognitive ability to attend to a lengthy whole-group lesson and then apply the instruction to their own work.This allows for teachers and students to do more shared writing and for teachers to individualize instruction based on academic needs and interests (Calkins et al., 2014; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Ray & Glover, 2008).

Individual conferences with children continue to propel forward this idea that children are “doers” of reading and writing. Ray and Glover (2008) write on the practice of “side by side teaching” and note that when we take the time to sit down with children and talk to them about their writing, we affirm for them that we see them as true, capable readers and writers. Rowe and Flushman (2013) write, “when we work with emergent writers, we ask them to read their marks whether they have produced scribbles or invented spellings. ‘What did you write?’ is one of the most powerful questions that emergent writing teachers can ask” (p. 247). There are several reasons why asking a child to read back his/her writing is so important. First, it makes explicit the reading/writing connection (Gentry, 2006). In other words, it makes clear for children that writing is meant to be read and that there is 1:1 correspondence between speech and print (Gentry, 2006).

Ray and Glover (2008) expand on this idea, noting that a large part of a teacher’s work is asking questions that give children a deeper vision of how to move forward and an understanding of the way in which members of the “literacy club” think and talk. Additionally, even if a child doesn’t have an answer to the questions she is asked, just being asked sends the message that the child is someone “who ought to have answers to questions like these, since teachers keep asking them” (Ray & Glover, 2008, p.165). Additionally, sharing writing with adults gives the opportunity for someone to affirm all of the wonderful progress and potential alive in the writing (Ray & Glover, 2008). Ray and Glover (2008) state, “the teacher’s primary role is to notice what a child is doing while writing, and then to call attention to the ‘moves’ being made as he or she composes,” (p.164). For example, a teacher might say, “Wow! McKenzie, I notice you used an exclamation mark when the lion roared to show it was loud and exciting at that place in the zoo.” This affirms for McKenzie that she is using the convention of punctuation in an effective way.

To summarize, children need opportunities for both independent and shared writing. They need to truly engage in writing with space and freedom to experiment with their understandings of print and engage in the forms and purposes of writing that excite and motivate them. However, they also need to see models of writing, to discuss writing with peers and adults, to receive intentional and purposeful feedback on their writing approximations, and to work with experienced writers who can provide instruction within the zone of proximal development.

**Conventional vs. Invented Spelling**

Most adults in America learned to spell by memorizing lists of words and were discouraged from inventing spellings in their schoolwork. So, when we encourage children to simply “invent spellings,” praise incorrect attempts at spelling, and/or fail to correct spellings in young children’s writing, it might cause concern among parents. Chandler (2000) writes on the findings of an elementary school teacher-driven research study that involved surveying parents regarding spelling instruction. The teachers found that while most parents valued spelling and wanted to know how to best help their children with spelling, many simply needed a better understanding of developmentally-responsive spelling instruction through improved home-school communication (Chandler, 2000).

Research has shown that spelling develops in a fairly predictable sequence. While the English orthography is complex, it also is regular in that spellings follow the “principles” of “spelling by sound, spelling by pattern, and spelling by meaning” (Griffith & Leavell, 1995, p. 84). Over time, children come to understand these principles and learn how to apply them both in their own writing and in decoding unfamiliar words in text (Gentry, 2006; Moats, 2005). Gentry (2006) calls this the “chunking breakthrough,” (p.4) as proficient readers learn chunks of spelling patterns for automatic word recognition. At the ages of 4-7, most children will be in what is called the “emergent” or “letter name/alphabetic” stages of spelling (Moats, 2005). At the emergent stage, children are just beginning to understand that we encode words with letters (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008). At the alphabetic stage, children are very much “spelling by sound” and understand that we use graphemes to represent phonemes within words (Bear et al., 2008). Gentry (2006) asserts that, especially at these early stages of literacy development, spelling is of high importance as young children learn to chunk segments of speech into words, attend to the phonemes in those words, and then match the phonemes to graphemes.

