

# CHAPTER 13



## Best Practices in Early Writing Instruction

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Young children are irrepressible mark makers. It is the rare parent who cannot tell a story about finding their preschooler's writing in unexpected places. Parents of our students have reported their young writers independently and neatly filling every page of the family checkbook with looping lines of personal cursive, or leaving a signature of unconventional letterlike forms on the wall. Several decades of early literacy research have established that children are forming foundational understandings about print in these first forays into writing (e.g., Rowe, 2009; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000; Tolchinsky, 2006). The early writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy have been termed *emergent literacy* (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). While children's emergent writing is often unconventional in form, it is not random. Instead, young children's writing is shaped by their current understandings about print. As with oral language, children construct hypotheses about print and test them as they take part in everyday literacy events (Rowe, 1994). For young writers, conventional understandings about print are a by-product of repeated opportunities for participation (Cambourne, 2009; Rowe, 2008) in events where literacy is used for meaningful social purposes.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

In this chapter, we describe classroom environments and interactions that capitalize on children's natural inclination to explore writing when it is used for authentic

purposes. Our goal is to provide research-based insights about how teachers can support young children as writers in the classroom. Support for these ideas comes from a series of classroom-based research studies we have conducted in preschool and early grades classrooms (Flushman, 2012; Rowe, 1994, 1998, 2008; Rowe, Fitch, & Bass, 2003; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010), as well as the work of other early literacy researchers. Our insights about instruction for young writers have been further developed through a 4-year collaboration with 13 public school prekindergarten teachers and their literacy coaches as part of the Enhanced Language and Literacy Success Project (Rowe & Dickinson, 2008), funded by a U.S. Department of Education Early Reading First grant.

Specifically, we address the following questions:

- ❖ What kinds of writing can we expect from 2- to 6-year-olds?
- ❖ What kinds of curricular environments support young writers?
- ❖ What kinds of teacher interactions support young writers?

## **EMERGENT WRITING: PATTERNS IN FORMS AND MEANINGS**



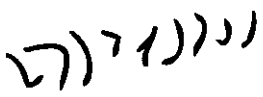
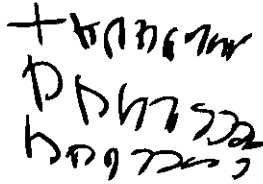

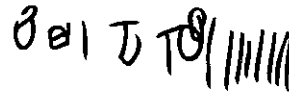
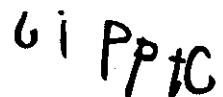
Learning to write is much more than learning how to form letters. As young writers construct and test hypotheses about the way print looks and the ways marks represent speech, they also learn about the kinds of messages print carries and its purposes. When children write in supportive classroom environments, they simultaneously learn about the content, processes, and purposes of writing (Rowe, 1994).

### ***Writing Forms***

Table 13.1 presents an overview of the print forms 2- to 6-year-olds used in the Write Start! Project (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Rowe & Wilson, 2009) when they were asked to write a caption for a photo showing them playing at school. Descriptive categories were generated through qualitative analysis of the children's writing in the fall and spring of each school year. These patterns, ordered from least to most sophisticated in Table 13.1, confirm earlier findings (e.g., Hildreth, 1936; Sulzby, 1985) that children's writing forms become more conventional in appearance over time. Each category also provides clues to children's current hypotheses about print.

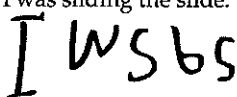
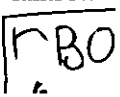

For example, when asked to write, some children make no marks or choose to draw (Categories 1.1 and 1.2). While these responses tell us little about the child's writing, they speak volumes about the child's willingness to "have a go" at writing. Other youngsters demonstrate a willingness to participate as writers by producing scribbles (Category 1.3) usually focusing more on the physical/motor activity

**TABLE 13.1. Emergent Writing Forms Produced by 2- to 6-Year-Olds in the Write Start! Writing Assessment (Rowe & Wilson, 2009)**

Category	Label	Description	Example
1.1	No marks	Child makes no marks.	
1.2	Drawing only	Child draws a picture instead of writing; marks are clearly identifiable as a picture.	
1.3	Scribbles	Child purposefully makes marks; large mass of undifferentiated scribbles; uses forearm movements to create large scribbles.	
1.4	Scribble units	Child makes small patches of scribbles separated from one another with space; usually created with wrist and hand movements.	
1.5	Individual stroke units	Child makes many repeated lines, circles, or curve strokes, usually of the same type.	
1.6a	Personal manuscript	Child makes letterlike forms; combinations of strokes within the same unit; not recognizable as a conventional letter.	
	or		
1.6b	Personal cursive	Child makes horizontal runs of loops, or zig zags.	
1.7	Conventional letters plus inventions	Child writes at least one recognizable letter, but it may be upside down or backward; the remaining marks may be letterlike forms, scribbles, and so on.	
1.8	Conventional letters (no letter-sound correspondence)	Child uses upper- or lower-case, may be mixed; reversals are OK; recognizable by others as letters; no letter-sound correspondence.	
1.9	Conventional letters, memorized words	Child uses conventional letters and words, but writes something memorized like his or her name or "I love you."	Child writes name.

(continued)

**TABLE 13.1.** (continued)

Category	Label	Description	Example
1.10	Invented spelling: First-letter sound	Child uses first-letter sound of word or syllable; may not use conventional letter: <i>c</i> for <i>seal</i> ; may contain other random letters; must have evidence that child is intentionally generating a spelling with letter–sound correspondence.	I was sliding the slide.  I was sliding the slide.
1.11	Invented spelling: First- and last- letter sounds	Child uses first- and last-letter sounds of word or syllables; many sounds left out.	"rainbow" 
1.12	Invented spelling: Most sounds represented	Child attempts to sound out most sounds in the syllable or word; letter choices may not be correct.	"ship" 

of mark making, than the resulting visual array. Children who produce scribble units (Category 1.4) show awareness that print is composed of units separated by white space. Stroke units (Category 1.5) demonstrate understanding of units as well as more sophisticated ideas about the kinds of strokes that make up English manuscript letters. Personal manuscript (Category 1.6a; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) is visually even more printlike, in that children now notice that print strings involve variation in letter shapes and combine more than one kind of stroke in each unit. In our data, personal cursive (Category 1.6b; Harste et al., 1984) often occurs at about the same time as personal manuscript, but represents a visual focus on the connected and linear features of print, and perhaps on cursive forms of writing.

