

Dusting Off the Writing Center: Creative Writing in the Preschool Classroom

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Authentic, Emergent Writing, Scaffolding, Zone of Proximal Development

Abstract

Emergent writing in the early childhood classroom is an essential part of literacy development in young children. Many early childhood settings reach the diverse developmental needs of students by facilitating small group interactions (centers) that are teacher-led as well as activities that are accessed independently. The purpose of my research was to examine how preschool students (typical and special needs) interact with resources within the classroom to communicate their stories and messages. As students began to make sense of letters and words, they also began to develop the skills needed to communicate their own stories and messages in the written form. Student achievement is often based on assessments that are tied to content standards. As a teacher I learned that, instead of focusing solely on delivering content standards, it is imperative to create a classroom culture where writing is valued and where opportunities for writing interactions are carefully structured, informed by student understandings, and scaffolded across classroom contexts.

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Rationale

Young children communicate their thoughts through a variety of means and they want their ideas to be heard. The progression of verbal expression to the written word can be as rich as the resources and opportunities that are available to young children. My action research project considers how children use their incredible imaginations as they think, communicate, draw, and eventually write their messages.

Upon reviewing the Early Learning Content Standards from the Ohio Department of Education (2003) and assessing my students last year, I realized that I was not meeting the needs of my students in the area of developing emergent writing in my preschool classroom. In an effort to better address the needs of my students, I wrote and received a grant to develop a Writing Center in my classroom and purchased materials to implement it; however, for the first four months of the school year, the center sat stagnant in a corner of my room. My goal for the second half of the year was to utilize these resources to create opportunities for authentic communication for my preschoolers, while meeting the requirements of the Ohio Department of Education's Early Learning Content Standards (2003).



I quickly learned that the demands and challenges of delivering a content standards-based curriculum to students of varying abilities can be overwhelming. At the beginning, I noticed that my students were not communicating clearly about their drawings. Their oral dictation did not always match what they drew on the page. My curriculum needed to be infused with resources and opportunities that engaged all of my students and deepened their social interactions with a wealth of meaningful connections and exchanges. I needed to ensure that the resources available would be beneficial to my students, yet not squelch their creative abilities and communicative efforts. Furthermore, I needed to address the issue of letter formation, which would be necessary as my students moved through the process of taking the spoken word to the written word without losing their intended meaning. Some other challenges included making sure writing instruction was developmentally appropriate, theoretically and research based, and feasible within the context of my hour of daily center time. The many complexities of establishing a successful writing program led me to this research investigation.

Research Question

How do preschool students (typical and special needs) interact with writing resources as they transfer from conception of ideas, through verbal and nonverbal expression, to the written word, without losing their intended meaning? The better I understand these interactions, the more I will be able to foster activity that improves my own practice and my students' learning.

Background

I am a Special Needs Preschool teacher for Westerville City Schools. I have two classes of children a day: each contains 14-16 students with varying needs and abilities. In my afternoon classroom, I have fifteen children ranging in age from four to six. There are eight students receiving special education services in my classroom; five children have speech and language disorders, and three children have social and emotional needs. I also have seven typically developing peers, all with a variety of abilities, needs, and strengths. The children are placed in flexible groups developmentally for small group instruction.

Review of the Literature

I began my research by following a line of investigation into the innovative philosophies and pedagogy in emergent writing today. I am particularly interested in the social aspect of communication and the sharing of stories at the preschool level. There has been a significant amount of research published on emergent writing in the last thirty years. I searched well-known databases like ERIC and Academic Search Complete; I narrowed the scope of my research to pre-kindergarten through second grade.

Social Aspects of Developing and Exchanging Stories and Messages

Young children engage in a variety of types of play in the preschool classroom. Rowe (2010) explains as follows: *conceptual play* is where children are focused on the purpose of materials; *procedural play* is the practice or skill of structured activities such as board games; *creative play* encompasses the use of open-ended materials for imaginative play; and *socially oriented activities* occur when students are focused on enacting social roles and routines. It is the creative and social play that I want to highlight in my classroom as those personal interests relate to their emergent writing. Observations in my own classroom of children's preferences in play will help to develop connections between the students' thoughts and how they express those ideas.