Keeping in mind that a major goal of writing instruction in supporting the reading development of young children is to give space to experiment with and practice understandings of how our print system works, it only follows that we would encourage children to invent spellings using what they know about our orthographic system. Squires, Gilliam, and Reutzel (2013) report that students who receive instruction in phonological awareness in combination with instruction in letter-sound correspondence before 1st grade are more successful readers later; and this is exactly what invented spelling at this stage of literacy development looks like. Rowe (2013) cites the findings of a study by Ouellete and Senechal (2008) which found that “invented spelling training led to positive gains in phonological awareness, orthographic awareness, and word reading” (p.429) for kindergarten students over instruction that only involved reading. Allington (2013) also makes the case for invented spelling to be used as a tool for beginning reading instruction, noting that when students invent spellings, they attend to individual phonemes within words. In general, children should be encouraged to use invented spelling to “problem-solve” words they do not know the conventional spellings for as it presents an opportunity to apply and practice phonemic awareness and phoneme-grapheme correspondence (Moats, 2005). Over time, teachers should guide children forward, encouraging them to start noticing spelling patterns including blends, vowel teams, syllable juncture patterns and so on- but not until they are ready to recognize these as patterns among words rather than just memorizing word by word (Gentry 2006; Moats, 2005). When children “invent” spellings, they are not memorizing incorrect spellings as one unfamiliar with spelling development may be concerned; rather they are practicing putting what they know about the English language into practice- and that’s something to celebrate (Gentry, 2006; Schickendanz, 1999).

Of course, there are some common irregular words that children will need to memorize (i.e. two, was, where). These words can be kept on a word wall or in a personal dictionary for easy reference (Williams, 2009). Moats (2005) suggests introducing these words in contrast to regularly spelled words because students can more easily analyze and discuss the regular/irregular patterns. She also notes that teachers should pay attention to which words students are using and misspelling most often in their writing and prioritize teaching the correct spellings of these words (Moats, 2005). In short, young writers should be encouraged to put their knowledge of the alphabetic principle into practice by inventing spellings of words not currently in their mental lexicon as they explore the English orthography and slowly acquire an understanding of more complex spelling patterns.

**Writing as Assessment**

In order to plan instruction that will properly move students forward along their developmental trajectory, teachers must constantly be gathering and attending to information regarding where their students currently are. Ray and Glover (2008) write, “children are ready to learn what they show us they are ready to learn, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the development of understandings about transcription” (p. 177). Keeping in mind the focus on writing as a tool for reading development, in this section, I will describe how student writing can be used as an assessment tool to gather information about what a student currently understands and is ready to learn about our print system. I will first describe general principles of assessing student writing and the theory behind the usefulness of this practice. I will then briefly describe and discuss several common empirically tested, more formal writing assessments.

