

# Name Writing: A Window into the Emergent Literacy Skills of Young Children

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This article discusses the potential significance of name writing skills in addressing many important questions about the development of early literacy skills. Young children are inherently interested in producing their own names in print. Furthermore, young children appear to construct their understandings of name writing skills in a predictable, sequential pattern. Questions raised include whether the development of name writing skills mirrors the development of other important cognitive skills, the potential of name writing skills to offer insight as to how young children learn important literacy concepts, the use of name writing as a developmental indicator for children that may be at risk for reading difficulties, and the potential for structured activities using name writing to facilitate the development of emergent literacy skills.

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## INTRODUCTION

One's own name is arguably the most meaningful of all the experiences young children have with print. A personal name is meaningful not only because it contributes to identity or sense of self as distinct from others but also as a labeling tool for denoting personal property. By approximately 2 years of age, children develop a categorical sense of self, which enables them to classify themselves and others into categories of "same" and "different" (Berk, 2000). Vygotsky (1962) wrote that the awareness of object names at age 2 signified the point at which thought and language began to work together to form intellect. A child's name is a particularly meaningful category that provides identification within their family and a foundation for the emerging multifaceted dimensions of self. Young children soon learn that individuals, like objects, have names that identify them as distinct from others. Further, young children learn that their personal names are used to target them for social attention, to ask them questions about their needs, and

to offer important information about their environment. Due to the salience of one's name, children may recognize their name in conversations long before they understand the use of pronouns. As a form of print, children are exposed to their name often—especially in day care and preschool environments. For instance, items such as book bags, lunch boxes, articles of clothing, and art and class work are generally labeled with a child's printed name.

## EARLY EXPOSURE TO PRINT WITHIN A MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

Unlike many early language experiences, a child is likely to be exposed to his or her own name in both print and oral form (Villaume and Wilson, 1989). This connection between the meaning of one's name (semantics), the spoken form (phonology), and the written form (orthography) may heighten interest in literacy skills. Children appear to have heightened interest in the printed form of their own name, as compared with interest in other forms of print. Young children actually prefer the letters that appear in their own names more than other letters, a phenomena called the name-letter effect (Hoorens, Nuttin, Herman, and Pavakanun, 1990; Hoorens and Todorova, 1988; Nuttin, 1985, 1987).

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The natural interest children have in their printed names provides a link to exploration and constructing knowledge about important literacy skills, such as phonology, using symbols to represent meaning, letter names, letter sounds, and understanding concepts of print (Bloodgood, 1999; Treiman and Broderick, 1998). The hypothesis that a heightened interest in one's printed name provides an important context for facilitating the development of other literacy skills is supported by research in memory and learning. Not only are children likely to be most interested in letters associated with their own names (Hoorens et al., 1990; Hoorens and Todorova, 1988; Nuttin, 1985, 1987) but they are also likely to better learn and remember new vocabulary and literacy concepts associated with their names. For instance, the self-reference effect is an established learning phenomenon in which individuals are best able to remember new information when the information is most relevant to themselves (Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker, 1977). In addition, the levels-of-processing model of memory (Craik and Lockhart, 1972) suggests that information is most deeply processed (and thus better remembered) when it is highly meaningful to the individual. Thus, a child's name seems to present a vehicle for learning about each child's growth in literacy.

### **A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO LEARNING ABOUT PRINT**

Name writing has been viewed as an early step toward developing literacy skills (Clay, 1975) and has been described as a "mirror" reflecting a child's mastery of written form, awareness of the function of print, and perceptions of literacy (Bloodgood, 1999). Rather than being something that is reproduced, learning about print and its relationship to oral language is a constructive process for young children. In Hildreth's (1936) landmark study of the development of name writing skills in preschool and kindergarten children, parents reported not directly teaching children how to write their names. Hildreth writes, "Apparently, these children acquired their writing accomplishments by begging to know how to write when seeing others writing" (p. 301).

Children are actively building and constructing their knowledge about print, a process associated with emergent literacy (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Villaume and Wilson, 1989). Treiman, Weatherston, and Berch (1994) demonstrated empirically that preschool and kindergarten children utilize knowledge of letter names to learn about grapheme-phoneme correspondence (the "alphabetic principle"). When orally presented with a word beginning with the phoneme /w/ (i.e., war), kindergarten

children were significantly more likely than first or second graders to begin the spelling of the word with the letter "y." Likewise, preschoolers were significantly more likely than first or second graders to name the first letter in an orally presented word beginning with the phoneme /w/ and the letter "w" as the letter "y." Thus, kindergarten and preschool children, not yet having had formal reading instruction, were inferring from their knowledge of letter names that a word beginning with the phoneme /w/ would be the letter "y." This inference was seemingly made because when read aloud, the letter "y" has the beginning phoneme /w/. This study demonstrates how young children construct information about sound-symbol relationships, using knowledge of letter names.

