



Developing Writing in Early Grade Children

Dr. Mousumi Sarkar

1. Assistant Professor, Shree Ramkrishna B.T. College, Darjeeling, West Bengal

Abstract:

The focus of the present paper is to study the different facets of writing development journey of early grade children that includes both the theoretical aspect, i.e. the developmental perspective as well as the practical part, i.e. the implication of developmental perspective in real life classroom practice. It highlights the basic tenets of developmental perspective of writing in the journey of scribbling to scripting – its goals, purposes and applications. It also reviews the mismatch of the ideal classroom pedagogy and real life classroom scenario and also tries to elucidate the possibilities and opportunities of creating the supportive environment for developing writers. Finally the paper tried to delineate the relevance of such studies in today's backdrop as well as suggested some measures to move to their desired future paths.

Keywords: *Writing Development, Young Children, Early Grade Pedagogy, Scribbling, Supporting Environment.*

Introduction:

Early learning in pre-primary and early grades of schooling acts as the foundation for all the future learning of a child. There is enough research and evidence showing the early years, i.e. the first 5 to 7 years are of crucial importance for forming of certain neural connections which are very much critical for all life-long development and learning. Early learning focuses on the development of early language and literacy along with the basic mathematical skills which are the building blocks for the later years of the educands. As the language, thought and understanding are closely linked, research has shown conclusively that unable to develop basic foundations of language and literacy are at a serious disadvantage – this can not only lead to poor learning of other subjects and poor academic performance but also results in poor self-esteem.

So, it is to be understood very clearly, to develop a strong-foundation of language and literacy in early grades is imperative for all the future learning and formal school setting.

Now if we consider the development of this early language and literacy in the formative years which can be termed as the foundational literacy requires developing a wide range of skills, knowledge and attitudes including child's own attempt to read, write and make their own meaning. Thus the sole aim of early language and literacy education is to enable the children to read fluently with deep comprehension and to be able to express themselves with clarity – for which writing can be the best medium – the window for communicating self-expression.

Now, if we focus on the term writing, we can understand from the very earliest days of human civilisation we have had a strong desire to share our thinking through writing –it is a way to convey our message – ability to encode the information along with the presentation of our thought process in a logical and organized manner. From those days of cave dwellers till today's context. no doubt, writing plays a very important role as a vital skill to form new understandings, communicate effectively and to be succeed in school and beyond. So, learning to write is surely a developmental process which must be started in the early years of children with their scribbling and drawing as a part of the foundational literacy framework.

Research evidences have supported that several milestones of the writing continuum are achieved by children much before they formally reach the boundaries of schools (Clay,1975, 1982; Ferreiro and Teberosky,1979; Goodman, 1985; Rowe, 2008;Strickland and Morrow, 2000). Young children show interest in exploring the features of writing (Bissex, 1980; Graves, 1983; Tolchinsky, 2006). But, it is very unfortunate that, in formal school setting, most of the times, 'writing' is perceived from a very rigid and conventional framework – all the potential form is now reduced to a joyless mechanical activity with a highly controlled manner.

So, it is very much essential to understand that only by embedding strategic instruction and evidence-based practice within a multicomponent framework, we can help our children in the journey of foundational literacy learning and for the purpose, it is important to study the several vital facets of writing and its development including the different influences on the process of writing development, formal practice in schools and also the evidence based strategies and related researches. Here lies the importance of the present study.

The focus of this present research paper is to study the developmental perspective of writing in the early years of a child and its underpinning theoretical framework which helps to know the wide range of educational implications of the developing writing process and in turn, facilitate the process of designing a meaningful writing instruction framework.

In the present paper, the aspect of writing development in early years is divided into a few sections for the ease of detailed discussion and reflection. The first section explores how do writers develop. The second one highlights the goal and purpose of writing development in the classrooms of schools whereas in third section try to focus on the real scenarios of writing development in day to day classroom practice. In the fourth section, different strategies with its possibilities and opportunities have been discussed to make a conducive environment for the developing writers. Next one, i.e. the fifth section deals with the role of the teacher in developing writer reviewed thoroughly and at last the concluding thoughts are delineated to summarize the different vital aspects and arguments of this paper.