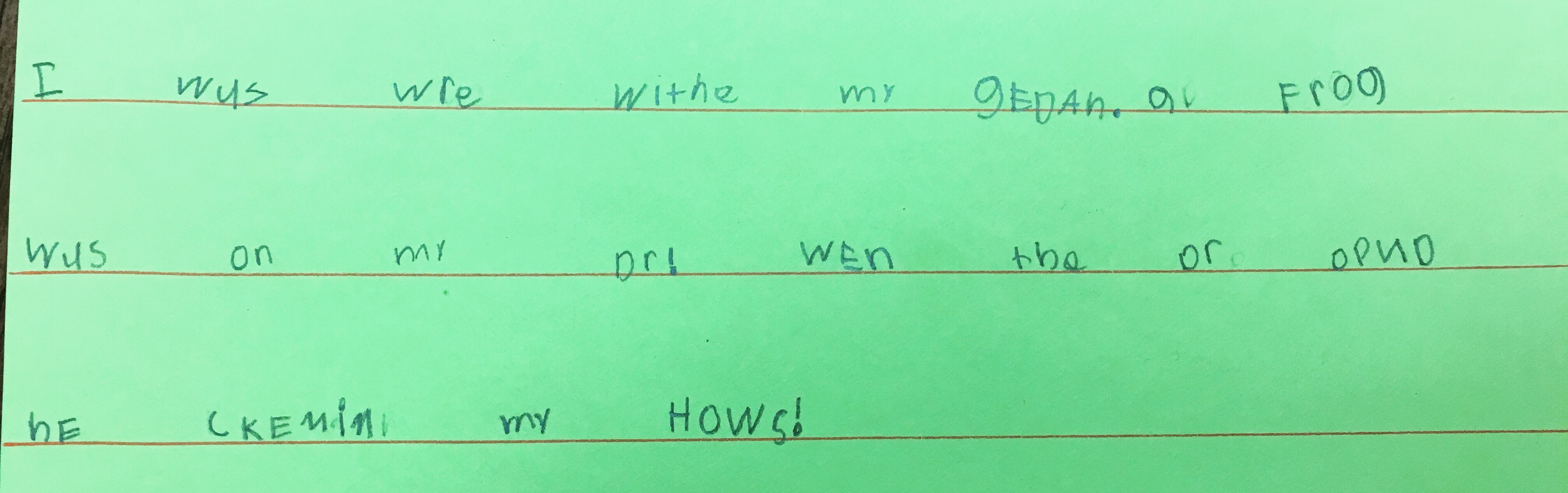
**Authentic Writing Samples as Formative Assessment**

Gentry (2006) highly recommends the use of student writing samples as a window into overall literacy development by stating, “writing is right there on paper, marvelously explicit and easier to see than the reading process” (Gentry, 2006, p. xiii). He explains that since much of the knowledge used by beginning readers to decode text is the same knowledge they use to encode their own text in writing, observing writing gives insight into what knowledge children are using as they read (Gentry, 2006). Clay (2005) also states, “the exploring of literacy done by preschool children is more obvious in their early attempts to write than in their attempts to read” (p.18). Many authors have explored this practice of observing student writing for insight into their literacy understandings (Clay, 2005; Fresch, 2001; Gentry, 2006; Harste et al., 1984). Ray and Glover (2008) warn, however, that the physical work only tells part of the story. In their words, “the written products mean very little without the children there to represent them” (Ray & Glover, 2008, p.57). They explain that to truly understand how students are thinking about writing and the print system, teachers need to watch, listen in on student conversations, and discuss their work with them (Ray & Glover, 2008). Additionally, Ray and Cleaveland (2004) and Gentry (2006) both suggest collecting student work samples in a portfolio so that they can be compared across time, revealing if and how a child is progressing in his/her understanding of the print system.

Ray and Cleaveland (2004) state that when looking at a piece of student work (and talking to a student about that work) the question we are trying to answer is “what does this piece of writing show me this child knows about writing?” (p.121). For the purposes of this capstone, I am going to adapt that to “what does this piece of writing show me this child knows about the print system?” Figure 1 shows an example of student writing. Let’s take a look and see what it tells us about this kindergarten student’s understand of the print system.

**Concepts about print.** First, we can tell that this child, we’ll call him “B” for the remainder of this discussion, understands left to right and top-down directionality. His writing is focused on one topic and tells about something that is important to him- a personal event in his own life. He understands that this is what writers do- they share meaningful information through print. Furthermore, the writing walks the reader through the story in sequential order of events. B recognizes this feature of the story genre, and that to clearly communicate with a reader, he must stay on topic and explain events in order.

B shows an understanding of concept of word as almost all words are properly spaced. He did omit a space between “come” and “in.” This would be an area to further investigate through observation or discussion to determine if it was a simple mistake due to inattentiveness or if he does not recognize that “come” and “in” are two separate words. B also understands the concept of a sentence as he clearly separates his three sentences with punctuation. Observation of B’s work would reveal that at the time this was written, he understood the function of a period at the end of a sentence. An adult introduced the exclamation point during this writing session as another end mark to convey excitement through his writing. He does not appear to understand

the function of capitalization yet. While he capitalizes “I” at the beginning of his first sentence, he does not capitalize the first letter of any other sentence. He also includes random capital letters throughout his writing (“Dr,” “opND,” “HoWs”).