If young children are already learning about reading based on their knowledge of letter names, consider the potential for constructing knowledge about print based on the personally meaningful information they have about letters that make up their own names. Young children have been found to use knowledge they have about the shapes, sounds, and sequences of letters in their own names as vehicles for testing hypotheses they have regarding dictating, arranging, modeling, and naming other letters (Treiman and Broderick, 1998; Villaume and Wilson, 1989). Name writing skills certainly have the potential to reveal the kinds of questions children are forming about print and the conclusions they are forming about how sounds and symbols work together to provide meaningful information.

### **DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF NAME WRITING SKILLS**

In addition to providing a glimpse into the thought processes used by young children to understand print, name writing skills may also provide information regarding a child's developmental level in regards to emergent literacy skills. This is particularly true if the child has demonstrated adequate visual-motor integration skills on other paper-pencil tasks, such as drawing, coloring, and cutting. Interestingly, there is a clear age-related developmental progression of name writing skills based on both longitudinal data (Green, 1998; Lieberman, 1985), and cross-sectional data (Bloodgood, 1999; Hildreth, 1936). This should not be surprising given that predictable changes in both the quality and quantity of skills have been found in many skills during the course of early development including cognitive skills (i.e., Piagetian Theory), play (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel, 2001), and drawing (Puckett and Black, 2001). Further, cross-cultural research supports a developmental pro-

gression of increasingly advanced name writing skills with age (Tolchinsky-Landsmann and Levin, 1985). The developmental course of writing appears to begin with circular scribbles. In fact, when asked to write their names, children produce scribbles distinctly different from those generated when attempting to draw a picture by age 3 (Brenneman, Massey, Machado, and Gelman, 1996; Hildreth, 1936). With increasing age, name writing transitions from circular scribbles to continuous linear scribbles, which look increasingly like letter forms (Clay, 1982; Hildreth, 1936; Lieberman, 1985). Other developmental trends include how the child uses space on the page (Green, 1998), letter reversals (Hildreth, 1936), firmness in control (Hildreth, 1936), number of correct letters (Lieberman, 1985), letters in the correct order (Lieberman, 1985), and the speed of writing (Hildreth, 1936).

### USING NAME WRITING TO ADDRESS ADDITIONAL LEARNING AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. *Does the development of name writing skills mirror the development of other cognitive and academic skills in young children?* The consideration of name writing as an early writing skill stimulates several interesting questions that warrant further research. For instance, does the development of name writing skills mirror the development of other cognitive and early academic skills? Collecting information about a child's name writing skills is a quick and inexpensive process. If problems with motor skills and visual-motor integration skills are ruled out, perhaps the quality of name writing skills could provide information as to developmental delays in areas such as cognition or language. This author is currently developing an instrument, the Name Writing Scale (NWS; Haney and Behnken, 2002), which assigns points according to certain criteria such as alignment of name on paper, capitalization, spacing, size of letters, and correct spelling. Further research using tools such as the NWS that provide a quantitative value, along with assessment of qualitative developmental criteria, and comparing these results to the developmental progression of other skills may provide some interesting correlations that could be used for early intervention purposes. This very process has been used to evaluate drawings of young children, using quantitative scoring systems such as the Goodenough-Harris Draw-a-Person-Human Figure Drawing Test (Harris, 1963) in screening for cognitive deficits.

2. *Can we improve on current screening batteries for children at risk for reading difficulties?* Given that

name writing skills reflect a child's developing knowledge about print, assessment of these skills may be useful for identifying young children at risk for reading difficulties. There are a number of early literacy skills, including phonological awareness, rapid naming, and alphabet knowledge (Adams, 1990; Perfetti, Beck, Bell, and Hughes, 1987; Snider, 1995; Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte, 1994; Vallutino and Scanlon, 1987) that predict later reading achievement. Thus, it is clear that a child does not have to fail at reading achievement before being recognized as requiring additional educational support. However, early screening batteries for predicting children at risk for reading difficulties tend to have a fairly high rate of "false positives." In other words, along with accurately identifying children in need of extra help, these screening batteries also identify a fair amount of children who end up having no difficulties learning to read (Fawcett and Nicolson, 1995).

