

How can teachers build on what young children are experiencing in the world around them...and promote early literacy at the same time? This article describes the many values of incorporating environmental print in early childhood classrooms.

Children Write Their World: Environmental Print as a Teaching Tool

Rebecca McMahon Giles and Karyn Wellhousen Tunks

“Hey, Ms. McMillan, you have three *McDonald’s*® in your name.” This observation, made by 4-year-old Jadin as his prekindergarten teacher wrote her name, reflects young children’s familiarity with popular logos and commercial print that they see every day.

Early encounters with environmental print, words, and other graphic symbols found in children’s surroundings are among their first concrete exposures to written language (Goodman, 1986; McGee & Richgels, 2000; Teale, 1986). These experiences

- provide an introduction to making meaning of abstract symbols and
- offer children their first opportunity to make sense of the world through print (Kassow, 2006).

As a result, children typically read print from their environment before reading print in books (Clay, 1993; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981).

Why Environmental Print Is Important in Early Literacy

More than 4 decades of research on the role of environmental print has substantiated its important influence in young children’s literacy development (Reutzel, Fawson, Young, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2003). The preponderance of studies on environmental print, however, took place in earlier decades (Aldridge and Rust, 1987; Durkin, 1966; Heibert, 1978; Kuby, Kirkland, & Aldridge, 1996; McGee & Jones, 1990) and focused on its impact on early *reading* behaviors. Interest in the impact of environmental print on children’s early *writing* is a more recent development.

Research clearly shows the benefits of exposure to environmental print for emergent readers and writers. In one study of preschoolers, 60% of the 3-year-olds and 80% of 5-year-olds could read environmental print in its context

of cereal boxes, toothpaste cartons, traffic signs, and soft drink logos (Goodman, 1986).

Children typically read environmental print first.

Children are initially dependent on the label or logo associated with the word (Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/82; Kuby, Aldridge, & Snyder, 1994; Ylisto, 1967). As their understanding of print and phonetic skills necessary for reading increases, they gradually begin to read words presented separately from the logo.

Children’s responses to environmental print are the direct outcomes of their prior experience with it (Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982). Academically at-risk preschoolers recognized significantly fewer environmental print logos than did their academically advantaged peers (Shaffer & McNinch, 1995). However, studies consistently show that regardless of socioeconomic status (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996) or home language (Teale, 1986; Xu, 1999) all children benefit from exposure to print in their environment.

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Choose Suitable Environmental Print

Using environmental print in pre-school, kindergarten, and primary classrooms is an important part of developing a language/literacy-rich learning environment. Many products marketed in the United States are labeled in English, French, and Spanish, so they can be tools to broaden children's language experiences even further. Even so, reading environmental print is likely to be individual and dependent upon geographic location (Heath, 1983). For this reason, children should collect much of the environmental print that they will learn from at school.