Beginning with Category 1.7, children show the direct influence of adult instruction in forming letters, often those that make up their names (Treiman, Kessler, & Bourassa, 2001). At first, children focus on visual features of letters, rather than the ways letters are related to sounds. Children mix conventional letters with stroke units or letterlike forms (Category 1.7) and later when they can more easily write letters, their texts contain only conventional letters (Category 1.8), but without letter–sound correspondence. Some children use well-practiced conventional forms and spellings to write memorized words or short messages (Category 1.9).

Starting with Category 1.10, children's hypotheses shift from a purely visual focus, to one that recognizes the connection between visual and sound-based features of print. When children begin to select letters to represent sounds in words, they actively apply the alphabetic principle. This is a watershed event in early writing, in that it marks an entirely new understanding about print processes. From this point, children's hypotheses about spelling words (Gentry, 2000) move from

the outside edges of the word by including first and last sounds (Category 1.11), to spellings that also include internal sounds of syllables and words (Category 1.12).

As children form new hypotheses about print forms, they do not drop all previous forms from their repertoire (Sulzby, 1991), but instead use less or more sophisticated forms depending on task demands and their interest (Kress, 1997) at the moment. Still, data from the Write Start! Project confirm that when samples of children's writing produced in response to a standard task are analyzed across time, they become increasingly more conventional.

Marise's responses to the Write Start! photo-labeling task show a typical progression. At 2 years, 11 months of age (Figure 13.1), Marise uses a combination of personal cursivelike zigzags that are joined into a mass of scribbles. At age 3 years, 11 months (Figure 13.2), he combines circular stroke units with shaky letters, mostly

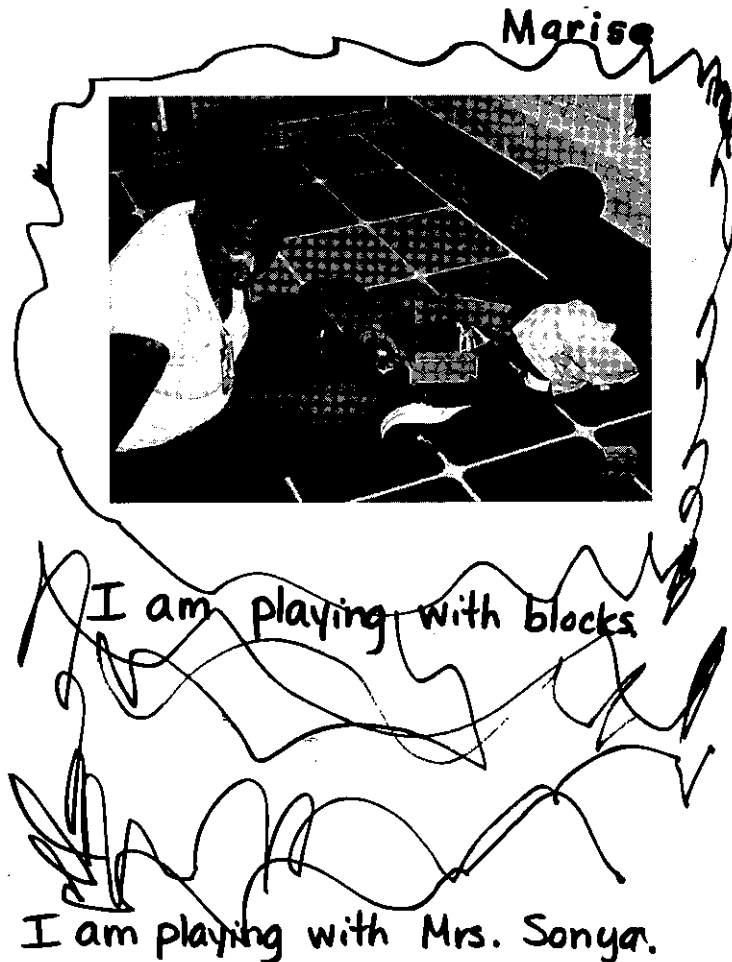
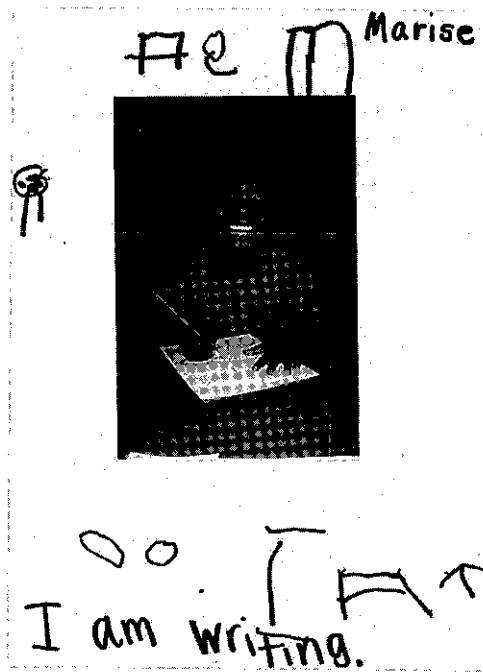


FIGURE 13.1. Marise's photo label: 2 years, 11 months.



**FIGURE 13.2.** Marise's photo label at 3 years, 11 months.

selected from his name. As he begins prekindergarten at 4 years, 11 months (Figure 13.3), he purposefully chooses the letter *I* to stand for the first word of his message, "I am writing on the little board," but selects the remaining letters randomly. By the end of prekindergarten, at 5 years, 7 months of age (Figure 13.4), he confidently produces a message using invented spellings that represent the initial sound of each word.

### **Writing Meanings**

There has been considerably less research focusing on the *meanings* children assign to their marks. In the Write Start! photo-labeling task, we asked 2- to 6-year-olds to read their marks, as a way of understanding how they assigned meaning to their marks. Table 13.2 presents categories describing the kinds of messages children produced when asked to read their written photo labels (Rowe & Wilson, 2009).

