

Emergent Literacy Development in Kindergarten: A Focus on  
Interactive Read-Alouds and Emergent Writing

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of Victoria, 2001

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

In the area of Language and Literacy

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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## **Abstract**

This project focuses on emergent literacy development. The four-part video series I created for parents/guardians of Kindergarten children provides them information about the importance of early literacy development and offers them suggestions about how they can support their children. Topics addressed in the video series include emergent literacy, interactive read-alouds, the importance of drawing in writing development, and the stages of emergent writing. In Chapter 1 of the project I share background information about personal experiences I have had with Kindergarten parents that influenced my topic selection, provide a rationale for the importance of supporting early literacy development, identify curriculum connections, and provide an overview of the project. In Chapter 2 I outline the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed the composing of the videos, and review the relevant literature on emergent literacy development, interactive read-alouds, writing development, and writing pedagogy. In Chapter 3 I describe the essential understandings I want parents/guardians to develop for each video, and provide a description of how the literature review informed the content of the video series. I also offer reflections on the process of creating the videos, make recommendations for pedagogy and future research, and reflect on my journey through the Master's program. The Appendix includes the scripts of the four videos and the references for the images included in the videos.

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## Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my supervisor, my friends and family, my girls and my husband.

Thank you, Dr. Sylvia Pantaleo, for your constant guidance throughout this process. I am forever grateful for your encouraging words, constructive feedback and patience. Your vast knowledge and dedication to your work may have been initially intimidating but these qualities are the greatest gifts to those fortunate enough to work with you. I was extremely privileged to have you as my supervisor.

To my cohort ladies, thank you for being my support network and understanding the life of a Master's student. A special thanks to Sue Agnew for keeping me motivated, making me laugh, and reminding me that I was not alone in this experience.

Thank you to my friends and family for cheering me on during the last two years. Without your encouragement and support I could not have undertaken this intense educational journey. Each of you stood by me and believed in me, even when I was unsure. For those of you who helped look after the girls, knowing my daughters were in your loving care is the only way this Momma could have completed this two year program.

Mackenzie and Abbey, although we never did find a wand to magically finish my final project, it is complete nonetheless. So as promised, Disneyland here we come!

Last but definitely not least, my greatest thanks is extended to my husband, Adam. Thank you for taking on daddy duty and making sure our girls and our household survived while I spent countless evenings and weekends working on my coursework and project. Your love, unwavering support and encouragement made completing my Master of Education not only a possibility but a reality

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Personal Background

The main reason for wanting to complete my Master of Education in Language and Literacy was to increase my understanding of how children learn to read and write. Although I had completed my undergraduate degree in Elementary Education, I never felt I had substantial knowledge about literacy development. Even as a well-educated individual I experienced feelings of uncertainty to adequately teach my students how to read and write. I can only imagine the feelings of parents/guardians of young children, whom are likely less informed about early literacy.

Educators recognize that the more school literacies are introduced as a natural extension of learning at home, the more likely students will be motivated to engage in and learn them (Gee, 1996; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In my opinion, the relationship is reciprocal. If teachers inform parents of effective ways to promote literacy, by creating similar practices in their homes as in the classroom, students can experience greater success. When parents/guardians and teachers work together, they can use each other's strengths to maximize the development of their children's literacy skills.

I knew I wanted to engage in research that would benefit myself as an educator in the classroom while somehow assisting my Kindergarten parents. I started to ask myself the following questions. *What do Kindergarten parents/guardians need to know about reading and writing?* and *How can parents/guardians support their children's literacy development at home?* However, these questions were too broad, as there is a vast amount of literature and research related to early literacy development.

Therefore, I decided to focus specifically on interactive read-alouds and emergent writing. I chose interactive read-alouds because of the relevancy of the subject to a Kindergarten classroom, as most students entering school are not reading themselves. In addition to personally wanting to improve my understanding and skills in this area, I also thought parents/guardians could quite easily incorporate the procedures involved in interactive read-alouds while reading aloud to their children at home.

I intentionally chose emergent writing as the other focus area because of a parent-teacher interview I had two years ago. I could not wait for the boy's family to arrive to show them the progress he was making in his writing. For the first few months of school, this student was extremely shy and hesitant to draw or write anything in his journal. But with time and encouragement, he began to see himself as a writer, both through his drawings and writing. We were both so excited to share his journal entries with his parents. However the spark and pride in that boy's eyes instantly faded away when his father started mocking his drawings and attempts at writing. I was shocked and he was crushed. I immediately started pointing out the multiple processes and skills his son was demonstrating in order to take the ideas from his brain, to his pencil and paper. I explained how beginning writers must first formulate ideas to write about, think of the words to convey the message, and attempt to associate those words with sounds and letters. In that moment I wanted this parent to understand and feel the excitement and joy that I experienced when I watched his son developing into an emerging writer. I decided this father and all parents need to be informed of the stages of beginning writing in order to acknowledge their children's writing accomplishments in the Kindergarten year.

Both topics, interactive read-alouds and emergent writing, were also chosen because they are not associated with traditional reading and writing. In the beginning of Kindergarten many

parents/guardians are anxious to help their children read and write conventionally, when most of their children are not developmentally ready. As educators we recognize that literacy learning is emergent and there are many things one can do to improve their literacy well before they can read and write in a conventional sense (Clay, 1982). This concept generated the idea of educating parents/guardians about emergent literacy development. I do not want parents/guardians to miss out on the remarkable growth their children experience through their early literacy development. I will never forget when the busiest boy in my Kindergarten classroom this year came in one morning and stated, “You said in my report card to my mom that I am really good at drawing letters.” I replied, “Do you know what that is called?” and he smiled and shouted, “Writing!” From that day on he wrote nonstop on his pages. He was motivated and excited to be a writer because he knew I saw him, and his mother now saw him, in this role. If educating my students’ parents/guardians on early literacy development increases even one student’s confidence, motivation and desire to read and write, then in my opinion, my project will be a success.

### **The Importance of Supporting Early Literacy Development**

Teachers and parents/guardians alike are invested in the success of their children. With the fundamental skill of being literate, people are afforded more opportunities and choices in life. When literate, children are able to communicate with others and express their thoughts, ideas and emotions. The components of language arts – speaking, listening, reading, writing, representing and viewing – provide modes for emerging learners to develop various literacy skills in order to communicate, using written and spoken word, as well as visuals (Clay, 1982).

Young children are in an ongoing process of becoming literate (Clay, 1982). With support, children can progress from emergent to conventional reading and writing. Through experiences



and meaningful literacy activities, teachers and parents/guardians can model and scaffold literacy skills for emerging learners. As is discussed in Chapter 2, scholars and educators have established that when children are actively engaged, they gradually become aware of the forms and functions of communicating through talk and print (Tafa, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Providing opportunities at school and home for children to experiment and explore aspects of reading and writing reflects an understanding of the importance of supporting early literacy development (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004).

### **Curriculum Connections**

One of the goals I set for myself when considering the topic and form of my final Master's project was that I wanted the result to be practical. Part of this goal required that the project connect to the curriculum. Below I describe connections to both the current English Language Arts Curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) and the draft English Language Arts Curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013).

Interactive read-alouds are an instructional activity used to help children better understand the concept of print, analyze an author's craft, and develop literacy understanding (Barrentine, 1996). Through discussion and interaction with adults, teachers and parents/guardians, and peers, students are able to make sense of the text as they construct meaning and explore the reading process (Barrentine, 1996). During this interactive practice, students are involved in oral discussions and expand their understandings. As children engage in interactive read-alouds, many of the prescribed learning outcomes in the curriculum documents are modeled by their teachers and/or parents/guardians. Over time, these demonstrations can provide children with the necessary skills to accomplish these expectations independently.

The following prescribed learning outcomes from the current curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) are addressed during an interactive read-aloud:

### **Learning Reading (and Viewing) and Extending Thinking**

It is expected that students will:

**B1** demonstrate awareness of the connections between reading, writing, and oral language

**B2** respond to literature through a variety of activities (e.g., role playing, art, music, **choral reading**, talking)

**B3** engage in reading or reading-like behaviour (p. 13)

### **Strategies for Learning to Read and View**

It is expected that students will:

**B4** in discussions, use **strategies** before reading and viewing to enhance comprehension, including accessing prior knowledge, predicting, making connections and asking questions

**B5** in discussions, use **strategies** during reading and viewing to monitor comprehension, including predicting and confirming unknown words and events by using language patterns and pictures, making pictures in their heads (visualizing) and asking the question “Does that make sense?” (p. 14)

### **Features of Reading and Viewing**

It is expected that students will:

**B7** demonstrate understanding of **concepts about print** and **concepts about books** (e.g., there is a directionality to print; books are for reading)

**B8** identify most of the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, and a few **high-frequency words**, including their name and names of significant others (p. 15)

In relation to the draft curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013), interactive read-alouds connect to the core competencies in the following ways:

### **Comprehending and Connecting**

- express thoughts, feelings, opinions and preferences in relation to text
- develop and use a variety of reading strategies to make meaning from multiple types of text
- develop and use critical thinking skills to make meaning from multiple types of text
- engage actively as listeners and readers to make meaning from multiple types of text (p. 1)

Although there are noticeable curriculum connections between interactive read-alouds and the curriculum expectations for reading/viewing, and between emergent writing and writing/representing (as is discussed below), the less obvious connections to oral language are equally, if not more important. Oral language competence is fundamental when children are learning to read and write. The following prescribed learning outcomes from the current Language Arts curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) address the oral language skills developed during both interactive read-alouds and emerging writing:

### **Oral Language Learning and Extending Thinking**

It is expected that students will:

**A2** engage in speaking and listening activities to share ideas about pictures, stories, information **text**, and experiences

**A6** use oral language to explain, inquire, and compare

**A7** experiment with language and demonstrate enhanced vocabulary usage (pp. 9-11)

### **Strategies for Oral Language**

It is expected that students will:

**A8** connect what is already known with new experiences during speaking and listening

activities

**A9** ask questions to construct and clarify meaning (p. 11)

In relation to the draft curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013), both interactive read-alouds and emergent writing connect to oral language competencies in the following ways:

### **Creating and Communicating**

- express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas through oral, written, and visual presentations and contribute as a member of a classroom community
- exchange ideas, emotions, and perspectives to build shared understanding (p. 1)

The other focus area of my project, emergent writing, includes a description of how writing is a developmental process. When children experiment with writing, they develop their understanding of how print and sound work together (Bissex, 1980). Children first explore writing by scribbling and drawing (Lamme, 1984 as cited in Vacca et al., 2009). Drawings play a fundamental role during the emerging stages of writing. Drawings, which are familiar to children, can provide an excellent starting point to experience and experiment with conventional writing (Calkins, 1986). As children progress through the stages of emergent writing, they are able to print most letters, record prominent sounds in words, and express meaning by invented spelling (Cabell, Tortorelli & Gerde, 2013; Gentry, 2005).