Writing Development: How do writer develops?

The developmental perspective of writing is based on the assumption that writing is a natural behaviour in a literate society (Goodman, 1985). Writing is crucial to us not only as it helps to express ideas, and beliefs but also it helps us to think critically, evaluate, analyze, generate ideas and present them coherently. Furthermore, learning to write helps children become better readers and comprehenders of all types of text (Shanahan, 1996) as reading and writing can often be thought of as mirror images of each other (Reutzel& Cooter, 2011), thus making learning to write as an indispensable component for the young children's literacy development in the early grades of school. Another important point to note in this regard, is writing involves the cognitive processing of ideas and thus may act as one of the important learning tool for the future.

However, to focus on the aspect that how do writers develop, it is vital to understand that young children discover writing as the medium of sharing idea at early in their life. In our day to day life we often observe

children attempting to solve the printed language puzzle through drawing and scribbling. Sometimes they try to explore writing with pencil and paper, or create marks, even cover the walls of home and all these happen much before their formal school going. And this is crucial to understand that the purpose of all their creation is to communicate the meaningful messages. Hence, it may be said that it is a reality that the root of writing development start growing much before a child attends formal school. Studies have evidence that much before formal school, young children show confidence in their abilities as writers and display knowledge about the functions of writing observed in their lives. (Goodman, 1985; Graves, 1983). Developmental perspective firmly believes that, a child is an active learner who carefully observes and engages with the usage of writing in life.

Through careful study over decades, research shows that young children move through a series of developmental stages in their journey of writing and spelling. However, research also suggests that children's familiarity with writing develops at numerous levels concurrently (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Sandbank, 2001). Moreover, throughout this journey knowledge required at one level aids learning at the next levels.

The stages children pass through before the conventional writing can be enumerated as scribbling and drawing stage, prephonemic stage, early phonemic stage, letter-naming stage, transitional stage including the inverted spellings. All these milestones are actually demonstrating the progression of children's writing along a developmental continuum, originating with their early attempts to make meaning on paper through scribbling and drawing to later refinements in conventional spelling, grammar and mechanics. There have been numerous research studies of children's emergent writing such as Ferreivo and Teberosky, 1982. Harste, Woodward & Bunke, 1984; Teale & Sulzby, 1986, most of which traced a common development pattern and supports the above view on writing development of children in early years.

To sum up, it may be understood that writing development in young children occurs along a development continuum. Here the young children act as the active participant and play the vital role in learning how to write. Going through this continuum children achieve its various milestones naturally and meaningfully.

Writing development in early grade classrooms : Goals, purposes and implications

The developmental perspective of writing came up with some notable goals and future educational implication for early grade classrooms.

From the discussions in previous section, it is clear now to understand that children's writing emerges out of their early scribbles. They start with scribbling, then move to drawing shapes and then move to writing basic letters. In early childhood, children's motor skills usually become well enough developed for them to begin printing letters and their name (Morrow, 2009).

Research evidences show that most 4-year olds, can print their first name, five year olds can reproduce letters and copy several short words. Thus it is very much important to encourage and support them wholeheartedly at this stage. So a supportive and trustworthy classroom intertwined with multiple opportunities is a must to engage children in their developing writing journey. However, designing a positive classroom environment called for the deep visions and a clear understanding of the developmental approach and it depends on the crucial participation for not only the teachers but also the peers and parents as a larger community. It also emphasizes multiple leaving opportunities to engage with authentic writing tasks and contexts and acknowledges children's lives and interest as asset in this regard.

The developmental perspective assumes that young children are interested in writing. Hence schools can utilize this 'interest' as means to create windows of opportunity for young children to depict their lives

through writing. They come to school with their colourful thoughts, memories and feelings which can be the courses for teaching-learning of writing of young children. Encouraging children to write about their own experiences and lives make the 'writing task' interesting. 'Voices' start emerging in their writing and thus writing becomes a highly purposeful activity for them. For the purpose, classroom environment must be conducive and safe place to write about oneself without the fear of judgement.