Initially, even with adult modeling and support, some children refused to read their marks (Category 2.1). Other children solved the problem of assigning meaning to their marks by producing talk, but without any discernable links to the photo (Category 2.2). A third approach to assigning meaning to the marks was to read a conventional message previously associated with print but not associated with the photo-labeling task. Beginning with the fourth category (Category 2.4), children

MARISE



I IPO  
A OMB

I am writing on the little board.

FIGURE 13.3. Marise's photo label at 4 years, 11 months.

MARISE



I WPOENTMB

I was playing on the monkey bars.

FIGURE 13.4. Marise's photo label at 5 years, 7 months.

showed awareness that the message should in some way relate to the writing event under way. The final two categories (Categories 2.5 and 2.6) showed awareness that the caption should relate either generally or specifically to the items pictured in the photo.

These categories represent differential willingness to assign meaning to marks and most importantly, qualitatively different approaches to deciding what one's marks might say. In short, these data suggest that 2- to 6-year-olds are not only developing and testing hypotheses about print forms but also about their roles as writers, how messages are related to print, and the kinds of messages one might expect to find expressed through writing in different situations.

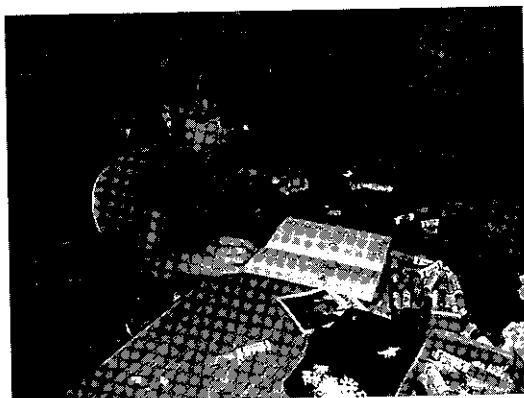
**TABLE 13.2. Types of Messages Produced by 2- to 6-Year-Olds in the Write Start! Photo-Labeling Task (Rowe & Wilson, 2009)**

Category	Written label	Description	Example
2.1	No understandable oral message	No message assigned to marks.	Silence. Unintelligible mumble. Gesture only.
2.2	Message unrelated to photo-labeling task	Child reads a message, but it is not related to photo content, or to the writing materials, processes, or functions of the photo-labeling task.	"I love my Mommy." [Photo shows the child working a puzzle.]
2.3	Message unrelated to photo-labeling task/other conventional message	Child reads message not related to photo or task. Only "standard" messages like those in the example would score here; otherwise, score as 1.	"I Love You." "A, B, C, D" Names of family/friends [not pictured]
2.4	Global relation to writing materials, functions, or processes	Child reads message that describes characteristics of writing materials, the function of the product, or processes used in writing marks; often sounds like oral language directed at the adult rather than a written label.	"It's red." "It's for you. I'm gonna take it home." "I went around and around." [to describe movement of pen]
2.5	Global relation to photo content	Child reads message that is related to items pictured in photo; often sounds like oral language directed at assessor rather than a written label.	"It's about dinosaurs." [Photo shows the child playing with dinosaur toys and blocks.]
2.6	Photo label: word, phrase, or sentence	Child reads message as word, phrase, or sentence that serves as a label for items or actions in photo.	"Bike" [Photo shows the child on the playground riding a bike.] "I am playing with KeMiyah." [Photo shows the child playing with KeMiyah.]



### **Form–Meaning Relationships**

As a final observation about early writing development, we note that our data (Flushman, 2012) show that conventional writing form is not always related to sophisticated messages in the ways that most adults expect; that is, the ability to legibly write alphabet letters does not always mean the child holds sophisticated notions about how one assigns meaning to print or the kinds of messages that are appropriate for a particular writing situation. Conversely, children producing sophisticated messages do not always use sophisticated writing forms to represent them. Some children, like Marise at age 2 (Figure 13.1), write and read their marks with a sophisticated understanding of the expected match between task and message, while producing highly unconventional print forms. Conversely, some children use relatively sophisticated marks, but approach the meaning-making aspect of writing less conventionally. In Figure 13.5, Nurrava's text is composed of several lines of letters and personal manuscript divided by spaces and produced with conventional directional patterns. When asked to read her marks, Nurrava produced a lengthy, stream-of-consciousness personal narrative with content that was related to neither the photo



~ V L K P P T  
M P P S P P T  
K L S E I A A A A # I I  
A A P P A A A A P P A A A  
A A P P A A A A P P A A A

**FIGURE 13.5.** Nurrava's photo caption: "I wanta go to my . . . gonna see my house, then Mommy is in the house, then cry and now I'm crying. . . ."

nor the immediate writing event. Her understanding of visual features of print were more sophisticated than her understanding of social purposes for writing.

For young writers, control of conventional form does not equal control of written language (Harste et al., 1984). Writing not only requires knowledge of print forms, but also of writing processes, messages, and social purposes for writing. Children explore each of these aspects of writing, but not necessarily in a logical or predetermined sequence. Data from the Write Start! Project support Clay's (1979) finding that there is not one expected sequence for forming and testing hypotheses about how print works, nor does every child form exactly the same hypotheses.

### ***Summing Up: Kidwatching as the Foundation for Early Writing Instruction***

An understanding of young writers' approaches to producing print forms and messages is foundational to implementing the best practices in early writing instruction that we describe in the next sections. First, teachers need to be good "kid watchers" (Goodman, 1996) who use children's unconventional writing performances not as evidence of "errors" but instead as indicators of children's current hypotheses about print (Goodman & Goodman, 2004). Second, because children's print hypotheses are multifaceted, teachers need to consider each child's writing profile. They need to consistently ask themselves "What does this child know about print forms, processes, meanings, and purposes?" Third, early childhood teachers need to take a "strengths" approach to teaching writing. Recognizing that children's hypotheses about print are not always equally sophisticated in all respects, teachers can consciously use children's most sophisticated understandings about writing as resources to support exploration of other features of print. Fourth, teachers need to expect and value variation in children's approaches to writing. Children's interests (Kress, 1997; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) influence what they notice about print and the ways they take part in writing events.

