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ABSTRACT

A study examined preschool children's awareness of literacy. Subjects included 18 children from 2 classrooms of prekindergarten children who lived in a black, inner-city neighborhood and attended a school that believed in providing formal reading and writing instruction in the prekindergarten year. Subjects were asked how they were learning, how they tried to read a picture-phrase book, and how they wrote or drew pictures in response to requests to write something. Results indicated that most children were aware of how they were learning; they pretended to read by labeling pictures in the book they were given to read; they usually drew pictures or wrote single letters for the writing task, and they produced meaningful descriptions of their writings or drawings. Variations in the subjects' literacy awareness were related to the instruction provided in school and the quality of home support for literacy. Three case studies illustrate various aspects of the study. (Eight tables of data are included, and 30 references are appended.) (Author/RS)

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

A READING RESEARCH AND EDUCATION CENTER REPORT

Technical Report No. 442

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S READING AND WRITING AWARENESS

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Abstract

Prekindergarten children's awareness about literacy--their ability to express varying facets of learning to read and write--was explored with tasks in which children described how they were learning, how they tried to read a picture-phrase book, and how they wrote or drew pictures in response to requests to write something. It was found that most of the children were aware of how they were learning; they pretended to read by labeling pictures in the book they were given to read, they usually drew pictures or wrote single letters for the writing task, and they produced meaningful descriptions of their writings or drawings. Variations in their literacy awareness were related to the instruction provided in school and the quality of home support for literacy.

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S READING AND WRITING AWARENESS

Even before beginning kindergarten, children can be asked to tell how they are learning to read and write. If asked, some will say nothing while others will talk about how a parent is helping them or about what they do to learn. If asked to read words, some will ignore the letters, listing instead their favorite words while others will whisper the word slowly, analyzing the words into letter sounds. If asked to read a book, some will make up a story from the pictures while others will use the print and picture information to read a few of the words. If asked to write something, again there will be large differences with some children scribbling or drawing a picture and others making letters or trying to construct words.

In responding to these reading and writing tasks, young children demonstrate an *awareness* of reading and writing, both by their ability to talk about how they are learning and by demonstrating what they can do. Thus, their awareness responses ought to provide insights for teaching children and for supporting their attempts to read and write. When these responses are coupled with information about parents' role in helping their children learn at home about reading and writing, practitioners should be able to plan appropriate activities in school and recommend other activities for home use. How this might be accomplished is the focus of this paper.

Research on children's awareness of their learning has been measured with interview questions such as "What is reading" and "How are you learning to read?" (e.g., Johns, 1972). Awareness that spoken words can be separated into letter sounds and that these sounds can be blended to make words has been tested in many studies and is reviewed in a report by Stanovich (1986). Awareness that written language is meaningful in the sense of a realization that one's oral language can be mapped in some ways onto the written language has been described by Chafe (1985) and Perena (1984), among others. It can be measured by interpreting the extent of children's text comprehension.

After describing these three sorts of awareness about literacy, namely, knowing what and how one is learning, knowing how the sounds of letters are mapped onto words, and knowing how to derive meaning from written texts, we explain how children's responses can be analyzed. Three children's literacy responses conclude the paper to portray early development.

Young Children's Awareness of Learning to Read and Write

From research in the 1950's and 1960's, it was believed that kindergarten and first grade children had serious difficulty talking about the purpose of written language, and held only a vague understanding of how they learn to read (Denny & Weintraub, 1966; Reid, 1966; Vernon, 1957). More recent work on the subject has determined that children can demonstrate how they read and can talk about an ongoing reading activity, although they do so in a simple way (Pramling, 1983). Furthermore, the quality or maturity of answers is related to their reading performance at the end of first grade (Stewart, 1986). Children who give a more complete explanation of how they are learning tend to be the better readers later.

