

WHAT DO YOUNG CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION?

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A review of the language arts literature of the past decade would suggest that educators advocate the notion of integrating reading and writing into a unified curriculum. Evidence for the effectiveness of this practice appears to be well supported at the decoding/mechanical level. It is not at all clear, however, how processes beyond those levels develop (Bracewell, Frederiksen, & Frederiksen, 1982). Some confusion concerning differences in comprehension of discourse by the reader or the writer seems to arise from the variation in terminology used to describe conceptualization in these reciprocal modes of processing. Bracewell et al. (1982) suggest a reorientation in viewing discourse comprehension and production using a common set of constructs and terms for describing behavior.

This paper reviews current hypotheses presented for analyzing the young child's growth in comprehending discourse. It also seeks to discern clues for integrating instruction in reading and writing through reports of observational studies on the growth of children's understanding of the composing process.

Hypotheses about the Child's Knowledge of Discourse Structure

Reader and writer differ in the manipulation of discourse. Moffett (1983) observes that both are involved in behaviors which modify inner speech. He regards both processes as temporarily changing the way we "talk to ourselves," and eventually having the potential to change our thoughts and feeling (p. 315). Smith (1984) observes that children learn almost unconsciously to "listen like a talker" (p. 558). In similar fashion, the developing writer uses authors. The writer must read like a writer in order to write. Smith feels that this understanding of the composing structure is best developed when the child assumes full responsibility for writing and does not rely on the teacher to act as secretary.

Cognitive links between reading and writing demonstrate the influences of each mode on the other. Goodman and Goodman (1983) note two important influences on writing. They point out that children use in writing what they observe in reading, but it is only when they try to write that the observation focuses on how form serves function. The Goodmans (p. 591) suggest the seven key points of interrelationship between reading and writing which are summarized here:

1. Productive and receptive roles are more interchangeable in a speech act than in a literary event of written language. It is difficult to identify the specific contributions of reading and writing.
2. Both reading and writing develop in relation to their specific function and use.
3. Most people get more practice reading than writing.
4. The degree of transfer of knowledge of text form conventions, styles, etc., to the writing act is hard to ascertain.

5. It is impossible to write without reading. Effective reading feedback is immediate. Writers depend on feedback from potential readers which is often delayed.
6. Writers must read and re-read during writing. As writing proficiency improves through use, there is a pay-off to reading since the schemata are similar.
7. The relationship between reading and writing are not simple and isomorphic. An understanding of the specific processes in each is necessary to build a unified curriculum.

Squires (1983) supports the points identified by the Goodmans. He affirms that writing requires attention to the various rhetorical modes and functions of language. Young children must have experiences using the varied forms and functions if they are to comprehend and compose effectively. He further asserts that instructions in comprehension and composing should concentrate on the total process of constructing and reconstructing ideas. For the young child, this is not an easy task. Vygotsky (1962) observed that the advanced conceptual development required for such tasks requires elements apart from the concrete experiences in which they are embedded. As the individual applies the use of similar features to new experience, concept mastery occurs. Translated to the writing act, this implies that growth in familiarity of forms and conventions occurs when the child understands the relationship of the parts or elements to the total work and then applies the process learned to new writing experiences.

How children develop a consciousness of form in discourse is described by several classic studies. Applebee (1978) finds early evidence for the spectator role required for a "sense of story" in the behaviors of preschoolers. Attention to rhythm as an organizer of ongoing life processes, practice of language sounds and focal words and repetitive ordering of thought are precursors of story concept. Applebee notes that young children demonstrate knowledge of the formal characteristics of story in the telling or retelling by using the following features: (1) formal opening and closing phrases, (2) change in voice pitch and tone while telling a story, (3) acceptance of fantasy, (4) use of conventional characters and types of situations, and (5) consistent use of past tense. According to Applebee (1978, 1979), the young child's growth in knowledge of story structure is shown in the complexity of the experiences dealt with, the mastery of the techniques and conventions of literary form and the ability to deal with separation of reality and fiction. Story production evolves from loose associations to, at age five, material organized around a problem or theme and having an identifiable beginning and end. The separation of fact and fiction which ultimately permits the generation of stories outside personal experience evolves slowly. Calkins (1983) also observed that concern for truth predominates until the child gives more attention to audience and text form. Applebee believes that this slow emergence of concepts of representation is important not for establishing distinctions between fact and fantasy but to provide opportunities for the child to observe recurrent patterns of values, and stable expectations about cultural roles and relationships.