## **DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT YOUNG WRITERS**

Our goal in designing instructional environments for young writers has been to capitalize on children's natural curiosity about writing and to build into our curriculum the same conditions that have supported their learning outside of school. A number of emergent literacy researchers (Cambourne, 2009; Goodman, 1990; Harste et al., 1984) have argued that children begin to learn about print in the same ways they learn oral language. Cambourne's analysis of the conditions of "natural learning" suggests that supportive environments for learning to write have the following characteristics:

1. Immersion: Learners are saturated in print.
2. Demonstration: Learners see writing in use.
3. Expectation: Learners are expected to be capable of participating as writers.
4. Response: Learners get feedback from knowledgeable others.
5. Responsibility: Learners make choices about what demonstrations to engage with and what kinds of texts they write.
6. Approximation: Learners have freedom to make mistakes as they learn to write.
7. Use: Learners have opportunities to use the writing skills they are learning.

Based on social and cultural views of early literacy learning (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2003; Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993; Rowe, 2010), we extend Cambourne's ideas by adding that children's hypotheses about writing are collaboratively constructed as they engage in writing with other members of their communities. Literacy learning is a collective process rather than an individual one. Learners not only get feedback (i.e., response) from others but also provide responses that help to shape the local writing practices of their homes, communities, and classrooms.

Based on these perspectives and our analyses of children's participation in emergent writing classrooms, we have created our own "top 10" list of essential curricular supports for emergent writers (see Figure 13.6). We consider each of these features to be essential to creating environments where young children are enthusiastically engaged as writers.

### *Essential Supports for Emergent Writers*

#### *Young Writers*

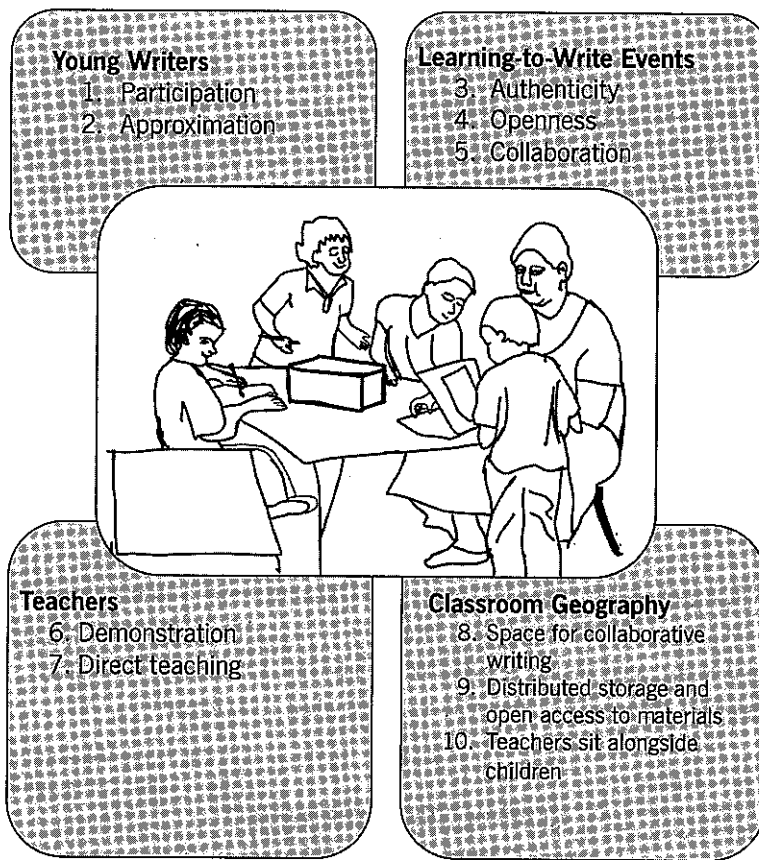
1. Participation: Children write for a variety of purposes.
2. Approximation: Emergent forms of writing are expected and valued.

#### *Learning-to-Write Events*

3. Authenticity: Writing is used for functional purposes.
4. Openness: Children of all skill levels can participate successfully in writing activities.
5. Collaboration: Children work with adults and peers during writing.

#### *Teachers*

6. Demonstration: Teachers write in front of children; texts are strategically accessed as demonstrations.
7. Direct teaching: Teachers teach formal and informal writing lessons.



**FIGURE 13.6.** Curricular supports for emergent writers.

### *Classroom Geography*

8. Materials: There is distributed storage and open access to books and writing materials.
9. Space: Classrooms have spaces for collaborative writing.
10. Bodies: Teachers sit alongside of children as they write.

In our work with teachers, we have used this framework and the questions it generates to design instructional environments where children's participation in writing is central. To give readers a feel for the ways these features work together in classroom writing events, we turn to Classroom Narrative 1, the Frog Log event, where two prekindergarten boys, Bronte and Jaron, worked with Rowe to write about a frog they were observing at the science table. Bronte was a confident writer. He often came to the writing table to compose his own texts using a combination

of conventional letters and invented spellings. Jaron rarely chose to write on his own, despite many teacher invitations. He complied with teacher requests to write by dashing off a few quickly formed marks, usually scribble units, stroke units, or a few letters from his name. After reading his text to the teacher, he quickly moved to other preferred activities, rarely staying with a writing activity for more than a few minutes.

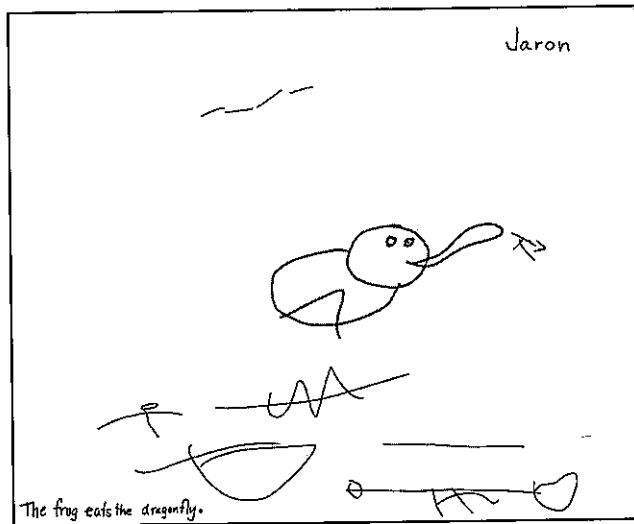
The Frog Log event occurred in April, when both boys had had many opportunities to take part in classroom writing events. While the writing occurred during the learning centers period, Bronte's and Jaron's interest in the frog began earlier when they had an opportunity to look at the frog and take part in a lively discussion of how to observe a live animal without scaring it, what frogs eat, and so on.