Spelling. B appears to have mastered conventional spellings of “the” and “my.”

Figure 1: Kindergarten Writing Sample: “I was working with my granddad. A frog was on my door! When the door opened, he came in my house!”

Observation of his writing fluency would tell us if “he,” “on,” and “frog” are also mastered by sight or if he spelled these phonetically. Observation of B’s invented spellings show that he has a firm grasp of the alphabetic principle and spells by attending to individual phonemes within words (wus, with), though he has trouble hearing some phonemes such as r-controlled vowels (dr for door) and preconsonantal nasals (opnd for opened). He has begun to experiment with consonant digraphs (withe) and vowel teams (hows).

**Other Considerations.** Observing this writing event would provide additional information including that this writing was prompted by reading a story about a frog. This shows an understanding that readers reflect and make connections as they are reading and can respond to reading through writing. Additionally, asking B to read his writing back would allow for observing whether or not he holds his message consistent over time and if he uses tracking to show concept of word in his speech-print matching. If B had illustrated his writing, we might also ask him to tell us about the illustration and see how closely it matches and/or adds to his writing. We would also want to take note of any recent instructional topics he was/was not applying to his writing. Finally, we would make note of his confidence in writing and reading his writing back to us- does he see himself as a reader and/or writer? All of this from only three sentences of kindergarten writing!

**Next Steps.** Finally, the teacher would ask questions and provide instruction to move B forward as a literacy learner. Some possible areas might be simply prompting B to add more detail such as “What did you and your granddad do when the frog came in the house?” or “What did the frog look like?” “What did the frog do when he went in the house?” She might start talking with B about capitalization, showing some models from conventional text. She would continue to give B time to practice segmenting and blending phonemes, pushing him to hear and represent all phonemes in a word. Most importantly, she would celebrate all of the understanding that is present in this piece by commenting, “I love how you told me what happened in the exact order it happened. This really helped me picture what happened in my mind,” or “I can tell this was an exciting event because you used exclamation marks.” This would encourage B to continue to use these features and conventions in his future writing and attend to them in his reading.

This relatively informal assessment is highly important in day to day planning and for identifying opportunities for teachable moments. However, there are times when more formal assessment tools are needed to guide teacher thinking and identify instructional benchmarks. Valencia and Marsha (2004) write on the importance of digging deep into assessment tools, making sure educators use the data they give to accurately identify the specific instructional needs of individual students. Several tools for systematically analyzing the writing of young children have been developed through research.

**Marie Clay’s Observation Survey**

Marie Clay (2005) developed the *Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement.* Clay (2005) recognized both the need for teachers to identify and attend to children’s individual differences and that they needed a way to assess young children’s understandings that met developmental needs in a way that a formal test could not. Clay (2005) concluded that teachers needed to engage in observation of children engaged in literacy tasks, “work[ing] with the complexities of written language” (p.13), to see a clear picture of their thinking. Her tasks are research tested for reliability and validity (Clay, 2005, p. 13).

The observation survey includes several writing tasks (Clay, 2005). One is a simple scoring of a writing sample, similar to figure 1. She provides a rating scale for language level (random letters/words/sentences/paragraphs), message quality (what he understands about composing- is he truly conveying a clear, unique message?), and directional principles (left to right, concept of word) (Clay, 2005, p. 99). This scale helps to track progress and compare between samples and students. However, with only six levels for each category, it may be difficult to see all nuances within a level. Additionally, a child’s sample may, for various reasons, fall within two different categories. If being used and discussed between multiple raters, agreement would need to be made regarding how to score such samples.