A personal connection I made with curriculum and my project is the importance placed on oral language. Many parents/guardians and even teachers are too concerned about the conventional reading and writing, and fail to recognize and understand the importance of oral language to the development of early literacy learners. Interestingly, the Language Arts curriculum document for Kindergarten (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006), contains

more PLOs in oral language than any other section - confirming the notion that talk plays a foundational role in literacy. Unfortunately the same emphasis on oral language is not evident in the new curriculum.

The informative videos on emergent writing give parents/guardians strategies to support their children achieve many curriculum writing and representing goals. The following prescribed learning outcomes from the current curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) are addressed during emergent writing:

### **Learning Writing (and Representing) and Extending Thinking**

It is expected that students will:

**C1** create simple messages using a combination of pictures, symbols, letters, and words to convey meaning

**C2** recognize that writing can be “talk written down” and that print carries a constant message

**C3** show an interest in, and a positive attitude toward, writing and representing (p. 16)

### **Strategies for Learning to Write and Represent**

It is expected that students will:

**C5** express meaning during writing and representing by using **invented spelling** and copying existing words/representations

**C6** engage in discussions after writing or representing about the experience of writing or representing and share work with others (p. 17)

### **Features of Writing and Representing**

It is expected that students will:

**C7** print most of the letters of the alphabet, own name, and a few simple words, and record a prominent sound in a word (p. 18)

In relation to the draft curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013), emergent writing connects to the core competencies in the following ways:

### **Creating and Communicating**

- express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas through oral, written, and visual presentations
- use the writing process to create written forms (p. 1)

### **Project Overview**

My final project, *Supporting Your Early Literacy Learner*, is a video series intended for the parents/guardians of Kindergarten children. Informed by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, this four-part video series was created to educate parents/guardians of the importance of early literacy development and how they can support their children during this developmental process. Topics addressed in the series include emergent literacy, interactive read-alouds, the importance of drawing in writing development, and the stages of emergent writing. In addition to being informative, the videos provide parents/guardians with suggestions about how to support their children's early literacy development. The videos are intended to be viewed by parents/guardians within the first term of Kindergarten in order for the audience to develop an understanding of the concept of emergent literacy, which is foundational to the kind of support they provide for their children throughout the entire school year. The video series, informed by the literature reviewed in the following chapter, reflects not only what I have learned but what I believe all parents/guardians should learn in order to collaboratively support early literacy learners.

In Chapter 3 I describe how I created the series, state the purpose of the individual videos and explain how the content of each one is connected to literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I also reflect on what I learned during the process of creating the videos, offer some pedagogical suggestions, and provide recommendations for further research. Finally, I reflect on my journey through the Master's program.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In Chapter 2 I describe the theoretical framework and conceptual foundations that informed and guided the design of my project. The brief review of the literature on emergent literacy emphasizes the interrelatedness of the components of language arts – speaking, listening, reading, writing, representing and viewing – in the process of early literacy development. As is evident by the review of the literature and research on interactive read-alouds and emergent writing, these topics can further our understanding and awareness of the complexities of early literacy development in order to improve the success of emergent readers and writers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sociocultural theory, which has its origins in the work of Vygotsky (1978), examines societal contributions on individual cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) believed adult and peer interactions influenced children’s learning, thus recognizing how parents, caregivers and the social and culture context contribute to children’s cognitive development, especially with respect to the higher-order functions. Likewise, Halliday (1969) proposed that language and learning are never separated from the social world, as they occur within it and are influenced by cultural content. He thought children were motivated to develop language because it served a purpose or function in their world. Halliday (1969) believed we learn language, learn about language and learn through language simultaneously and within a particular sociocultural context.

Similarly, Gee’s (1989) work on Discourses or “identity kits” demonstrates the ways language and learning are connected to social roles and the cultural context. Gee (1996) discusses how people’s behaviour, values, ways of thinking and perspectives all are influenced by their primary Discourse, which he described as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing,



valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (p. 131). Children make meaning and develop understanding of their world based on their personal Discourses. Indeed, when children learn they draw from their own experiences as they try to make sense and understand what is new or unknown. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) write about students’ rich cultural and social backgrounds or *funds of knowledge*, which include their language. They state that when teachers engage in pedagogy that respects and accesses students’ funds of knowledge, lessons are more meaningful to students.

Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural perspective serves as a theoretical framework for understanding child-adult social interactions that occur during emerging literacy development and how these interactions provide opportunities for practice, clarity and growth for the learner. For example, the interactions that occur during shared book reading and writing activities should reflect Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Learning to read and write involves working in what Vygotsky coined, the Learning Zone, where the learner experiences “disequilibrium and some level of uncertainty and anxiety” (Reid, Schultze & Petersen, 2012, p. 20). Without providing a challenge, no errors are made and no opportunity for improvement is offered. Within the learning zone, errors are often signs of growth (Chapman, 1997). Through their oral language, adults can model and guide the participation of learners to scaffold them within their ZPD. However, during discussions students need to spontaneously explore their ideas through speech without an adult dominating and limiting the flow of the discussion in order for in depth learning to transpire (Smagorinsky, 2007). Smagorinsky (2007) states “that exploratory, playful, experimental uses of speech can serve an important role in the development of new ideas,” especially when those involved in the discussion are from various cultural backgrounds (p. 66).

Consistent with sociocultural theory is the notion of literacy as a social practice. Scholars such as Barton and Hamilton believe “literacy is what people *do* with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it” (Perry, 2012, p. 54). A shift to thinking about literacy as something one does, rather than a set of skills or abilities one has, recognizes real-world ways in which people engage in real texts (Perry, 2012). The term New Literacies also reflects a sociocultural theory foundation in that the focus is not on the acquisition of skills but rather on literacy as a social practice (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). When educators are able to conceptualize literacy in this way, it can make formal literacy instruction more meaningful and purposeful for students within their classroom communities.

### **Conceptual Foundations**

As described above, talk plays a central role in learning and cognitive development. Indeed, speech is instrumental in developing and deepening thinking. Social interactions involving talk can provide students with opportunities to work through their ideas, change existing ideas and increase their knowledge by “talking their way into meaning” (Edward-Groves, Anstey, & Bull, 2013, p. 5). Therefore, when teachers talk they need to be conscious of how their words are perceived by their students. As Calkins (1994) stated, “our teaching is always a matter of selection, and what we chose to do often reveals more than we could imagine about our attitudes, towards children and their literacy” (p. 63). Addressing students who are engaging in emergent literacy behaviours as *readers* and *writers* can have a strong impact on their abilities to see themselves in these roles.

Talk in the classroom needs to be co-constructed and dialogic in nature in order to move away from the more traditional transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (Edward-Groves et al., 2013). In other words, talk should be dialogic and not monologic or one-

directional (Wells, 2006). However, interactions in many classrooms today still follow a common pattern of teacher initiation, student response and teacher evaluation (IRE). Many teachers too often use the IRE sequencing of talk, which provides little opportunity for student-initiated talk and is dominated by teacher talk and questioning (Edward-Groves et al., 2013).

One of the most significant recommendations coming out of research on dialogic talk is for a decrease in the amount of teacher talk to allow for more student talk (Edward-Groves et al., 2013). Essentially dialogic talk provides students with the opportunity to extend their talk and their thinking so that talk becomes, as Alexander (2003) states, a “purposeful and productive dialogue where questions, answers, and feedback (and feed forward) progressively build into coherent and expanding chains of inquiry and understanding” (p. 35). Through the use of exploratory talk (Barnes, 2008) in classrooms students can explore ideas together and through this process draw out meaning from each other that they individually would not have discovered on their own (Edward-Groves et al., 2013). Barnes (2008) believes this messy, halting, incomplete type of talk is extremely valuable for it requires the juggling of new ideas and therefore learners are actively engaged in the learning process. The development of speaking and listening skills, through exploratory and dialogic talk, are the foundations for literacy. If children are unable to say something, how can they be expected to read or write it? Further, during shared reading and writing activities, talk can set the groundwork for developing ideas and making meaning.

Fundamentally, oral language enables children to make sense of the world and to communicate with others. Reading and writing also help them accomplish these intentions. One of the best ways to help children become better readers and writers to engage them in talk. “The speaking-listening conversation that is oral language is the precursor to the reader-writer

conversation that is written language” (Reid, Schultze, & Petersen, 2012, p. 13). Students’ oral language skills affect their reading and writing competences. Paying attention to the way children use oral language during their storytelling, playing, persuading and arguing can help teachers build on their existing abilities used in their everyday practices and apply or connect this information to children’s reading and writing development (Dyson, 2015).

In the following sections I describe the concept of emergent literacy and its approach in relation to early language development. I then present a review of the literature and research on interactive read-alouds and emergent writing. Both of these topics include an emphasis on the interrelatedness of the components of language arts and further our understanding and awareness of the complexities of early literacy development.

### **Emergent Literacy**

Emergent literacy, a concept coined by Marie Clay (1982), is used to describe young children’s emerging knowledge of reading and writing before they read and write in the conventional sense. Emergent literacy, as described below, is very different from the old reading readiness approach that dominated the literacy curriculum for first three-quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, it was assumed there was a point in time or a ‘mental age’ when children were ready to learn to read and write due to their maturity and developed skills (Downing & Thackray, 1975). According to a reading readiness approach, children were ready to learn to read and write only when they could identify letters, sounds and written words, and spell words conventionally in order for adults to read. Learning to read was seen as a foundational skill that preceded learning to write. According to a reading readiness approach, reading and writing skills were attained through the use of workbooks, drills and memorization. This instructional

approach gave no purpose or meaning for the children with respect to connecting their experiences and interests to their reading and writing tasks.

In contrast, Clay's concept of emergent literacy, which she developed while writing her dissertation in 1966, recognized the interrelatedness of the components of language arts (speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing) in the process of early literacy development. Clay (1982) recognized how young children are in an ongoing, developmental process of becoming literate and with the support of parents, caregivers and teachers, children progress from emergent to conventional reading and writing. As noted by Dyson (2015), "it does not matter so much which practices children begin with, just that they begin" (p. 203). According to the beliefs of an emergent literacy approach, children learn through experience and meaningful literacy activities. This approach also stresses the communicative nature of literacy, therefore making reading and writing more purposeful; students learn that people read and write in order to communicate with others and to express their ideas, thoughts and emotions (Tafa, 2008).

An emergent literacy approach reflects Vygotsky's 'interactionist view' of learning, as discussed above, because of the social interaction advocated by such an approach. Students' active engagement in activities with adults and peers facilitates children's gradual awareness of the forms and functions of print (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004). Vygotsky believed children's acquisition of reading and writing develops when they are actively engaged in literacy activities. Print-rich environments promote student engagement in reading and writing, especially when teachers provide print materials and stationary to be used during non-instructional times. It is believed that "play provides a context within which the emergence of literacy can be manifested and explored" (Tafa, 2008, p. 168).