Awareness of thinking and learning requires an ability to analyze and talk about one's own actions. From work by Vygotsky (1962), we know that children are able to analyze their own actions beginning at about age 4. This is apparent from listening to their speech, which at that time can be characterized in two ways, as social speech, that is, talking to others, and as private speech, that is, talking to oneself. When children begin to use private speech, they first say it aloud, even though the speech is directed to themselves, but then they turn it underground into the silent speech that we all use to monitor and evaluate our thoughts and actions. Extending Vygotsky's work, Diaz (1986) found that young children analyze their own actions with private speech by verbalizing the steps they are carrying out in a learning task and expressing the difficulties they are confronted with when trying to solve a problem. Since beginning reading and writing activities often involve problem-solving, young children are likely to use

private speech when they are learning to write and read. They ought then to be able to tell others about what they are doing and how they are learning.

Young Children's Awareness of Letter Sounds

Reading and spelling, which draw on the regularity of letter-to-sound correspondences, require an ability to represent letters and letter clusters in terms of sound patterns in words. We experienced readers can read words never seen before. Take, for example, the pseudoword *THUT*. We can separate and recognize the sound /TH/, and blend the sound with short *u* and *t* sounds to produce the correct word sound, and we do this without being conscious of the process. We can agree about the pronunciation of *THUT* as well as about the way it is spelled because we have an awareness, which can be explicit or implicit, of the regular letter-to-sound patterns that are in our language.

We believe that young children become aware of letter-sound patterns and their relationship to words as they learn letter names and sounds, as they recognize and print or spell words, and as they try to read and write new words (See Ehri, in press). However, some children do not acquire an awareness of letter-sound regularity along with their classmates in the primary grades. These children are at a considerable disadvantage in learning to read, and research shows that many do not become good readers. Information about letter-sound awareness could provide an early identification of children who might otherwise have difficulty learning to read and write.

Awareness of Print Meaning

It is not known how young children become aware that the words they see in print are meaningful and related to their speech. Certainly, children make connections between what is meant on a printed page and their own oral language or else they would not make sense of print. Soderbergh (1977) documented her child's developing word-meaning awareness which began with an unwillingness to read words that did not have any meaning to her (e.g., the word, "have"). The child also imagined at first that printed words were real entities (e.g., telling her mother she got worried when she read the word "frightened"). Snow (1983) suggested that the process of understanding printed ideas can take place as parents read to their child and talk to them about pictures, words, and the children's related personal experiences. Assessing children's developing understanding of print meaning could indicate whether children need more help linking print to meaning.

Home Influences on Early Reading and Writing Awareness

Since most children begin to recognize meaningful written words, and since some begin to hear and write down letters and spell words before they are taught in first grade to read, it must be true that reading and writing awareness is, or can be, initiated at home. A supportive literacy environment creates a context that fosters the early development of concepts and strategies that are useful for reading and writing. An effective home environment includes the availability of printed materials, reading to children from a very early age, regular book reading sessions, helping children read and write, and opportunities to see that literacy products can be useful (Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Stewart 1986; Teale, 1981; Wells, 1986).

With respect to writing, there is some evidence that drawing at home facilitates later writing. Genishi, Dyson, and Hass (1984) found writing-like drawing was a means of symbolizing significant people and objects in the child's world. There are many variations in the strategies that children use when writing, and children move freely between art, drama and writing to communicate. Allen (in press) and Sulzby (in press) provide examples of ways that children add writing to their pictures, and continue to draw when asked to write even after they can print, because they can depict their ideas more completely in an art form. It is also the case that children use art to rehearse for writing (Graves, 1983). Thus, children make statements of meaning in the form of a drawing as a place holder for ideas while working on the message. This conception is supported by Vygotsky, (1978, p. 116) who suggests that

"make-believe play, drawing and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of written language development." If teachers knew that parent support was lacking at home, they could suggest appropriate home activities.

A Reading and Writing Study

The findings presented here are from a study in an inner-city community of black low income children's reading and writing development. We chose to study these children because it is vital to understand better their progress toward literacy and how to intercede for their benefit.