Another task, “hearing and recording sounds in words” involves a teacher dictating a short phrase to a child to transcribe word by word (Clay, 2005, p.111-120). The sample is then checked for correct phoneme/grapheme correspondence and given a point for each one recorded correctly. While not assigned a numerical value, Clay (2005) also prompts teachers to make note of other features of the writing including partially correct attempts, use of space on the page, and sequencing errors (p. 117). This is significant as it shows that Clay (2005) recognizes that a simple black and white, right or wrong “scoring” view can’t capture all that a child’s writing sample reflects. On page 119, Clay (2005) presents stanines for children ages 5-7 years of age so that teachers can see where their children are performing as compared to age level norms.

Potential drawbacks of this task are that it is inauthentic; that is children are writing a message out of context that holds no personal meaning to them. Therefore, motivation may be low and content and vocabulary may be unfamiliar.

**Write Start! Writing Assessment**

The Write Start! Assessment tool developed by Rowe and Wilson (2014) is a rating system designed to track the writing development of children ages 3-6 years old. Its reliability and validity were tested on writing samples of 139 low-income, African American children ages 2 years and 6 months through 5 years and 11 months of age. Rowe and Wilson (2014) write that this tool was developed because “if teachers are to support young writers, they need to be able to ‘unpack the scribbles’- that is, to recognize the patterns in children’s unconventional writing and use them as indicators of what children notice and understand about print” (p. 247). The assessment involves asking children to write about a photo or a picture the child has drawn (Rowe & Wilson, 2014). The scoring tool is separated into categories of form (what type of marks the child uses to encode with fourteen rankings from no marks to all conventional words), task/message match (whether the message the child reads back is related to the picture and includes eight rankings from no message read to a complete sentence labeling the picture), directionality (whether the child uses left to right, top-down writing in lines and is ranked in five levels), and intentionality (how children assign meaning to their writing and spans six levels from no marks on the page to having a clearly intended message with some letter/sound correspondences) (Rowe & Wilson, 2014).

A strength of this assessment is that it involves scoring children on a personally meaningful task, as it uses their own photo or drawing as the basis of the writing. It must be noted though, that it does not address all genres and forms of writing (Rowe & Wilson, 2014). Another benefit of this assessment is that examples are provided of each “level” in the categories to assist teachers in scoring samples (Rowe & Wilson, 2014). The authors have tried to make the levels as close and fluid as possible (i.e. there are 14 levels for “form”). However, difficulties may present when a single writing sample falls in more than one “level.” Additionally, Rowe and Wilson (2014) acknowledge that this assessment was developed out of samples from a very specific population and should be more widely tested among other populations of young writers. Finally, the authors acknowledge that this assessment does not address all features of early writing development and lacks attention regarding children’s metacognitive strategies during the writing task, genre-specific features, and social understandings of writing as an activity (Rowe & Wilson, 2014, p. 287).

**Spelling Inventory/Analysis**

As discussed previously, spelling development is closely related to decoding ability and a child’s invented spellings can tell a lot about what he/she understands about how speech is encoded in print. Gentry (2006) writes, “tracking developmental spelling is at the core of good assessment-driven instruction for beginning reading” (p.5). Several assessment tools have been developed for this purpose.

Bear et al. (2008) created the *Elementary Spelling Inventory,* which asks students to encode 25 words. Teachers then score for correct “features” on a grid that shows corresponding stages of spelling (Bear et al., 2008). For example, for the word “bed,” students could earn 3 “feature” points- one for beginning consonant (b), one for medial vowel (e), and one for ending consonant (d). Unfortunately, this spelling inventory is likely a little advanced for many preschool and kindergarten writers. Ganske (2006) developed the KIDS, a qualitative spelling inventory catered to typical preschool and kindergarten writers. The KIDS works similarly to the *Elementary Spelling Inventory (*Bear et al., 2008) in that teachers ask students to write a series of words. However, the students’ responses are scored on a six point scale ranging from least conventional forms (scribbles) to most conventional forms (some form of representing all sounds in a word) (Ganske, 2006). If students score relatively high on the KIDS, showing a fairly strong understanding of the alphabetic principle, Ganske (2014) has also developed a developmental spelling assessment (DSA) for letter-name spellers that is scored for features the same way as the *Elementary Spelling Inventory*. However, this DSA digs deeply into letter-name features of beginning single consonants, beginning digraphs and blends, medial vowels, affricates, and ending digraphs and blends (Ganske, 2014). A drawback of all of these assessments would be that they are inauthentic and isolated events.

