From "What Did I Write?" to "Is this Right?": Intention, Convention, and Accountability in
Early Literacy

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Abstract

When children enter public kindergartens in the current atmosphere of high stakes testing, they often encounter an emphasis on correctness that casts doubt on the integrity of their personally invented messages, prompting them to ask not "What did I write?" but "Is this right?" This ethnographic case study examines early writing by 23 kindergarten children within the context of their free-writing time and their teacher's plan to restore intention to compensate for a mandated curriculum that overemphasized convention. Children's writing samples were analyzed before and after the teacher introduced peer sharing, a strategy aimed at reestablishing the children's communicative intent.

Introduction

In her ground-breaking work, "What Did I Write?" Marie Clay (1975) demonstrated that very young children write with intention and confidence; they *expect* that others will be able to read the marks that they make on paper. Emergent writers scribble their early compositions with communicative intent, understanding that writing carries a message. These first writings are highly inventive: random strings of letters or curly loops of pretend cursive that represent stories, letters, and grocery lists. As children gain more awareness of the alphabetic system and rules that govern print, they begin to conform to writing conventions and incorporate literacy regularities into their invented spellings and texts. But when children enter public kindergartens in the current atmosphere of high stakes testing, they often encounter an emphasis on correctness of form that casts doubt on the integrity of their personally invented messages, prompting them to ask not "What did I write?" but "Is this right?" This shift from intention to convention is illustrated by an excerpt from my fieldnotes collected in one kindergarten in a focal case study in a three year ethnographic study of language, literacy, and play practices in early childhood classrooms (Wohlwend, 2007).

> John[1] labored over his paper, painstakingly connecting the strokes of each letter within his eleven word story. His tablemates, Lawson, Heather, and Ashley, hunched over clean sheets of white paper, as they penciled their recounts of recess play, newly lost teeth, and a big brother's soccer game. On this morning in early March, a companionable hum of conversation circulated through the classroom, punctuated by the "*t-t-t"s* and the "*puh-puh-puh"s* of kindergartners stretching out words to their breaking points. John drug his pencil to a stop, dissatisfied with the disobedient bend in the *S* he had just written. Flipping his pencil over, he scrubbed the paper with its pink eraser until the offending letter and all its neighbors faded to gray shadows. Beginning again, he carefully crafted each letter, stroke by uncooperative stroke, pausing to tug out the next sound, *puh-puh-puh*, from the word under construction: *spy*. After ten more minutes, he had written:

I gnot dis ton at wedie It wuz a spy ton.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

> John's teacher Becca kneeled next to him at the table and asked, "Can you read your story to me?' Word by word, John read "I got this toy at Wendy's. It was a spy toy." Touching the word *ton* [toy], John lifted his eyes from the paper and asked, "Is this right?" But before Becca could answer, Lawson cast an appraising eye across the table and pronounced, "No." At once, John's eraser was again attacking the errant words, even as Becca protested that his writing showed good thinking.

Since the beginning of the school year, John and a rotating group of regulars had gathered daily in the kindergarten writing center to chat and swap jokes as they colored, scribbled, doodled, drew, and wrote their stories, captioning their drawings with favorite words or random strings of letters. However, by February, the children's writing purposes turned from social storytelling to correctly reproducing conventional forms as they copied words or sought help to negotiate literacy mechanics (e.g., left to right directionality, handwriting, capitalization, punctuation, spelling) along with the phonological rules of the alphabetic system. Becca's concerns over a dull similarity in her students' writing intensified in March after a district assessment of her student's writing samples. These concerns prompted her to reorganize her writing instruction and implement an adaptation of the author's chair structure in writers' workshop (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983). This article describes the classroom conditions and analyzes the changes in children's writing samples that occurred during April as Becca introduced peer sharing circles, a strategy which offered possibilities for ameliorating the convention/intention imbalance and reestablishing the children's communicative intent.

Theoretical Framework

Deborah Rowe (in press) situates young children's authoring in literacy apprenticeships that negotiate the tension between the child's social intention to communicate with others and the organizing force of cultural convention. Vygotsky's (1935/1978) theory of language development supports the concept of literacy apprenticeship in which individuals co-construct

language through participation with others in the surrounding culture; the language and signs of the culture (cultural convention) are then internalized by the individual who uses language and its written forms as a tool for mediating and transforming the environment (social intention). Children write as social beings with communicative purpose that grows out of social functions (Clay, 1966; Halliday, 1975, Hildreth, 1936), nurtured by adults who interpret preschooler's mark-making as meaningful communication. Thus, the intention to write is socially constructed as children learn that writing is a way of participating which in turn, drives their need for writing conventions in order to communicate within a shared code with other members of a particular culture (Rowe, in press). Through their earliest scribbles, children learn to write to communicate (Clay, 1966, 1975; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Sulzby, 1985) in ways that express their unique personalities (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980) as they simultaneously learn to form letters, to spell words, to write phrases, and to form complete messages in holistic processes (Goodman & Wilde, 1992). Children's invented graphic forms are meaningful signs that approximate the writing conventions in their worlds (Whitmore & Goodman, 1995). As children develop in writing, their approximations become longer, more coherent, and include more complex structures (Dyson, 1989) as more elements of convention are incorporated.