We used interviews, reading and writing awareness tasks, and a parent questionnaire to assess children's awareness during the prekindergarten year. Then we instituted appropriate reading and writing activities in the latter part of that school year and retested the children after the summer break, when children were entering kindergarten. We looked for connections between their reading and writing performances and their awareness about reading and writing. Awareness of the learning process was measured with interview questions, letter-sound awareness was measured with analyses of children's spelling and writing attempts, and print-speech understanding was measured with questions about what a text said. Reading awareness was compared with writing awareness, and both were related to children's home literacy experiences.

Research Method

The study was carried out with two prekindergarten classrooms of black children who lived in an inner city neighborhood and attended a nearby church school. The teachers had college degrees and were certified teachers. The study was initiated in March of the prekindergarten year and was concluded the following September. The children ranged in age at the onset of the study from 4 years 2 months to 4 years 10 months. The setting was unusual in that the school believed in providing formal reading instruction beginning in the prekindergarten year. The teachers taught them to recognize letters, copy words and carry out reading readiness tasks. During the last three months of prekindergarten, we added instruction for one group to listen to and discuss stories and had another group recite and then read picture-phrase books, an approach used by McCormick and Mason (1986). Informal writing experiences were added for both groups. Although possible differences between the two groups could not be considered because of high attrition for the group that listened to stories, responses and changes over time for both groups of children were analyzed.

Children's awareness was measured with three sources of data. Children's awareness about the process of learning to read and write were evaluated with interview questions. Letter-sound knowledge was measured with spelling and writing tasks (adapted from Mason & McCormick, 1979). The Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT, Jastak & Jastak, 1965) was also used to assess children's letter and word knowledge. Children's understanding of written text was based on analyses of book reading tasks (adapted from an early reading test being developed by Mason & Stewart). Analysis of writing attempts and talk was adapted from Mason, Peterman, Powell, and Kerr (in press).

Awareness of learning to read consisted of two questions: (a) "Tell me, how are you beginning to learn to read?" (b) "Now we're going to play a game. You go over there and pick a doll or stuffed animal. Let's pretend that it can't read but wants to learn. Show me what you might do to help it learn." The awareness responses were scored according to a modified four-leveled response awareness score (Stewart, 1986). *Level 0* identifies children who can give no information, and respond with "I don't know" or "I'm not learning." A *Level 1* description includes only one actor. The child says, "I read" or "She reads." There is neither an elaboration of who helps nor is the child described as interacting with the text. *Level 2* includes the procedure and actions between significant others or the text but omits the description of the nature of an interaction with the other. Typical *Level 2* responses are, "My mother tells me" or "My teacher says to read it." *Level 3* includes the nature of the interaction with the other, such as, "I listen to the teacher and then I try to read it the same way" or "My mommy reads the words

and then I sound them out and read them to her." *Level 4*, which was not found among these young children, demonstrates the use of conditional knowledge, such as, "Well, you have to figure out the words. First you sound them out and say them real fast and then you read them to see if you know what it says" (examples from Stewart, 1986).

Awareness of learning to write was assessed from responses to the question, "How did you learn to write?" The responses, scored similarly to reading awareness, determine whether children perceive other people as significant helpers and what process they use for learning to write. *Level 0* indicates no response. At *Level 1* children describe writing in terms of one actor, such as, "I write" or "My Mommy writes." *Level 2* indicates that children are aware of others' help, such as, "My teacher tells me to write the words down." *Level 3* occurs when children describe an interaction between themselves and the text or another person (e.g., "My teacher writes the words on the board and then I copy them on the lines"). *Level 4*, describing a conditional process, was not found among these prekindergartners.