According to Tafa (2008), the main literacy goals of reading and writing instruction in an emergent literacy program are the development of phonological and phonemic awareness, as well as print awareness. Phonological awareness is an encompassing term that includes understanding that spoken language is made up of units (i.e., syllables, words, phonemes) and the recognizing rhyme. Phonemic awareness, which is a subcategory of phonological awareness, is the understanding that words are made up of sounds and the ability to hear and recognize these individual sounds in spoken language that make up words. Children need to be able to distinguish and manipulate sounds within spoken words and recognize the print-sound relationship in order to successfully read and write (Tafa, 2008). In relation to print awareness, “children should understand that oral language can be written and that written language can be verbalized, that print, not the picture carries the message” (Tafa, 2008, p. 164). Understanding that letters have names and sounds is also a key component in print awareness. Teachers who approach literacy based on the beliefs of an emergent literacy philosophy provide many authentic opportunities for their students to experiment and explore these aspects of reading and writing.

Tafa (2008) examined Kindergarten literacy programs in 10 European countries to determine whether their curricula supported and enhanced young students’ reading and writing development. Using comparative data analysis, Tafa determined that the majority of European Kindergarten curricula (90%) support early literacy acquisition based on the principles of emergent literacy practices. The study resulted in the identification of several methodological guidelines when implementing reading and writing activities in an emergent literacy approach. Tafa (2008) suggested that children need to: (a) be actively engaged in when learning; (b) understand that reading and writing are communicative in nature; (c) learn in a print-rich environment; and (d) learn how to read and write through play (p. 165).

A teacher's pedagogy around reading and writing, the way books and written text are shared with students, and the ways texts are used to expose emerging readers and writers to the concepts, functions and meanings of print play a key role in early literacy development (Lane & Wright, 2007; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Tafa, 2008). In the following sections on Interactive Read-Alouds and Emergent Writing I explain key concepts and processes teachers and parents need to understand as their children develop into emerging readers and writers.

### **Interactive Read-alouds**

Teacher read-alouds have been an instructional activity in elementary classrooms for years. Children have discovered the wonders of books and developed a pleasure of and for reading while being read to in class. Teachers have also used read-alouds to help students better understand a concept or topic, analyze an author's craft, and develop literacy understanding (Barrentine, 1996).

#### **Traditional vs. interactive read-alouds.**

In traditional read-alouds, the text, which can be any genre such as a fiction or informational text, is read by the teacher with very little student participation. Students are listeners and take on a passive role during the reading. Teachers limit the amount of dialogue, if any, during the reading and usually conduct a discussion after the reading event. Often these discussions provide opportunities for students to connect the story to their personal lives.

An interactive read-aloud is different from a traditional read-aloud in that teachers and students converse throughout the reading of the text. During an interactive read-aloud, children are encouraged "to verbally interact with the text, peers, and teacher. This approach to reading aloud provides a means of engaging students as they construct meaning and explore the reading process" (Barrentine, 1996, p. 36). Students actively listen and respond to the teacher's oral

reading of a text, and they may answer questions, make predictions, justify an answer, or draw inferences. Through this interactive process, students engage in oral discussion, listen to others, learn to think deeply, and expand their understandings (Hoffmann, 2011; Mercer, 2000; Pantaleo, 2007). Teachers need to select quality books and carefully plan points throughout the reading of the story or informational text to pause in order to generate interactive student responses. When planning read-aloud lessons, teachers need to include text with beautiful artwork and original storylines/characters in addition to choosing books with rich language and vocabulary (Beauchat, 2012).

Discussions stimulated by both forms of read-alouds are instructional but during an interactive read-aloud instruction is woven throughout the reading and in a more conversational type of discourse. As students are invited to interact throughout the read-aloud, the teacher maintains a casual conversational tone. This ongoing interaction during the story provides opportunities for students to notice patterns and aspects of the story they might have overlooked or consider new ideas others may suggest (Barrentine, 1996). When teachers conduct an interactive read-aloud students can ask questions and discuss their ideas while the book is being read rather than waiting until the end of the reading (Barrentine, 1996; Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004). Questions asked by the teacher are posed with the intention to help students construct meaning as well as show *how* one makes sense of a text. These interactions have been shown to develop students' literacy understanding and comprehension (Sipe, 2008). Needless to say, interactive read-alouds give listeners more to think about as the story progresses.

As discussed previously, teacher talk plays a fundamental role in developing students' cognition during interactive read-alouds. Through talk, teachers can expose students to information about the reading process in their literacy demonstrations, pointing out story



structure, making predictions, asking questions and modeling how to monitor comprehension (Barrentine, 1996). These interactions can introduce students to strategies used to construct meaning and contribute to their ability to respond to stories. What is obvious to adults and some students is often discovered by others through this explicit modeling of aspects of the reading process. Therefore, to enhance literacy learning and student oral language development, teachers should model rich language, ask open-ended questions, repeat and expand children's responses, provide follow-up prompts, listen actively, and provide specific praise and encouragement (Beauchat, 2012).

Further, teachers should engage in talk that is dialogic in nature to capture students' attention and interests, to promote critical thinking, encourage higher order thinking skills, and to create more purposeful and coherent discussions. When teachers engage in dialogic talk it models for students how to talk in such a manner and challenges and encourages them to do so as well. When teachers let go of power by 'vacating the floor' to allow for discussion, such as what can happen during an interactive read-aloud, students' thoughts and ideas are validated and a safe class culture can be established. Engaging in dialogic talk also enables teachers to be flexible and vary questions in order to keep discussions going.

As explained in the sociocultural theory section, talk plays a central role in the development of children's cognitive abilities. Effective interactive read-alouds can increase the level of discussion and oral language development. The nature of the talk during interactive read-alouds, as described above, is different than during a traditional read-aloud (i.e., raising of hands, speaking one at a time). When fully engaged in an interactive read-aloud, students participate freely and engage in open discussions where ideas are exchanged collectively and in a supportive way. Students are not talking to answer questions correctly, but instead are responding in order

to debate, explain, question, infer, collaborate or narrate (Edward-Groves et al., 2013). “An advantage of weaving interactions into the read-aloud is that the discoveries are made along the way as a group. No one is left out of appreciating the clever way the story works” (Barrentine, 1996, p. 41).

The interactive structure of read-alouds, which features the social function of group talk to develop student cognition, can result in what is known as ‘interthinking’ (Mercer, 1995). Coined by Mercer (1995), this term describes the use of talk to engage with others’ ideas and to think collectively. As discussed below, research findings have shown how children can explore one another’s ideas, assist each other in their understanding, and offer explanations and interpretations through language during interactive read-alouds. In order to achieve interthinking, teachers need to use a gradual release of responsibility model to teach children how to engage in interactive read-alouds. Teachers need to first provide explicit instruction and model how to engage in dialogic talk and then guide students to use skills, strategies and procedures independently before engaging in collaborative and independent tasks (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

### **Key components of effective interactive read-alouds.**

Children learn language and about language through talk and their experiences and interactions within the world (Halliday, 1969). The body of literature on interactive read-alouds reflects this complex but natural development of children’s language. Researchers have analyzed the structured process of effective interactive read-alouds in order to provide educators with guidance and strategies to successfully support language and early literacy development through the use of this valuable instructional activity.

For example, a study conducted by Fisher, Flood, Lapp and Frey (2004) examined interactive read-aloud practices in order to identify key components for effectiveness. The study featured two phases of participants. To begin, administrators of urban schools throughout the San Diego County were sent letters requesting nominations of one teacher who was considered an ‘expert’ in conducting read-alouds and whose students demonstrated high levels of reading achievement. From the responses, 25 teachers, each from a different school, were selected for observation of their read-aloud practices. In order to compare results, 120 Phase II participants from 15 schools, who were not selected as ‘experts’ but who were consistently used as sponsor teachers for student teachers, were also observed engaging in read-alouds. Teachers in Phase I were observed first and, while they conducted their read-alouds, researchers recorded observational notes in order to identify essential components of a quality read-aloud. From the data, a rubric was developed that included components deemed necessary for an effective read-aloud. Using this rubric, Phase II teachers were then observed and the components of their read-alouds were noted and compared to the ‘expert’ teachers. In addition, Phase I and Phase II teachers were interviewed after their read-alouds to better understand their planning and practice. Interviewers asked participants to expand on their reasons for including or excluding components on the developed rubric. All interviews were taped in order to compare participant responses.

After the use of comparative analysis, the following seven components were included by all of the Phase I ‘expert’ teachers during their interactive read-alouds (Fisher et al., 2004):

- 1. Text selection** - teachers selectively chose high-quality children’s literature, appropriate to their students’ interests and emotional, social and developmental levels.

- 2. Previewed and practiced** - teachers viewed and read the text before reading it aloud to their students in order to model fluency and choose appropriate spots to pause and ask questions, discuss challenging/new concepts, or encourage predictions.
- 3. Clear purpose established** - before reading, the teachers establish a clear purpose for reading the book or section of book (i.e., character analysis or comprehension skills such as predicting or inferencing).
- 4. Fluent reading modeled** - teachers brought the literature to life through fluent reading.
- 5. Animation and expression** - teachers captured their audience's interest and engaged their students through gross animation and expressive reading (i.e., voice change, hand gestures, facial expressions, use of props).
- 6. Discussion of text** - teachers paused and asked questions to further engage their students before, during, and after the read-aloud. Time was provided for students to have an opportunity to share their thoughts, questions, and predictions about the text.
- 7. Independent reading and writing** - after the reading, connections were made to writing activities and other readings. (pp. 11-13)

According to the researchers, if teachers implement these seven components, their students will gain the most from interactive read-alouds.

McGee and Schickedanz (2007) also identified four key components required when engaging in *repeated* interactive read-alouds. According to the authors, several readings of a story, focusing on different questioning techniques during each reading, can increase comprehension strategies, story schema, and concept and vocabulary development in young readers (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Van den Broek, 2001; Wasik & Bond, 2001 as cited in McGee & Schickendanz, 2007). Research findings revealed the most effective read-alouds to be

interactive, involving the asking and answering of questions rather than the traditional passive listening of the text (Dickinson, 2001). However, growth was a result of how frequently teachers engaged their students in analytic talk, such as making predictions or inferences (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Teachers effectively supported their students to engage in analytical thinking by first modeling such thinking, followed by asking thoughtful questions. Despite this wealth of information on effective read-alouds, the authors, whom are researchers and practitioners of early literacy development themselves, have noticed fewer teachers attempting to read ‘sophisticated’ books in favor of easy, predictable concept books (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007).