Another notably important aspect for the classrooms guided by developmental perspective is viewing writing errors as the natural part of writing development continuum of young children, thus not to scrutinize nor criticize. As they begin to write, children often invent spellings of words (Soderman & Farrell, 2008). They usually do this by relying on the sounds of words they hear. Therefore, spelling and printing corrections can be made in positive ways and judiciously enough to avoid dampening early enjoyment and spontaneity in writing (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz., 2008).

Now, to sum up, in above section a few of the basic tenets of the developmental perspective on writing including the purpose and educational implication has been discussed to get an overview of the ideal classroom practices for developing writing for young children. In next section, it will be tried to depict the real life classroom scenario in an Indian context to discuss how teaching-learning of writing development is approached in early grade classrooms.

Developing writing in classrooms: A real scenario

In the previous section, the point of discourse was highlighting the basic levels of the developmental perspective of learning writing and its derived implications to implement in the early grade classroom for the young children. But in this section the focus of discussion will be on the nature of pedagogy used for the teaching-learning of writing popularly followed in our classrooms. Thus in this section the real life classroom practice of early grades will be reflected and can be reviewed through the lens of evidence-based research work.

Therefore, to continue, it may be said that in our daily school context 'writing' is 'complex' task, it involves mastery of many subcomponents. Hence, most of the cases the writing development is viewed as a product-oriented act with loads of conventions and restrictions. So, for the purpose of teaching-learning of writing, technique of copying is taken into account as one of the best method. Across different grades in the school, writing is taught as an act of perfectly copying the given work in beautiful handwriting without any errors (Kumar, 1996). Unfortunately, such traditional writing practices not only dominate pedagogy practices but also influences the learning standards and parameters for evaluation and assessment.

For most of the cases, it is observed, our preschools and kindergartens are highly formal, restricted and structured. Early grade classrooms hardly have interesting and relevant grade-specific print (Kunwar, 2022). Writing is introduced to young children in a very mechanical manner. The structurally rigid patterns of writing presented to them have a very narrow scope to explore and with repeated daily practice it looks like the holy rituals for young children. Writing assignment developed for the early grades are mostly focused on a specified sequence such as joining dots, making standing and sleeping lines, two letter words followed by three letter words and so on. Further, any kind of deviation, including the invented spellings are taken into very serious consideration and so correction programs are mainly based on drill and practice of the same for them. Thus, the entire energy of the young children is now directed toward the writing of perfect shapes in beautiful handwriting in standard notebooks. On that account, it may be said that an exclusive focus on handwriting and mechanics is recognized as the sole target area of early-grade pedagogy (Kunwar, 2022).

Now if we analyze closely, it can be found, in our early grade classrooms, teacher-talk dominates. Children are passive listeners engaged in choral repetition, memorization and copying. The teaching method narrowed

the scope for exploration of print for the young children. While focusing on mechanics, perfection and error-free production, it is assumed that the only expectation is the excellence in the art of copying as the indicator of writing development for the young children, thereby contradicting the basic tenets for development perspective.

Therefore, it is important to understand our early grade writing pedagogy largely aiming at perfection in copying restricts the space for opportunities of experimentation and exploration of early grade children. This narrow down the scope for active engagement in the continuum of developing writing. Consequently young learners loose their interest for all kinds of writing and in turn conveys the constant message that learning to read or write is too difficult and complex. No doubt, this scenario is challenging not only for the young children but also the system of teaching-learning. Thus requires a transformative change in the pedagogy of early grade classroom. In the next section the different possibilities, opportunities can be discussed in this regard.

Creating environment for developing writers: Possibilities and opportunities.

