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The influential interactions of pre-kindergarten writers

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Abstract

This article examines six years of ethnographic research in Robyn Davis's pre-kindergarten classroom in the USA. Using a theoretical framework to embed writing within a social semiotic that is multimodal and has social intent (Street, 2003), the authors show how children used interactions during writing to create various written products. Three themes emerged from their findings: (1) interactions among children challenge their writing identities; (2) interactions among children introduce new possibilities in their writing; and (3) interactions among children with more knowledgeable peers help push writers forward with their writing acquisition. Through these findings, the authors conclude that peer interactions among four- and five-year-old children are influential in their writing processes and products.

Keywords

pre-kindergarten, sociocultural influences, writing

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Introduction

In Robyn Davis's pre-kindergarten (pre-K) classroom, students write. They have multiple purposes and audiences for their writing and they work on it passionately when given time each day to engage in the process. Their writing time is noisy. They engage in writing that is verbal in process and pictorial in product. And the writing is socially constructed as they rely on each other for support. The voices surrounding their writing events are loud and valued: valued by the teacher and valued by each other.

This article examines the six years we spent as researchers in Robyn's pre-K classroom in the southeastern part of the USA. First, we provide a theoretical framework that situates writing within a social semiotic that is multimodal and has social intent (Street, 2003). Next, we use this framework to show how students use interactions during writing to create various written products. We show this through three themes: interactions that challenge identities, interactions that introduce new possibilities, and interactions that show how more knowledgeable peers push writers forward. Finally, we explain why these findings are important for teachers of pre-K students.

Theoretical framework

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, we examine the deliberate nature of pre-K writers. We note the ways children use purposeful written marks to convey meaning long before writing is conventional. Second, we examine the exchanges among students to understand not only what social influences shape young writers' products, but also how these social influences help students create their own literate identities. All of these interactions take place within the context of a writers' workshop (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 2003).

We first address the research on writers' workshops and then review literature addressing the role of intention for emergent writers. Finally, we examine what is known about how children develop literate identities through interactions with their peers.

Writers' workshops

A well-documented context in which to teach writing is a writers' workshop. Workshops are used at all levels, from pre-K classrooms to college courses, and are based on the principles that writers learn to write by writing daily for extensive periods of time, talking to other writers and learning from experts

(Graves, 2003). Students write in text or pictures and choose their own topics. They experiment with different writing processes and learn through the study of mentor texts (Heard, 2002). Students share work from an author's chair (Graves and Hansen, 1983), a venue where writers solicit responses and suggestions from their writing community.

The teacher's role is to teach developmentally appropriate skills and strategies and to encourage writers to try new techniques within their own writing. They listen to children, confer with them and introduce them to new possibilities in their writing (Calkins, 1994). In a student-centred workshop, teachers glean information about what students know, need to know, and what they want to know, which guides their mini-lessons. This reflective stance requires teachers to be facilitators of learning, even in a pre-K classroom, where children are only four years old.

In a pre-K writers' workshop, instruction reflects the needs of young writers and students often practise basic strategies that writers use (i.e. revising, editing, etc.) within their pictorial writing. Kouvou (2006: 192), who studied the 'picture-writing' of first grade students, states: 'Drawing is a learning context that facilitates assimilation of new learning tasks. It seems that picture-writing is a cognitive exercise for young children during which they integrate drawing and writing.' Teachers who work with pre-conventional writers must recognize drawing as a cognitive act and scaffold emergent writers as they begin the shift from picture-writing to conventional writing. They must also acknowledge the intentionality of these pre-conventional emergent writers.

Emergent writers' intentionality

Young children come to school with various degrees of knowledge about the functions of literacy. Their literacy begins at birth and gradually emerges until they begin to use conventional knowledge of letter sounds (Luria, 1983; Morrow, 2001; Teale and Sulzby, 1985). Before children have command of the conventional, however, they are purposeful in their reading and writing endeavours.

For many years, the written productions of pre-K children were chiefly disregarded as 'scribbles' or 'drawings'. Researchers, however, warn against using these terms to describe the writing of young children because such language suggests that their compositions lack meaning or purpose (Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984; Laidlaw, 1998).

For young children who are not yet fluent in the production of letters, or have not successfully mastered letter-sound correspondence, pictures are the

means through which they can compose and share ideas, integrate meaning, and develop knowledge (Coles, 1992; Dyson, 1993; Martens, 1996; Sulzby, 1985). Early writers recognize two concepts before they become conventional writers: the 'sign' concept – that print carries meaning; and the 'message' concept – that spoken language can be recorded in a written message (Clay, 1975). These two concepts, which may be understood by children as young as two years old (Schickedanz, 1990), enable pre-conventional writers to create 'text' long before they are able to write or read conventionally.

As researchers of writing shifted their focus to encompass both product and writing processes (Graves, 2003), they recognized that children 'read' their pictures – as meaningful pictorial 'text' or writing. Researchers also began to note the social interactions among children during their writing processes; they wondered if and how peer interactions affected young children's literate identities.

Peer interactions and literate identities

Street (1985) states that literacy is always interactive and therefore may never be considered an 'autonomous' skill. '[Literacy] is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being' (Street, 2003: 2). We examine the classroom as a social world where children's interactions not only shape their writing, but also shape their literate identities (Rowe, 2008).

Classroom teachers who work from the philosophy of social constructivism (Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978) recognize that the context of classroom culture largely impacts on student learning. Proponents of this theory recognize the complex interplay of student interactions and view the teacher's role as one of facilitator in a student-centred environment. For the purposes of our research, we focus primarily on the interactions between peers and less on teacher-student interactions.

Social interactions during writing significantly influence the decisions children make as young writers, particularly in constructivist classrooms where teachers create a climate for social learning (Dyson, 1993; Gundlach, McLane, Scott and McNamee, 1985). Often, in pre-K classrooms, teachers encourage learning through play (Piaget, 1955).

Vukelich (1993) identified the impact play had on emergent writers. Through play, children discuss: (1) the functions of writing; (2) the features of print; and (3) the meaning of specific print. The social interactions of

children engaged in play helped them further develop their literate identities and help them establish social positions in the classroom (Ellsworth, 1997).

Bomer and Laman (2004: 422) focus on 'relational work', which they define as 'the evidence of energy expended in two people's constant maneuvering about "who I am," "who you are," and "what is going on between us"'. Through their careful study of conversations, they show how the social and emotional dimensions of peer interactions are intertwined and it is these interactions, rather than the mastery of discrete cognitive skills, that lead to intellectual growth.

In this article, we work from a sociocultural perspective; we examine literacy as a social semiotic that is multimodal and has social intent (Halliday, 1978; Street, 2003). We work from the framework that literacy is social in nature and cannot be transmitted, but is instead created among participants (Dyson, 2002; Street, 1985). Through the lens of New Literacy Studies (Lankshear, 2006), we examine how children use literacy to define, negotiate and establish their literate identities (Gallas, 1998).