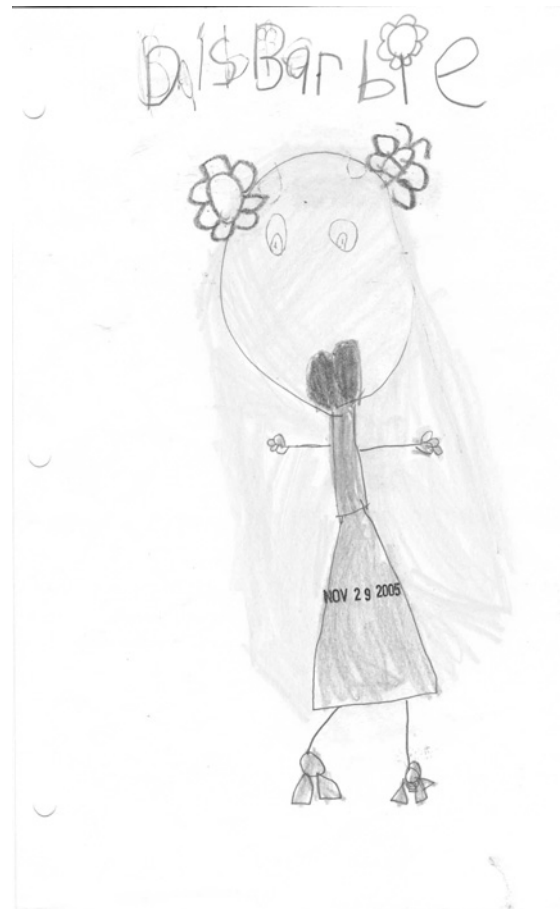
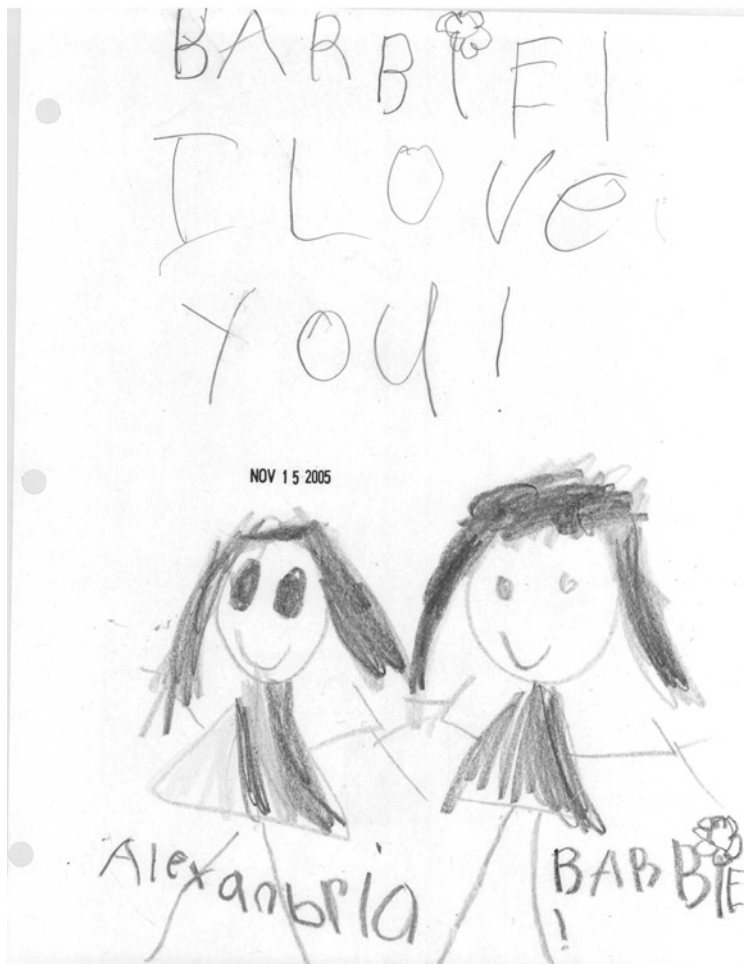
- Experiences in which children take ownership, such as cutting out a recognizable name or label from a container or magazine found at home, are particularly beneficial.
- Contributing their own examples of environmental print to create class books or displays also strengthens the home-school connection.

Activities like these reinforce the fact that readable and writable print can be found everywhere, while ensuring that the print is actually familiar to the children.

The purpose of using familiar environmental print for instruction is to

form a bridge between the known and new, so it is important that teachers use examples that are meaningful for the children in each group. Horner (2005) recommends emphasizing the use of child-familiar logos—such as those from toys, movies, and television shows—rather than community signs or household items. These were found to be most recognizable by both males and females of various ages. For instance, the journal entries in Photo 1, by two kindergarten girls, reflect their recognition of and interest in the text found on a classmate's lunchbox.

Horner (2005) also points out that an educator's use of logos could imply approval of the products they represent. She recommends that teachers



All photos courtesy of the authors

Photo 1: Two lunchbox-inspired journal entries by kindergarten girls. Child-familiar logos—such as those from toys, movies, and television shows—were found to be most recognizable by both males and females of various ages.

use nutritious food logos and widely acceptable toy names whenever possible.