In the classroom, children's interactions with peers happen on a variety of levels. As students navigate their day, each interaction plays an important part in the social development of young children. Lysaker (2010) looks at how children's play affects their experiences while participating in Writer's Workshop. Through watching video tapes of kindergarten and first grade students, she concluded that children play through singing, chanting, expression of intense emotion, and pretend play and fantasy. Children in her observation continued to engage in play as it transcended into the social interactions. They shared and commented on each other's writing, which in some cases resulted in children changing the direction of their stories to include or eliminate friends from their stories. Students would revise their text on the spot as their real world encounters mingled with the fantasy stories they were constructing. If friends disapproved of their story line or if they thought someone else's story was more interesting, the young authors would often change their stories. For the children in Lysaker's investigation, writing was just one of the many interwoven modes of communication.

Emergent Writing

The literature reveals several areas related to the development of emergent writing in young children that teachers and researchers have implemented in an effort to meet the requirements of state core standards. In a joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1998), learning to read and write is said to be critical to a child's success in school and later in life. Children's reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout their lifetime; but the early childhood stage from birth through age eight is the most important period for literacy development.

We must cultivate young children's dispositions (curiosity, desire, and play) to actively seek, explore, and use books to appreciate print. As they explore, they learn what letters look like and how they match up with phonemes, which strings of letters represent which words, and how to represent their meanings in print. Schickedanz & Casbergue (2009) explain that children go through a six-step process as they begin to develop written language. It begins with making marks on the paper, then marks have a meaning, marks begin to represent letters, writing begins to represent more standard letters, writing includes mock words, and finally, phonemic and invented spelling are used.

Invented spelling is when children match sounds in words with letters they know. It



begins before children's phonemic awareness is completely developed and often before they know all the names of the letters of the alphabet. With encouragement, writing develops through stages that culminate in conventional spelling (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). Exposing children to standard spelling in books, environmental print, and helping with spelling upon request will help young children move in the direction of conventional spelling (Schickedanz, 1999).

The first word a child usually learns to write is his or her name. Helping children learn the letters in their name, frequently having the children label their work, and having children identify their belongings are some of the first steps in the students' journeys of learning to write. As children write their own names, they begin to match letter production to letter/sound correspondence (Bloodgood, 1999).



In the Language Experience Approach (LEA), Roach Van Allen (1976) indicated how using the student's own language and prior experiences in reading and writing activities creates a natural bridge between spoken language and written language. Teachers act as scribes, writing children's words as they dictate them, listening carefully for the narrative thread, and helping children clarify their thoughts. As these stories are reread by the author and his or her classmates, children begin to match the remembered words with the printed ones. Language experience activities integrate all aspects of literacy: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Creative Writing in Action

Theoretical Rationale

The special needs preschool model in my district and my own instructional approach reflect multiple learning theories, including Social Learning Theory (Bandura), Emergent Literacy (Clay), Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget), and Social Constructivism (Vygotsky).

The preschool special needs classrooms within my district are comprised of 50% students with special needs and 50% typically developing students in order to provide peer modeling opportunities for the special needs students. This model is aligned with Bandura's social learning theory that ties behaviorism and social learning together. Students learn from each other, as well as from adult models (Tracy & Morrow, 2006).

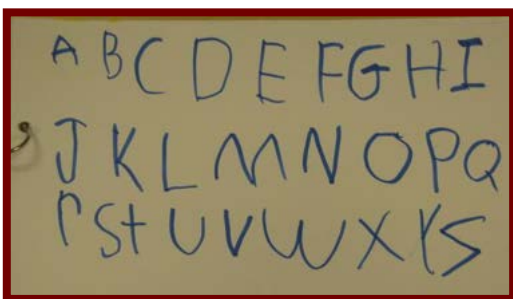
My classroom also represents Westerville's philosophy on emergent literacy, which is that young children's initial encounters with language should be in a print-rich environment to expose them to early reading and writing development. By facilitating opportunities for students to interact with resources in the classroom that include visual and auditory discrimination, letter recognition, and sound/symbol correspondence, we expect literacy to emerge as the spoken language, and reading and writing to develop concurrently as they mutually reinforce one another (Clay, 1975).

The preschool program's philosophy draws on the work of Piaget, which views young children as active constructors of knowledge who seek to make sense of language encountered in their environment. The teachers serve as facilitators to guide children in their interactions with the varied learning opportunities. Activities are primarily child-oriented and child-directed. Literacy learning is developmentally appropriate as children's concepts are constructed and change over time (Tracy & Morrow, 2006). I continued to make theoretical connections to my previous teaching experiences as I progressed through my graduate studies, but I found myself especially intrigued by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Bordova, 1998) and how it related to differentiation and the practical needs of the special needs and typically developing students in my classroom.