Methodology

Overall approach and rationale

We collected data in Robyn's classroom for six years by employing a qualitative interpretivistic approach (Erickson, 1986). We used this approach to collect and analyze data because it allowed us to delve deeply into the complexities and processes of the classroom of writers to learn about the multiple truths that existed within the meaning of their writing and their efforts as writers. This methodology also permitted our data to 'unfold, cascade, roll, and emerge' throughout the course of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Site and population selection

Robyn Davis is a certified teacher in a local school district in a southeastern college town. She started as an elementary school teacher, but eventually moved down to the pre-K grade level at the request of her previous principal. She has just completed her 11th year as a pre-K teacher. In this article, with her permission, we choose to use her real name because we believe she deserves recognition for the important work she fosters in her classroom.

In the six years of our combined studies, the number of children in the classroom varied from 13 to 15. This grant-funded programme, although a part of the public school system, is one of six in the city. It is a regular

classroom, not a special education site. Approximately 85 per cent of the students were identified as African American, 5 per cent Hispanic and 5 per cent European American another 5 per cent were designated as other, but were mostly identified as refugees. The children ranged from ages four to five. All were from families with low incomes and some came from communities where crime, gangs and drugs were familiar issues to them. To protect their identities, all student names are pseudonyms.

We chose Robyn's classroom because she was the only pre-K teacher in the area who taught writing daily to her four- and five-year-old students using the instructional structure of a writer's workshop (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001; Graves, 2003; Ray, 2008). Robyn modified the traditional elementary school structure of a writer's workshop to meet the developmental needs of her students.

Each day, for approximately 20–30 minutes, Robyn created some sort of gathering experience with her students. These gathering experiences consisted of read-alouds, conversations, or an outdoor exploration. After this short experience, Robyn wrote on a large chart in front of her students. Sometimes her writing related to the experience, sometimes it did not. Robyn wanted students to see the various ways in which writers generate ideas. Robyn also wrote in a variety of genres. It was important to Robyn that she showed young writers multiple purposes and audiences for writing. After the gathering experience, students would turn to one another and share their ideas for writing. When finished, the students moved to two tables and wrote together, talking and writing simultaneously. After 10–15 minutes, the students reassembled and shared their writing in an author's chair (Graves and Hansen, 1983).

Data collection

From 2000 to 2006 we either served as researchers in Robyn's classroom, or she served as a teacher-researcher. From 2000 to 2003 Holly served as the primary researcher in Robyn's classroom. For each academic year, she visited Robyn's classroom once a week for two hours. In total, Holly made 81 visits to the classroom, spending approximately 162 hours there. From 2003 to 2005, Brian served as the primary researcher in Robyn's classroom. He visited Robyn's classroom twice a week for two hours. In total, Brian made 78 visits to the classroom and spent approximately 156 hours there. From 2005 to 2006 Robyn spent a year as part of a larger Writing Across the

Curriculum (WAC) team. She served as a teacher-researcher, collecting data daily and writing reflectively about her experiences.

Each week, the researchers wrote a one-page analytic memo describing the events from the classroom and shared it with the WAC team established by Jane. Jane served on the team during the entire six years. Holly was on the team from 2000 to 2003, Brian served from 2003 to 2005, and Robyn served from 2005 to 2006. Jane, who saw Robyn's classroom evolve throughout the years, made connections to our findings. She found that the interactions amongst peers were influential to their writing growth. Her connections brought our separate studies together and form the findings section of this article.

Data gathering methods

Throughout the six years, Holly, Brian and Robyn gathered data in similar ways: they wrote field notes, conducted interviewed and collected writing documents during writing instruction.

Brian and Holly, doctoral students at the time, remained in the classroom for approximately two hours on each visit and observed the students as they engaged in their writers' workshop (teacher read-aloud, teacher demonstration, time to write, and an author's chair). Brian and Holly interviewed each child, each day, about their written product. These conversations, along with the peer conversations, were audiotaped and transcribed. At the end of each day, we analyzed our field notes, transcribed conversations, and wrote analytic memos describing the themes that emerged from the collected data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis

During our separate years in the research group, we used Erickson's (1986) interpretivist approach to determine the events that appeared to influence the pre-K writers. As we read and reread our corpus of data, we have attempted to understand the multiple events of the classroom. Eventually, we began to see how these events made an impact on the writers. We thematized the data by creating assertions and pored through the data to find instances that confirmed or refuted each assertion (Erickson, 1986). In our analytical memos we found emerging themes and consolidated our thoughts. Then, we shared these memos with our team of writing researchers who served as member-checks. This team, all participants in a WAC project, met weekly, brought a

piece of child's writing, and composed a one-page analytical memo about the piece of writing and its importance to the growth of the child, the classroom, and/or our WAC project.

For the purpose of this manuscript, we reread our previously written analytic memos and coded them. We coded the data using three themes: (1) interactions that challenged the identity of young writers; (2) interactions that introduced new writing possibilities for young writers; and (3) interactions with more knowledgeable classmates that helped young writers grow as writers. We used these themes because they were the most frequently recurring in our data and we had several examples that demonstrated these interactions.

Using these codes, we pored through our corpus of data to find our best examples of each one. Because this include six years of data, there were voluminous instances. To remain succinct, we include what we considered the best examples of each code. The data for the first theme come from Holly's data, collected from 2001 to 2002. The second theme comprises Robyn's data, collected from 2005 to 2006 and analyzed by Jane. The data for the third theme were collected by Brian from 2004 to 2005.

We believe our extended case study in one teacher's classroom offers a unique perspective. We do not recall reading any studies involving pre-K writing that takes place over six years in one teacher's classroom. We believe this in-depth inquiry provides something new to the field of early writing acquisition.

Findings

As researchers of children's writing in Robyn's classroom, we became acquainted with, and interacted with, the children. Their talk, either about their own writing or about another student's writing, and sometimes both, gave us insights into the roles the various types of interactions played in the evolution of their pieces of writing. We each observed and occasionally taught alongside Robyn as she responded to the talk and texts of the children with mini-lessons, think-alouds and conferences. In all cases, her intent was to involve them in interactions that supported what they were doing and to nudge them forward as writers.

We became aware of three primary types of interactions that influenced the children: (1) interactions that challenged their identity; (2) interactions that introduced them to new possibilities; and (3) interactions with more knowledgeable classmates. These three findings – types of interactions that influenced the young writers – frame our next sections.

Interactions that challenged their identity

In this section we will show various interactions that challenged the writers' identities, with an emphasis on the interactions within a set of boys. We focus on one particular boy as we show the revisions he made – of his own volition – to create and maintain his identity as a writer and as a person.