Children usually enter learning settings already familiar with a wide variety of *commercial environmental print*, such as road signs and household product logos. Their classrooms often are filled with *homemade environmental print*, such as daily schedules, labels on shelves, and a list of birthdays. Initial experiences with both types of environmental print enable children to associate print with meaning (Kuby, Aldridge, & Snyder 1994; Vukelich, 1994). This enables them to build confidence in their ability to read, which is necessary for becoming successful readers (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; Cunningham, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In addition to supporting young readers, recent research demonstrates how print from the environment gives young children confidence to experiment and use print resources to improve their writing (Tunks & Giles, 2007). These researchers found that children experimenting with writing engage in “environmental printing”—copying conventional forms of print—directly from sources in their immediate surroundings. This study of kindergarteners’ journal-writing behavior revealed three distinct ways children used environmental print.

- Some children used environmental print simply as a source to copy without regard to its meaning.
- Environmental print also served as a resource for the correct spelling of particular words or phrases, such as the day of the week, needed in the child’s message.
- Environmental print inspired children’s choices of writing topics.

Three distinct ways young children use environmental print:

- As a source to copy without regard to its meaning
- As a resource for the correct spelling of particular words or phrases, such as the day of the week, needed in the child’s message
- To inspire children’s choices of writing topics (Tunks & Giles, 2007)

For all three uses, children relied on the print found in their immediate surroundings to successfully convey a message.

Reading familiar logos contributes to children’s view of themselves as competent readers and helps them approach learning to read with enthusiasm and confidence (Wepner, 1985).

Similarly, copying available text contributes to children’s views of themselves as writers by allowing them to produce readable text.

After children realize that “real writing” is compiled from a set of pre-determined characters (letters), they often replace or supplement their drawing and scribbles with letters or words copied from the environment. Whether or not children can read or comprehend these words is irrelevant. Their choice to include them is evidence of their understanding of the difference between pictures or symbols and text. This use of environmental printing allows emerging writers to convey an understandable message to others, and the positive response they receive for this accomplishment reinforces their future attempts at writing the words that they see (Tunks & Giles, 2007).



Photo 2: Kindergarteners’ contributions resulted in this classroom display of environmental print. Show environmental print samples that children bring from home, such as sales fliers, healthy-food wrappers, safe household product containers, or art-supply cartons. Colorful displays draw children’s attention to familiar packaging and related print while serving as a springboard for conversation, reading, and writing.

Offer Environmental Print Learning Materials

How do wise adults support emerging writers? They encourage young children to incorporate words from their environment into their writing, thus producing authentic and readable text. Environmental print can easily be incorporated into displays such as word walls and bulletin boards, classroom libraries, and other learning materials found in high-quality early childhood classrooms.

Displays Such as Word Walls

Engaging children in conversations about print seen in everyday settings increases their curiosity, expands their general knowledge, and improves communication skills while helping them understand the alphabetic system. **Bulletin boards** can show environmental print samples that children bring from home, such as sales fliers, healthy-food wrappers, safe household product containers, or art-supply cartons (see Photo 2). These colorful displays draw children's attention to familiar packaging and related print while serving as a springboard for conversations, reading, and writing.

Many kindergarten and primary classrooms feature **word walls** to exhibit a variety of familiar words, such as sight vocabulary or children's names (see Photo 3). Adding environmental print to the word wall increases the usefulness of this valuable resource for emergent literacy learners as they engage in writing activities.

Digital photographs of familiar street signs, names of businesses, and billboards found in the school community also stimulate children's interest in the print around them and provide both inspiration for and mod-