Letter-sound awareness was measured with a spelling task in which children were asked to use magnetic letters to spell 3- and 4-letter words (e.g., pat and tape). Each correctly identified letter, placed in its approximately appropriate position, was assigned a point (see Ehri, in press for clarification of this kind of analysis). Thus, a child who spelled *pat* as "p" would receive 1 point, "pt" or "pa" would be 2 points, and "pat" would be 3 points.

Awareness of letter-sounds was also assessed by analyzing children's writing while they were tested and during class time. The writing situations were either unstructured or structured. In unstructured situations, children were asked to "write something." In structured situations, they wrote about a short story that we had just read to them and about an activity that the class had done together, such as their trip to Sesame Street. Writing samples were scored according to the maturity of written form. The types of forms were scaled: (0) *No response*, (1) *Free form* (scribble), (2) *Pictures or isolated letters*, (3) *Groupings of letters with space boundaries to represent words*, and (4) *Real words*.

Awareness of print meaning was evaluated with a book-reading task in which children were asked to read a picture-phrase book. The book contained a 6-page story with an illustration and a 3 to 4 word phrase on each page. Since most children could not read, we measured their movement toward meaningful reading with: (0) *No response or don't know*, (1) *One-word labeling of picture*, (2) *Phrase or sentence labeling of pictures*, (3) *Connection of one picture with the next*, and (4) *Reading attempt*.

Awareness of meaning in children's own written attempts (whether printed letters or drawings) was evaluated by asking them to describe what they had written. Responses were evaluated on the basis of their meaningfulness, disregarding its form, using the following scores: (0) *Not related to task, don't know, or no response*, (1) *Single labeling of each picture or print* (e.g., "Here is a car," or "It's an 'f'"), (2) *Two or more ideas about a written product* (e.g., "A girl who wants to go home"), (3) *Connection of one piece of text or drawing with another* (e.g., "This is Sesame Street, and Oscar is in the garbage can. I saw him when I went to Sesame Street and here is me"), (4) *Reading attempt* (e.g., "The fat cat. The cat sat on the mat. This is what we copy off the board" or "This says house and this says Pat, and that's my mom's name").

Reading tasks were given at three points in time: March and May of prekindergarten and September of kindergarten. Writing was assessed with a test in May and September, and writing samples were collected in the classroom between March and May and again in September. All tasks were administered individually except the class writing which took place in the classroom with adults circulating around the room and writing down what children said about the picture or writing sample they had made.

A parent questionnaire (reported by Mason & Dunning, 1986; Stewart, 1986) was given to parents in order to assess the amount and type of early literacy support provided at home. Questions about the

type and frequency of home reading and writing experiences were analyzed to determine whether parent support for literacy was related to children's awareness.

Results of the Analyses

Children were tested on three occasions with the reading measures and on two occasions with the writing measures. The average scores for the three time periods are displayed in Table 1. There were no overall changes in children's awareness of learning to read and write but there were improvements over time in their understanding of letter sounds, in awareness of print meaning, and in their letter and word recognition (WRAT). We presume that children did not change in their awareness about learning to read and write because this ability changes slowly over time (Stewart, 1986).

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Most children talked about how they were learning to read and write by describing their own actions or another person's help, and some described the nature of their interaction with others. The letter-sound awareness measures showed that in March most of the children had no awareness of letter sounds, but by May they had begun to place a few letters correctly when trying to spell words, and they continued to improve over the summer. Writing of letters lagged behind reading and changed less over time. Print-meaning awareness determined that children were more likely to label pictures in March but by May they were connecting the pictures. No additional improvement occurred during the summer. Finally, the letter and word recognition (WRAT) scores indicated that the children were able to name most of the upper case letters in March (a score of 25 signifies recognition of all the letters on the test), and they improved slightly over time.