Thus for, through the discussions of previous sections it has been tried to throw light on the different areas of writing development journey for the young children starting from the theoretical aspect of developmental perspective and its various tenets, as well as contrasting portrayal of an ideal classroom to real life classroom pedagogy practiced for writing development of early grades. Now, it is time to delineate the planning part to create a conducive and supportive environment for the developing writers as an way forward to future. As already discussed, for progressing through the age appropriate development continuum of writing young children need a favourable supportive, secure environment which is full of multiple opportunities to be engaged actively with the act of meaningful writing. For the purpose, it is needed to embed strategic instruction and evidence-based practice within a multicomponent framework of writing instruction programme.

Various techniques, strategies and methods can be adopted and integrated in this programme for the best outcome. Thus early-grade classrooms might offer unlimited but meaningful opportunities for authentic participation with reading and writing.

A few of those activities can be interactive writing (Gipe, 2002), writing aloud (Cooter, 2002), morning message buddy writing etc. Sometimes, a writing workshop can also be organised for motivating and giving students creative, writing assignments where the writing centre is an integral part. These strategies not only help the young children in their writing development journey but also motivates them to be consistent in their progression. All these activities also facilitate the process of collaborative learning and thus helps to build the pro-social behaviour in them.

Another notable component of this kind of conducive environment is the view, i.e., writing is a socially constructed task emerging from the social-constructivist approaches.

This view suggests – young children need to participate in a writing community to understand the author / reader relationship as well as to share their rich experiences with their peers. Also while writing in groups, they can experience the process of inquiry and clarification and thus often improves their writing.

In addition, according to this view, it is crucial to connect children experiences at school with the world outside the classroom as family and community involvement is indeed a pillar of comprehensive literacy framework. For the purpose various activities like camp imagination (Jurand, 2009) can be organised where we can directly involve the parents and larger community of young children.

A supportive and conducive early grade classroom for developing writing is incomplete without active participation and influence of a potential teacher as the teacher can only design that environment with meaningful opportunities and activities according to the need of her learners.

Avery (2002) shares that a teacher dealing with early writers must believe that young children can write, young children want to write and young children have required experience and interest for writing.

One of the major job as teachers is to help young writers have a sense of self-efficacy. It means that the teachers' role is highly valued in supporting young children's writing development.

Therefore, to sum up, it may be said that after thorough understanding of developmental perspective and critically analysing the early grade context for pedagogical practices a few significant areas draw attention of the present researcher.

On that account there is a need to elucidate a few but noteworthy points as a part of the next steps for the continuous progress, overall development and the future path ahead.

As we all are aware, National Education Policy (2020) highlighted once and again the significance of foundational literacy – specially reading-writing in early grades therefore focusing on that area is the need of the time. And for the purpose, the early grade curriculum should be revised focusing extensively on evidence based research practices and secondly, it is most important to redefine and recognise the agency of early grade teachers.

Multiple policies and innovative programmes can be launched but its success actually depends on the pillars, i.e. the teachers. We need to empower our teachers with all kind of support and for the purpose, there is a need to revisit our teacher education programme both in-service and pre-service. All the curriculum must be revised and embedded with evidence based instructions strategies along with a strong theoretical foundation.

Hence, the focus of effort must be on the bridging the real gaps of day to day classroom practice with stronger intention and resources.

Conclusion:

To conclude, all the discussions and discourses made throughout this research paper may be summarised as –

Children's writing follows a developmental timetable, emerging out of scribbling the journey extends up to scripting. Advances in children's language and cognitive development provide the foundation for developing writing.

Throughout this paper, it was tried to highlight those basic tenets of developmental perspective in the journey of writing and its application in the classroom practice. This paper also reviews the contrasting image of theoretical 'should be' and practical 'there is' of writing pedagogy practice of early grade classroom.

This mismatch is a serious concern for the day which needs an urgent action plan as remedial and restructuring. For the purpose, reviewing the early grade writing curriculum and redesigning it by embedding a research based strategies should be the immediate step along with reshaping the early grade teacher-education programme. Although it sounds like the real challenge but we need to move forward with our baby steps for the greater good of young children as well as our education system.

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