Fresch (2001) wrote an article on analyzing students’ journal entries for their spelling knowledge. She writes that this more authentic context allows teachers to see how their students “put it all together” (p.500) and would seem to be in agreement with Ray and Cleaveland’s (2004) claim that until teachers observe students spontaneously applying their learning to their work independently and unprompted, they can’t be sure a student has mastered a new skill/concept. Fresch (2001) explains that on a spelling test children tend to “put their best spelling foot forward” (p.502) and so feels that analyzing authentic writing samples such as journals provides much more accurate and meaningful information. Her article takes a case study format showing how one student’s understanding of the English orthography can be observed developing throughout her primary grade journal entries (Fresch, 2001).

Rowe (2016) has developed a tool for teachers to assist in analyzing students’ writing samples. The tool is a grid in which teachers list students’ spelling errors and then check off the description that best matches how the word is spelled (Rowe, 2016). The features are listed from least developed to most developed and linked to developmental spelling stages (Rowe, 2016). There is also a place to list conventionally spelled words and calculate the percentage of words in the writing that are spelled conventionally (Rowe, 2016). This allows teachers to collect and analyze systematic data from authentic contexts. One drawback of this type of assessment is that some students may not take as many spelling “risks” as others, making it harder to gauge a clear zone of proximal development. It would be important for teachers to create a supportive culture in which children feel safe to push themselves and take risks that lead to personal growth. Ray and Cleaveland (2004) write on this topic, stating that one way they have observed teachers creating this culture is by keeping an “I’m not afraid of my words!” chart on which they record unconventional spellings of tough words kids have tried spelling (p.70). They have students sign their name, write their “kid spelling” of the word, and the teacher then writes the conventional spelling. Students share out what strategies they used to invent their spelling and the class celebrates their efforts (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004, p. 70).

All of these forms of assessing student writing hold value. As Valencia and Marsha (2004) discuss, what is important is the way in which teachers use the data they collect. Teachers must be sure their assessments are answering the questions about student understanding they are seeking, and then put the information they get into practice by planning instruction that is responsive to student needs (Valencia & Marsha, 2004). Rowe (2014) created a guide for teachers that shows how to scaffold instruction within a child’s zone of proximal development as reflected on the Write Start! Assessment. This is one example of how teachers of young children can use assessments of student writing to plan meaningful instruction targeted at student needs.

**Discussion**

The importance of teaching young children to read has never been questioned. However, because of this, writing is often under-emphasized throughout early childhood in the name of developing phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills as emphasized by No Child Left Behind (Calkins et. al., 2012; Dudley-Marling, & Paugh, 2009; Rowe, 2015). The message seems to be; we can worry about writing after we master reading. In reality, when we take the time to write with young children, we not only help them grow as writers, but also as readers in the areas of identity as a “doer” of literacy, decoding skills, and concepts about print. Not only does writing give students a voice and help them understand the communicative nature of print, but it is also an avenue through which to deliver meaningful instruction on many core aspects of reading development. It can also provide valuable insight as an assessment tool into children’s early literacy development.