Review of Literature: Research on Intention, Convention, and Accountability

Intention and Convention

For more than three decades, case studies of children's early writing development have documented the interplay of intention and convention (Rowe, 2003) as children face and resolve discrepancies in their emerging hypotheses about the alphabetic system (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky 2003) when confronted cognitively by a new aspect of convention in print

(Martens, 1996; Tolchinsky, 2003) or when confronted socially by the questions or comments of a peer (Condon & Clyde, 1996; Rowe, 1994). Careful observation in individual case studies provides further documentation that children write texts for their own purposes based on logical hypotheses about alphabetic principles that reflect their phonological understandings of words (Bissex, 1980, Ferreiro &Teberosky, 1982; Read, 1975; Tolchinsky, 2003; Wilde, 1991). Research on the range of children's writing indicates that emergent writers also actively incorporate their increasing awareness of story sense and genre as they compose messages (King & Rentel, 1983; Newkirk, 1989; Wolman-Bonilla, 2003). Classroom case studies show that children's writing intentions are dependent upon time, freedom to use resources, teacher and peer expectations (Lensmire, 1994), and opportunities to interact within a community of learners (Goodman & Wilde, 1992; Rowe, in press). Process writing approaches (Graves, 1983) strengthen writer's intentions through child-centered purposeful writing that focuses on meaning, informed by conventions through moment by moment rehearsal, revision, and editing (Ray, 2004).

Convention and Accountability

However, recent federal policies disregard this well-established body of research and widespread recognition of the capabilities of emergent writers (Meyer, 2002). Assessments and rubrics that define writing as a universal sequence of pre-determined benchmarks stress skill acquisition and proper usage, devaluing developmentally appropriate literacy instruction that encourages children's literacy explorations and approximations (International Reading Association, 2005; Stipek, 2005).

> In the current politics of accountability in the U.S., writing is a collection of skills, particularly in financially strapped urban schools... Traditional 'basics' (e.g., writing conventions) loom large at least in part because they are easily tested by grade level benchmark assessments and by school-wide achievement tests

required by federally supported reading programs. In this basics-skills approach, children are invisible, indexed only by their achievement test scores. (Dyson, 2007, p. 115)

Writing tends to be neglected in early literacy assessments partially because it is not easily quantifiable (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003); even when rubrics are used, writing is parsed out into easily-taught, efficiently-measured subskills. In benchmarks and rubrics, intent is often not a consideration: children are not expected to write *to* anyone; they just write. Dyson summarized federal and state expectations in Reading First handbooks given to teachers in her ethnographic study of first grade writers in a "regulated (i.e., test-monitored) urban school" (2006, p. 8).

There was no expectation that, outside teacher-structured lessons, children would attend to audience views of their writing, nor that they would vary their writing for different genres (as explained in the language and literacy handbook distributed to Reading First teachers). Both the handbook and the state grade level expectations described personal narratives and, more particularly, three to four coherent sentences, as reasonable goals for first graders. (Dyson, 2006, p. 15)

High stakes testing and reductive writing assessments that drive instruction are not unique to a classroom, a grade level, or even a state. "In every state, when teachers have little knowledge of writing, the testing system tends to become the knowledge base for teaching writing" (Hillocks, 2002).

Programs that stress correct usage of mechanics and limit children's writing to narrow prompts or patterned fill-in-the-blank assignments stunts writing (Meyer, 2002), devalues children's voices, and ignores their intentions for writing. Conversely, a writing curriculum that offers fun and free expression but little else underestimates children's abilities and neglects their need to access conventional forms. Both excesses give a distorted picture of literacy to children: one portrays literacy as getting the letters and words right without considering the meaning of the message or the child's purpose; the other portrays literacy as individual expression without

accounting for the necessity of competence in shared conventions to allow communication between author and audience. Research is needed that reports how teachers are successfully negotiating this tension. The research in this article describes how one teacher actively responded to counteract excessive convention in her writing program in the context of mandated assessments and curriculum. Becca's action research corrected a pattern that I witnessed not only in this classroom but in other kindergarten classrooms in the larger study: children's writing stagnated as teachers responded to accountability measures and accommodated commercial programs that stressed phonics, mechanics, and the eradication of error. In this article, I look closely at children's writing samples to answer the following questions:

- What elements in children's writing indicate a focus on convention?