3. *Could name writing be used as part of a screening battery to identify young children in need of early intervention to prevent reading failure?* Perhaps inclusion of a variable that captures how a child is constructing knowledge about print would help more accurately predict children most in need of early intervention services. Thus, inclusion of a name writing assessment in an early screening for reading difficulties battery may help reduce the rate of false positives. Bloodgood (1999) administered a battery of early literacy tests to 67 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children. The early literacy battery included name writing based on Hildreth's (1936) developmental criteria. Bloodgood found significantly positive correlations for name writing with word recognition and letter production for 4-year olds, and with letter production, spelling, word recognition, and concept of word for 5-year olds. Behnken and Haney (2001) piloted the NWS by including its administration along with a reading screening battery for 162 kindergarten children. However, the early literacy tasks included in their screening battery were somewhat different from those in the Bloodgood study. Name writing skills, along with alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness, were found to contribute significantly ( $r^2 = .05$ ) to the best prediction model for basic reading skills. These results are consistent with the Bloodgood findings that for 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds, name writing correlated significantly with word recognition. Thus, name writing does appear related to word reading skills. Behnken and Haney did not find name writing to correlate significantly with other early literacy skills, including phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, verbal fluency, or alphabet knowledge. Name writing appeared to reflect skills distinct from the other early literacy skills in the

screening battery for kindergarten students. Bloodgood's results suggest that skills such as letter production and concept of word are closer to describing the kinds of skills reflected by name writing. Based on these two studies, name writing skills may very well be an important predictor of reading achievement and should be considered for inclusion on early screening batteries.

4. *Could name writing be used to learn how children construct knowledge about print from their environments?* Another important question that needs to be addressed is whether name writing skills provide information about how children accumulate knowledge and construct meaning from their oral and print environments. When name writing skills are studied in preschool children, it is likely that direct teaching of such skills has not yet taken place. Thus, investigation of how preschool children learn letter shapes, letter sounds, the actual process of writing letters on paper, and the ultimate meaning provided by the printed name (i.e., ownership, identity) may shed light on how children construct knowledge of language and print from their environments to develop beginning literacy skills. Furthermore, research investigating the developmental course of the progression of name writing skills for children with atypical developmental patterns (i.e., pervasive developmental disorders, speech/language disorders, intellectual disabilities) may also be helpful in both tracking the development of literacy skills and addressing whether these populations use different strategies to construct meaning about print.

5. *Could activities that facilitate the development of name writing skills be useful in teaching beginning literacy skills within a meaningful and natural context?* Certainly one cannot leave this topic without wondering if the intentional facilitation of name writing skills might enhance the development of literacy skills in young children. Should parents, preschools, and kindergartens create activities that help develop and encourage name writing in young children? Green (1998) and Nelson (1999) describe name writing sign-in activities that provide daily opportunities for developing literacy skill in a natural environment. Additionally, a "name-of-the-week" activity could be an interesting strategy for using name writing skills to introduce and reinforce emergent literacy skills. Each week a different child's name could be featured and letters from the name taught. For instance, children could sit in a large group and brainstorm about different words beginning with the letters L, U, C, and Y. The teacher could write these words on a large piece of paper, highlighting that the beginning letters were those in classmate Lucy's name. Overall, the highly personal and meaningful nature of names seems

the perfect vehicle for introducing new concepts such as letter sounds, letter names, and phonemic awareness. Undeniably, empirical studies that evaluate the effectiveness of name writing activities as tools for introducing important literacy concepts within a natural context would be useful in making important decisions about learning activities and curriculum for young children.

## CONCLUSION

There is much theoretical and empirical support for the significance of name writing skills as a tool for better understanding literacy development in young children. However, there are many other questions that need to be addressed. Name writing is perhaps the earliest experience a child has with print and certainly one of the most meaningful. Names also provide many learning opportunities due to the frequent exposure children have to both print and oral forms of their name, in addition to the inherent high interest young children have in characteristics associated with their name. Further development of research tools, such as the NWS, will allow for empirical studies that can address critical questions including: how children construct literacy knowledge, how to best identify children in need of early intervention support, and what kinds of early learning activities are developmentally appropriate and helpful in fostering important literacy skills for children with diverse learning profiles.

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