Based on their findings and previous research, McGee and Schickendanz (2007) identified sophisticated picturebooks, requiring the reader to infer more than a predictable book, to be the best to use during interactive read-alouds. Sophisticated picturebooks can play a key role in enhancing young readers’ vocabulary and oral comprehension. While reading such texts, effective teachers model what readers do by thinking aloud when predicting, inferring, or changing their ideas about what is happening in the story during the read-aloud (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). The research reviewed by McGee and Schickedanz (2007) also found many benefits associated with the second and third readings of the same text such as enriched comprehension, deeper vocabulary development and reconstruction of the stories (pp. 745-746).

McGee and Schickedanz (2007) identified four key components required during the first read-aloud of a sophisticated picturebook:

- 1. Book introduction** - used to focus young children’s attention and make the problem of the story explicit.

**2. Inserting vocabulary support** - teachers select a few key phrases or vocabulary words to highlight or define during the reading. Determining which ‘vocabulary enhancer’ technique to use, such as stating the definition or pointing to illustrations for meaning, is also predetermined by the teacher before reading.

**3. Comments and questions to support and extend comprehension** - analytical comments are determined at specific spots in the read-aloud, usually starting with the phrase “I’m thinking.” The teacher models her own thinking and asks questions to allow students, especially those who are not yet capable of doing so on their own, to think analytically.

**4. After-reading questions** - “why” questions are asked after reading to make inferences about events in the story. (pp. 744-745)

#### **Coconstruction of knowledge and interthinking.**

Wiseman (2010) is another researcher who has explored interactive read-alouds. She examined the nature of interactive nature read-alouds and how a teacher and students in a Kindergarten classroom constructed knowledge together. This ethnographic study took place over nine months in an urban Kindergarten classroom, consisting of 21 children and a teacher with 10 years teaching experience. Wiseman and two other research members conducted observations in the classroom four times a week from October through to May, during the morning message, an interactive read-aloud and journal writing. Data were gathered during the interactive read-alouds in the form of field notes (recording teacher’s instruction, students’ interactions and responses), as well as through audiotaped recordings of the read-alouds, student journal entries and informal interviews with the teacher and students. The research team analyzed the data by reading the transcripts and field notes and generating codes based on patterns that emerged from the data. Wiseman and her research partners categorized the way

knowledge was constructed based on four main categories of teacher response during read-alouds: confirming, modeling, extending and building. Confirming referred to when the teacher supported her students' thinking. Modeling referred to when the teacher modeled thinking for her students (i.e., think-alouds) such as taking clues from the illustrations to help construct the meaning. Extending occurred when the teacher and students extended one another's ideas. Finally, building was described as when the teacher and students collaborated their ideas and built meaning together. According to Wiseman, these four components provide evidence that effective interactive read-alouds are complex when analyzed, yet her research revealed how interactive conversations tended to naturally address them.

In a qualitative study by Pantaleo (2007), the nature of the interthinking (Mercer, 1995) that occurred during the discussions of specific picturebooks was examined. Working with Grade 1 children from an inner city school, Pantaleo engaged the students in both small group and whole class interactive read-alouds. Once a week, children were pulled from their classroom and participated in small group read-aloud sessions. The students were encouraged to talk to one another or herself about the picturebook at any point during the read-alouds. Following the small group readings, Pantaleo reread the story to the whole class, once again encouraging discussion. Data were collected in the form of audio-recordings, field notes detailing children's comments, facial expressions and body language, and student journal entries completed following the whole group read-aloud. Data were analyzed to explore the children's responses and interpretations of the eight picturebooks examined in the study.

Pantaleo's (2007) data analysis revealed how effective interactive read-alouds can provoke children to talk about their thoughts, feelings and questions, as well as share their wonderings and interpretations. During the read-alouds, collective thinking occurred during the process of

exploratory talk as the children engaged “with others’ ideas through oral language” (Pantaleo, 2007, p. 439). The findings of Pantaleo’s study revealed how the children asked questions, made observations, provided explanations or interpretations, imagined, and supported and extended other’s ideas when immersed in an effective read-aloud. Pantaleo (2007) referred to Mercer’s (2000) term “interthinking” as a way to connect thinking and social interaction to language.

Similar to Pantaleo’s findings about the interthinking that can take place during quality discussions, Hoffman’s (2011) research focused on the coconstruction of meaning through interactive literacy discussions during Kindergarten read-alouds. Data were collected when Hoffman worked with a Kindergarten teacher of 22 students at an urban school. Hoffman met with the teacher monthly for 1.5 hours during Professional Development (PD) over the course of six months. The goal of these sessions was to design ‘instructional supports’ to help students engage and focus on higher level literacy practices (i.e., analysis, interpretation, critical thinking). According to Hoffman (2011) most traditional read-alouds focus primarily on literal-level comprehension; learning that emphasizes print awareness, vocabulary and comprehension (p. 183). Before each PD session, Hoffman and the participating teacher read professional literature on their focus of the month (i.e., interpreting literacy constructs in text, intentional questioning and response) and then analyzed video and transcripts of the teacher’s read-aloud that had been designed at their previous meeting in order to reflect and revise for the next read-aloud. The results of Hoffman’s study revealed two common elements necessary for successful implementation of higher level literacy practices: (1) interactive discussion (moving away from the traditional IRE format) and (2) interpretive meaning. Redesigning read-alouds to include interpretation of meaning provided structure for a variety of responses. Such interpretive responses can be categorized into five types: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent and



performative (Sipe, 2008). These types of responses allowed for interpretation of meaning rather than simple comprehension. By scaffolding and modeling high level thinking, Hoffman found educators can teach children to think more critically and deeply. Through the process of redesign, Hoffman developed four effective structural supports to promote literacy discussions during interactive read-alouds:

1. **Encouraging student talk** - allowing students to share their thoughts, interpretations and ask/answer questions promotes and builds interaction.
2. **Reconstruction of meaning** - acknowledging misinterpretations and misconceptions (i.e., literal and explicit to the central meaning of the story rather than open to interpretation) by ‘reconstructing’ understanding, rather than simply continuing to search for the correct answer from another student.
3. **Coconstruction of meaning** - in order to guide students through the meaning-making process, Hoffman identified two critical components: (1) making use of student-initiated responses and (2) using follow-up questions to guide this process.
4. **Shifting focus from literal to interpretive** - guiding class discussions towards interpretation shifts the focus to a higher level of meaning making. For example, teacher guidance is useful (and often necessary) for young students to recognize symbolism intended to strengthen the theme of a story. (pp. 187-191)

#### **Making the most of teaching time.**

Finally, a study by Santora, Chard, Howard and Baker (2008) looked more broadly at read-alouds. Teachers within the study were struggling to cover the curriculum within the classroom schedule and were specifically looking for time to teach students how to apply comprehension strategies to what they read. The researchers’ project was federally funded in order to design and

evaluate a structure for teachers to teach comprehension of both narrative and expository texts through the use of interactive read-alouds to Grade 1 students. Lessons were constructed around week-long ‘units’ consisting of one narrative text and one information text based on a science or social studies theme or topic. Book selection was based on set criteria, such as high interest topics, diversity, and multicultural connections. Within each text selected, two to four words were chosen to teach and discuss in order to enhance comprehension. Vocabulary selection within these texts needed to be meaningful, rich, and important to understanding the story. Santora et al. (2008) described how the lessons also included comprehension strategies to use before, during and after the read-alouds, such as identifying the purpose of the reading (i.e., story or information), predicting, making connections or retelling (p. 403). Through careful unit planning, teachers were able to maintain the familiar structure of the read-aloud throughout the year while following a gradual release model.

By scaffolding instruction, teachers were able to begin the year with teacher-directed discussions and gradually moved to independent responses throughout the year (i.e., think-alouds and modeling to start, moving to guided and finally independent responses). A total of 15 units were designed and evaluated. Data were collected by assessing the performance of participating students to comparable nonparticipating students. The researchers then used a variety of comprehension measures to evaluate student understanding of a narrative text such as the length of the retelling, text-based examples and detailed statements were recorded and scored. Data were analyzed by use of a coding system.

The results of this study indicated that partnering read-alouds with comprehension strategies and discussions around the text made a significant difference in student performance. Within the focus group, students’ comprehension and vocabulary increased, they improved their retellings

with respect to quality and accuracy, students were more confident speaking aloud, they had a deeper understanding of the text when questioned, and the students were able to make connections between common themes, texts and events. This study validated the idea that while students are learning language through language (i.e., through teachers modeling and through interactive discussions), students can specifically learn about language when read-alouds are structured this way (Halliday, 1969). As a result, teachers can teach more within a single lesson when incorporating the structure of interactive read-alouds within the school day. Within Santora et al.'s (2008) suggested read-aloud framework, teachers choose to focus on a specific aspect of literacy development while addressing other subject areas. Teachers build on students' background knowledge, weave in comprehension skills or strategies, introduce text structure, and/or define difficult vocabulary while integrating social studies and science content. The incorporation of multiple instructional learning outcomes is possible due to the specific choices made around the texts used during the interactive read-alouds.

### **Overall benefits of interactive read-alouds.**

As is evident from the research reviewed above, there are strong benefits for the use of interactive teacher read-alouds, especially when the key components for effectiveness as suggested by Fisher et al. (2004) and McGee and Schickedanz (2007) are included. A review of recent research on interactive read-alouds by Lennox (2013), including some of the studies described previously, identified many of the same advantages above. Firstly, consistent with the findings from the studies above, Lennox noted how the use of dialogic talk which can occur during interactive read-alouds validates learners' thoughts, ideas and questions. Before, during and after reading, teachers can actively engage students in dialogic talk, where ideas are shared and alternate perspectives are heard, both deepening individual understanding. The dialogic

nature of interactive read-alouds can also provide students with the opportunity to ask for clarification *during* the reading of a text. Teachers can stop to build on their own and students' ideas while expanding content of the text in ways that support language and thinking skills (Lennox, 2013).

Secondly, Lennox (2013) described how research findings indicate that interactive-read-alouds are “positively linked to children’s overall academic achievement, reading skills and interest in reading and writing” (p. 382). Not only are interactive read-alouds enjoyable and engaging, oral language development increases, enhancing children’s thinking and understanding. As noted above in the discussion of several of the studies on interactive read-alouds, there is also the opportunity to teach new vocabulary, text structures, phonological and phonemic awareness and concepts of print. Collectively, these investigations show the third advantage of this instructional activity: interactive read-alouds can make learning more meaningful (Lennox, 2013). Students can deepen and extend their thinking and understanding when they converse with the teacher and peers. Fourthly, interactive read-alouds are consistent with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Read-aloud texts are typically more difficult than those at students’ independent reading level texts and the teacher-student interactions can allow for discussion of higher level content. The review of the literature on interactive read-alouds by Lennox revealed how teachers also have the opportunity to demonstrate reading strategies students can adopt when reading independently. Finally, Lennox wrote that collectively, studies on interactive read-alouds have revealed how the interpretation and exploration of students’ ideas and the ideas of others can promote interthinking and the coconstruction of meaning when in the safety of an interactive read-aloud setting.