- What factors in the school setting contribute to a preoccupation with convention by kindergarten writers?

- How can teachers restore a balance between social convention and personal intention in early literacy?

- What are the implications for children's writing development and teacher education?

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

Following case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I used purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) to locate this kindergarten, asking knowledgeable informants in three school districts to recommend specific classrooms with child-directed literacy-play periods. I used early literacy classroom environment scales (Wolfersberger, Reutzel, Sudweeks, & Fawson, 2004) and print literacy surveys (Loughlin & Martin, 1987) to assess the materials in each classroom to select focal classrooms for further study. During weekly visits to Becca's kindergarten room

over the course of the school year, I observed, took fieldnotes, videotaped, and transcribed children's activity at the writing table to capture the flow of talk and action that accompanies young children's literacy events. I used constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998) to compare two sets of student writing samples, identifying similarities and differences to locate categories for indicators of children's adherence to writing convention. Six categories emerged from the data, cross-checked for validity with research in writing composition as well as developmentally appropriate practice and member-checked with the classroom teacher: 1) spelling accuracy through use of known words, 2) phonological information, 3) topic choice, 4) patterned syntax, 5) genre, and 6) organization and linguistic complexity. Genres and text organization were analyzed according to Newkirk's (1989) research in emergent writers' repertoires. For example, genres included: personal narratives such as recounts of everyday events and plans for future events, affinity statements (I like...), claims, requests, and fantasy stories. The students' writing samples were coded according to the categories and the results compared and contrasted for qualitative and quantitative patterns of similarity and difference.

<div align="center">The Research Context</div>

Teacher/researcher relationship. Becca taught 25 kindergartners in a three-section midwestern suburban school of approximately 450 students where I also worked as a kindergarten and first grade teacher. Our constructivist early childhood curriculum (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; DeVries, 2001) provided plentiful opportunities for writing in daily learning centers where Becca facilitated using Vygotskian and Piagetian teaching methods designed to encourage peer negotiation and collaboration (Clay & Cazden, 1990; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Goodman & Goodman, 1990; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Becca and I shared a history of collaborative curriculum design, of sharing frustrations and successes, and of I'm-here-for-you

problem-solving. Over four years in our grade level teams, we met weekly and collaborated on thematic units, shared daily lesson plans, and discussed classroom issues. We also shared professional books, citations, and project ideas while sorting out our interpretations of learning in terms of constructivist theory (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1951, 1959; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) or literacy development (Clay, 1993; Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Whitmore & Goodman, 1995) as Becca worked on her master's degree in early childhood education and I pursued a doctorate in literacy, language, and culture. Our differences in age and teaching experience also positioned us: Becca was 10 years younger than me; She had 10 years of kindergarten teaching experience and I had 20 years of kindergarten and first grade teaching experience.

The classroom. In daily 40 minute center periods, children chose their own activities from a menu of ten center options, including wood blocks, Legos, house corner, story easel, playdo, art, math games, books, and the writing center. Children were allowed to change their center activity as frequently as they wished but participation at each center was limited by a maximum capacity; a class meeting had established that a maximum of five children could work in the popular writing center at one time.

At the writing center's low table crowded with plastic cups filled with freshly sharpened pencils, neon gel pens, water color markers, and well-worn crayons, a small group of kindergarten writers gathered each afternoon during center time to write, giggle, compare, and consult as they printed and erased and reprinted their texts. They puzzled over the peculiarities of letter c, competed by writing long memorized words such as Mississippi, sought advice about spelling, copied words from the abundant print that coated the classroom walls, and created endless lists of children's names. The listing of classmates' first names often required the use of multiple markers or pens to mark each name with its own color. At times, name lists were copied

from the nearby chart posted on the wall; at other times, lists were assembled with spelling

assistance from nearby children.

<center>Findings, Data Set I: Emphasizing Convention</center>

Despite a wealth of materials available during free-writing center time, the children

created few personal narratives or original stories. In addition to the plentiful pencils and pens,

Becca provided blank books and assorted papers to spur their storytelling but the children chose

instead to copy names or try out new styles of printing. Even when blank books were used, these

apparently avid writers seemed to have no purpose for their writing.

KW:	So, Lawson what are you doing?
Lawson:	I'm making a book.
KW:	You're making a book! What's your book about?
Lawson:	We usually have books or something. Making a book or something
KW:	So what are you doing?
Heather:	I'm drawing a picture.
KW:	Uh-huh. What's it going to be?
Heather:	I don't know.
Ashley:	I'm writing something (…) and (…) black and I messed up on something and I was writing it and now I'm drawing something.