The young child's mastery of form and conventions is further delineated by Graves (1975) in his descriptions of reac-

tive and reflective young writers. In contrast to the reactive writer, the reflective writer in Graves' study writes with the confidence of one who understands form and convention and needs little rehearsal. The reflective writer re-reads to adjust language and has a growing sense of audience. This mature writer has an empathic understanding of character behavior.

Graves (1982) explains a five-stage growth of concepts in child writing from the earliest point of using words while unaware of meaning to independent use of words with intent to revise. He observes that children address content in their writing when motor-aesthetic conventions (spelling, handwriting) are behind them. Next, they deal with organizational imbalances. Graves urges teachers to avoid emphasizing information when the child is struggling with handwriting and mechanics. Coping strategies to get from lower level stages to content are areas addressed in conferencing sessions. Siegel (1983) presents a similar account of developmental stages of children's writing proceeding from transcribing to independent writing. During the independent stage, forms are not rigidly used. The child works for coherence and builds structure and sequence into the writing.

Dyson (1982, 1983) contributes important insights from her ethnographic studies concerning the way young children conceptualize in early writing. She observes that children begin with writing by labeling their drawings. They first symbolize what is known in their environments rather than discover or create new aspects of their world. Dyson emphasizes that the precise connection between talk and print is not understood. She concludes that young children's knowledge and use of the written language system appears to involve several levels at once. These levels include perceptual features, symbolic features, structural characteristics, discursive procedures (transforming dynamic experience into explicit, ordered and linear format), sociocognitive features (relating meaning to the knowledge of the reader), and functional capacities (arbitrary and precise uses of written language). Dyson cites Durkin's reference to "paper and pencil kids" as she describes those spontaneous writers who know how language works and who engage directly in the writing as opposed to those who dictate to a teacher.

A model for developing critical readers through writing is presented by Newkirk (1982). In his presentation of the elements of beginning writing, Newkirk shows the progression from proto-critical judgments to critical judgments about the child's own writing. He feels that critical thinking is more easily acquired through writing than through reading because children tend to regard a text as fixed — beyond criticism. Criteria for criticism can be juggled in one's own written work. Newkirk observed that the critical thinking skills acquired in writing do not always transfer to reading.

The hypotheses presented by the literature reviewed thus far suggest that children's concepts of discourse structure seem to occur in discernible stages with gradually changing foci or priorities. Mature young writers seem to get beyond hurdles of handwriting, spelling and conventions and are able to focus on theme, character development, order, and style. What is still unknown are the exact relationships between comprehension in reading and writing.

Observational Studies on Children's Understanding of the Composing Process.

"Watching a first grader write a story is a little like witnessing a bandit pick a lock." (Hauser, 1982, p. 681.) This analogy seems to describe aptly the beginning writer's struggle to apply a variety of knowledges and skills as he/she tries to be an event alive in print. Unlike reading, in which young children tend to open themselves to receptivity and the text becomes their own inner language, writing requires transformation of ideas along a logical progression. The writer makes connections of thought, memory, and feeling (Moffett, March 1983). In their ethnographic studies of child writers, Graves (1979, 1983), Hauser (1982), Pradl (1979) and Golden (1984) document the child's growth in control of story structure. Typically young children begin with generalized themes or retellings of events. The writing is at first real-life oriented and egocentric. Although sensitivity to audience and use of linguistic markers are evident, the child lacks an adult sense of chronological and thematic coherence. Gradually the young writer learns to add details and conclusions. He/she omits extraneous information and chooses more elaborate organizational structures. Formal beginnings, middles, and endings are clarified during revision. Plot is not fully developed in early stages of writing. In later stages of writing (second and third grade), Graves (1979), McConaughy (1982) and Golden (1984) observe that elements of setting and character are determined in the prewriting phases allowing ideas to flow more smoothly during writing. Character attributes and use of dialogue are features of this age. Action or physical causality is the predominant focus as opposed to character development in adult writing.