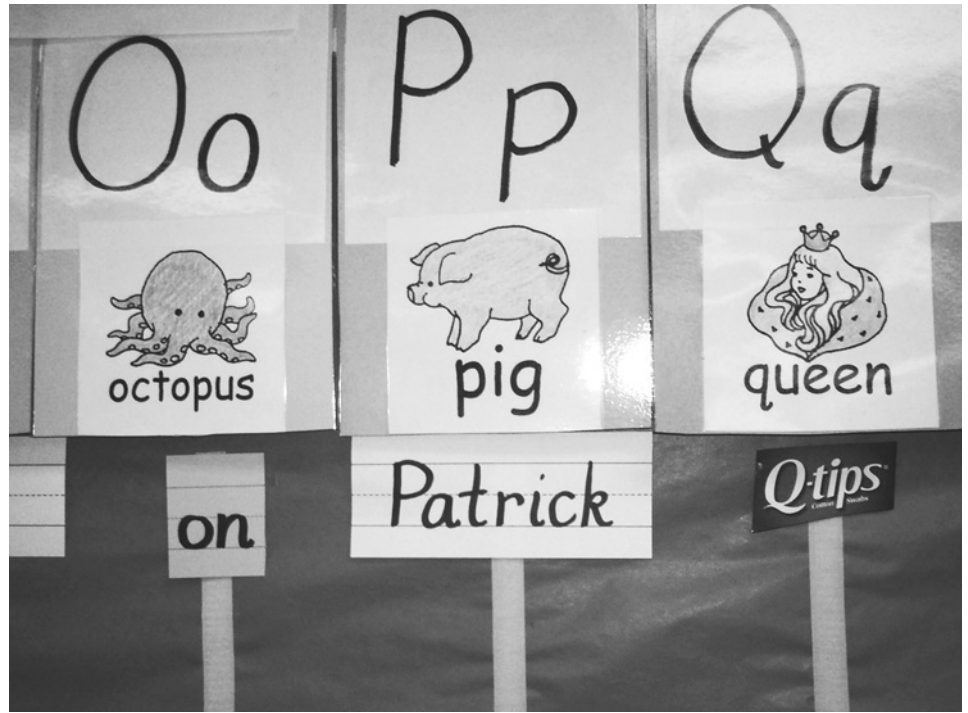


Photo 3: Environmental print enhances a traditional word wall. Digital photographs of familiar street signs, names of businesses, and billboards found in the community can also be displayed to stimulate children's interest in the print around them and provide both inspiration for and models of writing.

els of writing. When possible, take walking trips in the school neighborhood to take photos of the print samples that children choose, and ask families to engage in similar projects at home.

Classroom Library

Every classroom library collection is enhanced when it features

children's literature that includes environmental print (Table 1). Books such as Tana Hoban's *I Read Symbols* and *I Read Signs* use colorful photographs to show recognizable print in familiar contexts. Other books, such as *School Bus* by Donald Crews and *A House Is a House for Me* by Mary Ann Hoberman, embed environmental print into the illustrations.

Table 1. Environmental Print Books for Young Children

Ancona, G. (2003). <i>Murals: Walls That Sing</i> . Tarrytown, NY: Cavendish.
Canizares, S., & Chanko, P. (1998). <i>Signs</i> . New York: Scholastic.
Crews, D. (1993). <i>School Bus</i> . New York: Harper-Trophy.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs at the Airport</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs at the Park</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs at the Pool</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs on the Road</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs at the School</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hill, M. (2003). <i>Signs at the Store</i> . New York: Children's Press.
Hoban, T. (1987). <i>I Read Signs</i> . New York: Harper-Trophy.
Hoban, T. (1983). <i>I Read Symbols</i> . New York: Greenwillow.
Hoberman, M.A. (1982). <i>A House Is a House for Me</i> . New York: Picture Puffin.
Holub, J. (1998). <i>Red, Yellow, Green: What Do Signs Mean?</i> New York: Cartwheel.
Klove, L. (1996) <i>I See a Sign</i> . New York: Aladdin.
Milich, Z. <i>City Signs</i> . Buffalo, NY: Kids Can Press.

Books on familiar science, social studies, and math topics, such as butterflies, vehicles, families, and shapes also include images and words from children's everyday worlds. Choose a varied collection from which children can build their vocabularies and knowledge about how print is incorporated into their lives.

In addition to published books, children can make their own books of environmental print, both individually and as a class. These can be created by stapling a cardstock cover to blank pages of different shapes and sizes, according to their purpose.

For example, a **class book** of "Words We Can Read" might be made when each child contributes environmental print cut from a food container, shopping bag, or magazine. Other class books may be made around themes such as "What's for Breakfast?" The book might feature environmental print from favorite breakfast items, such as cereal, frozen waffles, or bananas, that could be embedded into predictable text, such as "I like to eat _____ for breakfast."

Children should collect much of the environmental print.

