Children’s acquisition of early literacy skills continues to attract attention from researchers, educators, families, and policy makers. Literacy development starts early in life and is correlated with academic achievement. All acknowledge that children must learn to communicate both orally and in written forms in order to be successful in school and society, as well as being able to relate to each other.

The experiences young children have with their families and teachers can influence their development of oral language and ability to be successful readers (Hart & Risely, 1995). Key predictors of reading and school success include the development of

- oral language,
- phonological skills, and
- the acquisition of print awareness (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Early childhood educators can implement effective strategies to promote young children’s literacy development (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2007; Owocki, 1999; Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Schickedanz, 2004). With changing demographics in many classrooms, teachers also are responsible for implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies that support young children's efforts to interact with each other when they come from different cultures and speak different languages.

### Starting the Cycle of Inquiry

The collaborative team project described here involved a university instructor, university students, and a preschool teacher, all of whom sought effective ways to support the communication abilities of children who did not speak English as their primary language. The preschool children attended a Title 1 elementary school that served families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Several children spoke Spanish as their first language, one student spoke Mandarin Chinese, and several children were from Native Alaskan families.

The university students were enrolled in an undergraduate early childhood education teacher preparation program that supported the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. In this approach, students, faculty, and teachers engage in a process of documentation known as a cycle of inquiry (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). Teachers inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach become researchers who study their classroom practices by

- framing questions,
- collecting and analyzing classroom observations,
- discussing with peers, and
- planning for subsequent experiences with children (Fyfe, 1998; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Hughes, 2002).

A semester-long university course focused on conducting classroom research in order to understand the inquiry process and its relationship to curriculum planning. The university instructor and classroom teacher discussed topics and formed questions that the university students could study in the classroom.

The classroom teacher recommended that the team
study this question: “How do adults support young children who are learning English to communicate with each other?” To seek answers to this question, university students videotaped, took photographs, and made written observations of young children’s classroom literacy experiences.

Another core element of the Reggio Emilia approach centers on the beliefs that all children have potential and that educators perceive children as capable and competent (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Rinaldi, 2001). The team examined their images of the children and agreed to look for situations that would highlight children’s strengths. Consistent with culturally responsive teaching strategies, the students and classroom teacher respected the children’s knowledge by observing the ways in which the children effectively communicated with their peers.

The following classroom examples demonstrate how the team studied their observations to better understand how the children in this group used their written communication. Their findings were then used to plan effective teaching strategies to extend children’s communication abilities.

Teaching Strategies

Invitations to Snack: Context for Learning to Write

Oral language is the foundation for literacy development. University students, their instructor, and the classroom teacher first collected everyday classroom observations by photographing, videotaping, and then studying the transcripts and videotapes to better understand how children already communicated with each other.

These early observations immediately revealed the key role teachers play to facilitate communication. Ms. Kathi, the preschool teacher, was committed to facilitating the development of oral and written language in her daily interactions with children. She knew that phonological awareness develops when children have knowledge of a sound system, which is important to construct words and sentences.

Therefore, Ms. Kathi provided a print-rich environment, offering abundant opportunities for children to build their knowledge of print materials. The university students observed how the classroom environment was structured to reflect the importance of early literacy.

- A variety of paper and writing tools were available.
- Books and print materials were displayed in many play areas.
- Ms. Kathi often used sticky notes to write down children’s words as they described their drawings or paintings.

In one of the first classroom observations, Raquel asked if she could invite a child from another classroom to have a snack with her classmates. Raquel decided to write an invitation (see Figure 1), which drew the attention of a small group of her classmates. Children gathered around a table and followed Raquel’s example to construct their own invitations. They used a combination of drawing and scribbling, forming both symbols and letters. The children who spoke Spanish talked to each other, while other children drew by themselves. All of the adult observers noted children’s sustained engagement in the experience and their interest in each other’s work.