Before My Investigation

My recognition of the need for improved writing instruction stemmed from my students' letter identification, letter/sound correspondence, Concept of Print (Clay, 2002), and standards-based assessments. Prior to my investigation, all fifteen of my students were proficient in letter identification, were able to identify all 26 uppercase and lowercase letters, and had varying knowledge about print concepts, but were deficient in their writing abilities. From those results, I concluded that I was not meeting the needs of my students in the area of developing emergent writing based on the Ohio Department of Education's Early Learning Content Standards (2003).

The writing portions of the English Language Arts Writing Standards are divided into Writing Processes, Writing Applications, and Writing Conventions. After using these standards to assess my students, I ascertained that my students were lacking in the areas of Writing Processes and Writing Applications, but for the most part were proficient in the area of Writing Conventions. They were able to write letters and some of them were able to print some meaningful words, but they had trouble generating ideas as well as difficulty dictating their thoughts and ideas. I had in essence made them prompt-dependent. My prior writing instruction was centered on giving my students theme-based prompts, which I believe limited their creativity and individuality. I observed my students repeating what their friends had said about their pictures or giving me only one or two word descriptions about the pictures they drew or about the subjects they wanted to write about.



Furthermore, I believed that my students had developed letter formation skills through using the *Hand Writing Without Tears*, (Olson, 2003) program. *Hand Writing Without Tears* (HWOT) is systematic instruction in “hand writing” (e.g. letter formation) that involves big and little lines along with big and little curves. The belief is that if students struggle while writing their letters, then their ability to express themselves will suffer as well. *Hand Writing Without Tears, Get Ready For School* (Olson, 2003) for preschool provides multisensory lessons to develop key readiness skills with a hands-on curriculum that uses music, building, playing, counting, and drawing for learning to write letters. The curriculum includes, but is not limited to songs, finger plays, wooden pieces, chalk boards, roll dough with templates to roll dough and construct letters, and “stamp and see” screens. The “stamp and see” screens are similar to a “Magna Doodle” toy in which students use magnets to move iron filings around a screen and construct letters based on the same premises of big and little lines, along with big and little curves. The HWOT is based on three stages of learning: imitation, copying, and independent writing without a model. My students have used a variety of materials to practice writing uppercase letters; the HWOT curriculum does not introduce lowercase letters until kindergarten. Furthermore, HWOT’s emphasis is on the formation of the letters not the letter/sound correlation.

Beginning My Investigation

I started my project by telling my own story to my students about how I fell in love with turtles. The students each took turns telling their own real and pretend stories. As they told the stories I asked the students about the details, (i.e., *What color was his or her shirt?*, *Who was in the story?*, etc.). I based this approach on research by Anne Haas Dyson (1988), who believes that one of children's developmental challenges is to get more meaning into their writing. By drawing pictures and talking with their friends about the message they want to convey, children are able to incorporate more details into their writing. I continued to develop storytelling with my students by drawing a picture of my own story as the students recalled the details that I told them about my experiences

feeding the turtles during a camping trip. Dyson discusses how children's stories are embedded in their artistic abilities, social interactions, and wider experiences in their worlds. Our classroom storytelling started with the students telling stories about their own lives. They could tell a real or pretend story if they did not bring in an item to share. We chatted about their stories throughout the day and talked about as many details as possible. I continued discussing with the students that when we drew a picture the person looking at it should be able to tell what it was about based on the drawing and the details.



I made individual 12" x 18" storybooks for each one of my students; I used donated paper, recycled placemats to serve as the sturdy back, held together with one-inch rings. The front page was a laminated, colored piece of construction paper with the student's name on it. These books were set in a bin on the writing table for easy access, along with paper, containers of markers, pencils, colored pencils, pencil sharpener, erasers, and crayons.

The children were very excited when they came into the classroom and saw the new writing center. We had whole group lessons on the appropriate care and use of the materials. I also stocked three carry-all bins with all of the above materials and added four mobile desks so that students could take a portable desk and carry-all bin to sit on the floor or another comfortable place in the room to create their stories.