Big books made solely from the print found on cereal boxes inspire nutrition-related writing activities that incorporate skills such as listing, describing, and sequencing (Kettenring & Graybill, 1991). Children can use words such as *whole grain*, *fruit*, and *milk* in meaningful context.

Individual books are made as children fill their blank pages with environmental print they choose. They might create books with titles such as "My Favorite Places" or "Upper-Case Letters I Found." These readable books will become instant favorites. They contribute to children's confidence in their ability to read and write as they are enjoyed again and again. Repeated readings to various audiences, friends and family alike, further enhance children's views of themselves as authors and motivate children to engage in future publishing.

Learning Materials

Teacher-made learning materials can be easily constructed using familiar logos cut from recycled product packages, ads and sale fliers, magazines, or printed from Web sites.

Laminated cards of environmental print word sets, including words children chose, can be used in a variety of ways. Young children can sort by beginning sounds, number of letters or syllables, or categories. Older children can practice putting words in alphabetical order without the constant erasing and rewriting that often accompanies pencil-and-paper alphabetizing (Rule, 2001).

With two sets of word cards, children can match logos, play games such as concentration, or come up with their own creative variations of favorite games. Older children may enjoy the challenge of matching logos to words written separately on a sentence strip, which encourages them to focus on the unique features of the letters rather than their color and design.

Stock play areas with authentic environmental print and writing supplies.

Teachers can make **simple puzzles** by cutting apart fronts of clean pizza boxes or other recycled cardboard packaging that includes both print and logos. As children put the pieces back together, they focus on details in the graphics and words. The same is true when children are encouraged to collect and match, sort, or reassemble puzzles made from product coupons or magazine advertisements, for example.

All of these activities provide repeated exposure to familiar print, giving children opportunities to incorporate words into their sight

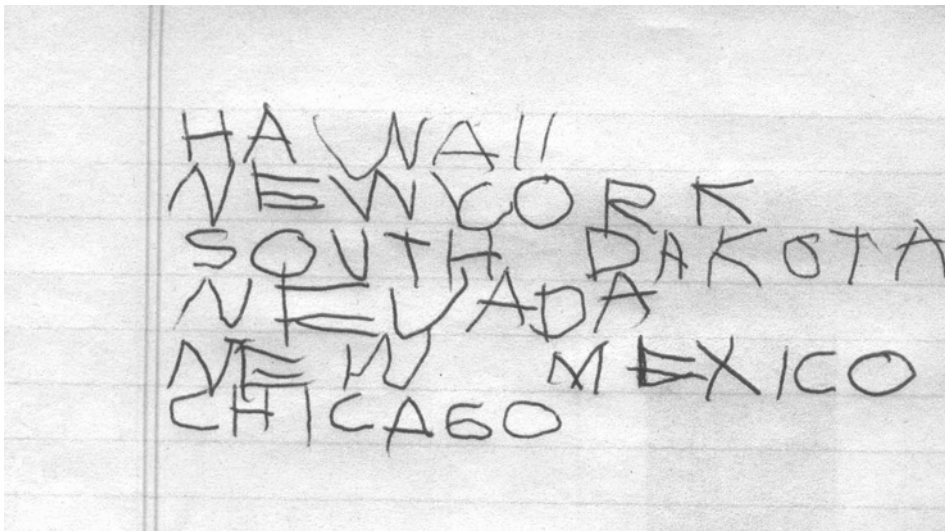


Photo 4: Locations identified on a United States map puzzle became the impetus for this kindergartener's list of places he wanted to visit. The print and pictures displayed on the completed puzzle became the inspiration for his writing as well as providing the assistance needed to write a readable message he eagerly shared.

vocabularies and, later, their written vocabularies and journals. Each word a child knows how to write holds the potential for future use.

Environmental Print in Daily Explorations

Early writing attempts can easily be promoted by deliberately stocking children's play and learning areas with a combination of authentic environmental print and writing supplies along with other props. For example, a **block center** that contains street signs, "under construction" labels, and corporate logos such as those from restaurants and manufacturers encourages the use of environmental print when building. Coupling such signs with blank index cards, sticky notes, and markers promotes environmental printing as children label or write about their structures.