Relating Reading Awareness to Writing Awareness

As children became aware of reading constructs, they also became aware of writing. In the next table (Table 2) correlation values describe how well related the reading measures were to the writing measures. Although only 18 children could be tested at all three times, the values do suggest that reading and writing are moderately well related to one another, a result which Dobson (in press) also finds. Moreover, most of the measures are moderately related to the standardized measure, the WRAT, which suggests that letter-name knowledge is acquired in conjunction with reading and writing awareness.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

One explanation for the tie between reading and writing awareness is that children who try to read also try to write, as papers by Allen (in press), Dobson (in press), Ehri (in press), and Sulzby (in press) demonstrate. Here we found that as children began to recognize a few printed words, some began to write letters and words. Their descriptions of what they produced then reflected what was written. For example, in May one child drew a picture and wrote his name. His description of his picture was "This is about a man named bad Joshua. He kicked out the glass and went to jail. I saw this story on T.V." In September, the child began printing words and after a long deliberation, he said, "I write about the honey." He pointed to a picture of honeycomb in the book where he had copied the words and said, "I write *I* but I don't know what's this name," as he pointed to the letters *TROT* that he had written. "I got this from the book. I just made up my mind on this one." He had figured out what one word was but did not attempt to read the other words he copied. This example, which is typical of children who were beginning to acquire letter-sound awareness, indicates that young children can use their partial knowledge about how to read for both reading and writing attempts.

Relating Literacy Awareness to Home Support

Connections between children's literacy awareness and their home support were analyzed from responses about how they were learning. They described who was involved at home in helping them learn, what activities and materials they used, and what was the nature of interactions with others. Table 3 lists all the different responses children made regarding learning to read and to write.

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

Children described a wider range of materials and activities and types of adult-child interactions when they talked about learning to read than when they talked about learning to write. Reading activities they described reflected their notion that reading could be watching, writing, drawing, talking as well as actual reading. Writing activities they mentioned were limited to looking, copying, and practicing. They described only one type of writing interaction but mentioned six different types of reading interactions.

One explanation for the paucity of learning-to-write responses may be the constricted view that these teachers and parents had regarding writing. Children practiced copying letters and words in school and took the worksheets home for further practice. Creative and free writing activity and writing with drawing had not been encouraged until we began working with the teachers. School reading activities, by contrast, had included some story reading that went beyond the worksheets and board work, and some parents had books, magazines, and other literacy materials at home for their children. These differences could be seen in children's awareness responses. For example, one child said about learning to read, "My mommy buys books and flash cards. And we practice them." Another child said, "My mommy reads to me and then I read the book back to her. If I have a problem with a word she tells me. I can read good." A typical description of learning to write was, "My big sister teach me."

Table 4 compares these parents' questionnaire responses with those from a sample of 100 mostly middle class, black and white families from rural and small town regions of Illinois (Mason & Dunning, 1986). Responses to nearly every item reveal less support for literacy by the inner city black parents. Rural and small town parents began reading to their child at an earlier age, they were more likely to set up a regular time for reading, they read to the child more frequently, and they provided more help for reading, though they provided less help for writing. Despite these differences, most parents from both sites said their children were interested in reading and writing, suggesting that one source of inner city black children's difficulty in learning to read is an insufficient amount of reading support from home, not a lack of interest. The results also suggest that schools might be able to change the level of support by distributing home literacy materials. Writing may have been better supported in this inner city school because teachers assigned home writing, albeit too limited. If the home assignments had provided a broader range of writing activities and had included books and other reading materials, it is conceivable that a larger proportion of inner city parents would have provided better support for their children's emerging reading and writing.

[Insert Table 4 about here.]

Vignettes of Three Children

Our results indicate that children in prekindergarten can talk about how they are learning to read and write, they have an emerging awareness of letter sounds, and they are aware of text meaning. They can also talk about learning to write, they can draw pictures to write, and they can present meaningful descriptions of their pictures. A more concrete sense of these children's awareness and how they changed is presented next with three of the children. Odessa was behind her classmates in learning to read and write, Senai was above, and Myesha was about average with respect to classmates. Tables 5 and 6 summarize their awareness of reading and writing over time, Table 7 presents their talk about

their writing, and Table 8 lists parents' questionnaire responses regarding home support for reading and writing.