Echoing Applebee and Moffett, King and Rentel (1981) describe the first giant step in writing as producing discourse without interaction with a conversational partner. The task of the child writer is to appreciate language as a structure separate from actions. King and Rentel observe that young children can use many elements of cohesion in an appropriate writing atmosphere. Their study of kindergarten and first grade writers show that direct teaching does not play a significant role in the acquisition of the fundamental skills of cohesion. They suggest that children notice these distinctions through exposure to well-written stories, discussions, and other informal activities. Ganz (1983) shares her observations of children's writing to solve problems. She asserts that the creative and psychic energy of problem-solving often result in quality work. Her case studies reflect more elaborate and cohesive writing when children deal with strong emotional themes. Donnelly and Stevens (1980) also observe high emotional content of topic to be a strong factor in children's writing for two students over the period from first through third grades. These case studies note similar growth in story length, approximation of adult conventions, language complexity, cohesion and sophistication of subject matter for both students. Each child experienced an erosion of previously mastered skills when attempting to deal with new cognitive problems. Individual differences are observed in the voice used most frequently. The child using the poetic voice (a more advanced form) had less control over writing conventions. The investigators caution teachers not to restrict the focus of the work of young children and not to generalize or label behavior

on the basis of a few writing samples.

Bracewell et al. (1982) use frame construction theory to analyze second and fourth graders' comprehension of discourse structure. They find that children's early writing reveals skill with language devices but lack of a type of conceptual frame, suggesting a time lag between comprehension and production. On the six comprehension tasks, the subjects show a distinct preference for a narrative frame prototype over a conversation frame. There are marked individual differences in ability to vary frame used at both grade levels.

Calkins (1979, 1983) identifies a sequence for concept development in writing. Her observations show that concepts and concept organization undergo constant revision for active young writers. Calkins examines concept development in terms of overlapping interconnected characteristics (Calkins, 1983, p. 143-151).

1. Correspondence between writing products and concept development. Breakthroughs occur in both good and bad efforts.
2. Changes in the number of concepts in the child's repertoire. The number of concepts a child uses may relate less to concept development than to the writing context.
3. Changes in sophistication of these concepts. Action becomes a tool rather than a goal. Concern for absolute truth is superseded by concern for audience and text. Poetic license is observed.
4. Changes in concept density. By fourth grade, Calkins' subject is able to juggle multiple concept criteria. She could explore various treatments of a topic. This was the start of thematic unity. The subject expressed her growing control over a piece of writing by stating, "It's better now, . . . I can tell because I listen to it and look it over. It just feels better." (p. 151).

The observational studies cited seem to suggest that young children acquire a widening sense of discourse structure through their early writing experiences. A number of similarities in development occur across the studies. Because the child must produce script and manipulate forms and conventions in writing, he/she is likely to profit from inclusion of writing in reading instruction. Searle (1984) cautions that schools should not attempt to structure or monitor the writing experiences too rigidly for the child. Flexible scaffolding which allows children to initiate topics or to shape experiences for themselves may provide more nurturing environments for concept building. It seems apparent from the literature presented that the young child's reading performance can be significantly enhanced by writing experiences. The key to successful integration is in the teacher's ability to create appropriate learning environments in which both processes can flourish.

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