When Holly was a researcher in Robyn's classroom, Kenny was a confident eager writer who initially appeared to write for himself, and seemed indifferent to his classmates' opinions. Kenny was focused and quiet, pausing only to offer terse remarks to himself and any classmates who happened to be nearby.

Theo, who was soon to prompt change in Kenny, was a boy with a strong personality; he valued sharing his work as much as he valued producing it, and considered his audience from the very beginning. He often announced to anyone within earshot what his intentions were for the day and kept everyone posted on his progress.

Despite their differences, the talk Theo and Kenny engaged in influenced both of them, but we will focus on how various interactions influenced Kenny. The following example highlights one such interaction.

Interactions between Kenny and Theo confirm Kenny's identity. After one mini-lesson in early autumn as each child told the class what their plans were for writing that day, Theo was the last to speak. 'I'm going to do a treasure map,' he announced just before the children rushed to the tables to get their choice of crayons. Kenny looked up with interest; he had begun to write treasure maps the previous week and was now the class expert on them. He took his maps outside during break and he and his friends used them to guide their treasure searches. Theo, knowing of Kenny's expertise, sat with him and they wrote their map (Figure 1).

Holly: Tell me about your map today.

Kenny: [*his fingers alternating between following lines and using a sweeping motion over his entire page*] You have to go across here and when you get there you dig and dig and we bring into the school diamonds and toys and lollipops.

Holly: [*pointing to Kenny's starting point*] So you start here?

Theo: [*joining the conversation*] You go all the way everywhere and when you get to the hole in the ground. . . [*His voice trails off. He looks at his paper, perplexed by what was the obvious lack of a hole*] Wait, I'm not done.

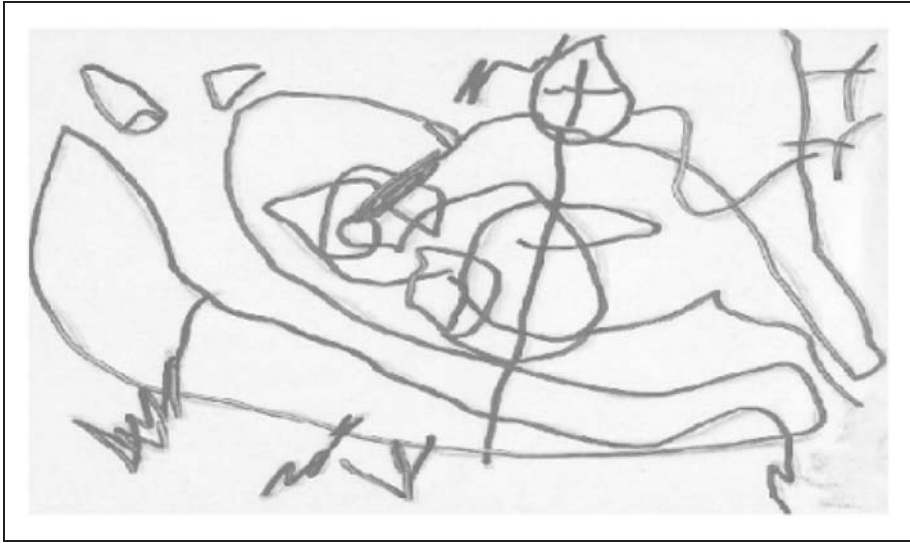


Figure 1. Theo and Kenny's treasure map.

Realizing a flaw in their map, the two boys go off to a corner to work on it and comeback after a few minutes.

Theo: We got two holes and that's an X. When we get there we dig and dig.

The boys, on this day, figured out a crucial element in treasure maps: there must be an 'X' to mark the spot.

The next week Theo brings what he learned from his effort with Kenny to his next attempt. He announces his intentions for writing that day.

Theo: [to his classmates] I'm going to write a treasure map and I will write an X marks the spot and we will go out there and find it and dig it up with shovels. [He begins, works for a while and stops.] My treasure map is going to be with two lines. [He begins again, with a completely new line.] I go this way, go back around, and go around and around.

Theo reaches across the table to show his map to Kenny, who remains the undisputed leader and authority on treasure maps. Kenny looks up from his work and glances over Theo's work with an unexpressive face. He states, matter of factly: 'That is not a treasure map.'

Theo considers this and decides to revise. He learned from his previous attempts that an X is necessary to indicate the location of the treasure and he learned on an intervening day from Kenny that a good treasure map is not only useful, but is interesting to look at. So, Theo adds lines, which make for a far more interesting map (Figure 2). After this revision, he looks to Kenny for his opinion.

After getting another matter of fact, 'That is not a treasure map,' Theo appears to realize that Kenny is still the expert and does not appreciate that Theo is entering his territory as the 'treasure-map maker'.

Robyn's mini-lesson challenges Kenny's identity. Kenny, now more firmly in place as the class leader, created a treasure map every day during writing, except for the day he wrote a get well card that said, 'I love treasure maps.' He had found his niche and stuck with it. Within Kenny's chosen area of expertise he revised his work, trying something new each day and building on it the next day. He grew as a writer through his focused experimentations within a single genre.

Robyn tried to use her mini-lesson to reflect and validate the children's efforts, so when she saw how Kenny's treasure maps had taken hold, she decided to draw a treasure map for the children as she demonstrated her



Figure 2. Theo's revised treasure map.

writing. Writers, after all, are influenced by the ideas of others. After her mini-lesson, during which the students interacted with Robyn as she created her map, more children started to create maps. This seemed to be more than Kenny could bear. The very day Robyn drew her treasure map, Theo, in fact, was one of the children who created one. When he showed Kenny his creation, Kenny was unimpressed, and his typical sombre, 'That is not a treasure map' let Theo know that Kenny felt a bit crowded in the territory he had created for himself.

Other children, however, did not realize that. Many of them drew maps and Kenny had to move ahead quickly in order to maintain his authority. As he created (Figure 3), he said: 'I make this zombie and I make this zombie. This is a treasure map. I go over it and over it and I found a treasure and I found a treasure and I found another treasure.'