Rowe (2015) summarizes it well, when she states, “contemporary research converges on one conclusion: Writing can provide powerful opportunities for literacy learning in early childhood” (p. 33). There is still work to do to make sure we are providing the very best instructional experiences for these young writers. First, as identified by the NELP Report (2008), we need to make sure teachers receive proper professional development training. They must be informed about the benefits of early writing experiences and know how to use writing activities in practice with their students. Additionally, in reviewing research, I found that there seem to be two separate bodies of literature on preschool writers and early elementary writers (K-2nd grade). I did a lot of analyzing, teasing apart, and then blending relevant pieces from both bodies of literature. As Gentry (2006) explains, writers who are just beginning to grasp the alphabetic principle have unique instructional needs from students whose writing does not yet take the form of conventional letters and those who are well on their way to mastering the alphabetic code. Teachers of students in this phase of development would benefit from more targeted literature. Finally, as Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) remind us, writing and reading are not fully reciprocal. In teaching writing, we cannot forget about all of the important instruction unique to reading. Writing is just one part of a full literacy program. However, as any early childhood teacher knows, the instructional day is limited. More research needs to be done regarding how to interweave early reading and early writing instruction to best support young literacy learners in both reading and writing. In closing, the NELP Report (2008) reminds us that early literacy experiences affect later literacy success. Early writing experiences are one method through which to provide highly impactful instruction for beginning readers. With proper support, these students can truly write their way to reading.

References

Allington, R. L. (2013). What really matters when working with struggling readers. *The Reading*

*Teacher, 66*(7), 520-530.

Aram, D., & Biron, S. (2004). Joint storybook reading and joint writing interventions among low

SES preschoolers: Differential contributions to early literacy. *Early Childhood Research*

*Quarterly, 19,* 588-610.

Armbruster, B.B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: Kindergarten through Grade*

*3 (*3rd ed.). J. Osborn (ed.). National Institute for Literacy: The Partnership for Reading

Retrieved from <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/prf_k->

3/Documents/PRFbooklet.pdf

Bear, D.R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2008). *Elementary spelling inventory.*

Retrieved from <http://connect.readingandwritingproject.org> /file/download?google\_drive\_document\_id=0B3yKjAsMtuECX2lRSU44UGdTbm8

Bloodgood, J.W. (1999). What’s in a name? Children’s name writing and literacy acquisition.

*Reading Research Quarterly, 34*(3), 342-367.

Calkins, L., Ehrenworth, M., and Lehman, C. (2012). *Pathways to the Core: Accelerating Achievement* (pp.102-122). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press.

Calkins, L. M., Hohne, K., & Robb, A. (2014). *Writing pathways. Performance assessments and*

*learning progressions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cambourne, B. (1995). Toward and educationally relevant theory of literacy learning: Twenty

years of inquiry. *Reading Teacher, 49(*3), 182-190.

Chandler, K. (2000). Squaring up to spelling: A teacher-research group surveys parents.

*Language Arts, 77*(3), 224.

Clay, M. (1995). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement (*2nd ed.)*.* Portsmouth, NH:

Heinemann.

Clay, M. M. (1975). *What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behaviour.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Common Core State Standards Initiative (2015). *English language arts standards.* Retrieved

from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>

Culham, R. (2015). Call a Meeting With Your Writing Teacher Self. The Reading

Teacher, 69(2), 219–222. doi:[10.1002/trtr.1383](http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1002/trtr.1383)

Driscoll, M.P. (2005). *Psychology of learning for instruction (*3 ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Dudley-Marling, C ., & Paugh, P.C. (2009). Teaching struggling writers: Some underlying principles. In a classroom teacher’s guide to struggling writers: How to provide differentiated support and ongoing assessment. (pp.1-12). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fitzgerald, J. & Shanahan, T. (2000). Reading and writing relations and their development. *Educational Psychologist, 35(*1), 39-50.

Fresch, M.J. (2001). Journal entries as a wondow on spelling knowledge. *Reading Teacher, 54(*5), 500-513.

Ganske, K. (2006). *Word sorts and more.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Ganske, K. (2014). *Word journeys (*2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Genishi, C. & Dyson, A.H. (2009). *Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse*

*times.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gentry, J. R. (2006). *Breaking the Code.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gerde, H.K., Bingham, G.E., & Pendergast, M.L. (2015). Reliability and validity of the Writing

Resources and Interactive Teaching Environments (WRITE) for preschool classrooms.

*Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 31,* 34-46.

Goodman, Y. M. (1995). Miscue analysis for classroom teachers: Some history and some

procedures. *Primary Voices, 3 (*4), 2-9.