[Insert Tables 5, 6, 7, & 8 about here.]

Table 5 includes scores on the beginning reading portion of the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) in which the children were asked to name and match a set of letters and then to print their name and identify some common words. A score of 25 indicates letter-naming and printing ability while a higher score indicates recognition of words as well. All three children could name letters and Senai also knew a few words.

The letter-sound task had children try to spell 3- and 4-letter words. Although none of these children could do it in March or May, Odessa's score of 1 in September indicates an emerging awareness because she put down 1 letter correctly (spelling *PAT* as "pfi") while Senai's and Myesha's September scores indicate a substantial change in awareness with 10 letters correctly placed. Myesha correctly identified one or two consonant sounds in every word. Senai spelled *PAT* correctly and got several other words partly correct (e.g., spelling *SACK* as "sar").

The text meaning task required children to read a 13-word caption book. It was one that had been read to Odessa and Myesha but Senai had not heard it (which explains his lower scores). Odessa's score of 1 indicates one-word labeling of the pictures on each page (saying, "Go" for each picture). Myesha read many of the words correctly on both occasions, getting 1 point when she said, for example, "Go out" for the text, *Go pig*. Senai elaborated on the pictures, saying on the *Go Pig* page, for example, "A pig is running," a response which secured 1 of his 3 points in September.

Regarding the learning-to-read awareness task, Odessa gave a *Level 0* response in prekindergarten because she said she did not know how she was learning to read. However, in September of kindergarten she explained, "My mommy and daddy, we read books." Myesha's awareness responses were more complex, with one being, "My mommy teach me, my mommy read me a story and then I teach her, then I read my mommy a story and then she read me a story again." Senai was able to talk about learning to read with more attention to the interaction with parents, particularly in September when he said, "They talk to me, they buy me some school cards. They read me a story. I do my flash cards and my mommy writes some numbers on it and some words." In May he did not mention his mother or father but did say, when referring to one favorite book, "I know how to read *Clifford*, I read stories."

Writing awareness was also evident from their writing form, the meaningfulness of their descriptions, and their descriptions of how they were learning to write. Scores are in Table 6 and their responses in September to the three writing tasks are in Table 7.

Odessa's writing was completely pictorial, no letters, and when asked to draw "something" her pictures were usually limited to a smiling face. She made several pictures and gave an extended description for a structured class activity when she was asked to write about springtime. When asked how she was learning to write, however, she either said nothing or said, "My mommy."

Myesha's writing form was also pictorial but sometimes included letters. In the structured tasks her descriptions were more elaborate and she connected the pictures into story-like forms. Regarding learning to write, she reported on both occasions, "My daddy teached me."

Most of Senai's writing samples were pictures that usually included his name. His descriptions of his art were higher in meaningfulness when he was asked to respond to a story or an activity than when he was asked to write "something." When asked how he was learning to write, his response was similar to Myesha's with, "My mommy teaches me."

Odessa's responses to questions about learning to read and write indicate that she was aware that she was not learning to read alone, but she was unable to describe what or how she was learning. We suspect that Odessa's low level of awareness was due in part to the low level of her home literacy experiences (Table 8). Her mother said that she only read to her occasionally, that there was no regular time for reading, and that she never helped the child in reading but helped daily in writing. Children's books but no magazines were available at home. Odessa liked to look at a few literacy materials but only tried to read traffic signs, billboards, and a favorite story. She tried to print only her name and alphabet letters.

Myesha, who was able to describe how she was learning to read, had received more home literacy support (Table 8). Myesha's mother reported that she read weekly to the child, "occasionally" had a regular time for reading, and helped daily with writing but hardly ever with reading. The child looked at and tried to read many types of materials, though few children's books and no magazines were available in the home.