Kenny's earlier treasure maps were fairly standard: follow one of the lines to the treasure and when you get to the X you dig it up. With so many of the children making treasure maps, with even the teacher making treasure maps,

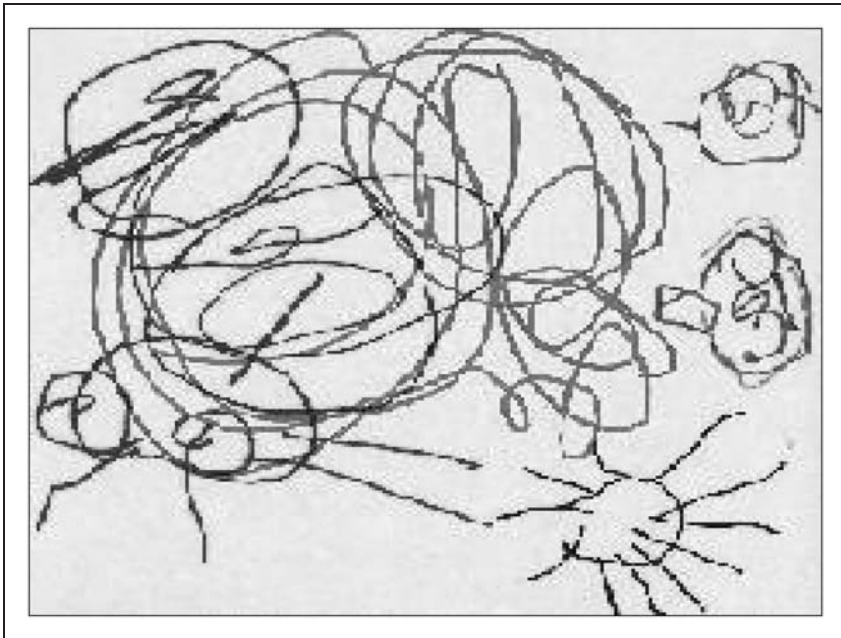


Figure 3. Kenny's treasure map with zombies.

Kenny had to make some changes to stay ahead. He added characters for the first time.

Other children continued to create treasure maps and come to Kenny for feedback, and his interactions with them were always somewhat terse. Though he strongly discouraged Theo's efforts, he did not respond as strongly to the other children. However, he still quickly dismissed them before he continued with his work. He had been challenged, and he needed to maintain his identity.

Kenny steps forward to solidify his identity. Kenny revises further within his treasure map form. He continues to add characters and extends his writing by making his treasure maps settings for adventure stories. On the following map, Kenny includes characters (Holly and Antoine) engaged in action (Figure 4). The plot involves Holly finding the magic key and the treasure. All is resolved at the end; the magic key saves all the characters and allows them to get the treasure.



Figure 4. Kenny's treasure map with characters.

Kenny has come a long way with his maps, and as they get more complicated, the other children stop making them and using them at break. Kenny earned his place back as the leader and, as good leaders do, he continues to move forward. He stays with the things that worked for him, especially the magic key and characters, but looks for new ways to put them in danger.

In general, the students in Robyn's classroom revised their writing based on interactions that occurred in the classroom. Not only were they using revision, they were using it in their own ways, for their own purposes, and devising strategies that served them well as they mastered their goals.

Kenny stuck with and developed the genre that had made him famous from the beginning. The respect and interest from his peers led him to go further with his adventure stories. His original responses to his peers, who were also his main audience, motivated him to create work over time that his audience could interpret without him.

He used revision as a tool for learning. Kenny stayed focused on what he was learning and his attention to his mapped adventures did not waver during the first three months of the year.

Interactions that introduced new possibilities

In this section we will show the pre-K children as they write, for the first time, about mathematical concepts. During the spring, Robyn, as a teacher-researcher, brought to our team meetings children's work that showed their changes from seeing one-to-one correspondence (one cookie per child), to two-to-one correspondence (two per person), to one-to-two correspondence (one cookie for two children to share), which, more honestly, turned out to be, 'He want to make three halves of it.'

Robyn writes about maths – for the first time. Robyn opens each of the daily writers' workshops with a read-aloud, and for this series of lessons her main read-aloud is *The Doorbell Rang* (Hutchins, 1986). She chooses it intentionally, wondering if it will spark some children to decide to write with maths in mind. Robyn does not tell the children that, but she reads from this book (or other literature), or reads the entire book, for several consecutive days. As Robyn reads, the children spontaneously interact with her – she gives them as many oral language experiences as possible. Also, the children experiment with plastic cookies, dividing them among themselves in various ways, to satisfy different scenarios they imagine.

After each read-aloud, Robyn writes in her oversized spiral as the children watch, listen and spontaneously interact with her. On the first of the three days Robyn writes (Figure 5):

Robyn: [talking as she writes] First, I'll write my name. Then, this is the door of my house, and Ms. B [the classroom aide] is bringing me a tray of cookies. Here is the tray, and do you know what I do? I make a pot of tea, and the two of us sit down to enjoy them! Ms. B eats 3 and I eat three, so we eat all of them! Look! They're all gone!

This creation is quick, but takes a little longer than it looks because the children continually interact with her as she writes.

Then, to indicate the next action within the writers' workshop, Robyn asks, 'What do each of you plan to write about today?'

As each child states their decision – anything from cookies, to my dad, to monsters – that child goes to a table of their choice where paper, markers and other resources are ready for their use.

At one table, as the children settle in, we see Nemond working quietly as he draws a tray full of cookies (Figure 6).

Robyn is circulating among the tables of writers and settles for a few minutes at Nemond's table.

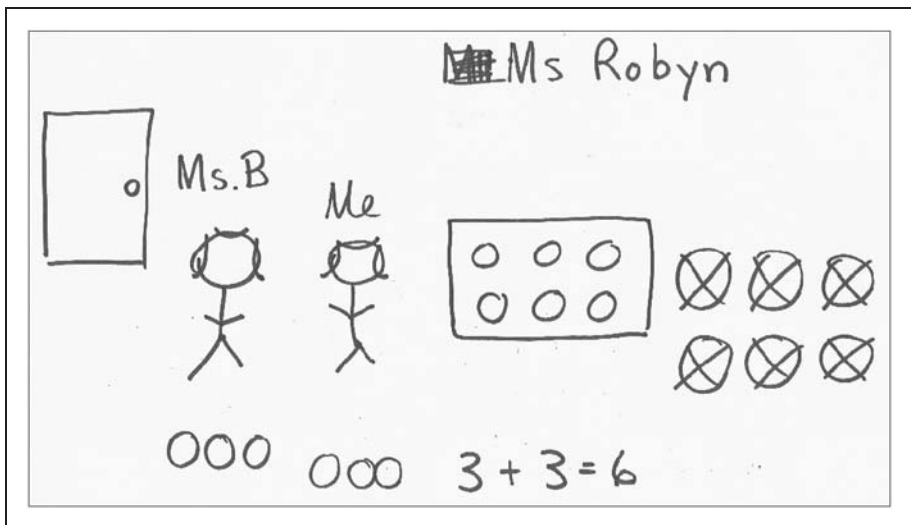


Figure 5. Robyn's tray of six cookies.