Early childhood teachers often write children’s words, a strategy that promotes both written and oral communication. Ms. Kathi often used self-stick notes to write children’s words about their drawings and actions in their play. She typically recorded words after a child completed a drawing. While children were engaged in various learning experiences, Ms. Kathi might name alphabet letters, point out patterns, or note letter-sound associations to promote language skills (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Schickedanz, 1999).

During the invitation writing, Ms. Kathi asked children to “Tell me the letters to put here,” which prompted children to elaborate on their invitations. University students and their instructor noted the use of these strategies and the numerous opportunities the teacher created to extend children’s communication abilities. Student discussions centered on ways assessment information could be obtained from their observations.

First, students posed the question, “What do we understand about language acquisition?” Students identified developmental milestones or literacy skills related to the acquisition of written communication. For example, as shown in Figures 2 and 3,
children observed their movements with markers and recognized the differences between drawing and writing (Schickedanz, 1999).

Review of the children’s work samples demonstrated that children were learning about the features of written communication by discovering properties of the written word (Schickedanz, 2004). The classroom teacher identified objectives from the Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum that were aligned with the children’s writing samples (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2005).

The focus on children’s writing samples was both a meaningful starting place for discussion and led to a deeper understanding of children’s actions. Another level of meaning was gained when the discussion centered on the purpose of the children’s writing, which was to build relationships. The team noted children’s focused attention on their writing, because creating the invitations was important to the children. The activity brought children closer together over a shared interest.

Piaget’s theories of children’s construction of knowledge can be extended to the ways that children learn written language and the ways they assign meaning to lines, scribbles, and letters in a cultural context (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Just as children make meaning out of print they see in the environment, they also assign meaning to their written work. Children assigned meaning to their scribbling and letter attempts as they constructed their invitations.

This observation highlighted the ways Ms. Kathi stressed children’s use of written communication, the developmental aspects of their writing samples, and the ways children assigned meaning to their written work. By analyzing the documented observations, the team could develop strategies to expand the purposes for written communication.

Building Relationships Among Children: Purpose for Writing

In another observation, Crystal, a university student, recorded the actions of Hannah, a Taiwanese child who spoke Mandarin Chinese. Hannah typically played alone, often watching other children. In several observations, Crystal captured Hannah’s persistent attempts to enter into play with other children, none of whom spoke Chinese. These observations helped the team understand how children’s written notes were used to build relationships.

Young children are learning ways to enter into the ongoing play of other children (Wolf & Neugebauer, 2004), a skill that can be complicated by language differences. A significant interaction occurred when Hannah watched three Spanish-speaking girls playing with dolls in the drama area. After watching the girls, Hannah dressed in play clothes, picked up a doll, and stood nearby, trying to gain a place with her peers. When her attempt to join the play went unnoticed, Hannah got a paper and a pencil and drew a note (see Figure 4).

Crystal presented photographs of the incident and Hannah’s note to team members. Ms. Kathi was moved by the emotion in Hannah’s facial expressions and her deliberate attempts to interact with the other children. She noted subtleties captured in the photographs that are often overlooked in the midst of teaching. Hannah’s drawing was an effective strategy to enter into play and an ingenious way to communicate with children who spoke a different language.

After this presentation, university seminar discussions shifted away from merely looking at developmental milestones for written communication to focus on children’s intents. The team examined ways in which children assigned meaning to their written notes. Not only were the children modeling...
writing, they were developing a common language for the purpose of forming relationships.

**Ideas to Share: Writing to Build Relationships**

One foundation for becoming literate is that young children understand the functions of communication (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). In order to evaluate and plan an appropriate curriculum, Owocki and Goodman recommend exploring several questions, including: “How does literacy development occur through children’s exploration of functions?” (p. 79).

Social context is important for children to exchange ideas and to eventually learn to regard others’ points of views (Berk & Winsler, 1995). The process of writing can be like using a pencil or marker to “think” (Applebee, 1977). This notion suggests that learning to write is more than learning the mechanics of spelling or grammar. Rather, children learn to write to express themselves to others and to offer differing ideas or viewpoints.