<center>*Elements of Convention in Writing Samples, Set I*</center>

Despite high levels of phonetic accuracy, the children's third quarter writing received

only mid-range scores in a district-wide quantitative assessment using the district writing rubric.

In these samples, while children focused on correct spellings, letter spacing, and letter formation,

the volume of their writing shrank, reducing their scores.

To identify indicators of convention, I looked across the third quarter writing samples:

comparing levels of conformity in topic choice and genre, amount and type of phonological

information used, the inclusion of more known words than attempts at unknown words, highly

patterned syntax as a beginning frame for sentences, and low linguistic complexity in syntax using categories adapted from Newkirk's (1989) descriptors of paragraph development.

Spelling accuracy through use of known words. Children averaged five high-frequency *known words* in their writing samples and these words were spelled correctly by all but two children. Known words was Becca's term for words such as *like, can, to, the* that children used frequently. These words were directly taught, practiced regularly, and posted on a classroom word wall. While children earned points for spelling accuracy by using these words, they incorporated very few novel words that would make their writing more descriptive and interesting. Only four children attempted more "unknown" words (words that required invented spellings) than known words within their compositions, with Curtis risking the greatest percentage of unfamiliar words (90%) to write his expository text about a shark-scaring snake.

Phonological information. Twenty-three children wrote words that approximated the conventional spelling in word length, using beginning, middle, and ending consonants in words and at least one vowel in most words. Two children used one or two letters to stand for a word, usually representing the beginning and ending sounds. Most children wrote texts which are easily interpreted as closely adhering to phonetic regularities. In other cases, the samples showed evidence of common hypotheses that children form about alphabetic/phonetic relationships. For example, young children often base letter/sound relationships on letter names rather than the letter sound association (Oglan, 2003), using "h" to represent a /j/sound or as in Hilary's amazing sleep-counting claim, "g" represents the /dr/ blend in "hundred":

Hilary: I can cot to nine hugud in nine. I cot to it uen. Im uslep.
I can count to 909.   I count to it when I'm asleep.

Topic choice. The third quarter writing samples were collected after a whole class free-writing period with no assigned topic. Most children wrote about preferences for activities at

school or recent and upcoming events such as birthdays, recent purchases, and visits to friends

and relatives. "It is fun" was a highly popular closing. Typical examples were:

> Alex: I like to play wif the baGs. it is fan. at scl.
> I like to play with the bugs. It is fun at school

> Chad: I Had a brthDay I wit to the YMCA
> I had a birthday. I went to the YMCA.

Two children wrote about their ability to count to high number and Curtis wrote about snakes

and sharks:

> Curtis: Thrs a sac that sgrs choxe evin grat. wit choxe.
> There's a snake that scares sharks, even great white sharks.

Reliance on patterned syntax. Children's avoidance of error is evident in their reliance on

familar sentence frames and patterned text. In the third quarter samples, 10 of the 25 samples

began with the phrase "I like…" and 3 began with "I can…" although improved over second

quarter results in which 17 samples began with "I like…" or "I can…"

> Michael: I like to cLen up my room.
> I like to clean up my room.

> Travis: I can cat aL the way up to 200.
> I can count all the way up to 200.

Genre. Two genres comprised 20 of the 25 of the samples. Eleven children made simple

affinity statements about preferred objects or activities ("I have", "I got", "I like", or "I like to"),

> Courtney: I like the setrs Bkas it is fan
> I like the centers because it is fun.

while nine children wrote narrative recounts of events in the immediate past.

> Erica: It was my brta. an SunDay. We Wet to the jwmac stoteo.
> It was my birthday on Sunday. We went to the gymnastic [sic] studio.

Three children made "I can" claims about their counting abilities. Curtis wrote the single expository text about the scary snake (described earlier). Connor wrote an attempt to persuade his teacher through an implicit request for new materials at the block center:

Casey: I cat wat tal you put aot The morbls Ded The legos
I can't wait 'til you put out the marbles and the Legos.

Organization and linguistic complexity. Simple sentences which dominated the second quarter often included a patterned phrase "I like the…", or "I can…" as an anchor. Although "I like…" patterned sentences continued to lead all others in the third quarter, a few children wrote more complex sentences which sometimes contained subordinate phrases which carried out rhetorical functions. Adverb phrases qualified or enhanced persuasive statements while prepositional phrases added detail to event descriptions. The beginnings of couplets—an introductory sentence followed by one detail—also appeared as the children supported claims with evidence or paired cause with effect in logical connections.