Interactive read-alouds are one of many activities that can be used by teachers to promote and support early literacy development among young learners. To help children develop as readers, teachers and parents must also look at children's understanding of the writing process because as described previously, learning to read and write is a reciprocal processes. In the following section I examine the literature on the writing development of emergent writers and discuss how a teacher's writing pedagogy can positively effect this growth.

### **Writing Development**

Learning to write is a developmental process. Just like learning to talk or read, children's writing abilities emerge as they interact with people and materials, including environmental print. Reading and writing skills and knowledge develop simultaneously and are interconnected (Mayer, 2007). Children develop their understanding of how print and sound work together when they experiment with writing – by creating and testing hypotheses about how writing works in the process (Bissex, 1980). Children's development as writers is underway when they begin to understand that writing is used to communicate and that the marks on the page are meaningful and convey a message.

#### **Scribbling and drawing.**

Theorists generally agree that children first explore writing by scribbling and drawing. Based on the work of Linda Lamme's (1984) handbook for parents, Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, and McKeon (2009) describe three progressions of scribbling in writing development: early scribbling, controlled scribbling and name scribbling. Early scribbling is characterized by random marks on paper and may begin before a child's first birthday. These scribbles are not representational but spontaneous and are compared to babbling in oral language development. Controlled scribbling, which occurs between the ages of 3 and 6, is characterized

by more systematic, repeated marks (e.g., circles, dots, and lines) similar to the symbols found in the child's culture. Within this age range, children use drawings and pictographs to 'write' and can recognize the difference between drawing and writing. In the name scribbling phase, children redefine their view of writing and start to experiment with the symbolic nature of writing, beginning with the letters in their name. Tolchinsky (2006) believes name scribbling is due to the self-centeredness of children at this age which provides the motivation to learn to write their names. At this stage, children's scribbling has meaning and becomes representational. They begin to understand that symbols can be used to communicate a message, develop alphabet awareness, and gain an understanding of the conventions of writing. From this point forward, children's writing becomes more conventional. Concepts of words and letter-sound correlation help children write words and sentences with invented spellings. Conventions such as punctuation and capitalization evolve as well as the control of letter-sound relationships.

Reid, Schultze, and Petersen (2012), who discuss these three progressions in greater depth, include oral language in writing development. They recognize that when students use controlled scribbling to experiment with writing, they orally label the objects and/or use a few words or phrases to share their 'writing' (p. 26). Reid et al. write that when children begin to use representational shapes including some initial consonant sounds to represent the objects, they tell the story in simple sentences and can add more if they are prompted. As the children's text increases and their drawings decrease, the oral stories become more detailed and evolved.

### **From drawing to writing.**

Hubbard (1989) stated that drawing is not only "for children who can't yet write fluently, and creating pictures is not just part of rehearsal for real writing. Images at any age are part of the serious business of meaning-making - partners with words for communicating our inner

designs” (p. 157). A case study by Mackenzie (2011) explored the importance of drawing during the emerging stages of writing and the significance of drawing in both the quality of writing produced by and the building of confidence within young writers. Ten Kindergarten teachers worked collaboratively with the researcher to examine the effects of prioritizing drawing within their writing programs for the first six months of the school year. Within their individual writing programs, participating teachers talked with students about how drawings can prompt writing and hold their ideas. The teachers reinforced how meaning can be represented in many ways (drawing, talking, and writing) and emphasized how all ways are valued. During independent writing/drawing, teachers talked with students and used their drawings as the focus of conversation. Qualitative data were collected in the form of teacher observations and reflections, teacher and student interviews, and writing samples.

Mackenzie (2011) used content analysis to interpret meaning in speech and written text based on the following seven dimensions: meaning, genre, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and handwriting. The findings revealed that when students combined drawing and writing, their concentration levels increased, the development of their ideas expanded, and the written outcome was more complex than when they used solely writing (Mackenzie, 2011, pp. 332-334). Individual choice of drawing provided a bridge and powerful connection between school and home, as topics chosen often related to out-of-school experiences. This connection created a starting place that was motivating for individuals (having something to talk and write about) and allowed for the scaffolding of early writing. Drawings were also used to remind students of ideas – drawing ideas was faster than writing them down. In addition, the findings emphasized the power of building on what is known; making-meaning through talking and drawing were known to children while writing as script was new to them. Indeed, Calkins

(1994) has discussed how drawing, which is safe and familiar, can provide a starting point to experience and experiment with the new challenges of writing.

Participating teachers noticed a shift in students' enthusiasm and a change in their criteria for identifying a successful writer, which no longer related to the accuracy of their written work. Emerging writers discovered that one can successfully make meaning without having to write with complete accuracy. Mackenzie recognized drawing as one of the various ways emergent writers can express themselves and communicate about our multimodal world. "In an era where visual literacy is central to new literacies it does not make sense to ignore the research which identifies the important relationship between drawing and writing" (Mackenzie, 2011, p. 322). Multimodality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has caused educators to consider and re-evaluate traditional literacy practices that prioritize print. According to Hassett and Curwood (2009) print represents only one mode of communication. Allowing a variety of modes for children to communicate is necessary in today's classrooms.

### **Stages of emergent writing.**

Scribbles and drawings as discussed above are evidence of the first stages of emergent writing. Many researchers have analyzed the development of children's early writing and have suggested varying stages to characterize this growth toward conventionality. For example, the Gentry Writing Scale (2005) identifies five stages of emergent writing: non-alphabetic writing, pre-alphabetic writing, partial alphabetic writing, full alphabetic writing, and consolidated alphabetic writing. Gentry's (2005) scale marks progress from one stage to the next in areas such as symbol versus letter formation, phonemic awareness, level of invented spelling and the understanding of the alphabetic principle (p. 128). Similarly, Cabell, Tortorelli, and Gerde (2013) describe four levels of early writing development. Although discrepancy exists in the



number of stages among various authors, the same progressions and processes in the early stages of writing are usually recognized. I chose to describe the framework proposed by Cabell et al. because the stages can be more easily identified (by teachers and parents alike) simply by the specific names they have assigned to each stage.

The four level model proposed by Cabell et al. (2013) draws from a large body of work in the area of the emergent writing. In the first level, *Drawing and Scribbling*, children's drawings *are* their writing and children do not distinguish between the two when asked to write. Schickedanz and Casbergue (2004) argue that children at this level do not distinguish between drawing and scribbling because to them, both convey meaning. Eventually children begin to separate their writing 'marks' from their drawings, indicating their initial understanding that writing conveys meaning. These early marks often are directionless scribbles but eventually take on the features of written text in the children's environment and finally the form of distinct characters (Cabell et al., 2013).

The second level of early writing development, *Letters and Letter-Like Forms*, is reached when children begin to write with letter-like forms and a few letter shapes (Cabell et al., 2013). Children often mix numbers and symbols with these random letter-like forms. Eventually conventional letters are produced, usually written in strings of letters. Children often begin by reproducing the first letter of their name, along with other name letters (Treiman, Kessler, & Bourassa, 2001). At this stage, children are beginning to understand that text carries meaning but generally they do not understand that letters represent sounds in spoken words. Although phonological awareness and knowledge of the alphabet is developing, generally children at this level have not made the speech-to-print connection. Cabell et al. note how the messages children

write using letters and letter-like forms cannot be understood by adults without children's interpretations.

The third critical stage of writing development, *Salient and Beginning Sounds*, has been reached when children represent sounds they hear in spoken words in their writing. Relying on their growing letter and sound recognition, children begin to invent spelling based on this knowledge. Beginning sounds, in addition to other *salient* sounds (sounds most prominent because of the way they feel in the child's mouth), are most often represented (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2008). Children combine their understanding of print and sound for the first time at this stage. However, Cabell et al. (2013) note how children still experience difficulties deciphering when spoken words begin and end in written text and as a result do not usually use spaces between words while writing.

In the fourth and final stage of early writing development described by Cabell et al. (2013), *Beginning and Ending Sounds*, children can distinguish individual sounds in words due to their increased phonemic awareness and they begin to represent beginning and ending sounds of words in their writing. Children usually write with spaces between words at this stage, showing an understanding of word boundaries. Letter-name strategies are seen at this stage; for example, *eight* might be spelled AT. Even though beginning and ending sounds are consistent, middle sounds, especially vowels, are often omitted.

Although writing development tends to progress in this order described by Cabell et al. (2013), it is not necessary for a child to master one level before moving onto the next. Often children move back and forth between levels of difficulty, especially when writing tasks change (i.e., name writing vs. story writing).

Regardless of children's level of development, it is important for them to believe they are writers. Asking them to find stories in their personal lives to write about encourages the development of this identity. When students write about events and ideas that personally interest them, the results are more in depth and powerful. When students feel confident and do not struggle with writing anxiety, teachers observe an increase in children attempts to express themselves and write creatively (Reid et al., 2012). From the beginning, teachers and parents need to be enthusiastic supporters of emerging writers. A child's first attempt at writing should be acknowledged and celebrated. It is important for children to be recognized for their attempts to convey meaning in their scribbles, drawings and symbols. As noted above, when a teacher acknowledges and incorporates strategies, and promotes self-efficacy, emerging writers will experience greater success. In the following section on writing pedagogy I discuss some ways to effectively support our emerging writers.

### **Writing Pedagogy**

Theorists and researchers maintain that learning to write is a social process. Children gain their knowledge about how to write by observing and interacting with experienced writers (Mayer, 2007). Before formal schooling, this interaction usually occurs with people in the home and greater community. At school, children can learn through peer interactions; they can help one another explore and understand the process and purposes of writing (Mayer, 2007). According to Dyson (1997, 2003), children play around with the idea of themselves as writers and their intended audience when working together informally.

Overall, Dyson's (2003) extensive research on writing and young children focuses on literacy development from a sociocultural perspective and explores the effects of popular media on literacy learning. In her book *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*, Dyson (2003)

examines how cultural references can influence young children's writing and overall academic success when educators recognize and incorporate social and cultural connections into their literacy practice. When conducting research on children's writing development, Dyson (1997, 2003) documented how children learn about writing when they discuss their ideas and coconstruct text with one another. Among Dyson's (1983, 1995) many research findings, she described how talk is an integral part of the early writing process, how young children write for different purposes, and how there is no one process to learn to write. Her research has had a tremendous impact on educators' views, beliefs and pedagogy about early literacy development. Below, I review some literature that provides techniques and strategies teachers can implement in the classroom that recognize the developmental stages of writing and therefore support emerging writers.

### **Supporting emergent writing.**

Children learn about the writing process through student-teacher interaction. Writing with a teacher's support allows for immediate feedback and guidance through modeling and scaffolding. When teachers state the purpose of writing and model the writing process, emergent writers witness the construction of written text and begin to understand the composing process (Mayer, 2007).