In Classroom Narrative 1, we pick up the action at the classroom science table. Column 1 presents the transcript of Jaron's interactions with Ms. Debbie (Rowe) as they drew and wrote about the frog. For easier reference, numbers have been inserted in the narrative to mark participants' turns and to show the sequence of events as transcribed from the video. Some turns have been omitted because of space considerations. Following the narrative, we discuss 10 essential curricular supports for young writers, referring to column 2 for examples. Then, we discuss features of teacher talk and actions as highlighted in column 3.

**CLASSROOM NARRATIVE 1:  
COMPOSING JARON'S FROG LOG**

Transcript	Curricular supports	Teacher talk and actions
Jaron and Bronte have joined Ms. Debbie at the science table. All three are peering through the sides of a plastic box containing a frog their teacher has found in her yard at home.	Space for collaborative writing Teacher sits alongside children	
(1) "Do you see 'im?" Jaron asks.		Find common ground
(2) "I don't right now," replies Ms. Debbie.		↓
(3) Jaron points to the side of the box. "I see him. I see him. I see him on the <i>dirt</i> . Right here on the dirt."		
(4) Ms. Debbie peers into the box.		
(5) Bronte arrives and joins the inspection of the frog, leaning over Ms. Debbie's shoulder.		
(6) "He won't come out 'cause he scared!" Jaron insists.		

(20) Ms. Debbie draws a picture of a frog on her paper. "Let's make his big ol' eyes. I'm not that good at drawing." [Figure 13.7]	Authenticity Openness Demonstration	
(21) Jaron leans over to see what she is drawing. "That his tongue," he comments with excitement.	↓	
(22) Ms. Debbie continues drawing as the boys look on. She narrates each addition to the picture. "There are his legs. Let's make him have a big long tongue."		
(23) As she finishes drawing, she puts the picture and her pencil on the table between Bronte and Jaron. "Now draw some bugs he's eating," she suggests.	Openness Collaboration Participation as artist	Invite (to draw) Suggest
(24) Jaron grabs the pencil before Bronte can reach it. "I do it! I do it!" He begins to add to Ms. Debbie's drawing. [Figure 13.7]		
(28) When Jaron finishes drawing he holds his paper up, facing Ms. Debbie and Bronte. "There the dragonfly," he announces.	Approximation	Share
(29) Ms. Debbie reaches across the table to point to the mark representing a dragonfly. "Yeah . . . frogs love dragonflies when they come by."		
(30) "Make it say, 'The frog eats dragonflies,'" Ms. Debbie suggests. She says each word slowly as if she is dictating.	Participation as writer	Invite (to write) Suggest
(31) Jaron takes up the task enthusiastically. "Yes!"	↓	
(31) He puts his paper back on the table and bends over it with concentration. He says his message aloud, emphasizing each word. "Frog eat bug. Frog eat bugs." As he voices each word, he draws a series of the small horizontal lines like the ones his teacher uses to support the children in writing each word of their messages. Still bent close to the page, he returns to the left side of the line and records a mark on each word line as he says his message: "Frog eat bugs. Frog eat bugs." [Figure 13.7]		
(32) He hands his paper to Ms. Debbie: "The frog ate the bugs."	Approximation	
(33) "Oh! That's great!" she says. She holds the page so Bronte can see, also. "That's great!" She points to the small mark at top center. "There's the <i>dragonfly</i> . That's great, Jaron!"	↓	
(34) "Thank you," he replies.		
(35) "Excellent!" she says.	↓	



**FIGURE 13.7.** Jaron's Frog Log.

(36) Ms. Debbie pages through an informational text. "I'm looking through this book. . . . Let's see . . . I don't know if there're any frogs in this book or not. This is about the rain forest . . ."	Demonstration Distributed storage Open access	
(37) Jaron takes the book Ms. Debbie hands him. He begins to look, talking to himself. "Let's see if it has frogs."	Participation as reader	Invite (to read)
(38) Ms. Debbie takes out another book and begins to look. "Let's see if we can find any pictures of frogs."	Demonstration	
(39) "I see a frog!" He holds the book up for Ms. Debbie and Bronte to see, pointing to the picture.	Participation as reader	
(40) "That's an orange one," Ms. Debbie observes. "That's different from the one we've got."	↓	
(41) Jaron holds his open book up again: "What is this?"		
(42) Ms. Debbie points to the print and reads. "That says, 'the tree sloth.' That's a tree sloth," she says.	Direct teaching	Support
(43) Jaron takes the book back and turns some more pages. "I'm looking for some more frogs."	Participation as reader	
(102) The clean-up signal sounds. Ms. Debbie hands Jaron his paper. "Go read that to Ms. Amy and tell her what you noticed about the frog."		Share
(103) Jaron finds his teacher across the room, and pushes the paper into her hands: "Here!"		

(104) "Oh, Jaron! Did you write this?" she asks.	Approximation	Invite to read
(105) He reads, gesturing to the paper. "It says, 'Frog eat bugs.'"	Participation as reader and writer	
(106) "That's wonderful! Will you share this at group?" she asks.	Approximation	Share
(107) Jaron breaks in to a big smile.		↓
(108) "Go put it on my chair. You can read it at group."		↓

◆ *Participation: Is the pen in the child's hand?* If children learn to write by forming and testing hypotheses about print, then it follows that they need reasons, opportunities, and support for participating as writers. The Frog Log event is typical of classrooms where we have worked, in that expert teachers of early writers engage in some direct teaching, some teacher-child coauthoring, and lots of demonstration, but all of these teaching activities occur in an environment guided by one mantra: "Put the pen in the child's hand."

In the Frog Log event, beginning at Turn 20, Rowe uses her own text as a means of drawing the boys into writing. In practice, we have learned that most children are willing to take up roles as coauthors when asked to help with our texts. Few children refuse to write when we lay the pencil and our page in their space and wait expectantly for them to write (e.g., Turn 23).

The central importance of engaging young children as writers is based on the observation that learners who perceive themselves as potential "do-ers" of a target activity engage with instruction with an eye toward application in their own practice (Cambourne, 1988, 2009). For example, Jaron observed Ms. Debbie's drawing and writing and used these demonstrations as the starting point for his own text. When adults invite young children to participate as writers, they fundamentally change their opportunities for literacy learning. The child who actively takes up the role of writer has compelling reasons to form and test personal hypotheses about print and many more chances to do so.