I soon realized that it was not materials alone that was going to make the writing effective, but the focused learning opportunities that I provided for them through structured lessons, adult-student, and student-student interactions. I began to facilitate contexts for my students to build on their drawing and writing skills. I changed the small group lessons so that I could be available for all the students to help them develop their drawings. On days that the children created stories, I made sure that I had at least two other adults available to help the children access the resources and to discuss their stories with them as they drew. I introduced simple drawing lessons with the students to encourage growth and confidence in their drawings as they developed their stories. I purchased a prekindergarten drawing book that had simple four- to six-step illustrated drawing examples. I enlarged the pictures, laminated them, and put them in a container on the writing table. Children were able to go through the examples and use them if they needed help in constructing an animal, standard objects, toys, person, etc.

"I can draw a butterfly!"
- Grant

This practice is aligned with the Talking, Drawing, and Writing trade book that has sample lesson plans on teaching the craft of drawing (Horn, 2007). Horn suggested drawing lessons, specifically on drawing people to help students add details to their stories. As we continued through these lessons, I encouraged the children to add words to their stories or dictate to an adult in the classroom. I put such a great emphasis on drawing for details so that when the children's words were added to their drawings, the specific meanings they wanted to convey were not lost in translation from story, to picture, and into words.

Children love to communicate with their family and friends. Students in my classroom were often "writing" letters to each other consisting of a series of marks and scribbles progressing from top to bottom and left to right. "Young children's grasp of print as a tool for making meaning and as a way to communicate combines both oral and written language. Children draw and scribble and 'read' their marks by attributing meaning to them through their talk and action" (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003, p. 2).

I kept a field journal throughout the process; it was helpful in reflecting on what worked and did not during writing instruction. I also used the field journal to write the children's responses to the lessons, to record their feedback to each other's stories, and to document some of the conversations they had with each other as they drew and wrote in their storybooks.

Each Friday, I looked at the students' story books to determine where I would need to focus my instruction for the upcoming week. I looked to see if they were including details in their drawings, if they were using any emergent writing skills, and (if they dictated to an adult) if their words matched the drawing on the page. From this assessment of their drawings, I wrote appropriate lesson plans for the upcoming week that included letter formation, print concepts (uppercase letter at the beginning of a name), and drawing instruction. Most importantly it gave me a talking point to use with individual children by using their stories as the basis to discuss events in their lives and how their picture and words conveyed that message to the person looking at their creation.

Preschool teachers must be able to assess children's writing development, simultaneously, across multiple dimensions. Accurate assessment requires capturing and analyzing examples of children's writing, over time, and from multiple contexts. (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009, p. 87).

I used varied levels of support based on the children's prior knowledge and experience with thinking, telling, drawing, and eventually writing about their stories. This strategy of scaffolding gave students varied support from their teachers and peers based on their current zone of proximal development (Bordova, 1998). The use of scaffolding helped the children meet their potential learning capabilities. I was able to give individual and/or small group instruction in drawing lessons, spacing between words, and letter sound correlation with different groups of students at center times throughout the week as they developed through the writing process.

Findings

I took the time to observe the interactions of my students with the provided resources, their peers, and the adults in the classroom. My notes, daily reflection, and the progression of the student's work samples led me in the direction I needed to pursue. I began the facilitation of the Writing Center with excitement and optimism that I would be able to reach my students' fullest writing potential by giving them open ended resources to draw and write. I communicated with my aide, Otterbein students, and parent volunteers the importance of encouraging children in the process of using their incredible imaginations in their progression as they think, communicate, draw, and eventually write their messages. Barbara Everson (1991) recognized that young writers need time, and space, along with prewriting and conferencing skills to work through their ideas. Most importantly I learned that it wasn't the materials in the Writing Center alone but the focused, data driven instruction and interactions that enhanced the quality of the children's writing within my classroom community.

Writing Enriched the Community of the Classroom

At first I found that I was unable to give the students enough time to accomplish drawing a picture and adding words while moving through the other centers in the day. I changed the schedule in the classroom so that I could use one hour of center time a week as a free time for the students to draw, write, or dictate to an adult about any topic they desired. I arranged my schedule so that I could have at least two extra adults in the classroom on these days. I noticed that the children did not stay in the same assigned groups; they spread out in the room. There were only a few children sitting at the Writing Center; others sat on the floor, used the table in our dress up area, and sat at various tables in the room. A few children even asked if they could go out in the hallway and sit on mats so they could "concentrate." My *Writing Center*, initially a table of materials, had transformed into a *Writing Community*; a culture of writing that included all of the children and adults in my classroom.