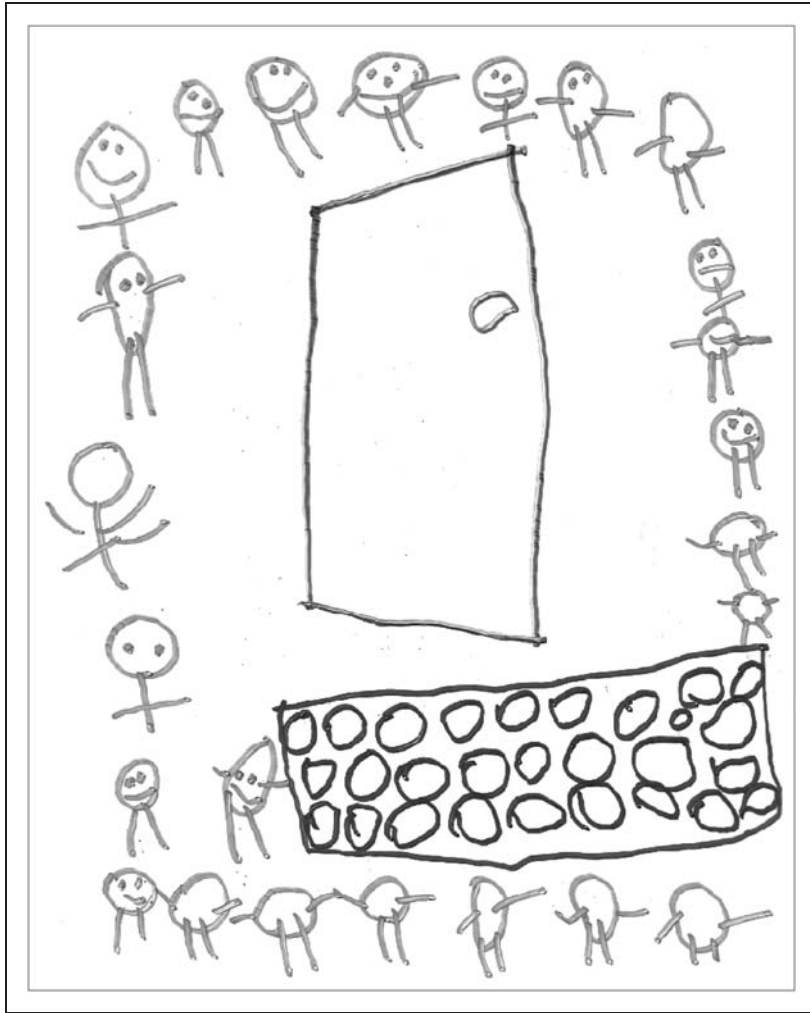


Figure 6. Nemond's writing with 24 people.

Before long, Nemond says to her:

I'm gonna count these cookies, 1, 2, 3 [...] 24. I got a lot of cookies! Ding! Dong! You know who that was? You, Ms. Robyn! Ding! Dong! And that was Ms. B. Ding! Dong! You know who that was? That was my dad.

Nemond begins to name a person for each cookie, when his tablemate joins the conversation.

Eston explains, 'I did cookies! Three cookies!'. Then, picking up on the one-to-one correspondence Nemond started, Eston draws three people (Figure 7; note the tray in the centre of his series of trays).

Eston, talking as he draws, says, 'I did more cookies! Four cookies!' He draws four people. 'Now I'm doin' two and two!' He draws two cookies and two people.

Nemond, in the meantime, is getting rid of his 24 cookies. As his doorbell continues to ring he continues to exclaim, 'Ding! Dong!' and name another person he knows until each cookie is claimed.

The two boys create similar pieces of writing, as do a few other children, but most write on totally different topics. Of the children who chose to write about maths, the most common theme was one-to-one correspondence, even though that is not exactly what Robyn showed. This, however, is an important mathematical concept the children continue to practise. Several of them came knowing how to count, but to count objects carefully is a harder task and it pleases Robyn to see several children choosing to display this knowledge in their writing.

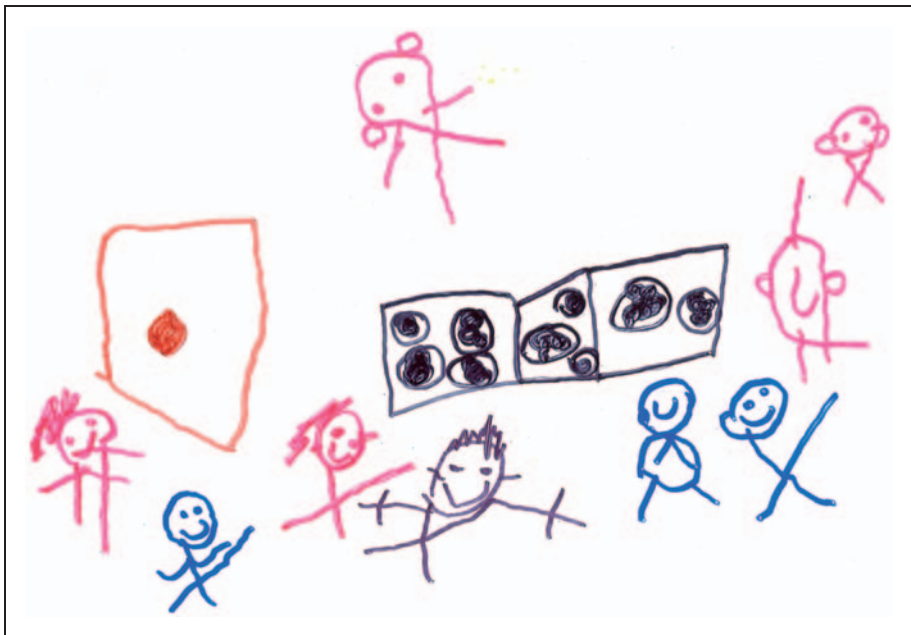


Figure 7. Eston's writing.

Robyn decides to write about two-to-one correspondence. Within a couple of days Robyn ups the ante. She talks as she writes:

I'll start with my name. Then, once upon a time when I was home, I heard my doorbell ring. When I opened it I was so surprised to see three of you! Launde, Meleizha, and Zinny had come for cookies! I had eight cookies in my kitchen and we shared them. First, we each ate one, and then we each ate another, and then all the cookies were gone!

Robyn showed a two-to-one correspondence pattern in her writing (Figure 8) – two cookies per person – and wondered if any of the children would decide to do likewise.

As the children start to write, Robyn records this conversation at the table where Thomas is settling in.