Griffith, P.L., & Leavell, J.A. (1995). There isn’t much to say about spelling. . . or is there?. *A*

*Childhood Education, 72(*2), 84-90.

Harste, J.C., Woodward, V.A., & Burke, C.L. (1984). *Language stories & literacy lessons.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1998). Joint position statement of the IRA and NAEYC: Learning to read and write -- developmentally appropriate practices for young children. *The Reading Teacher, 52*, 193-216.

Kissel, B., & Miller, E.T. (2015). Reclaiming power in the writers’ workshop: Defending

curricula, countering narratives, and changing identities in prekindergarten classrooms.

*The Reading Teacher, 69(*1), 77-86.

Moats, L. (2005). How spelling supports reading: And why it is more regular and predictable

than you may think. *American Educator,* 12-22, 42-43.

Morris, D., Bloodgood, J., & Perney, J. (2003). Kindergarten predictors of first- and second-

grade reading achievement. *The Elementary Svhool Journal, 104(*2), 93-109.

National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy. Report of the National Early Literacy Panel. A scientific synthesis of early literacy development and implications for intervention*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.

Ray, K. W. & Cleaveland, L. B. (2004). *About the authors: Writing workshop with our youngest writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ray, K. W., & Glover, M. (2008). *Already ready. Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rayner, K., Foorman, B. R., Perfetti, C. A., Pesetsky, D. & Seidenberg, M. S. (2001). How

psychological science informs the teaching of reading. *Psychological Science in the Public*

*Interest, 2*(2), 31-74.

Richgels, D.K. (2013). Talk, write, and read: A method for sampling emergent literacy skills. *The Reading Teacher, 66*(5), 380-389.

Roskos, K. A., Christie, J. F., Richgels, D. J. (2003). The essentials of early literacy instruction.

*Young Children.* Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200303/> Essentials.pdf

Rowe, D.W. (2013). Recent trends in research on young children’s authoring. In J. Larson & J.

Marsh (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy (*pp. 423-447).

Copyright 2013 by SAGE Publications Ltd.

Rowe, D. (2014). Writing forms: Scaffolding in the child’s ZPD [class handout]. Department of

Teaching and Learning, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

Rowe, D.W. (2015). Writing in early childhood: The value of children’s early explorations of

writing. In N. Kucirkova, C. Snow, V. Grover, & C. McBride, (Eds.). *The Routledge*

*International Handbook of Literacy Education.*

Rowe, D.W. (2016). Spelling analysis [class handout]. Department of Teaching and Learning,

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

Rowe, D.W. & Flushman, T.R. (2013). Best practices in early writing instruction. In D. M.

Barone & M. H. Mallette (Eds.). *Best Practices in Early Literacy Instruction* (pp. 224-

250). Copyright 2013 by the Guildford Press.

Rowe, D.W., & Wilson, S. (2015). The development of a descriptive measure of early literacy

writing: Results from the Write Start! Writing Assessment. *Journal of Literacy*

*Research, 47(*2), 245-292. Doi:10.1177/1086296X15619723

Schickendanz, J.A. (1999). *Much more than the ABC’s: The early stages of reading and writing.*

Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

SEDL (2015). *Cognitive elements of reading.* Retrieved from: <https://www.sedl.org/reading/>

framework/elements.html

Squires, K.E., Gillam, S.L., & Reutzel, D.R. (2013). Characteristics of children who struggle

with reading: Speech pathologists collaborate to support young learners. *Early*

*Childhood Education Journal, 41, 401-411.*

Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, K. A. D. (1998). Theory and research into practice: Everything you

wanted to know about phonics (But were afraid to ask). *Reading Research Quarterly,*

*33(*3), 338-355.

Tolchinsky, L. (2006). The emergence of writing. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 83-95). New York: Guilford Press.

Valencia, S.W., & Marsha, R.B. (2004). Behind test scores: What struggling readers really

need. *The Reading Teacher, 57(*6), 520-531.

Williams, C. (2009). Word study instruction in the K-2 classroom. *The Reading Teacher, 62*(7),

570-578.