I documented the groups of children to see if they were prone to congregating in certain cliques, but I determined that there really was no "rhyme or reason" to their placement throughout the classroom other than to gather around certain adults. Our custodian came in early to help out: she modeled drawing and writing for the children, but was also available to help the students spell words or dictate their stories. It

seemed that everyone that entered my classroom became a member of our rich community of readers and writers. Furthermore, the many social interactions led to an epidemic of story ideas.

Stories and Themes Were Contagious

As the children talked about their stories and shared their ideas, I observed that their stories had many themes in common. I collected qualitative data in the form of the students' story books, handwriting samples, students' comments, and my own journal reflections. Just as Dyson (1988) observed in her research, some students would change their stories based on the conversations with their peers. Some children would change their stories based on a theme that someone else had shared. I talked about my love of turtles; so many of my students' stories had turtles in them. We had days of rainbow stories and an entire week of "stinky" stories. Once one child got a laugh for his "stinky baby" story, almost every child had a "stinky" story to tell. This sharing of ideas also resulted in a sharing of how to spell certain words.



Use of Conventional Print Evolved and Increased Over Time

As ideas and letter sound correlation developed, these young authors began to use conventional print in their stories. During the last week of school, I took pictures of each book (every drawing) in an effort to look for students' progression in their writing. In reviewing the 305 pictures, it was evident that my students had made great gains in four short months. Eight of my students showed progress in the amount of detail they showed in their pictures, which enhanced their ability to communicate more details in their dictation, directly relating to the content of their pictures. Five of my students felt confident in using conventional print in their stories. These children would occasionally ask for help in spelling words or would ask an adult to write additional words as they wanted to include conveying a complete message.

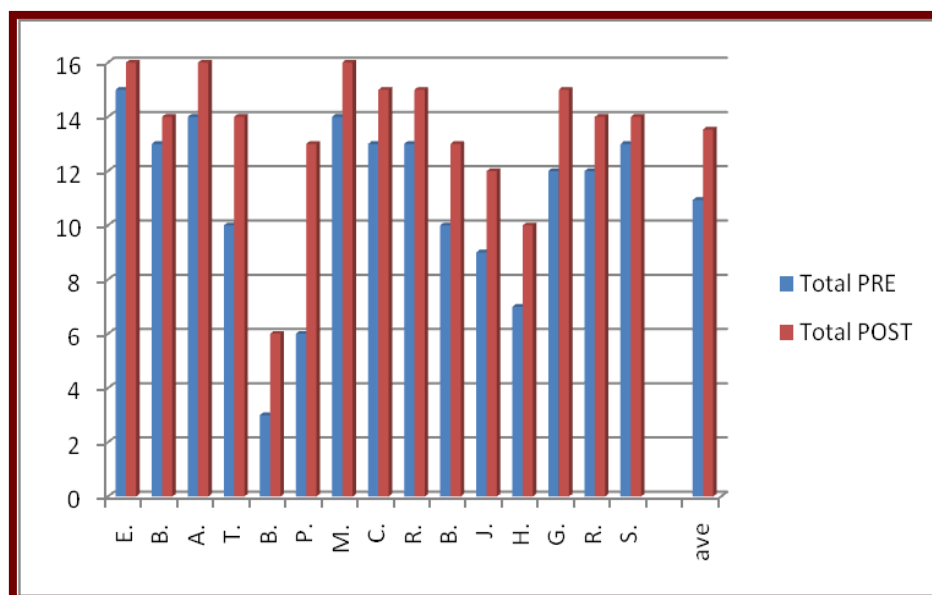




The students' work also showed that they had an understanding of print concepts, such as word boundaries and punctuation, even though they were not always used correctly. The story books became a sense of pride and accomplishment for the children as they became aware of their progress in developing their thoughts into pictures and words (Ray, 2008). Our share time which began in February with students telling their stories matured in May to students sharing their writings.