Thomas speaks. 'I'm drawing my friends.' He draws four friends – the first of the many faces. 'Then my friends will eat two cookies.' He draws two cookies for each of the four friends (Figure 9) – the fancy cookies along the edges of the rectangle. 'How do you spell /k/k/ cookies?' This question

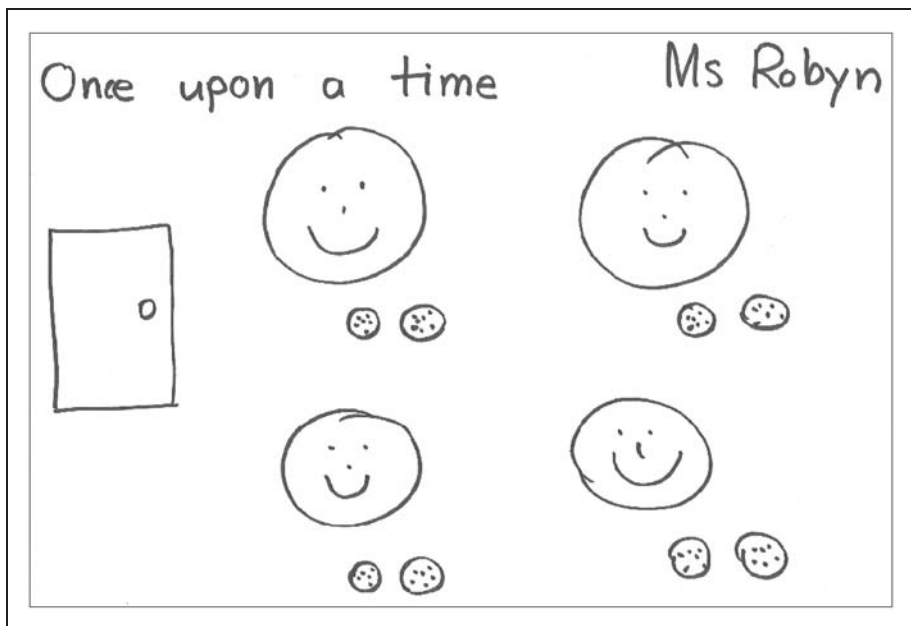


Figure 8. Robyn's Once Upon a Time with faces.

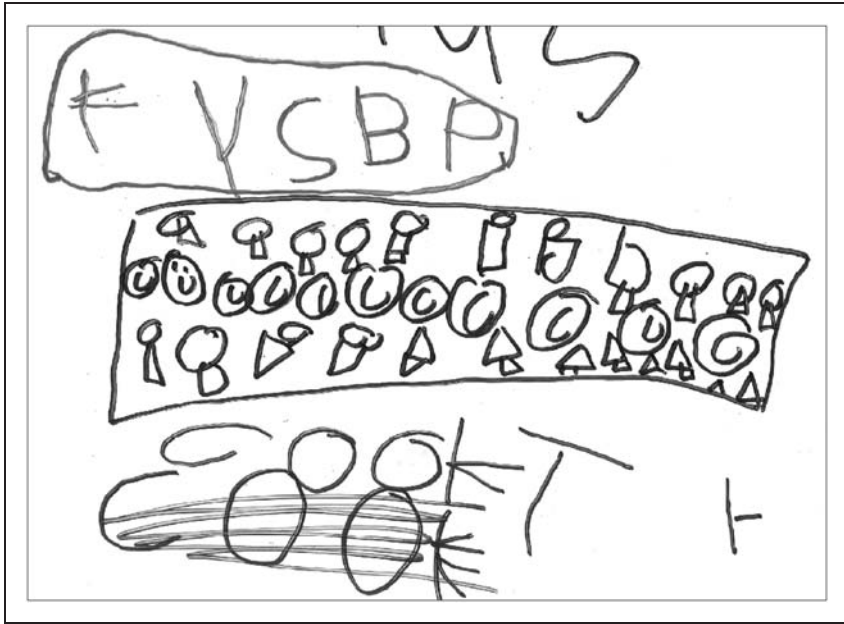


Figure 9. Thomas's writing.

initiates a long conversation among Thomas, Shana, and De'Quan that leads Thomas to try to sound out the word 'cookies', and to try to copy it from the word wall. You can see Thomas's experimentation in his writing.

Eventually Thomas returns to his drawing, 'We're all drawing cookies, 'cause I see cookies everywhere.' He draws more friends, with two cookies for each. (Well, that is his intent.) Thomas is working hard, incredibly hard. He wants to write a new word, he insists on finding help, and he draws a complicated scenario. The notion of two cookies for each person is one he wants to convey – and he does understand.

Whereas several children write about cookies and talk about them in various mathematical terms, Thomas is the only child who takes on Robyn's two-for-one notion. She notices this and wonders how much she can challenge this class.

Robyn presents the children with a further challenge. Within a few days Robyn creates this piece of writing (Figure 10):

Robyn: [speaking as she writes] First, I'll start with my name. Here is my story. Once upon a time, there were two very hungry cats looking for food. They searched all over but all they could find was *one* cookie! What were they going to do? They

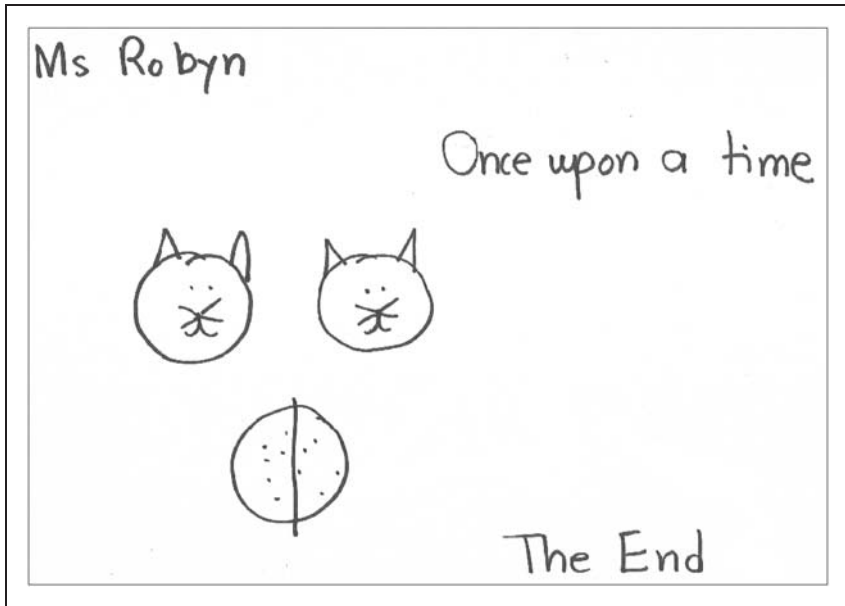


Figure 10. Robyn's cats.

put it on the floor and both wished they could eat the whole thing! But, they decided to share it, so they each ate half of it. The End.

As always, while Robyn composes, the children interact with her, making comments about what she is doing. They know that writers can, and often do, talk with others and think aloud as they work.

As the children go to the tables, Robyn wonders if any of them will include this new maths concept in their writing. Will anyone divide something in half?

She decides to spend a few minutes at the table where D'Jarne has chosen to sit. He is one of three children there and Robyn records this conversation. D'Jarne says, 'I'm drawing my kitty.' (Figure 11).

De'Quan, also at this table, responds to D'Jarne, 'I drew a cookie.' (Figure 12).