School Factors Emphasizing Convention

In the school district rubric used to evaluate the kindergartner's quarterly writing samples, inattention to the writer's intent and overemphasis on convention manifested as correct letter formation, spelling of memorized or copied words, phonological accuracy, situating words on lines, left to right orientation, and spacing between words. Rubric benchmarks and descriptors, generated through consensus by the entire kindergarten faculty, reflected teachers' notions of typical kindergarten tasks rather than current research in best practice in developmentally appropriate composition. Teachers' professional development sessions focused on applying the writing rubric and consistent scoring of writing samples rather than on enhancing the quality of children's compositions or teaching through the writing process.

In the classroom, school district mandates required Becca to use commercial materials that elicited and rewarded conventional responses from the children. Each child spent fifteen minutes each day at the computer, clicking on correct responses to prompts within the Breakthrough to Literacy program. Shared reading lessons with big books that accompanied the computer program focused on conventions of print, phonological cues, and word identification. Following daily whole group rereadings of the week's big book, children wrote in response to picture prompts on commercially-prepared worksheets.

Assessment practices directed Becca's attention to the children's adherence to convention, influencing her instructional decisions. Although she valued children's inventive storytelling and approximations, Becca believed that writing samples would receive higher scores on the district writing rubric if they included correct spelling, spacing, capitalization of *I*, periods, and known words from the classroom print and word walls. Factors such as linguistic complexity, originality of phrasing, and genre variety were not explicitly addressed within the rubric descriptors.

<div align="center">A Teacher's Action Plan for Restoring Intention</div>

Following the analysis of writing samples, I shared the results with Becca. At her request, we looked for missing elements of intention in daily free writing opportunities at the classroom writing center. Here, children were able to choose from an array of writing instruments and book-making supplies: papers, paper punches, glue, yarn, markers, stamps, and stamp pads. In addition to free choice in topic and in format, children were encouraged to write in ways appropriate for their development: approximating words through random strings, stretching out words to hear phonemes to create invented spellings, consulting with nearby peers, or copying words from the print-rich classroom environment. However, the children's focus remained on the mechanics of production of written products rather than writing to communicate ideas to peers.

Intention and Convention

To draw children's attention to audience and communication, I assisted Becca in planning and implementing one component of writers' workshop, *Sharing Circles*, a kindergarten variation on author's chair and peer conferences.

To implement the Sharing Circles, Becca substituted a one-hour writing period once a week for the regular big book with writing prompt lesson time. Becca introduced each of these free-writing times with a short talk on writing for an audience, inviting suggestions for interesting stories and having the children share possible topic ideas with a partner before beginning. During the writing session, Becca and I circulated among the children, asking meaning-focused questions that extended children's narratives such as "How did that happen?" or "That's really interesting. What happened next?" We avoided talking about conventions during this time and encouraged children to think about what a listener would want to know.

Following the writing period, children shared their stories in groups of eight as we circulated among the groups. (During the first two sessions, we split into two larger groups, with each adult staying with one of the groups to model responding to the stories and facilitate the logistics of kindergarten turn-taking.) While seated in small circles on the floor, each child took a turn reading the story while the others listened. After the last story was read, the children arranged their papers on the floor within their circle. Then each child commented on another child's writing, making a connection to their own personal experience or asking questions for more information. Again, we encouraged the children to focus on the meaning expressed in the writing or pictures rather than on neatness, spelling, or other conventions.

In the first session, Curtis's story, supplemented by his oral elaboration, prompted lots of interest.

> Curtis: I wit to a hgkey gam. a hgey giy too a puk. and I bot a sti.
> I went to a hockey game. A hockey guy threw a puck and I bought a stick.

> Accompanying talk: I went to a Mallard's hockey game and one of the hockey guys threw a puck to me past the glass thing into the stands. I was the only one to get one. I bought a hockey stick to practice with it.

The opening comments in the first sharing session boded well for Becca's action plan. Lawson began, "Well, I think Curtis' story's really exciting and most fun and cool and stuff and I really think it's neat he kept the hockey puck and nobody else." After Hilary added that she also liked the hockey story, Curtis turned to Lawson and beamed, "Two people did my story!" This sincere interest by friends jump-started other stalled writers and by the third week, longer, more detailed stories began to emerge. But more important from my perspective, the stories began to engage their listeners. Children spontaneously began talking back to authors, both in the sharing time and at their tables, seeking clarification and elaboration in addition to relating their own experiences with a particular topic or event.

<div align="center">Findings, Data Set II: Attending to Intention</div>

<div align="center">*Intention in Writing Samples II: Writing for an Audience of Friends*</div>

After the third session of Sharing Circles, I collected the children's writing samples again and analyzed them using the same elements of convention that I had previously identified. I then compared and contrasted the two sets of samples, noting changes that occurred over the three week period, a relatively short time period in developmental terms.