Senai gave an extensive description about learning to read, though less about how he was learning to write. His parents responded (Table 8) that Senai was read to daily, that there was a regular time for reading, and that he was helped weekly to read and daily to write. Many children's books and magazines were available at home. He looked at and tried to read a wide variety of materials, including books, magazines, and labels. Writing at home also appeared to be substantial, consisting of alphabet letters, words, telephone messages, shopping lists, copying, reminder notes, and labeling pictures.

Parents' responses to the questionnaire could be related to children's reading awareness responses. Senai and Myesha were given considerable support for reading and were furthest along in awareness of how to read, of letters and sounds, and of expression of print meaning. Odessa was behind Senai and Myesha in reading awareness and received the least amount of support. However, parents' responses did not concur with children's writing awareness. All three parents said they helped in writing every day, yet children's writing awareness was less well developed than their reading. Why wasn't Odessa better able to write if she was helped every day, and why were all three children less able to describe how they were learning to write than to read? We suspect that the writing practice, copywork of letters and words and circling, underlining, tracing, matching letters and words, did little to foster children's awareness of writing. This explanation is supported from the more elaborate descriptions by children of learning to read than of learning to write that was reported in Table 3.

Conclusion

Even before preschool children are able to read and write, they can talk about how they are learning. Moreover, the quality of their responses indicate their emerging awareness of literacy. With help from adults at home and school, some can assign a few letters correctly for spelling, though most cannot write words. They can talk about what they have written or drawn, and they have begun to understand how print has meaning and can be construed as a story or report. Some can even produce stories with titles and story endings.

Parents differ in their support for their children's early literacy experiences and in the types of interactions with their children, and those differences appear to be related to children's awareness of reading and writing. Although the children in this study had received a very limited view of reading and writing at school, a view that seems to have affected parents' home support, the added experiences of free writing and book reading that we provided during the spring of the prekindergarten year may have encouraged some parents to use a wider range of literacy activities, and helped children become more aware of how to read and write.

Until additional classroom and home reading and writing samples are gathered from a larger group of children, we hesitate to recommend instructional changes. There is no doubt, however, that young

children, even those who can be labeled at-risk for learning to read, are able to talk about learning to read and write. Children's perceptions of reading and writing and their emerging knowledge about literacy as well as children's awareness and the extent and quality of support they receive for literacy appear to be linked. Children given more support at home express higher levels of awareness. As well, classroom reading and writing activities seem to make a difference, with a wider range of activities furthering literacy awareness.

The results indicate that young children's responses to reading and writing tasks communicate their developing knowledge of literacy. This means that teachers and researchers could obtain more complete pictures of children's understanding of reading and writing by employing some of the techniques that we described here. They could evaluate children's talk about how they are learning, assess their knowledge of letter sounds, and listen to what they think a commercially produced story or their own drawing or text means. They could ask questions about children's writing attempts as well as about their reading. In addition, they could obtain measures of the extent of support at home for literacy with a set of questions to parents.

More complete information about children's literacy awareness ought to enable teachers to intercede in children's behalf. If they were provided a broader viewpoint about literacy development, teachers could initiate programs that introduce children to a wide range of literacy activities at school and offer a variety of ideas to parents for home use.

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Table 1

Average Levels of Awareness in Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Classrooms

Awareness Level	March	May	September
Learning about reading	1.9	1.8	1.9
Learning about writing	---	1.6	1.6
Letter sounds, reading	.4	3.2	4.4
Letter sounds, writing	---	2.3	2.6
Print meaning, reading	2.3	3.4	3.2
Print meaning, writing	---	2.4	2.4
WRAT score	22.5	23.9	24.9

Table 2

Correlations Between Reading and Writing Awareness in May of the Prekindergarten Year

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Learning about reading	---	.25	.60	.42	.50	.34	.47
2. Letter sounds, reading	---	---	.45	.29	.12	.40	.23
3. Print meaning, reading	---	---	---	.25	.58	.11	.48
4. Learning about writing	---	---	---	---	.05	.33	.57
5. Letter sounds, writing	---	---	---	---	---	.67	.61
6. Print meaning, writing	---	---	---	---	---	---	.47
7. WRAT score	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Table 3