De'Quan had drawn a large cookie in the centre, and now asks D'Jarne, 'How you make a kitty cat?' For a few minutes the two boys focus on drawing cats, and then De'Quan draws another cookie. He puts his name on it, and then returns to the first cookie, 'This cookie gonna have icing.'

Then D'Jarne adds himself to his drawing and explains, 'My kitty and me. We gonna eat this cookie.' Yes, this young writer has taken on the challenge of dividing a cookie in half.

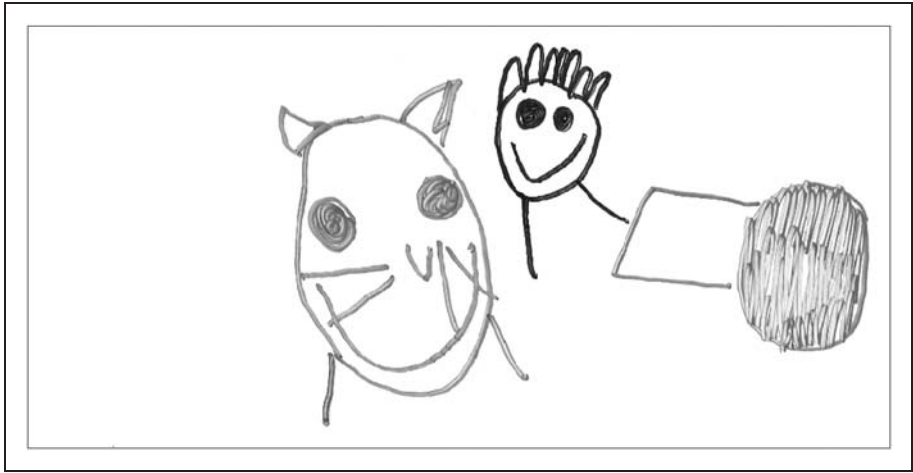


Figure 11. D'Jarne's writing.



Figure 12. De'Quan's writing.

De'Quan, pointing to the cookie without his name, says, 'This cat gonna eat this cookie. He want to make three halves of it.'

De'Quan doesn't want to share the cookie with his name on it, and the kitty has a cookie of its own, so no sharing is needed, but he is somehow aware of the dividing that Robyn and D'Jarne have engaged in. No problem. His kitty has its own solution. His kitty will, 'make three halves of his own cookie.'

D'Jarne, however, took Robyn's challenge, and wrote about two who share one cookie, the only child in the class to do so.

Robyn marvels at what her children do, what they know, what they try as writers. She stretches them, and now wonders if writing in maths will continue to seep into their writing. Occasionally, she will bring it up in her writing, and will engage the children in maths-oriented conversations when she reads aloud. Writing that includes maths can become part of pre-K writing – for the children who decide to incorporate it into their repertoire.

To Robyn the issue of decisions – for the children to be the ones to decide what to write about and how to format their work – is at the heart of what her children experience as writers. When they make their decisions, they consider Robyn's read-alouds, her writing, their lives and the other children. At their tables, they control their writing and their conversations. Robyn circulates and studies the children as they work.

As writing draws to a close, Robyn touches base with each writer, and asks one question, to which she records, in her notebook, each child's answer: 'Tell me about your writing.' They talk, and express interest in her notes. She records every word they say, and they know that. They talk with care about their important work – the work their teacher honours.

Many of Robyn's children live in chaotic settings where anything can happen at any time. Many of them, as four-year-olds in their homes, do not have positions of authority. Their voices do not necessarily carry much weight. As writers at their tables, Robyn gives the children control and they maintain it. Yes, in this classroom, these authors are the authorities over their own writing.

Interactions with more knowledgeable classmates

'Show me how to write it!' The students in Robyn's classroom demand help from each other when they write. The writers' workshop is loud, and Robyn honours these interactions. Her students learn a great deal from one another.

Students ask for help with illustrations. Throughout the school year, different symbols, such as kitty cats, hearts and monsters, became popular inclusions

in the students' writing. This typically happened when students announced their ability to draw something, thus piquing the interest of others. During one author's chair session (Graves and Hansen, 1983), Talisha proclaimed her ability to create hearts in her writing, and the next day Lisa followed her to a table when it was time to write, hoping for membership in the heart-making club (Figure 13).

Lisa: [begging Talisha] Show me how to write a heart.

Talisha: Okay. [She demonstrates on her own piece of paper. Making two curves and connecting them at the bottom as she explains.] Go like this, then go like that.

Lisa: [making one curve and stopping] Like that?

Talisha: [encouraging her] Yes. Now go down.

Lisa responds by crafting her second curve and joining it at a point. She successfully creates her first heart.

Talisha: [elated] Look! I showed her!

Lisa: [encouraged, wants to continue] Let's do it again!

Lisa, guided by Talisha, learns that she can rely on peers to guide her as a writer. The social nature of language, as described by Vygotsky (1978), evidences itself when Talisha guides Lisa within her zone of proximal development. Robyn's students learn collaboratively, and their ability to write with partners helps them to see possibilities in their writing.

Students ask for help with the print they place on their pages. Robyn's students learned about print in much the same way they learned how to draw various symbols: they consulted peers. After they learned to write their own names, they wanted to write their friends' names and sought help from them. This is illustrated in the following conversation between Pierson and Jibir (Figure 14):

Pierson: Jibir, I'm going to write your name.

Jibir: Okay.

Pierson: Show me how to do it.