Elements of Convention

Spelling accuracy through use of known words. The average number of known words used in their texts remained about the same. However, because the average text length doubled, the percentage of known words used in children's text fell as the number of novel words attempted increased (figure 1). The move away from reliance on a small set of memorized high

frequency words and the addition of more unfamiliar words allowed children to play with more

complex vocabulary as well as more natural phrasing, as in Alex's fantasy about a king cobra.

Alex: I WisH I Had a SneaK It wood de skre
       it wood HV sqixs It wood de a ceing cobre
       I wish I had a snake. It would be scary.
       It would have spikes. It would be a king cobra.

Figure 1. Comparison of Means of Known and Novel Words in Writing Samples
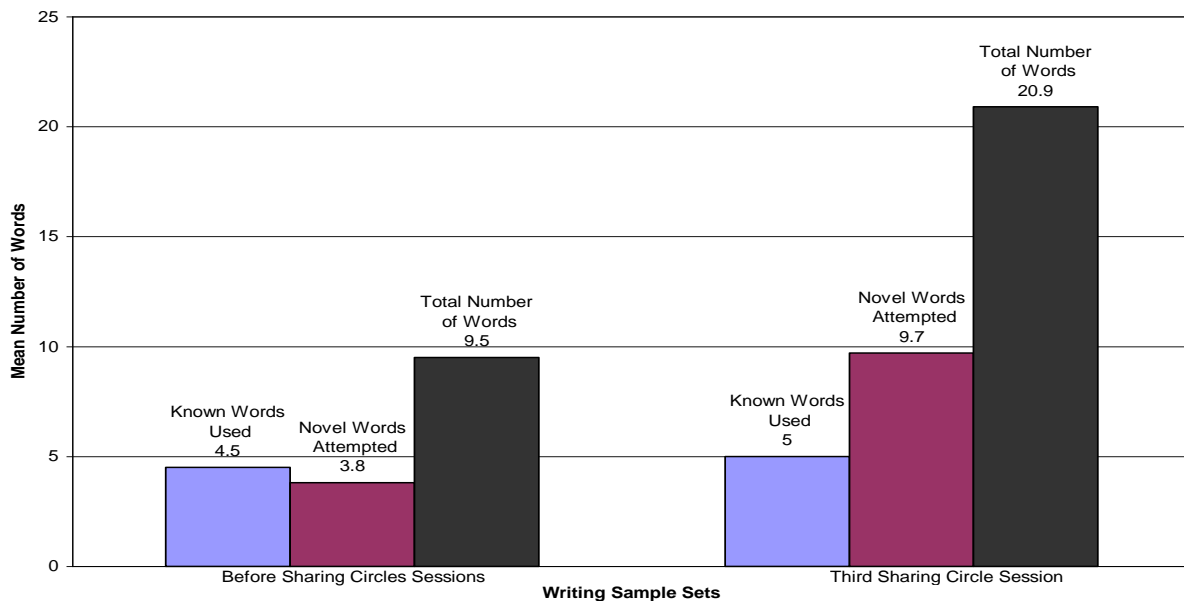
Topic choice. Children's daily experiences with family and friends continued to generate

topics. However, the story settings shifted from predominately school-based experiences to

events and activities that occurred outside the classroom. Compared to nine children who wrote

about school activities or abilities in the third quarter samples, by the third session only one child

relied on the familiar format and topic to write "I can go to school" with an accompanying

picture of a word wall chart. Greater diversity in topics and the selection of nonschool events

(see Figure 2) reflected children's desire to share stories that would be new to their listeners.

Intention and Convention

Phonological information. Children continued to consult adults and each other to write

words using beginning, middle, and ending consonants in words and at least one vowel in most

words, usually adhering to phonetic regularities.

Figure 2. Comparison of Writing Samples Before and After Sharing Strategy Implementation

Indicators of Convention	Third Quarter Samples (March)	Third Session Samples (April)
Topic Variety	9 School 5 Special Events 3 Family 2 Animals 4 Play Materials	1 School 9 Special Events 5 Family 4 Animals 3 Play Materials 3 Friends
Genre Variety	11 Affinity Statements 7 Narrative Recounts 2 Narrative Plans 3 Claim 1 Request	0 Affinity Statements 17 Narrative Recounts 4 Narrative Plans 2 Claims 0 Requests 2 Fantasy Stories 1 List
Patterned Syntax as Opening (Reliance on sentence starters or frames)	11 "I like" 4 "I can" 2 "I have/had"	0 "I like" 2 "I can" 2 "I have/had" 6 "I went"
Organization	17 Single Sentences 8 Couplets	2 Single Sentences 2 Unrelated Sentences 6 Couplets 13 Introductory Sentence and Supporting Details 2 Elaborated Stories

Genre. Affinity statements disappeared in this set of samples as children chose instead to

share past experiences or future plans in their narratives.