Summary of the Nature of Reading and Writing Awareness

Who helps	
Writing	Family members, friends and teacher
Reading	Family members, friends and teacher
What activities	
Writing	Watches, copies & writes
Reading	Spells, writes, does homework, says words, reads, draws, talks, words, traces, repeated reading
What materials	
Writing	Alphabets, letters, hand, names, words, numbers
Reading	Hand, letters, notebook, words, homework, stories, books, specific books (*Clifford* and *The Three Bears*), flash cards, numbers, scribble-scrabble
Nature of the interaction	
Writing	Child is told to copy or write
Reading	Child and parent solve reading problem Child and parent do repeated reading Parent drills Child listens and repeats words Child tries to sound out words alone Child's reading errors are corrected

Table 4

Literacy Support From Low-Income Parents in Comparison to a Sample of Middle-Income Parents

Questionnaire item	Parent response	
	Inner city	Rural and Small city
Frequency of reading to child (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	2.8	3.3
Child's age when reading was begun	2.1	1.6
Regular time for reading (2=yes, 1=occasionally, 0=no)	0.9	1.3
Number of children's books in home	28.6	81.4
Frequency of parent help to child in reading (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	2.2	2.8
Frequency of parent help to child in writing (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	3.4	2.9
Number of literacy items child likes to look at	5.7	4.8
Number of literacy items child tries to read	5.4	5.5
Number of literacy items child tries to write	3.4	2.9

Table 5

Reading Awareness Measures For Three Children

	WRAT		Letter Sounds		Text Meaning		Learning to Read	
	May	Sept	May	Sept	May	Sept	May	Sept
Odessa	24	23	0	1	1	1	0	2
Myesha	24	22	0	10	4	4	3	3
Senai	26	27	0	10	2	3	2	3

Table 6

Writing Awareness Measures For Three Children

	Form of Writing		Writing Meaning in Class		Learning to Write	
	May	Sept	May	Sept	May	Sept
Odessa	2	2	3	3	1	0
Myesha	3	4	3	4	2	2
Senai	2	2	3	4	2	2

Table 7

Writing Descriptions Across Tasks

Unstructured Test	Structured Test	Structured Class Situation
Odessa		
"It's a happy face."	"A girl who wants to go home."	"These are kites that are floating on the water. Two boys are flying their kites. The sun is shining. It's a nice day. I also see a large rainbow."
Myesha		
"This is the moon and this is the rainbow."	"This is rain and she got an umbrella, she put her umbrella on her but it was still raining and then she held on her umbrella and went walking."	"The girl was crying because she didn't went to Sesame Place. Then she went to Sesame place by herself."
Senai		
"cat and my name." "It's a tree"	"Jan wanted to to go outside so she put on her rain-no she put on her dress first, put on her dress and she wanted to put on her raincoat and she put on her boots and she said it's fun to jump in the rain."	"This is a museum. There are cats and snails. There is a lady at the museum who sells souvenirs. There are space ships all at the museum, also an elevator and an alarm system. The name of the museum is the Senai Brown Museum (this was written on the picture)."

Table 8

Parent Estimate of Support at Home For Literacy

Questionnaire Item	Odessa	Myesha	Senai
Frequency of reading to child (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	2	3	4
Child's age when reading was begun	1	1	1
Regular time for reading (1=yes, 1=occasionally, 0=no)	0	1	2
Number of children's books in home	25	15	50
Frequency of parent help to child in reading (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	1	1	3
Frequency of parent help to child in writing (1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=weekly, 4=daily)	4	4	4
Number of literacy items child likes to look at	4	7	6
Number of literacy items child tries to read	3	7	9
Number of literacy items child tries to write	2	3	7