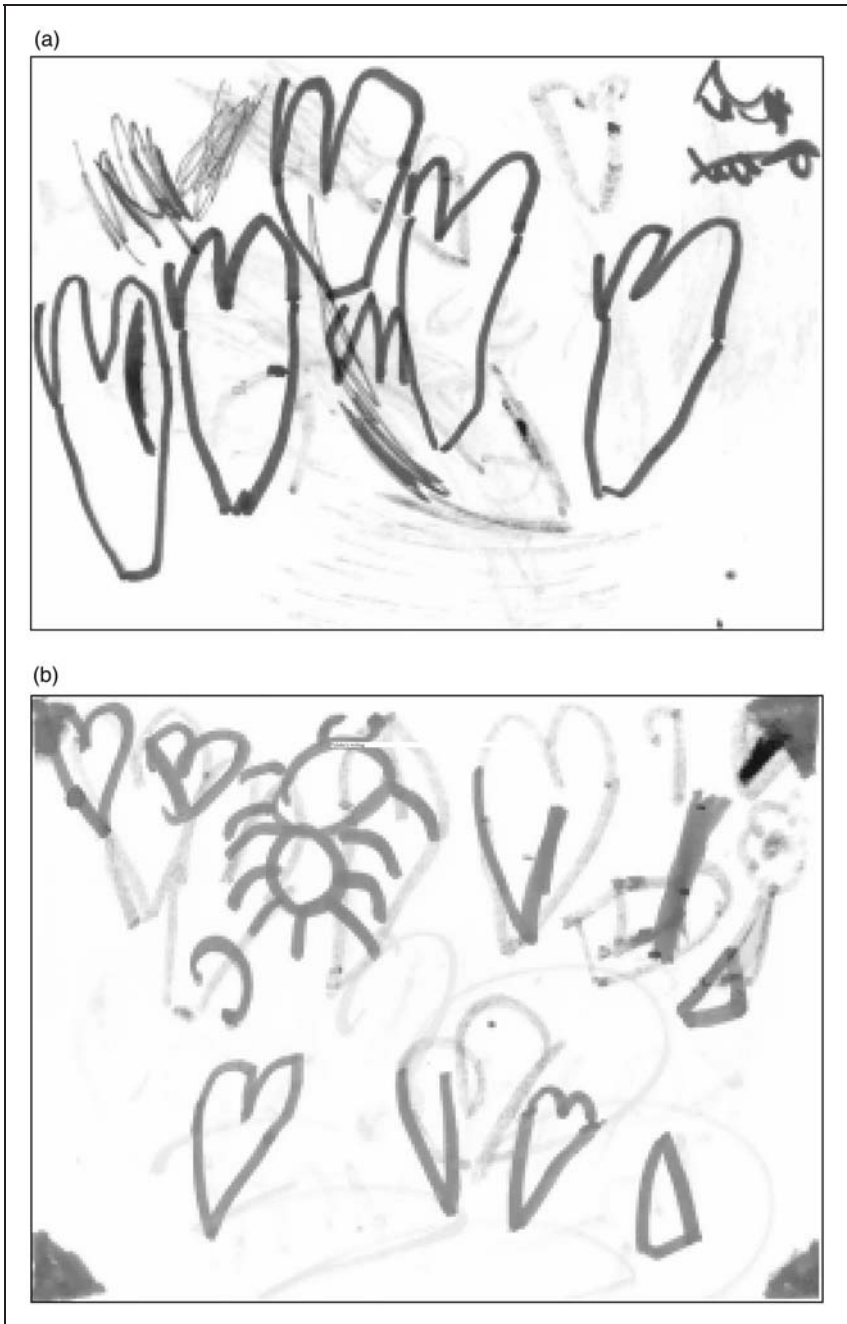


Figure 13. Talisha teaches Lisa to create hearts. (a) Lisa's writing (b) Talisha's writing.

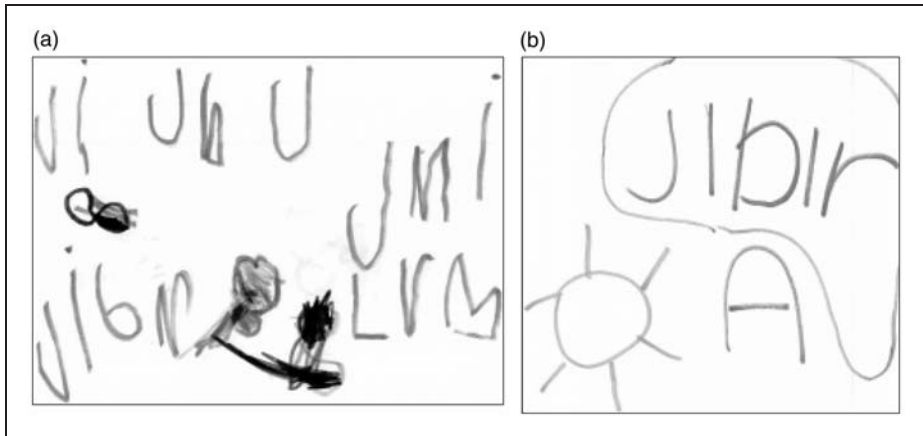


Figure 14. Pierson learns to write letters from Jibir. (a) Pierson's writing (b) Jibir's writing.

Jibir: [writes his name on his own paper] I got these letters in my name. Now you do it.

Pierson writes and is amazed by his ease in forming the letters: 'This is easy.' This was not an uncommon practice in Robyn's classroom. Often, when students sought to learn new letters, their friends referred them to someone's name. Because of their interactive writing environment, the children knew where to find knowledgeable peers. They knew what each of the other writers/students/children knew.

When the children went to the tables to write, some of them appeared to follow others with intent. It was not always clear what motivated them to choose various peer configurations when writing, but they regularly saw an opportunity to learn to write from peers who seemed more knowledgeable, using this time as a chance to learn something new. Some students wrote with friends and, on occasion, there were a few students who picked places to write where they would not be bothered by outside influences. But for those interested in learning from others, Robyn created a space where such learning was a possibility.

Discussion and implications

Kenny uses his language, written and otherwise, to establish his identity in the classroom (Dyson, 1993; Gallas, 1994). As he writes, he creates, maintains and solidifies his personal identity, his identity as a writer, his relationship

with his classmates, his dominance over his chief rival, and his social position among his break buddies.

Robyn uses her writing to demonstrate areas of writing into which the children have not yet ventured, but seem to be on the verge of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). They interact with her as she writes, and a few respond to her invitation to try the particular new idea she introduces. Over time, as she revisits mathematical concepts, and additional children become interested in these possibilities, the children will see their friends write about maths and this will influence them.

The children look to each other as authorities from whom they want to learn. This is a classroom full of four-year-old teachers who know a great deal about writing, and enquire using drawings and letters (Lindfors, 1999). Although there were situations, such as that of Kenny, when children did not want to help one another, we almost always observed the children willingly interacting with each other.

Based on this research, it is clear how interactions amongst pre-K children during writing provide valuable support for young writers. This is important for teachers and curriculum developers to note. Effective writing classrooms in pre-K cannot be silent ones. Students use the interaction as a way to develop their knowledge and push themselves forward as writers. They use writing as a social semiotic; they choose their own communicative purposes and audiences (Halliday, 1978). We witnessed this as students sought advice and guidance from peers. They used writing to connect, explore and understand.

Pre-K teachers should make room for writing instruction to go beyond tracing letters and writing names. That is, writing instruction must extend beyond convention and form to include purpose, audience and genre. This was evident in Robyn's classroom. Students wrote for multiple reasons, about multiple topics, based on ideas that they found interesting. Robyn did not prescribe their topics. They were self-selected by the students, and often, these self-selections allowed them to connect with peers.

'Show me how to write it,' is not just a saying students utter. It is an instructional approach Robyn employs to encourage writers to learn from one another. They learn from her, she from them, and they from each other. She is responsive to students' needs and designs her mini-lessons based on what students demonstrate an interest in and readiness for. Robyn values each student as a learner, as another teacher in the classroom, and an expert at something. Peer interactions in Robyn's classroom are influential. The children's words carry weight. And they know it.

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