Placing cookbooks, large colorful paper, and blank recipe cards in the **pretend play area** may prompt children to record the dishes being served. They might design restaurant menus or transfer information from a cookbook to a personalized recipe box using the original text as a model and spelling reference. By adding labeled measuring utensils in pretend and water/sand play, children begin to see the relationship between quantities, numerals, and words.

Setting up a classroom movie rental facility, pet rescue service, or grocery store with children for their dramatic play is another way to provide familiar environmental print as a motivation for writing. Telephone books, magazines, travel brochures, play money, and similar items all can expand children's early literacy resources.

A variety of creative **manipulatives**, such as games, music, art materials, toy vehicles, and puzzles include print. For

example, locations identified on a United States map puzzle became the impetus for one kindergartener's list of places he wanted to visit (see Photo 4). The print and pictures displayed on the completed puzzle became the inspiration for his writing as well as providing the assistance needed to write a readable message he eagerly shared.

With a wide array of manipulatives that spark the use of environmental print, children will soon be able to write words to their favorite songs, learn color name words (in three languages) from crayons or markers, and match the names and shapes of seashells. Immersing children in a learning setting intentionally filled with environmental print to be used as a writing resource increases their ability and motivation to write.

* * *

Children who are surrounded by print flourish in literacy development.

Children who are surrounded by print flourish in literacy development and are often more successful in school. As children observe, read, discuss, and copy the signs and symbols in their world, they become aware that literacy is part of everyone's daily activities. They come to realize that reading and writing fulfill various purposes and functions in their lives. Environmental print

- provides models for children's writing,
- helps them internalize correct spellings of commonly used words, and
- inspires their own writing through environmental printing.

With support and guidance, young children eventually learn to

write conventionally, composing messages for a variety of purposes and audiences. Consciously capitalizing on their familiarity with environmental print as an aid for early writing is one way to promote their progress on the road to becoming independent authors and readers.

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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Why Environmental Print?

Early encounters with environmental print, words, and other graphic symbols found in children's surroundings are among their first exposure to written language. These experiences

- provide an introduction to making meaning of abstract symbols,
- offer children their first opportunity to make sense of the world through print, and
- enable children to take ownership, such as cutting out a recognizable name or label from a container or magazine found at home.

As a result, children typically read print from their environment before reading print in books.



Subjects & Predicates

Points to Keep in Mind

- Child writing occurs in various non-sequential forms. It is different from adult writing.
- The use of environmental print enables emerging writers to convey understandable messages to others.
- Teachers can positively impact emergent writers' writing development by increasing the amount and type of classroom print.
- Daily journal writing enables emergent writers to experiment with print as a way to communicate.

Enrichment Experiences

Children from preschool through grade 3 can use environmental print as a writing resource with explorations such as these.

- Take an outdoor word walk. Children write words they find on a notepad or clipboard.
- Store environmental print in individual, re-sealable clear plastic bags. Use it for story starters and art inspiration.
- Have a "T-Shirt Day." Each child wears a T-shirt with a logo or slogan. Write a class story about the experience.
- Create an environmental print alphabet display or book.
- Discuss word configuration as a reading/spelling strategy. Make word frames to fit environmental print.
- Make logo books—such as Eat the Alphabet (foods), Vacation Dreams (places to visit), or Keeping Clean (soaps, shampoos, and toothpastes)—for the classroom library.
- Build environmental print word families of words with the same beginning sounds, plurals, or words ending with *-ing*.
- Use rhyming words in environmental print to write poems.
- Find non-standard (made-up) words created for a product or company, such as Lexus® or Exxon®. Use them in stories.
- Find the same logos and product names in different languages. Challenge children to incorporate these words into their writing.
- Find alliteration in environmental print. Encourage children to use alliteration in their writing.
- Find abbreviations in environmental print. Discuss their purpose in writing.

For further reading

Schickedanz, J.A., & Cabergue, R.M. (2004). *Writing in Preschool: Learning to Orchestrate Meaning and Marks*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Tunks, K.W., & Giles, R.M. (2007). *Write Now! Publishing With Young Authors, Pre-K Through Grade 2*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.