Quantitative Data

I created a scoring rubric based on the Ohio Department of Education's Academic Kindergarten Content Standards (2001) in the area of Writing Processes, Conventions, and Applications (Appendix A). I scored my students' abilities to write from left to right and top to bottom, print uppercase letters correctly, make sound/letter correlations, and convey meaning in their writing samples. I scored their first and last writing samples and calculated their overall composite scores. A t-test (paired two samples for means) showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the students' total writing scores before ($M=10.93$, $SD=3.41$) and after ($M=13.53$, $SD=2.64$) the writing center intervention work, $t(14)=6.70$, $p<0.01$ (two-tailed), $d=0.86$. The t-tests show a reliable/significant change in the average scores from pre- to post in everything except "letters." There is a significant difference in the total score, the direction score, the sound score, and the content score. Below is a graph of my fifteen students' combined scores at the start of implementing the new writing center and their last writing samples.



Lessons in Learning

Through this investigation I learned many things that surprised me. Two of my students had difficulty from the beginning of this project. In our very first lesson, they both drew on every page of their books - about 20 pages. One student drew the same dinosaur creature in a single color on every page of her book. Another student just drew a series of spirals in various colors of blue, green, and purple on every page. I held individual conferences with these students, which included discussing their drawings and re-teaching of drawing for details. I allowed each of them to pick out two pictures and then I replaced the rest of the pages in their books. These two students did progress in drawing of pictures. Grace outlined her hand on seven pages and drew flowers on the other five. Braden drew people in each of his drawings. I made an effort to spend time with each of these children in subsequent weeks so that we could talk about their drawings as they worked. I also assigned these two students to small group lessons so that I could work on the direct instruction of drawing and handwriting skills.



I was most astonished by my two highest readers, Aidan and Rachelle, who were reading at the kindergarten level. Both students have parents who are very involved in their development and are provided rich literacy environments at home. These students had written on only a few of their pages and each only dictated to an adult twice. This is in direct conflict with the literature that revealed students develop in the areas of reading and writing in a parallel manner. “Young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing, and they need oral language to help them learn about both” (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003, p.3). This may be an area of future research to look at the students in my classroom who are reading above grade level and the rate at which their writing skills are developing.

Limitations

In this project I am the researcher and the classroom teacher; because of this, my findings may be subjective and may not be as objective if the researcher and the teacher were separate entities. My research was carried out over a five month period with a small sample size of only fifteen students; I look forward to repeating this instruction next year in the hope that I will be as successful. I am very fortunate to have a classroom aide, volunteers on a daily basis, and college students completing field placements in my classroom. This benefit of additional adults made it possible to facilitate whole group writing instruction; it allowed students to work independently or in groups to create their stories. It is not feasible in many preschool settings to have at least three adults available to assist students in dictation and emergent writing, though some teachers may find a way to accomplish reaching students individually during their center times.

Implications

With the adoption of the English Language Arts and Mathematics Common Core Standards in June of 2010 for grades K-12 students, teachers will have to continue to raise the bar on academic instruction in the early childhood classroom. In preschool and kindergarten, children will need to compose three text types and be able to understand the purposes of these writings. How this affects personal and social growth in children is yet to be determined. Past and present research on early childhood writing, including my own classroom research, makes it clear that one effective way to support writing composition and understanding for young children is to create structured opportunities for them to make meaning within a teacher-supported, data-driven, authentic writing community.

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Appendix A

Emergent Writing Scoring Rubric				
Score Point	Directionality Standards: Process - 5	Letter Formation Conventions - 1,2	Spelling Standards: Conventions - 3, 4	Content Standards: Applications - 1,2
4 - Consistent	Writes left to right Writes top to bottom	Prints uppercase and lowercase letters correctly	Includes early sound - letter spelling	Conveys meaning of simple story that relates to the topic
3 - Frequent	Writes mostly left to right Writes mostly top to bottom	Prints most uppercase and lowercase letters correctly	Includes early sound - letter spelling most of the time	Conveys a meaningful idea that relates to the topic
2 - Partial	Writes left to right some of the time Writes top to bottom some of the time	Prints some uppercase and lowercase letters correctly	Includes early sound - letter spelling some of the time	Conveys a meaningful idea that somewhat relates to the topic
1 - Minimal	Does not write left to right Does not write top to bottom	Prints few uppercase letters correctly	Does not include early sound - letter spelling	Conveys an idea that does not relate to the topic
0 - Students attempts to write, but results is illegible, is insufficient, or otherwise fails to meet criteria for Score Point 1.				
Adapted from Ohio Department of Education's Kindergarten Writing Assessment				