Children often use drawings to make visible and public records of their ideas (Forman, 1989). Children in Ms. Kathi’s class had already shown that they were comfortable using written communication as a means to form relationships. Consistent with culturally responsive teaching strategies, Ms. Kathi wanted to build a learning community that supported children’s expression and exchange of ideas. The team decided to extend children’s use of written notes by introducing how drawings and writing can be used to exchange ideas.

**Wasp Nest: Children Exchange Ideas With Drawings**

Ms. Kathi arranged the learning environment to focus children’s attention on a wasp nest displayed in a scaled clear plastic jar. She placed writing tools, magnifying glasses, and paper around the jar so children could draw their observations. Ms. Kathi invited children to use the materials by saying, “Come see! We found a wasp’s nest.”

Aaliyah stated, “I am going make a picture.” She drew a smaller circle within a larger circle and filled it with dots (see Figure 6). As Aaliyah drew, Ms. Kathi suggested that Jaylyn also check out the wasp nest. Ms. Kathi told her that, “Aaliyah observed the wasp’s nest and is drawing a picture.” Ms. Kathi purposely called attention to the children’s drawings, which was a step toward having the children understand that their drawings offered ideas to others.

As Jaylyn approached, Ms. Kathi turned her attention to Aaliyah, and this is the conversation that followed.

Ms. Kathi: “Do you want me to put some words on there for you? You let me know when you want me to put some words.” Ms. Kathi then helped Aaliyah to describe her observation by noting the features in her drawing. “I see a big circle and a small circle. What goes inside?” As she talked to Aaliyah about her drawing, Jaylyn watched. Aaliyah began to explain her drawing.

Aaliyah: “A bug comes out and they eat honey.”

Ms. Kathi: “The bugs come out and they eat honey.”

Aaliyah: “Uh-uh.”

Jaylyn studied the jar and made her own drawing.

Ms. Kathi: “Aaliyah and Jaylyn, you each drew the wasps’ nest. Aaliyah shows a round nest filled with bugs. Jaylyn’s drawing looks all bumpy and...”
rough, just like the texture of the nest. You both made very informative drawings.”

In this experience, Ms. Kathi helped the girls assign meaning to their drawings and encouraged them to study each other’s work. She communicated that she valued their drawings when she described them with specific, vocabulary-stretching words. Adult responses like this support children’s efforts to record ideas and make their ideas public.

**Wasp Nest Extension: Building Intentionality**

Meeting together to study the documentation helped the team to be intentional in their plans for future experiences with the children. For example, when the team found that children used notes to communicate with each other, they could extend learning opportunities by teaching more functions of communication through the use of drawing.

Using drawings to express ideas could be a way to support metacognition or the ways that children think about their ideas (Brown & DeLoache, 1978; Rowe, 1994). Drawings can help children represent what they understand, and enable the teacher to identify any gaps in children's thinking (Forman, 1998). Thus, children explore more functions of communication including learning to formulate and convey ideas, thinking about their ideas, and sharing their written ideas with others.

Ultimately, the teacher wanted to support children as part of a classroom culture that promoted the value of knowing and understanding the ideas of group members. Through team discussions, the students, instructor, and teacher developed common goals and planned thoughtful activities to build children’s communication skills.

Teachable moments are ideal opportunities to invite collaboration and extend the use of the drawing for sharing ideas. This example highlights one teachable moment.

Hunter: “I see wasps.”
Teacher: “You see wasps?”
Hunter: “Yeah.”
Teacher: “Do you see where he is talking about, Hannah?”
Hannah (who spoke Mandarin Chinese) is graciously invited to become part of the interaction.