In the emergent writing classroom, our goal is for children to unequivocally see themselves as writers, and to view their texts as legitimate and useful. To this end, we invite even the youngest children to write for meaningful purposes—regardless of their ability to produce conventional texts (Turn 30). We talk to them "as if" they are writers (Turn 104). We ask them to read their marks. We recognize their expertise (Turn 33), and refer other children to them as experts on specific aspects of the writing process.

◆ *Approximation: Do teacher responses show that children's unconventional writing is valued?* Young children are unlikely to be able to participate with any regularity in writing, if they or their teachers expect them to produce fully conventional texts. Jaron's text, seen in Figure 13.7, makes this point. Up to this point in the year,



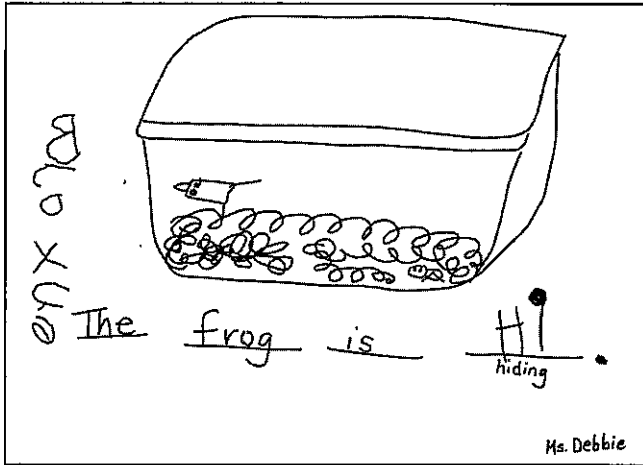
Jaron had been a reluctant participant in writing events, and the forms he used to represent his message were usually scribble units, stroke units, or personal manuscript along with the *J* that begins his first name. If conventional letters had been a requirement for participating in the Frog Log event, Jaron would almost certainly have been unsuccessful.

In our early writing classrooms, teachers accept and praise all attempts at writing, however unconventional (e.g., Turns 33, 106). We explicitly talk with children about the importance of writing approximations (Cambourne, 1988), what we call “kid writing.” When children ask us if a word is spelled correctly, we provide the information they need about “adult writing,” but praise their willingness to get their meanings down in their own way first. Along with the children, we notice and celebrate the ways their writing is becoming more conventional. Accepting approximations allows children to participate as writers no matter the sophistication of their print knowledge. The social press to communicate more effectively keeps children moving forward toward convention.

◆ *Authenticity: Is writing used in a functional way?* Children need authentic (Edelsky & Smith, 1984) and socially meaningful reasons for writing. To this end, we carefully examine all curricular areas to see how writing would naturally be used. As teachers make careful plans for writing invitations, they also continually look for writing opportunities that grow from children’s interests and activities. The Frog Log event is a good example. Rowe based her writing invitation on the boys’ intense interest in observing and talking about the frog. In our classrooms, our goal is to invite children to write for a variety of purposes that make “human sense” (Donaldson, 1978) as part of everyday classroom life.

◆ *Openness: Can children of all skill levels and interests participate successfully?* Curricular activities are open when they invite a variety of ways of responding and when children with a variety of skill levels can successfully participate. The openness of a writing activity comes, in part, from the willingness of teachers to accept a variety of writing approximations. In the Frog Log event, while Jaron responded with scribble units (Figure 13.7), his friend Bronte independently created spellings using letter–sound correspondence (Figure 13.8). When teachers issue open-ended invitations for children to use their current version of “kid writing,” they can observe what children understand about print, and individualize their teaching so it is matched to the child’s level. Designing for openness is essential given the variety of skill levels in any classroom and also the variety of ways that young writers approach text production at any point in the year.

◆ *Collaboration: Are there opportunities for teachers and children to work together or side by side on their writing?* In our classrooms, even though children are encouraged to “hold the pen,” they are rarely required to work independently. Instead,



**FIGURE 13.8.** Bronte's Frog Log.

the kind of collaborative composing and observation of other writers seen in the Frog Log event is the norm (Turn 23). Rather than encouraging children to “do your own work,” we encourage them to use others’ demonstrations as springboards for their own writing projects. Opportunities to write collaboratively with teachers and peers provide both demonstrations and easy access to the support children need to move forward with their texts. Writing with a more experienced peer or adult provides the kind of scaffolding children need to work at the far end of their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

◆ *Demonstration: Do children see “live” demonstrations of writing? Do they have access to published or class-authored texts of the kinds they are writing?* Demonstrations are acts and artifacts that show children how writing is done, why it is done, and what print “says” in different situations (Smith, 2004). Young writers need many opportunities to see adults writing and also to explore the demonstrations provided by familiar texts (Cambourne, 2009; Harste et al., 1984; Smith, 2004). In our Enhanced Language and Literacy Success prekindergarten classrooms, teachers provide live demonstrations of writing through daily large-group interactive writing where they write in enlarged print in front of children. As in the Frog Log event, they also coauthor texts with children or write their own texts alongside them during the learning center/workshop period (e.g., Turn 20). As teachers write their own texts, they have natural opportunities to think out loud to make their writing and reading processes more understandable to young writers (Turns 20–22). Children have access to teachers’ and peers’ texts as well as published texts, and children are encouraged to consult them as demonstrations for how, what, and why they might write in the activities that are under way (Turns 36–40).

◆ *Direct teaching: What lessons on writing content, processes, or purposes do children need as touchstones for their writing?* While children learn by participating in writing, teachers play an important role by explicitly explaining the use of key features of print such as letter names and shapes, letter-sound correspondence, purposes for writing in different situations, and so on. Teachers teach formal lessons that serve to highlight writing content, processes, and purposes, and provide touchstone experiences that both teachers and children refer to as they write their own texts. Direct teaching of literacy skills and strategies also occurs informally as part of composing events, where teachers individualize instruction to match children's interests and needs for support in the texts they are constructing. An example comes from Ms. Debbie's interaction with Bronte in another segment of the Frog Log event presented in Classroom Narrative 2.