Erica: My mom and dad are going to now olings.
My Gramua and Gapua are staying at home wet uas.

17

pell

> My mom and dad are staning at now onlings for 4 Days.
> My mom and dad are going to New Orleans.
> My grandma and grandpa are staying at home with us.
> My mom and dad are staying at New Orleans for four days.

Fantasy stories appeared in the form of wishes or in this imaginary adventure text about Tim's

father, an innovation on the movie "Spy Kids":

> Tim: I diin no ThaT my dAd is A reel Ajunt
> naow I no ThAt my dAd is A reel Ajunnt And it is COLL
> And this is His GAJiss
> I didn't know that my dad is a real agent.
> Now I know that my dad is a real agent and it is cool.
> And this is his gadgets.

Reliance on patterned syntax. Reliance on patterned sentence starters decreased

dramatically by the third session, with use of the previously heavily-used "I like…" pattern

completely abandoned. In narrative recounts, "I went…" was used by six children to begin their

texts.

> Andrew: I went to a football patis. I sall sum trofeys.
> I was in the fut ruow!
> I went to a football practice. I saw some trophies.
> I was in the front row.

Writing became more conversational as children dropped other standard sentence starters such as

"I can…" and wrote instead "I might get…", "I could stand up…", or "I didn't know…"

> Jason: I mit git to have a woter fit with my freds and my woter Kanyins
> And with james and Losin and me and Michll and madey Tm.
> I might get to have a water fight with my friends and my water canyons [sic]
> and with James and Lawson and me and Michael and maybe Tim.

Organization and linguistic complexity. The greatest growth over the three week period

occurred in text organization as children moved beyond single sentences or couplets to

rudimentary paragraphs. When Becca began her action plan, seventeen children had written

single sentences and the rest had written couplets. In the third week's samples, two children

wrote single sentences, two wrote unrelated sentences, and six wrote couplets. The remaining

fifteen attempted the beginnings of a paragraph with an introductory sentence and supporting

details.

> Hilary: I went to Dare Cuen. I got a Smoel vnileu icrem con.
> My buther had a tist of choclt vnleu. He liket it.
> I went to Dairy Queen. I got a small vanilla ice cream cone.
> My brother had a twist of chocolate vanilla. He liked it.

Some children included a cause and effect explanation in their stories.

> Travis: I wit to berlingten with my MOM and my DaD.
> I playd owtsid ol day And I Got Sunbert.
> I went to Burlington with my mom and dad.
> I played outside all day and I got sunburnt.

Two children wrote lengthy (55 and 58 words) texts: one child describing her recent fall that

resulted in a broken heel and the other child describing how future misbehavior might lead to a

loss of privileges at home. The stories represented dramatic moments in the lives of these two

children to be shared with their friends in class.

> Ashley: I had a brokin hele. It hert a lot. I got a purple cast. I had to were
> my dad's sock. I colud stad but I had to holde the rale wene I went
> down the step's. I brok it like tise I went down the step's I slipt and
> bumpt it on the door.
> I had a broken heel. It hurt a lot. I got a purple cast. I had to wear my dad's sock. I
> could stand but I had to hold the railing when I went down the steps. I broke it
> like this: I went down the steps. I slipped and bumped it on the door.

John wrote his story slowly, struggling with the formation of letters. But he would not stop when

center time began, remaining at his table to work on his story for another fifteen minutes as

others played with blocks and playdo at the next tables.

> John: I have two pawer ranger move. I wus viyint be fou yeday. I got a
> pawer ranger move be fou yeday If. I be viy int a ginn my two pawer

> ranger move wil git takin a way an. I wot not wouit ow not seyit and afer skoow. I am go to hoom. I am go to woch my pawer ranger move it wus cow.
>
> I have two power ranger movies. I was violent before yesterday. I got power ranger movies before yesterday. If I be violent again, my two power ranger movies will get taken away and I would not watch it or see it and after school, I am going to home. I am going to watch my power ranger movie. It was cool.

In his story, John first provided background information: that he had two Power Ranger movies and that he misbehaved by acting out a wild Power Ranger sequence ("be violent") at home. He then clarified that he already owned the Power Ranger movies at the time of the instance of misbehavior. He explained what the consequence would be if he acted out again and then told his plan to watch the movies after school. By writing this sequence, John was able to express and work out an issue that mattered greatly to him; he was internalizing a rule from home and its consequence through his writing while expressing his hero worship of the Power Rangers. Literacy functioned here as a tool to mediate his personal and internal understanding of social behavior and his social and external interaction with popular culture. His emotional investment in this writing was a far cry from the tedious description he had written, erased, rewritten, and finally completely erased three weeks earlier:

> John: I gnot dis ton at wedie It wuz a spy ton.
> I got this toy at Wendy's. It was a spy toy.

