

CHALLENGES FOR BEGINNER WRITERS

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Abstract: This article explores some of the challenges that young children face when they begin formalised literacy learning in the classroom, in particular learning to write.

The challenges are discussed in terms of the transitions children are faced with when moving from family and community literacy practices to more explicit and formal school learning situations. How teachers can help children transition and learn the complex task of learning to write as emergent and early literates are discussed relative to the writing process.



For beginner writers, learning to write in English is a challenging and a complex task. The task is complex because children have to use what they know about language to communicate and express their thoughts in a symbolic code; progress along individualized and different learning pathways; transfer and link reciprocal literacy skills and understandings to attain meaning in print; all of which are supported through social interactions with expert others.

Learning to write is a challenging task because beginner writers must learn to negotiate many transition changes when they enter school and engage in formal literacy practices. The socio-cultural and literacy acquisition transitions children make when they move from home community practices to formalised schooling practices are challenging for teachers and students (1998; Mc Naughton, Parr & Tuhiwai Smith, 1996; McNaughton, 2002).

This article briefly discusses some of the transitions children confront when learning to write in the classroom and suggests some ways teachers can support this learning process.

TRANSITION CHALLENGES

The social and cultural knowledges that children bring to the classroom are varied and depend on the wide range of interactions and activities children experience at home and in their communities. Children arrive at school with "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) which include a range of cultural and ethnic knowledges, language, attitudes and experiences. Dyson (cited in McNaughton, 2002) "reframed the view of children from diverse culture and language backgrounds, from one being 'at risk' (deficit) to one of providing teachers with rich cultural resources on which to build" (McNaughton, 2002, p.18).

Children's experiences with literacy are diverse and may or may not include: multiple interactions with books (Elley, 1998); noticing environmental messages and their inherent meanings; family expectations that children be actively engaged in literacy activities (Tizard, 1985); experimentation with writing for different purposes (Dyson, 1989); a range of oral language experiences - conversations, story telling, chanting alphabet, songs or prayers. The varied family/community beliefs and literacy practices experienced shape children's understanding of their world (Clay, 1998; Freebody & Luke, 1990). Clay (1998) recognizes that children's individuality is shaped by their early learning experiences. She stated that "children are surrounded by people. Some of them have strange beliefs, such as thinking it is useless to talk to children because they cannot talk to you. Other families do talk to babies and even read books to them... Such beliefs and associated practices are known as culture, and some cultures emphasise school readiness more than others" (p. 99).

It is the match between children's early learning experiences and school experiences that has historically advantaged and disadvantaged some children's achievement in literacy (Clay, 1998; McNaughton, 2002). Teachers play an important role in ensuring some form of continuity in early school transitions, that is, by matching the children's expertise gained from activities outside school, with the sorts of entry skills that they need to engage in for effective classroom learning. McNaughton (2002) refers to this in *Meeting of the minds* and states:

We can view the meeting of minds as a matter of enhancing the multitude of sites that learners and teachers have available to them in which to make connections. These connections might be enhanced by building on the familiar – a kind of transfer of learning, as expertise and activities found in one setting are incorporated into another... But they might be enhanced also by unlocking the familiar – a kind of discrimination learning in which awareness of the goals and rules of different activities develops, enabling the boundaries or applicability of different forms of expertise to be discerned (pp. 26-27).

Clay emphasises that to enhance learning connections teachers need to notice what children can do, identify what skills and understandings children bring to the classroom, and then build learning programmes on these understandings. She points out that:

Remarkable learning has already occurred before children pass through the school doors. Even those who are most reluctant to speak have learned a great deal about the language of their community - how to name many things, how to construct a grammar for language with very little help from us, how to obey the social rules of speaking to certain people in certain places, and even something apparently as simple as putting their own thoughts into words. You can hear the construction of grammar going on in every conversation you have with little children (p. 1-2).

Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1982) research argued that further literacy transition challenges for beginner writers are centred on understanding that learning to write requires switching from an oral mode of communication, to a graphic form of expression. A transition challenge for beginner writers is managing the shift from face-to-face communication, which is supportive and interactive, to writing independently for a remote audience. Talk is often jointly constructed and shaped according to the purposes and responses given by the listening partner. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) stated that:

It is the transition from a language production system dependent at every level on inputs from a conversational partner to a system capable of functioning autonomously. When people converse they help each other in numerous, mostly unintentional ways. They provide each other with a continual source of cues - cues to proceed, cues to stop, cues to elaborate, cues to shift topic, and a great variety of cues that stir memory. They serve as text grammarians for one another, raising questions when some needed element of a discourse has been omitted... They serve as auxiliary memory aids, helping each other stay on topic, keep a goal in mind, or recall a previous remark (pp. 1-2).

Beginner writers find it difficult to write continuous text without the aid of conversation and visual gestures which prompt and generate further language. When switching from an oral code to a written code, beginner writers are also absorbed in self and the experience of the moment. They want to tell their personal story and write their message now, whether using illustrations or print. They are dominated by the need to write down their immediate experiences. It is difficult for beginner writers to plan ahead, create convoluted plots or set long-term goals for their writing. Their energy is taken up in getting down their message letter-by-letter, word-by-word. The audience is usually immediate, the classroom community, their teacher or a friend.

Another transition challenge for beginner writers is to be able to decentre or distance themselves from what they have written. When translating thoughts into writing, young children are focused on the actual words on the page and find it difficult to shift from being a writer to a reader; a writer who can reflect and evaluate, consider the intended text with what is written on the page and make revision changes to their own writing. Revision changes for these children, is part of the process of recording words, writing down the message, rather than questioning for alternatives. Graves (1983) believed that without direct help children saw little sense in reviewing and revising. Not until after teachers' demonstrated revision strategies and showed children how to generate options did changes occur in young children's revision behaviour. However, once initial encoding skills become more automatic, beginner writers will take risks and experiment, realising that words and sentences can be changed, that they can review the writing process.

The fundamental transition challenge for beginner writers, however, is grasping control of the complex task of writing a meaningful message in alphabetic script. This complex task for beginner writers requires them to create thoughts into complete sentences, to select and discard possibilities, to develop fine motor skills and form the relevant letter shapes, learn the print conventions of English language, and record thoughts as words making the phoneme-grapheme links.

LEARNING TO WRITE IS A COMPLEX TASK.

The complexity of the task requires mastering written text as a reciprocal learning process. Both reading and writing require the learner to actively process print to gain meaning, communicating using the receptive or productive modes of language. Children employ their knowledge of the print conventions; for example,

whether reading or writing, they need to know about directionality, where to start reading the words and writing the words, and how spaces separate words. Children need phonological knowledge to sound out words and match phonemes to graphemes; phonemic knowledge of alphabet letters, the consonants, vowels, blends, diagraphs and knowledge of orthographic spelling patterns for both reading and writing. Children need to develop their visual memory and control a large bank of words, as quick word recognition speeds up the ability to read or write the message down. When reading, the child works to unlock the code: decoding letters, graphemes or word segments to determine what the words say.

Furthermore, reading and writing continuous text requires an understanding of the how language works. English language is structured a certain way, it follows accepted patterns of grammar. Children initially learn these structures using their oral language and becoming aware of how the words are organized into sentences. Writing in English requires putting words together in a particular way because words follow a particular order. But early literates must also recognize that words take on their meanings according to the position in the sentence and the context of other surrounding words. When reading, children use their knowledge of syntax as another cue to decode and retrieve meaning from written words. Finding opportunities for explicitly teaching the reciprocal skills required for reading and writing can be explored through a range of contextualised literacy experiences, such as shared reading, guided reading, or teacher demonstrations for writing.

LEARNING TO WRITE IS AN INDIVIDUALISED DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAY

For each child, learning to write, developing skills and understandings about literacy, is a unique pathway. There is an expectation that their individual differences, their socio-cultural experiences, will form the basis for learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to identify the child's literacy skills transitioned into the classroom and to build on these.

