

Should preschool writing be more communication and less ABCs?

October 29 2019



Hope Gerde, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Writing instruction in early education should be about more than letter formation and penmanship, argue Michigan State University researchers who found preschool teachers don't often encourage writing for communication purposes.

"Few teachers in this study think about writing as communication," said Hope Gerde, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "However, all children have ideas, and when we allow young children to communicate their ideas using whatever type of 'writing' they can produce—whether it's scribbles, drawing or letter-like formations—writing is an age-appropriate and engaging endeavor."

There's been little research on how preschool teachers view writing in early education, including child interest and enjoyment, she said. But it's important to understand teachers' beliefs because those beliefs influence instruction. In addition, using writing as a communication tool is an effective way to strengthen writing skills at an early age—which improves academic success.

In the study, published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, researchers observed teachers' material resources and practices to support writing. They then interviewed teachers to ask about beliefs and instruction.

Gerde and Tanya Wright, associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education, interviewed 32 preschool teachers from varying programs, such as Head Start and nonprofit child care centers, to determine how they support writing instruction in their classrooms.

They found environmental supports, such as designated writing spaces, were in place in 94% of classrooms. However, while materials were available, there was limited discussion of how children were taught to use the materials.

At the same time, only 22% of teachers reported placing writing materials in other classroom areas or allowing children to bring writing materials into play centers. But meaningful opportunities to write exist

within children's play experiences, such as writing a grocery list or taking an order at the classroom restaurant, Gerde said.

The most widely observed activities reflected a focus on handwriting, such as teachers reminding children to write their names on artwork; writing letters for children to copy; describing the procedure for creating a letter; signing in; and tracing their names.

In addition, researchers found teachers provided few opportunities or activities focused on supporting children to communicate their ideas through composing (journaling, writing a thank you card) and few classrooms provided evidence of meaningful writing, such as books made as a class or writing a message to a family member.

Teachers agreed that, in general, young children enjoy writing. During interviews, however, teachers reported there is a lack of guidance on teaching [children](#) to write in preschool, despite having research-based curricula. In fact, recent work led by Gerde identifies that even research-based curricula are uneven in their guidance for supporting early writing.

Since Common Core standards for [elementary school students](#) emphasize writing composition, could teachers, who focus primarily on handwriting, be putting preschool students at a disadvantage?

Maybe.

"These findings may be particularly useful to [teacher](#) education and professional development programs as they consider ways to change preschool teachers' beliefs and practices for early writing," Gerde said.

More information: Hope K. Gerde et al, Preschool teachers' beliefs about and instruction for writing, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/10901027.2019.1593899](https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2019.1593899)

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Should preschool writing be more communication and less ABCs? (2019, October 29)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-preschool-abcs.html>

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