Discussion: Convention, Intention, and Development

Even at the beginning of Becca's action plan, children in this kindergarten were successful in getting words out on paper and many teachers would have been satisfied with that. However, Becca was concerned with the *what* and *why* of her students' writing; she wanted children to attend to the meanings of their writings and to see writing as a way to engage others, to write for a reason other than filling up a page with lines of print.

Convention and intention work in tandem to develop children's writing abilities. Elements of convention abounded in this print-rich classroom environment as children actively and strategically absorbed the regularities in literary organization and alphabetic principles into their developing systems of literacy. However the No Child Left Behind (USDE, 2002) mandate to achieve "adequate yearly progress" was translated by this school district into drastic program shifts toward scripted teaching and computerized instruction in an attempt to standardize teaching across elementary classrooms. The reductive definition of literacy in national educational policy stresses convention, ignoring decades of literacy research that supports developmentally appropriate practice in literacy teaching (Whitmore, Goodman, Martens, & Owocki, 2004). Becca discovered that curriculum materials that overwhelmed children with attention to correctness and convention reduced their natural inclination to experiment with text, resulting in careful texts that adhered to the framing of the assignment while children's voices disappear and their writing shrivels (Martens, 1996).

Commercial literacy programs that focus on the production of correct responses rather than communication and expression decontextualize previously embedded elements of convention, erasing the social context and purpose for writing (Larson, 2002). Curriculum that lifts convention out of its context stresses literacy as procedural display (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989) rather than literacy as a tool for communication and personal expression. Literacy becomes a thing to be mastered for some mysterious purpose known to the grown-ups but not to the children. Here, children wrote books, filling pages with one name or a number, caught up in the making of a book but not its meaning; making a book because "That's what we do" but not telling a story. Some children created greeting cards that were genuinely authored for others, but only for others at home where the context was authentic.

Intention and Convention

By focusing on a connection with listeners, Becca helped the children to balance intention with convention and reclaim their purposes for writing. The fact that the children's purposes, topics, and genres expanded so rapidly may be related to other developmentally appropriate classroom practices that were already in place: a talk-rich and print-rich environment, a learner-centered approach, plentiful materials, and teacher facilitation. The peer culture (Corsaro, 2003) shaped writing choices as children attempted to impress their peers with jokes or express friendship and affiliation through copying topics in the writing center. Following the sharing circles implementation, topics proliferated and sometimes became contagious at the writing table, infecting one story after another yet transformed by each writer. Courtney's story about getting scratched by a dog inspired Ashley's recount of her dog scratching her brother, which prompted Gabrielle to write a story about her baby brother's bath.

Implications

A balance between convention and intention must be re-established in early literacy classrooms. Elements of intention can be actively facilitated by teachers who value creative expression, encourage children's invented spellings, and grant them freedom to choose topics and forms as they write. However, recent research indicates that young writers may still focus on convention despite teachers' attempts. Even in classrooms where teachers stressed meaning and a process approach, children most often cited concrete features such as correct spelling and neatness as signs of good writing (Bradley, 2001). This tendency combined with an instructional focus on convention leads children to see writing as a set of skills within literacy, a body of knowledge to be mastered, as a way to demonstrate competence rather than as a way to reach out to communicate.

To shift children's focus from the constraining force of convention, it is necessary to make the social nature of language explicit for young writers. The sharing strategy used here as an antidote to an overdose of convention is one approach to keying children into the social value of writing. By writing for an immediate audience, children began to craft their pieces to share new information, to impress their listeners, to make requests, or invent a fantasy. When children also talk as they compose, they share ideas, augment the communicative purpose of the message under construction, and build their knowledge of literacy conventions and functions (Larson, 1995, 2002; Wells, 1986). "The key to writing development is … not what is written on the page but what the child is trying to accomplish in the world beyond the page" (Dyson, 1989, p. 265). Children's writing development reflects the complex interplay of individual literacy, language system, and social situational context (Dyson, 2001).

Teachers must recognize the effects of an overemphasis on convention and believe that they have the professional judgment and the power to counteract reductive rubrics and mandated curriculum (Graves, 2002). Teacher education courses that include critical literacy and action research components in field experiences encourage teachers to evaluate writing practices critically, to plan thoughtfully, and to respond proactively (Suskind, 2007). When teachers create opportunities for exploration and intention within forms of convention, children can see that even at school writing is a tool for mediating and transforming their immediate social worlds.

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