**CLASSROOM NARRATIVE 2: BRONTE'S FROG LOG**

Transcript	Curricular supports	Teacher talk and actions
(7) As Ms. Debbie draws a picture of the box with the frog inside. [Figure 13.8] (8) Bronte leans over her page watching as she draws and writes.	Demonstration	Find common ground
(9) Ms. Debbie narrates as she begins to draw. "This is the box . . . I think he's down here." She draws the frog under the dirt. "I'm not a real good frog drawer. He's got a body and big legs." She peers into the box again, then returns to drawing. "I think he's down under the dirt."	↓	↓
(10) Bronte points to the dirt in the box. "There he go."		
(11) Ms. Debbie begins to draw a line for each word of her message, saying each word separately. "This says, 'The . . . frog . . . is . . . hiding.' There's my period." She rereads the planned message, touching each line: "The frog is hiding."	Demonstration	↓
(12) Bronte points to the frog. "Yeah, I see him. I see 'im right there!"	↓	↓
(13) Bronte, Jaron, and Ms. Debbie bend forward with heads crowded together looking for the frog.		↓
(14) Ms. Debbie sits up and begins to write again, reading her message aloud as she records the words. "The . . ." She pauses to make eye contact with Bronte, then continues. "This is the frog word. Fuhh . . ." She stretches out the initial F sound, then continues to read as she writes: "frog is . . ."	Direct teaching	
(15) She stops writing and hands the pencil to Bronte. "Write <i>hiding</i> for me!"	Collaboration	Invite to write Suggest

(16) Bronte takes the pencil. "H?" he asks.	Participation as Writer	
(17) She confirms his choice. "H, huh huh," she says drawing out the initial sound. Ms. Debbie taps the page indicating Bronte should write the letter on the line.	↓	Support
(18) Bronte leans over the paper to write, then announces the letters, "H, I."	↓	↓
(19) "H, I. You're right!" she says. "This is what scientists do. They write down and draw pictures of what they're seeing, and when they come back if it's changed, they draw another picture."	Direct teaching	↓

In this portion of the Frog Log event, Rowe not only provides demonstrations of writing for Bronte but also teaches two quick mini-lessons on sounding out words (Turn 11) and the function of science logs (Turn 19). This teaching is tailored to Bronte’s interests and current hypotheses about writing and is linked to the familiar context of the Frog Log event they are constructing together.

### **Designing Spaces for Writing**

The physical arrangement of classroom furniture, space, materials, and people sends powerful messages about the kinds of writing activities that are expected. Our research (Rowe, 2008, 2010) shows that classroom geography is as much a part of supportive conditions of learning to write as are teaching interactions. In our research classrooms, we follow three broad guidelines when designing spaces for writing.

◆ *Materials: Are writing materials present and easily accessible to children throughout the classroom?* First, in emergent writing classrooms, we store writing materials and texts throughout the classroom on open shelving. Decentralized storage and open access to writing materials physically send the message that writing is an expected part of children’s activities throughout the classroom. As in the Frog Log event, when children and teachers only have to reach over to a nearby shelf to get writing materials or books (Turns 36–43), they are more likely to follow through on ideas for writing or reading that emerge as part of ongoing activities. Having books and other texts available for consultation gives children easy access to demonstrations they need to support their writing.

◆ *Space: Are spaces available for collaborative writing?* Second, we make sure that space and furniture is arranged so that it comfortably accommodates small groups of children and a teacher working together on their writing. The drawing in Figure 13.6 was created from a photo taken in one of our research classrooms and shows

a typical arrangement where the teacher sits at a table writing with a small group of children. In addition to a designated writing center, many teachers store materials in totes that can be moved to the multipurpose spaces used for writing during the learning centers/workshop time. In general, we consider whether each ecological area of the classroom can comfortably accommodate two to three children and an adult. In the Enhanced Language and Literacy Success Project, we have found that when writing spaces are too small, teachers rarely spend time in these areas, and possibilities for collaborative writing decrease. If collaboration with teachers and peers is an important feature of supportive learning-to-write events, then the arrangement of space needs to send that message.

◆ *Bodies:* Do teachers sit alongside children as they write? Third, if teachers value collaborative composing, they need to consider the messages their physical positioning sends about expected teacher-child interactions. We encourage teachers to arrange both space and time so they can sit down with small groups of children and compose alongside them. Figures 13.6 and 13.9 illustrate how changing the arrangement of space and bodies can alter the potentials for activity, interaction, and learning. The image seen in Figure 13.9 was created from a photo taken during the first year of the Write Start! Project and shows typical arrangements of space, materials, and people during writing in one of our research classrooms. Figure 13.6 shows the kind of arrangement the teacher used for writing with her students in the second year of the project. This is a writing space purposefully planned to provide very different possibilities for interaction and composing. The close, side-by-side, eye-to-eye



**FIGURE 13.9.** Spaces for observing and directing writers.

seating arrangement provided opportunities for two-way conversation, observation of both peers' and teachers' demonstrations, and shared access to the page for collaborative composing.

### ***Summing Up: Essential Features of Emergent Writing Classrooms***

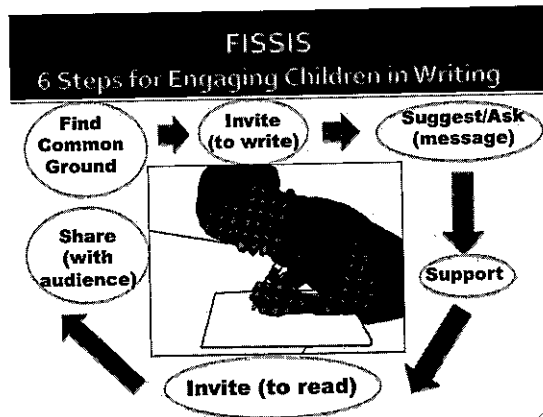
In every classroom, every year, teachers and children build a local culture that includes values and expectations about what it means to learn to write. This includes understandings of children's and teachers' roles, the kinds of learning-to-write activities that are a usual part of classroom life, and the ways teachers and children are expected to use materials and arrange their bodies in classroom spaces. The features listed on our Top 10 list (Figure 13.6) provide a good starting point for reflection and planning when the goal is to build a classroom that supports children's engagement as emergent writers. In the next section, we focus on patterns of teacher talk and actions that engage young children as writers in these kinds of curricular environments.