Gentry described six exemplary techniques that can be used to support emergent writing and the development of independent writers. While observing effective Kindergarten writing sessions, Gentry (2005) determined the lessons included the following six techniques: creating a writing block, teaching in the zone of proximal development, scaffolding writing, using private speech, incorporating "materialization" (techniques that use physical action to represent a mental construct), and assessing the developmental stage (pp. 121-122). The daily writing blocks

Gentry observed were approximately 45 minutes in duration and included whole class mini-lessons, independent writing and time for sharing. Students had choice in writing topic and drew pictures of the concept being written about as a prewriting activity. Teaching in the ZPD refers to Vygotsky's (1978) notion that the best instruction moves students to a higher level of independence through modelling and scaffolding. Through the use of scaffolded writing, the Kindergarten students were provided the necessary support to complete writing tasks at higher levels than they could have completed independently. With respect to private speech, defined as "self-directed regulatory speech," Gentry (2005) noted how writers give themselves auditory direction to support the writing of a new mental action (p. 124). For example, emergent writers may use private speech when rehearsing the spelling of *hat* by repeating *h-a-t* out loud. This writing support is temporary and dropped once the process is internalized. Materialization, which is a Vygotskian concept (Gentry, 2005), refers to emerging writers using tangible objects or physical action to represent an idea. Examples of materialization in the study included letter boxes, finger spelling, and stretching out sounds.

Finally, Gentry (2005) identified how teachers assessed the developmental growth of emergent writers through observation and scale measurement. Often, using the Gentry Scale of Writing that was described above, teachers observed and assessed how their children's conception of the alphabetic principle changed over time and they also used the writing scale as a tool for predicting the type and timing of instruction for further literacy development. Gentry's (2005) recommendations of instructional techniques find theoretical support in Vygotsky's idea that "instruction leads development" (p. 131). Effective teaching promotes the movement through the developmental stages of writing – growth in writing does not just happen when children are 'ready' to learn.

Mentioned briefly in the setup of writing blocks, Gentry (2005) discussed the importance of student co-operation when discussing writing ideas with one another. De Smedt and Van Keer (2014), who write extensively about the importance of student collaboration, would probably add this process to Gentry's list of techniques for supporting emergent writing. According to DeSmedt and Van Keer, when students are allowed to work together and help one another during the writing process, the quality of work increases. Many empirical studies reviewed by De Smedt and Van Keer (2014) provide evidence that collaborative writing also has a strong impact on writers' motivation, self-efficacy, attitude towards writing, self-perception, ownership and reduction in writing anxiety (p. 696).

### **Guided writing for emergent writers.**

Gibson's work on guided writing echoes several of Gentry's suggested techniques for effective emergent writing instruction. Gibson (2008b) analyzed the effects of her daily guided writing instruction on five Grade 2 students who had similar abilities and needs. Gibson's (2008a) small-group instructional framework for guided writing instruction included four main steps: (1) a brief, shared experience, (2) discussion of strategic behavior for writing such as how to construct a strong opening sentence, (3) time to write with immediate guidance from the teacher, and (4) connecting students' writing with an audience (pp. 326-330). Videotapes of the writing events were analyzed and writing samples assessed, revealing individual student's strategic behaviours for problem solving during writing. Each student demonstrated a dramatic improvement in the shift to a more active use of strategies when writing. Gibson's (2008a) guided writing framework supported students' "expanded knowledge for language use for composing, for text and sentence structure, for phonemic awareness and for orthography" (p.

325). Thus, Gibson's findings (2008b) revealed that young students *do* learn strategic behaviours for writing when taught such strategies in supportive ways.

When describing her instructional framework, Gibson (2008a) noted how the introductory section of the guided writing lesson should capture students' interests and orientate them to the writing task as well as provide opportunities for students to hear and use language structures needed in their writing. Teachers need to engage students in conversations and explicitly rehearse what could be said in their writing. The second step of Gibson's framework recommended that teachers describe the specific writing strategy to be explored through the use of a think-aloud or introduction of a cue card. For example, if the focus was on the use of a topic sentence, teachers and students should discuss how to incorporate the strategy into their own writing. During the third step students had time to write. Teachers need to scaffold instruction through the use of prompting where they direct students' attention to key aspects of the tasks, motivate students to use information from resources or interests, encourage students to monitor their work or simply support students with their next step in writing (Gibbons, 2008a, p. 329). Teachers need to step in to scaffold and prompt and then step back to encourage students to explore the writing process on their own. The fourth and final step in Gibson's writing workshop framework is connecting the students' writing to an immediate audience. Sharing writing supports students' attempts to clearly convey information to intended readers. In addition, when students share their writing teachers have time to analytically look at the writer's decision making to see if and how the taught strategies are being implemented by students. Overall, Gibson's framework bridges the gap between whole-class writing instruction and successful independent writing.

### **Writing workshop.**

Similar to Gibson, King (2012) also described research about the implementation of a writing workshop but her study took place in a preschool classroom. Considering children enter school at various ages around the world, I decided to include and review research that included preschoolers when looking at emergent writers. A year long microethnography was conducted by King in her own classroom consisting of 12 students and a paraprofessional. The students were all four years of age at the start of the school year and they attended school four times a week, for two hours and 45 minutes per day. Data were collected by videotaping the writing workshop and collecting writing samples. These data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to develop common themes.

King (2012) examined the four major components of a typical writing workshop (minilesson, writing time, conferencing, sharing) and adapted them accordingly. Since King included very few minilessons throughout the course of the year, the first major component of a typical writing workshop was eliminated. During writing time, students created a new story in their journal each day. Students were free to write about topics of their choosing and balanced their writing time between drawing pictures, practicing writing their name, and using a combination of letters and lines to represent words. Writing time was a time of student experimentation with letters, labels, retelling of events, and even story structure.

During sharing time students shared their writing from an author's chair, walked around the circle of students to show their work, and then returned to the chair for questions or comments. After reviewing the data, King discovered the occurrence of a situational code switch when students stepped out of the author's chair and walked around the room. Discussion about the



writing suddenly became more informal and her students' interactions and conversations became more authentic.

King did not begin student conferencing until midyear. She conducted conferences only once a week due to time constraints associated with her scribing the students' stories, making it difficult to conference during writing time. In addition, King wanted her students to have a clear understanding of what was expected during journal and sharing time before conferencing was introduced. When conferencing was eventually implemented, data analysis revealed an improvement in student writing practice and understanding, as well as the development of a classroom structure that was both collaborative and social, when they invited a peer to join them during conference time. The change in structure, similar to the one during sharing time, created a shift in students' perspectives with respect to making conferencing seem less formal. This adaptation allowed more informal conversations to occur and transformed conferencing into a social structure of the writing workshop.

Supporting the theoretical ideas that underlie emergent literacy, King's (2012) study revealed how students at an early age are capable of learning the fundamentals of writing in a supportive, nurturing environment. Indeed, King's research showed how writing workshops can be used successfully in a preschool setting as a means for students to explore what writing is and what writers do. The adapted format of the writing workshop provided a bridge between writing as play and writing as a formal task.

#### **Other recommendations for writing pedagogy.**

In addition to the pedagogical suggestions implied from the studies above, Mayer (2007) identified the following six important recommendations for teachers as essential when teaching young children to write based on his review of the research on emergent writing: (1)

developmental awareness, (2) supportive instruction, (3) opportunities to write, (4) models for writing, (5) motivational environments and resources, and (6) locations for writing (pp. 38-39). The first recommendation reflects the findings of Vacca et al. (2009), Mackenzie (2011), and Cabell et al. (2013), in that teachers need to be aware of the suggested stages of emergent writing while understanding that learning to write is not linear and that not all children follow the same progression. This developmental awareness informs teachers of the importance of concentrating on the intended message rather than letter formation or spelling during emergent stages of writing. Related to the first recommendation, and also strongly suggested in the findings of several of the studies above (e.g., Gentry, 2005; Gibson, 2008a; King 2012), the second recommendation focused on how when teachers have an understanding of early writing development they can identify the needs of individuals and are more equipped to provide appropriate support at their developmental level.

Providing students with multiple opportunities to write was the third recommendation. Gentry (2005), Gibson (2008a), and King (2012), who each wrote about the importance of scheduling writing time, would strongly agree with Mayer's (2007) recommendation. Unfortunately, research has indicated that the amount of time allotted to writing is often limited in early literacy classrooms. Mayer's fourth recommendation was that children learn new skills by observing experienced writers engaged in meaningful writing activities. As noted above, Mayer (2007), Gentry (2005) and Gibson (2008a) wrote about how structuring time to model the purpose and mechanics of writing can further develop emergent writers' understanding of the process.

Collectively, the studies on emergent writing pedagogy support Mayer's (2007) fifth recommendation: that teachers need to create a classroom environment, through its physical

arrangement and availability of types of materials and activities, that encourages writing development. Providing a variety of materials for students to experiment with and explore can help motivate students, stimulate students' creativity and provide challenges with writing (King, 2012). Similar to the third suggestion, to provide students with multiple opportunities to write, the final recommendation was to encourage writing at various times and locations and for meaningful purposes to encourage the development of writing skills. Both Gibson (2008a) and King (2012) suggested connecting students' writing to an audience, which creates a purpose to write for intended readers or listeners. According to Mayer, teacher implementation of these six recommendations can empower emergent student writers.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I shared the theoretical framework and conceptual foundations that informed and guided the development of the four videos for my project. Following a brief review of the literature on emergent literacy, I discussed Interactive Read-alouds. This section focused on the key components of this read-aloud structure, including teacher dialogic talk, and examined how the coconstruction of knowledge and interthinking can occur during effective interactive read-alouds. I also examined some of the research on emergent writing development and discussed how a teacher's writing pedagogy can inform, support, and guide students' early literacy development. Overall, my review of the literature reveals that in order for young children to develop their early literacy skills and knowledge, teachers and parents alike need a strong understanding of the complexities of this process.

In Chapter 3 I describe how the literature review informed the content of the video series, *Supporting Your Early Literacy Learner*. I also reflect on what I learned from developing the series, and suggest implications for future research.

## Chapter 3

### Connections and Reflections

In this chapter I connect the content in the videos I created to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. By watching the videos, parents/guardians are introduced to information about how young children learn to read and write, and how they can create and engage their children in literacy and language learning opportunities at home.

After describing how I created the videos, I analyze each one. For each video, I state the purpose and how the script connects to relevant literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Following these sections, I reflect on the process of creating the videos, offer some pedagogical suggestions, provide recommendations for further research, and reflect on my journey through the Master's program.