Close recording of what children say reveals that they have traveled differently along the path of language acquisition, and they are not all at the same place in their learning: some have gone further than others. Their individual differences probably arose from different kinds of learning opportunities in their real-world contexts, and the only place to start further language development

is to work with what they already control (Clay, 1998, p.88).

There is an expectation that children should achieve particular learning–skills and knowledge at certain points in their schooling. While recognizing that developmental progression and the markers that indicate this is desirable, not all children follow the exact same pathway. Like Clay (1998), I am concerned when educators select specific markers or criteria for learning and teach and assess to only those, especially when other rich learning acquisition may be evident. “They [educators] describe markers along the way as if there is a set route to be traveled and achievements that can be checked off... Enough markers of progress seem to plot a developmental route, a guide to teaching, but no one child has passed from marker to marker” (Clay, 1998, p.89). Children construct their own knowledge in a variety of ways.

LEARNING TO WRITE IS A SOCIAL PROCESS

Beginner writers are dependent on expert others to show them how writing works for different purposes. The classroom community, the interactions with teachers, parents and peers continue to support and scaffold transition challenges for the learner writer. While the cognitive processes involved in writing; planning, translating and reviewing are regarded as recursive and ongoing as the writer creates text (Flower & Hayes, 1981), the writing process proceeds through several overlapping stages (Smith & Elley, 1997). How teachers can support beginner writers is discussed under the following broad stages – planning to write, constructing the writing, and presenting the writing – evident in constructing written text.

PLANNING TO WRITE

The ability to create a message and organize thoughts into sentences is dependent on children having rich experiences that will generate ideas.

- It is important to acknowledge children’s personal experiences because they are immediate and often very intense. Children write best from personal experience, they can visualise what happened, evoke the images, senses and feelings associated. Personal experiences provide real life experiences, motivation to write and authentic purposes for writing (Calkins, 1991).
- By providing opportunities to talk about the experiences children are helped to clarify their thoughts, organise the sequence of events, put them into sentences for

writing. Children can tell their story to a buddy or teacher. This provides further opportunity for a listener to question the storyteller and ask for more information or detail. Question prompts support elaboration and extension of the ideas for writing.

- For many beginner writers, drawing a picture first is a way to generate ideas and associated vocabulary, to revisit an experience and to help plan and organize what they want to say. Further talking about the drawing, questioning about the detail, helps them clarify their thinking, in preparation to transferring visual messages into written text (Ward & Dix, 2001). Pictures are an important part of young people’s writing.
- Teachers can build and extend children’s ideas and their concepts by providing experiences. This can happen in many different ways. The language experience approach is one way. This activity involves all learners in a range of language modes and provides opportunities for writers to share, to listen, to question, to have language modeled for them and it provides a concrete experience or action that children can revisit. Another way of introducing new ideas, concepts, language patterns, vocabulary and authors’ writing techniques is through using a range of literature. Reading to children and talking about new concepts or word meanings provides models for children to transfer into their own writing.
- Teachers demonstrating how they plan their writing by thinking out loud, shows the metacognitive decisions writers make when choosing a topic, generating and revising ideas. When the thinking processes are explicit, beginner writers become aware of these and can develop strategies that will help them plan for their writing (Cambourne, 1988; Dix, 2003a; Graves, 1983).
- Children need opportunities to know that they can revise their message, change the ideas, the sentence beginning or choice of words before they decide what to write. Making decisions, revising ideas is an important understanding and helps develop ownership of the writing process.

CRAFTING WRITING

When learning to write and encode their messages, beginner writers transition into school exhibiting a wide variety of skills (Dyson, 1989). Beginner writers expend a lot of energy in getting their message down. Once they have formulated their message, they must translate their ideas into written sentences using the knowledge they have about writing in a symbolic code and concepts about print.