## **THE FISSIS MODEL AS A GUIDE FOR TEACHER TALK AND INTERACTION**

In working with preschool and early grades teachers, many have shared that they are unsure what to do once they are sitting with the children during writing time. While teachers typically have considerable experience teaching children about the alphabet or correcting unconventional letter forms, many have less experience supporting children in composing messages using emergent writing. To provide research-based answers to this question, we analyzed patterns of interaction of the expert teachers in our research classrooms (Flushman, 2012; Rowe, 2008; Rowe et al., 2003). We found that though teachers' styles of talk differed somewhat, and the content of talk varied widely depending on the nature of the event under way, teacher interactions with young writers tended to include the six interactive moves (abbreviated with the acronym FISSIS) seen in Figure 13.10. As we discuss how the FISSIS model can guide teaching interactions, we refer to column 3 in Classroom Narratives 1 and 2 where adult interactive moves are labeled for the Frog Log event.

### ***Find Common Ground***

To engage children in writing, the first step is building the common ground needed to construct a shared purpose for writing. Teachers need to understand the child's current activities in order to support his or her participation as a writer. For example, in Classroom Narratives 1 and 2 (Turns 1–22), Ms. Debbie, Jaron, and Bronte's



**FIGURE 13.10.** Guides to teacher talk and interactions: Six steps for engaging young children in writing.

talk about frogs became the common ground for the writing and drawing that followed. Writing is a rich opportunity for conversation that can help teachers understand how writing connects to the child's interests. Conversations about emergent writers' texts are especially important, since their products may not be conventional enough to be understood without the author's explanations.

### ***Invite Children to Write and Suggest Messages***

Because young children will not always know how print can be used functionally, an important role for teachers is issuing invitations for specific types of writing, and suggesting possible content for children's texts. Rowe's writing invitation and suggestions for text content in Classroom Narratives 1 and 2 are typical (Turns 15, 23, 30). Because emergent writing teachers plan for openness, their invitations for writing projects and suggestions for text content are offered tentatively, and children usually have the opportunity to take up and build on their suggestions as Jaron and Bronte did, or to respond with their own ideas. If children are already moving forward with their own text ideas, teachers ask what they are writing about, instead of offering adult suggestions.

### ***Provide Support***

When teachers are present as children write, children often seek them out for help in recording their messages. Sometimes teachers also offer unsolicited help (Rowe, 2008). Teachers match instructional supports to the child's specific needs at the moment and, more generally, to the child's level of skill and understanding about print. The phonics lesson Rowe taught at Turn 14 of the Frog Log event was a good

fit for Bronte's skills, while her focus on Jaron's message was appropriate as a way to fan the spark of interest shown by this reluctant writer (Turn 33). The goal in supporting young writers is to offer just enough help to nudge them to the next level in their understandings. Teacher support can come in the form of coauthoring, demonstrating, suggesting writing strategies, direct teaching, or directing children to resources they can use to solve their authoring problems.

### ***Invite Children to Read Their Messages***

When we work with emergent writers, we ask them to read their marks whether they have produced scribbles or invented spellings. "What did you write?" is one of the most powerful questions that emergent writing teachers can ask (Rowe, 2008). In the span of four words, children are addressed as writers and their writing approximations are legitimized as readable texts. As children become experienced participants in emergent writing classrooms, the teacher's question is often unnecessary. When teachers consistently show interest and approval for children's texts, as Rowe and Jaron's teacher did at Turns 28 and 104 in Classroom Narrative 1, children are eager to seek them out as audiences, and often read their texts spontaneously as Jaron did at Turns 32 and 105.

### ***Share Writing with an Audience***

When writing is used for authentic purposes, sharing it with an audience is an important step. In emergent writing classrooms, the audience is often the group of peers and teachers who are present as the text is created. As children talk about their writing, the content is negotiated and their positions as writers are validated (Rowe, 2008). Teachers may also provide opportunities for young writers to share their texts with the large group from the author's chair (Graves, 1994), as Jaron's teacher did in the Frog Log event (Turn 108). Writers need audiences to encourage, motivate, and challenge them to think about writing in new ways.

### ***Summing Up: Teachers' Interactions with Young Writers***

As is evident from a quick scan of the third column in Classroom Narratives 1 and 2, in practice, teacher-child interactions do not always cycle through every step of the FISSIS model as presented in Figure 13.10, and teachers sometimes move recursively back and forth between steps several times in a single writing event. As children become more engaged as writers, they often initiate some of the steps, making teacher action unnecessary. Overall, the FISSIS model centers on two teacher actions that are essential to emergent writing classrooms: Invite the child to write! Invite the child to read his or her marks.



## CONCLUSION

While research on emergent writing has been available for several decades (e.g., Goodman, 1980; Harste et al., 1984; Teale & Sulzby, 1986), it has been slow to affect classroom practice. This may, in part, be because educational attention has been so strongly focused on beginning reading. However, recent research converges on the conclusion that early writing experiences are an important way children learn skills needed for conventional reading and writing (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. Children who experience supported opportunities to try out writing in their classrooms have increased opportunities to learn foundational skills needed for later reading and writing. If young children are not supported as writers, they are missing powerful opportunities for literacy learning. The best practices in early writing instruction are those that encourage children to participate as writers, to use their current understandings to get their messages down, and to use their texts for purposes that are meaningful as part of everyday classroom activities.

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# CHAPTER 14



## Strengthening Play in Early Literacy Teaching Practice

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### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ❖ What are the design features of a literacy-enriched play environment?
- ❖ What kinds of play activity support early literacy development and learning?
- ❖ How can teachers assess children's play maturity to strengthen play in early literacy experience and learning?

That play and literacy share common ground is a milestone in the scientific journey of emergent literacy in early childhood. Not all that long ago, the idea that some kinds of play might support literacy readiness was not prevalent, although in theory it seemed promising (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). Only recently has a body of play-literacy research, rooted in strong theory, shown the potentially significant influences of play activity on young children's literacy development (Roskos & Christie, 2012).

Building bridges between play-literacy research (what we know) and practice (what we do), however, remains a challenge in early literacy education. Implementation of any new research evidence into classroom practice is difficult. Linking play and literacy is especially so because it involves the interweaving of environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, not to mention deeply rooted belief systems of educators. In this chapter we discuss the knowledge base that informs the development of a coordinated framework for strengthening play activity in early