#### The Videos

The first video created, *Stages of Emergent Writing*, which is in fact the last of the series, was filmed during the first year of my Master's program for an assignment in a writing course. Although I wrote the script for the video before I conducted my literature review, overall the video content reflects the information on the stages of beginning writing presented in Chapter 2. Asked to create a Public Service Announcement about writing for a specific audience, I chose to inform parents on the stages of emergent writing. The feedback from my professor, colleagues, friends and family was extremely positive. This experience inspired the idea of creating more informative videos for parents. As a full-time working mother, I knew I did not want to create a handbook, website or blog that most other busy parents/guardians would not have time to read. I believed even the busiest parent could manage to sit and watch a five minute video.

With respect to the other three videos, I crafted the scripts by extracting and synthesizing from the literature review, the most informative concepts for parents/guardians to recognize and utilize, as opposed to some of the information that was more appropriate for teachers or adults working with larger groups of children. Once I created a list of key points to include in each video, I wrote the scripts featuring both my daughter Mackenzie and myself in order to incorporate a casual introduction of ideas when Mackenzie was speaking, and an explanation of technical concepts narrated by myself. I wanted the tone of the videos to be somewhat relaxed, so I incorporated humor and wove a child's perspective into the conversations. Through the use of iMovie, I inserted videos of my daughter and interwove these recordings with images I downloaded from the Internet as I narrated, using simple voice recording for each video.

Ideally, the videos will capture the intended audience's attention while introducing, informing and educating them about emergent literacy development in Kindergarten.

The scripts of the videos are found in the Appendix. All four videos can be accessed and viewed at <<http://throwintothe21stcentury.blogspot.ca/>>.

### **Video 1 – Emergent Literacy**

The purpose of my first video, *Emergent Literacy*, is to introduce parents/guardians to the main reasons for creating the videos. In my experience as a Kindergarten teacher I have found that many parents/guardians are anxious and worry about their children learning to read and write. I wanted to normalize their feelings and assure parents/guardians that these literacy skills will emerge. My goal of introducing the idea of emergent literacy was to inform and educate parents/guardians, especially the handful who are worried at the beginning of the year that their children do not know the alphabet, the sounds associated with letters or how to print their names.

In the video I also inform the audience of the key concepts I would like them to understand about young children and the way they learn.

**Video 1: Essential understandings.**

The overall goal of Video 1 is to communicate the following four concepts to parents/guardians: 1) emergent literacy vs. reading readiness approach; 2) learning is a social practice; 3) learning must be meaningful; and 4) learning requires children to be actively engaged.

As is described in the video, an emergent literacy (Clay, 1982) philosophy and approach differ greatly from a reading readiness approach, where reading and writing are conceptualized as sets of skills and mental age determines student readiness for reading and writing (Downing & Thackray, 1975). Within an emergent literacy approach, learning to read and write is a development process and this learning is optimal when three concepts, as described in the video, are acknowledged and practiced. First, learning should be a social practice; Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory recognizes how social interactions affect and shape individual cognitive development, while Halliday (1969) proposed that learning is never separated from the social world. Secondly, learning must be meaningful. In Chapter 2 I discussed the work of various scholars who suggest ways to connect learning to the individual to make it personal and meaningful: Gee's (1996) "identity kit" or learners' Discourses; Moll et al.'s (1992) Funds of Knowledge; and Dyson's (2015) scholarly work that emphasizes the importance of connecting learning to prior knowledge. Thirdly, learning requires children to be actively engaged. Whether engaged in exploratory talk (Barnes, 2008; Smagorinsky, 2007), or dialogic talk (Alexander, 2003; Edward-Groves et al., 2013), or working within their zone of proximal

development (Vygotsky,1978), when learning is active children better retain what is being taught.

## **Video 2 – Interactive Read-alouds**

Most parents/guardians consider the initial step towards learning to read to be when a child sounds out that first word in print. In Video 2, I wanted to introduce parents/guardians to the notion that reading is emergent in nature and that young children are learning about the process of reading long before this conventional stage. In Kindergarten students do eventually develop literacy skills in order to decipher words but they are learning other critical reading skills well before this development occurs. In my experience, most parents/guardians know it is important to read to their young children but they may not fully understand why this activity is so fundamental to their children’s language and literacy development. I wanted to inform parents/guardians of the benefits of reading aloud to their children and ways to promote thinking and questioning about reading during this activity.

### **Video 2: Essential understandings.**

My goal was to communicate the following two key concepts to parents/guardians in Video 2: 1) interactive read-alouds significantly influence the development of language skills; and 2) the use of dialogic talk during interactive read-alouds is instrumental to developing and deepening thinking. I also wanted to offer parents some pragmatic suggestions when engaging in an interactive read-aloud, such as criteria to consider when selecting a book and recommendations for prompting and responding to children’s talk.

Interactive read-alouds not only develop literacy understanding and comprehension skills, but also they are connected with overall school success (Barrentine, 1996; Sipe, 2008). When teachers and parents/guardians model and scaffold literary skills during this interactive process,

such as engaging in “think-alouds” about predictions or inferences, these demonstrations can enhance students’ literacy learning and oral language development (Beauchat, 2012; McGee & Schickdanz, 2007).

As was described in Chapter 2, dialogic talk is an essential component of interactive read-alouds. Unlike traditional read-alouds, the interactive nature provides opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, as they respond beyond answering a literal level question. Engaging in dialogic talk involves children conversing with one another and the adult as they respond to, debate, infer, explain, question and construct meaning during the interactive read-aloud process (Barrentine, 1996; Edward-Groves et al., 2013; Fisher et al., 2004). Such dialogue opens the discussion in order for interthinking and the coconstruction of knowledge to occur (Hoffman, 2011; Mercer, 2000; Pantaleo, 2007).

I wanted parents/guardians to consider the texts they select for an interactive read-aloud and recognize how certain books are better than others for reading in this format. Research findings indicate that the text needs to be rich in artwork, storylines, characters and language, and the reader needs to preview and practice the reading, model fluent reading, use animation and expression, and engage in dialogic talk (Beauchat, 2012; Fisher et al., 2004).

Finally, Video 2 contains practical suggestions for parents/guardians about how to get their children talking about the text and appropriate ways to respond to their answers. By introducing Whitehurst’s CROWD acronym (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) for prompting, and Wiseman’s (2010) response techniques such as confirming or building, ideally parents/guardians will develop confidence engaging in dialogic talk with the set of skills provided to incorporate these behaviours into their reading routines.



### **Video 3 – Beginning Writing**

For the most part, when the parents/guardians of my Kindergarten students were in school, they were taught that writing is an individual activity and the value of the writing is placed on the written text, never the accompanying drawings. In Video 3, I explain the value of children interacting with others as they learn to write, and emphasize the importance of drawing during emergent literacy development.

#### **Video 3: Essential understandings.**

The overall goal of Video 3 is to communicate two key concepts to parents/guardians: 1) learning to write should be an interactive process; and 2) drawing plays an essential role in the development of emergent writers.

Especially for beginning writers, student collaboration is essential when engaging in the composing process (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2014). In a nurturing, supportive environment, children can learn how sound and print work together when they are given opportunities to work with peers and experiment with writing (Bissex, 1980). Ensuring writing time is scheduled into the daily routine will facilitate this development (Gentry, 2005; Gibson, 2008a; King, 2012; Mayer, 2013). At this developmental stage, young children also learn through observing and experimenting with expert writers, such as their teachers and parents/guardians, and often instruction leads the development of writing skills (Gentry, 2005; Mayer 2007). An integral part of the early writing process is talk, so when these expert writers converse about their writing and the writing process with young children, learning takes place (Dyson, 1995). Implementing structures such as guided writing and/or writing workshop can increase the amount of talk about writing and this type of discourse can positively affect the growth and development of beginning writing (Gibson, 2008a; King, 2012).

As discussed in Chapter 2, children learn best when building on what they already know. For children, talking and drawing are familiar ways to express meaning (Calkins, 1994). Young learners need to be taught that meaning can be represented in many ways – talking, drawing and writing (Hubbard, 1989; Mackenzie, 2011). In the early stages of emergent writing, drawings ARE children’s writing. Children’s scribbling and drawings have meaning and are representational (Vacca et al., 2009).

In Video 3 I wanted to convey to parents/guardians how drawings are significant during emergent writing development. Firstly, drawings create a starting point for children to talk, and eventually write about. Drawings are safe and familiar, therefore providing a point of departure to experience and experiment with the new challenges of writing (Calkins, 1994). Secondly, drawings hold students’ ideas. Drawing ideas is much faster at this stage than writing them down (Mackenzie, 2011). Thirdly, allowing choice provides a starting point that is motivating, often bridging connections between home and school (Mackenzie, 2011). This motivation helps increase writer’s concentration, confidence and therefore quality of writing (Mackenzie, 2011).

#### **Video 4 – Stages of Emergent Writing**

The purpose of my final video was to inform parents/guardians about the stages of emergent writing. I want parents/guardians to understand and feel the excitement and joy that I experience when I watch their children developing into emerging writers. After the parent teacher interview I experienced and described in Chapter 1, I decided parents/guardians need to become knowledgeable about the stages of beginning writing in order to recognize and understand their children’s writing accomplishments in the Kindergarten year.

**Video 4: Essential understandings.**

Understanding the developmental nature of emergent writing is the concept I wanted parents/guardians to develop after viewing Video 4. Ideally, parents/guardians will have watched the first three videos and understand that literacy learning is a developmental process (Clay, 1982). When learning to write, young children developmentally progress from drawing to writing (Mackenzie, 2011). Scribbling and drawing are the first stages of writing development (Cabell et al., 2013; Gentry, 2005; Vacca et al., 2009). Shapes and letter-like formations are the next to appear, followed by the ability to identify and record the initial sounds of words. Eventually, emergent writers are able to identify middle and end sounds (Cabell et al., 2013; Gentry, 2005). Although all children do not necessarily follow this linear pattern when learning to write, if parents/guardians have an understanding of the various stages and multiple processes required for children to get ideas from their brains to their pencil and paper, I believe the adults will be better able to support their children during early literacy development.

**Reflections****Creating the videos.**

Having already used iMovie in my previous writing class, the actual process of putting the videos together was not a challenge. However, I soon discovered that having an eight-year-old as the spokesperson of not one, but a series of videos, was very time consuming. In the initial video, although Mackenzie was six-years-old, her lines were shorter and less complex. Although she did an incredible job learning and delivering her lines, Mackenzie's blooper reel is quite large.

In addition, I believe my initial video will be best received by the parents/guardians. I understand the other videos needed to reflect what I have learned from my literature review, but I

feel the scripts may have too much information to absorb and may be overwhelming for the parents/guardians who would benefit most from the information. Ideally, all parents/guardians, not only those who feel overwhelmed by the information, will view the videos several times in order to grasp the key concepts.