Teacher: “You think that is a wasp, Hunter? It is a possibility.”
Hunter: “Let's look everywhere.”
Teacher: “Hannah has another idea.”
Hunter: “I saw wasps.”
Teacher: “You saw wasps inside. Could we write this down?”
Hannah: “I have another idea.”
Teacher: “You have an idea, too?”
Hunter: “I have an idea.”
Teacher: “Hannah has another idea and you have an idea. Let me get some paper so we can write down your ideas.” Children were therefore encouraged to construct their ideas and to express them in written form to share with the class.

In these examples, the adults encouraged children to think about what it means to have an idea. This way of recording children's ideas extends the common teaching practice of dictation of children's words. Children's ideas were captured and valued as they were being developed in an effort to extend their thinking.

This extension of the practice of children's dictation of their ideas was a valuable new way to view language development. Instead of the teacher recording words, the children were recording their own ideas. Ms. Kathi began to listen for children's ideas that might be important for her to better understand their questions and misconceptions. She could then plan to revisit the ideas through additional learning experiences.

**Learning From the Inquiry Process**

As these observations demonstrate, outcomes of the documentation process can lead educators to establish common curricular goals with intentional teaching strategies. Several important outcomes for everyone involved resulted from this collaborative inquiry project.

- The team focused on observing children's strengths as competent communicators. The purpose of the project was to support children who were learning English as a second language. Failing to recognize children's capabilities can lead to underestimating children's competence (NAEYC, 1998) and educators must be careful not to link performance with any language, dialect, or culture.

The team observed children's ways of communicating to identify their potential (Rinaldi, 2001). Initial assumptions were that the children were capable of communicating in meaningful ways, and that they all wanted to interact with each other.

- The inquiry process helped the team better understand
how observation is linked to curriculum development. The cyclic nature of the observations and the study of each observation helped the team to make curriculum decisions and develop approaches to support literacy development. Through careful study of observations, the team was able to plan intentional learning experiences connected to children’s words and actions. The organized, documented observations for team discussion made the children and adult’s learning concrete.

- Photographs and videotapes can expand ways adults learn about literacy development. The observation of children writing invitations was a starting place to study how they were learning writing skills and processes. The teacher described how “alive” the literacy items on her developmental continuum checklist became when she could visualize the photographs related to objectives. Learning about the context for writing led to a greater appreciation for the functions of communication that were important to children. The process of organizing observations resulted in a deeper understanding for how children learn about literacy. Understanding the learning processes involved in developing communication skills ultimately influenced the implementation of effective teaching strategies.

Using an approach to literacy learning that involves teachers as researchers in their own classrooms offers a meaningful and effective pedagogy. The process of documenting “provides teachers with many of the same types of opportunities that they provide children:

- creative thinking,
- collaborative problem solving,
- articulation of collective understandings, and

Theory, teaching principles, and practices are indeed interconnected.

References


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Learning Language: Listening and Writing With Diverse Young Children

Eileen Hughes and Kathi Wineman

Build a learning community to support children’s relationships

• Be aware that children communicate to form relationships.
• Facilitate children’s efforts to communicate. Ask children to listen to each other’s ideas.
• Post photographs and display children’s writing and drawings to show that their ideas are valued.

Encourage drawing to communicate

• Provide easy access for children to paper and writing tools.
• Model writing and drawing as a way to collect ideas, questions, or thoughts. Keep writing materials in a pocket.
• Record children’s ideas as they occur. For example, “Anna you have an idea. Let’s write that down so you can share it with others.”
• Offer activities and materials that encourage children to observe and record their observations.
• Make the most of teachable moments.

Document children’s learning

• Observe and document interactions. Photograph children’s actions.
• Note children’s strengths. See how they communicate with gestures, words, drawings, and other behaviors.
• Observe and record how children acquire communication skills. Focus on understanding children’s intentions.
• Organize observations to share with children’s families. Study how children learn to communicate.
• Talk about photographs and observations with other teachers. Interpret children’s actions. Plan meaningful experiences that support language development.