- Learning how to hold a pencil and how to correctly form letters is a challenge in developing fine motor skills. These handwriting skills need to be practiced daily.
- The beginner writer needs to be able to generate a sentence and repeat that sentence to him/herself or to a buddy so the message is consolidated and is transferred from thought to print.
- Beginner writers need teacher demonstrations on how to get the message down. Using whiteboards, news-books, interactive whiteboards or overhead transparencies enables the teacher and class to jointly construct class news, recount a class experience and write invitations or letters to friends. By demonstrating how a teacher-writer thinks and organizes ideas into sentences, uses capital letters and other punctuation markers, writes down words using what is known, stretching out and listening for the sounds in words, the beginner writers are scaffolded into new learning.
- Writers must have opportunities to use their spelling knowledge, that is, record words they have a visual memory of (names, high frequency words), also approximate unknown words using their knowledge of letter sounds, blends and orthographic spelling patterns. This enables the teacher to see what the writer knows about words.
- The use of word lists, word charts, words on the wall, and dictionaries are useful aids for children to use but must not become a diversion for fluent writing or an excuse to disengage from the writing task. The teacher needs to guide children in locating the word and making the correction.
- Beginner writers need teacher conferences. A quick roving conference is most beneficial as the teacher can support and prompt each child individually according to their learning needs. Prompting may be at the meaning level, “What are you going to write?” or “Tell me your sentence?” or “What happened when she fell over”? The prompt may be at word level

and ask the child to "Say the word slowly. What sounds do you hear first, next...?" or "You know how to spell and, how do think you spell hand?"

- Encouraging children to read aloud exactly what they have written enables them to check for sense, use correct punctuation and consider what else they need to tell their reader.
- For some beginner writers, indicating a sentence by using capital letters and full stops is a difficult transition. Leaving spaces between words and chunking ideas is not as evident in oral language use, as speakers often run words together or, as in conversations, sentences are often not completed.
- At this early writing stage children will vary in their desire to revise or mess with their writing (Dix, 2003b). The beginner writer's effort has gone into getting the message down on paper or computer. However, children need opportunities to revise their written message. Changing ideas or words is an important understanding and indicates to beginner writers that words are not set in concrete and that writing can be messed with (Dix, 2003a). The teacher's initial focus for revision must be on the meaning. Teachers at this stage will probably prompt for clarity, which may require adding in words that have been omitted or to adding on more information. The revision of surface features, however, are an important expectation for reader accuracy. The teacher may use a conferencing situation and direct or teach the writer about punctuation, accurate spelling, correcting letter formations or using the relevant grammatical tense.
- To allow teaching opportunities for beginner writers, some classroom teachers direct the children to write text on the right hand page and the left hand page is where explicit teaching can take place. Demonstrations such as; using elkonian sound boxes to identify unrecognised or unfamiliar letter sounds; word building of known rhyme words; correct letter formations or links to earlier learning situations, are some examples. This learning is demonstrated alongside the child's text and can be referred to later. For focused and effective learning, teachers should choose only some aspects to focus on acknowledging the child's learning needs (Graves, 1983).

PRESENTING THE WRITING

Not all writing can be published. However, writers need an audience, an opportunity to share their work.

- Beginner writers should be provided with a range of audiences that can read and respond to their writing. It may be their friend, parents at home, a writing buddy from another class, or they may wish to read their writing to the whole class or just a group. The writer needs to know that what they have to say is valued.
- Writing that is going to be published for others to read needs to be accurate. The procedure of rewriting a text is laborious for young writers. The teacher or parent helper or senior buddy may word process or, at times, hand write the child's text for them. This writing can be displayed, along with illustrations, in the form of a class news book, in the class newsletter, on the school's web site or as part of a class display in the library or entrance foyer. Children need to be taught the writing process, that is, the process of writing thoughts down so that they can be read and enjoyed by others.

Writing is a complex and a challenging task for beginner writers. No two children will approach this task in exactly the same manner. As teachers we need to be aware of the diverse and rich knowledge that children bring with them into the writing classroom and use this to support all learners on their exciting journey of message-making as they weave their understandings, and transition between home and school literacy practices.

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