### **Recommendations for pedagogy.**

The most important pedagogical suggestion I can make is for more professional development opportunities to be available for the educators. Research is constantly being conducted but the findings do not seem to reach those stakeholders who most need this invaluable information. The demands experienced by most classroom teachers today leave them with little time or energy to keep up with current research. I believe it would be beneficial if more studies could be conducted that provide the researchers with the information they are seeking while simultaneously supporting the learning of educators. Mackenzie's (2011) study is an example of such research; not only did the researcher discover the importance of drawing during the emerging stages of writing but also a shift in the participating teachers' pedagogy was apparent after they were asked to consider the importance of drawing in their individual writing programs.

As well as participating in professional development opportunities when they are available, teachers need to take the time to think about their teaching philosophy on early literacy development. Being mindful of the how, the what and the why of classroom pedagogy is fundamental. Something as simple as a name change for a center can reframe children's view of what is considered important and valued by the teacher. For example, revising the name of 'Writing Center' to the 'Writing, Drawing, Talking Center' validates the importance of drawing

and talk in the process of writing (Schickedanz, 2013). This change of name could shift teachers' pedagogical stance and their students' view of learning.

As is evident by the video series I created, I also believe teachers need to involve parents/guardians in their children's literacy development. Teachers need to connect with parents/guardians to communicate and/or confirm that significant learning is occurring/can occur in the home as in school. Ideally, teachers should offer parents/guardians information and strategies that would reflect and complement the beliefs and practices enacted in the classroom.

### **Recommendations for further research.**

Although there is a large amount of research revealing the benefits of interactive read-alouds, I do not believe the majority of classrooms reflect and incorporate dialogic talk. I believe this situation to be true because teachers are unaware of the benefits of dialogic talk (or dialogic talk itself), nervous about the lesson getting out of control, or feel pressure to 'cover' all of the prescribed curriculum. I recommend research be conducted on the teachers themselves, similar to Mackenzie's research (2011), where teachers are asked to incorporate dialogic talk in their classroom practices and to record any shifts in their views after having tried out this type of discourse over a certain amount of time. I believe such research would be helpful to those educators who hear about the benefits of dialogic talk but are hesitant to make the pedagogical shift needed to try it out.

Another recommendation is for research to be conducted on the benefits of creating a strong parent/guardian connection with the classroom. Researchers could explore how to strength the connection between home and school. For example, to what extent, if any, do information videos such as the ones I created contribute to parents'/guardians' involvement in their children's

literacy development? Researchers could also explore whether or not a deepened connection between home and school has an impact on children's early literacy development.

### **My Master's journey.**

My Master's journey has been a long and windy road. When I embarked on this educational journey, completion was my only destination. However, as I near the end of this experience, I realize it was the journey, not the destination that has had the greatest impact. Completing my Master of Education program has forced me to stop and consider my teaching beliefs and practices. Many of these will remain the same but now I have theoretical frameworks and conceptual foundations to justify my actions. A few beliefs, especially around the importance of talk in the classroom, have drastically changed. However, the most important lessons that I take away from my graduate experience have nothing to do with the content of my literature review or the coursework.

Both lessons are not new but have been validated and affirmed over the past two years. The first is *if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing right*. The saying was ingrained into my head by my father when I was a little girl. My three sisters and I used to roll our eyes and repeat the saying in monotone voices. It was not until I was older that I truly understood and valued the lesson my dad was trying to teach us. Putting that lesson into practice is how I was able to successfully complete high school, undergrad and now my Master's degree. I am positive my supervisor, Sylvia Pantaleo, believes in this saying as well. She provided constant guidance throughout the completion of my project. I am forever grateful for her encouraging words, constructive feedback and patience. With her support, I am extremely proud of my accomplishments and final Master's project. The second lesson is that the support of my friends

and family is priceless. I will never forget and be forever thankful for their constant encouragement and unwavering belief in me throughout this educational journey.

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## Appendix

### Video # 1 Script

Mackenzie: Hi everyone and welcome to Kindergarten! It was only a few years ago I started kindergarten...and my mom was panicking! *When will she learn to read? What should I do? How can I help her?* And she's a TEACHER! Everyone worries and wants the best for their kids, right?

My mom decided to make a few videos to help you and your Kindergartener understand about learning to read and write and of course she needed my assistance in making them. Maybe you already know the ideas or maybe they're new to you. Either way, I hope these videos help you support your Kindergartener's emergent literacy development.

So...what is emergent literacy? Let me and my mom explain.

Me: The term emergent literacy is used to describe young children's emerging knowledge of reading and writing before they read and write in a conventional sense. Children's understanding and abilities to read and write develop as they experience and experiment in literacy activities. An emergent literacy approach is very different from the old reading readiness approach that assumed children's readiness to learn to read and write was based on only their mental age and developed skills, many of which were not necessarily related to literacy. An emergent literacy approach recognizes how learning to read and write occurs simultaneously.

Mackenzie: I am so glad that teachers now know more about how kids learn and understand how literacy development is emergent. Here are three key points to remember about how kids learn.

Me:

1. **Learning is a social practice.** Peer and adult interaction influence children's learning. Interactions provide opportunities for practice, growth and clarity for the learner.
2. **Learning must be meaningful.** Children make meaning and develop understanding of their world based on their personal experiences. Connecting learning to students' interests allows for personal connections and creates a meaningful, engaging learning environment. Children need to be taught that the purposes of reading and writing are to help us communicate with others and express our ideas, thoughts and emotions - just like talking!
3. **Learning requires children to be actively engaged.** Children learn through experience and meaningful literacy activities. When students participate actively in their learning, their focus and engagement increases dramatically. Children still learn letter names, formations and sounds but these aspects are taught in interactive, engaging, meaningful ways.

Mackenzie: There is not only one way to learn; especially when learning to read and write. The children's learning will emerge throughout the Kindergarten year as they develop their understanding and skills of reading and writing. In my next video on Interactive Read-alouds I introduce ideas and tips on how to support children's literacy development by reading aloud to them at home. Hope you'll keep watching!

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## **Video #2 Script**

Mackenzie: Hello again! Today Mom and I want to talk to you about interactive read-alouds.

Kids discover the wonders of books and the enjoyment of reading when read to aloud. Reading aloud to kids helps to develop their language and ideas and is connected to their school success. By participating in an interactive read-aloud your Kindergartner will learn about story structure, text features, print knowledge, making sense of books, and much more. My mom will explain more about an interactive read-alouds.

Me: Traditional read-alouds are different than interactive read-alouds. Traditionally, student participation was very limited and students assumed a passive role as listeners, with minimal dialogue taking place at the end of the reading. Interactive read-alouds differ in structure as dialogue is promoted throughout the reading of the text. This dialogue, known as dialogic talk, encourages student interactions to hold their attention and interests, promotes critical thinking and purposeful discussions. Educators now recognize how talk plays a central role in learning and cognitive development. Students engage in talk throughout the reading in order to explain, question, infer, debate, justify and collaborate. By being actively involved with the reader and other listeners, children are able to make meaning together through this interactive process.

Mackenzie: Did you know that speaking and listening skills are the foundations of literacy? Often overlooked or dismissed as unimportant, talk IS important when learning. If kids are unable to say something, how are they going to be able to read it or write it? During interactive read-alouds, kids can engage in meaningful talk with each other – they are not talking all the time though – we will explain how to get your kids talking later. Right now my mom is going to outline three things to remember when you are reading aloud with your child:

Me:

1. Select quality books with great illustrations, well-developed characters and interesting storylines. These books will capture children's attention and interest and will increase the level and depth of discussions.
2. Read fluently, with expression and animation in order to bring life to the story and characters, and to model expert reading to our emergent learners.
3. Encourage and engage in dialogic talk to promote questioning, thinking, and constructing knowledge together.

Mackenzie: The first two suggestions are easy for most parents to incorporate. But how do you get your child to talk and how do you respond to their talk? Five types of prompts can be used to get the talk started. You can remember these prompts with the word **CROWD**.

Me:

**C-ompletion Prompts-** For this type of prompt, you leave a blank at the end of a sentence and the child fills it in. Completion prompts provide kids with information about the structure of language that is critical when reading later on their own. Completion prompts are best used when reading books with rhyme or repetitive phrases

Mackenzie with Abbey: "Jillian Jillian Jillian Jiggs, it looks like your room has been lived in by\_\_\_\_"

Abbey: "Pigs!"

**R-ecall prompts** are questions about what happened in a book a child has already read. Recall prompts help children understand story plots and describe sequences of events.

Mackenzie to Abbey: "Can you tell me what happens to ... in this story?"

**O-pen-ended prompts** focus on the illustrations in the books. Open-ended prompts help children attend to detail as illustrations often contain important clues when making meaning and can be used to justify the reader's interpretation of the written text. Open-ended prompts also increase student's ability to express themselves as answers require more than a yes or no response.

Mackenzie to Abbey: "Tell me what's happening in this picture"

**W-h prompts** usually begin with what, where, when, why and how questions.

Mackenzie to Abbey: "Why is Princess Leona's father returning to the kingdom?" "How does he know she is in trouble?"

Print referencing is another reading strategy that often relies on Wh- prompts. Print referencing focuses children's attention to the print on the page by directly pointing to print. You can make comments about words and letters on the page, ask Wh- prompts about the words and letters, and point to words when talking about the story or tracking the words when reading.

Mackenzie with Abbey: "What does this word start with?" "S"

"What sound does that make?" "ssssss"

**D-istancing prompts** ask kids to connect the pictures or words in the book they are reading to other experiences outside the book. Distancing prompts can help children form a bridge from what is happening in their books to what is happening in the real world.

Mackenzie with Abbey: "Remember when we went to the zoo last week, which of these animals did we see?"

Mackenzie: Now that you know the CROWD prompts, you might be wondering how to respond to your child's answers. Depending on what they say, you could use any of the following four responses.

Me:

1. Confirm - by confirming your child's answer, you are validating your child's thoughts, ideas and questions.
2. Model- As experienced readers, we can model our thinking. By thinking-aloud, we can expose children to information about the reading and writing process. For example, pointing out clues from pictures for meaning, making predictions, and asking questions are ways to model what good readers do when they are trying to make sense of the text.
3. Extend - you can extend or add more to their ideas.
4. Build – you and your child can build meaning together. When using oral language to engage with each other's thinking and to explore one another's ideas, you and your child are 'interthinking' and building meaning together.

Mackenzie: Regardless of the questions asked or responses given, the goal of these discussions is to help kids construct meaning and understand how to make sense of the text. By simply allowing kids to talk to and interact with each other and the person who is reading the book, language is developed and reading skills are introduced.

In our next video, my mom and I discuss the importance of writing and ways you can encourage writing at home to support your Kindergartener's emergent literacy development.

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### **Video #3 Script**

Mackenzie: I'm back! Today mom and I are talking about when kids learn to write. When kids learn how to talk, they need to interact with people, right? It is the same when kids learn how to write. With help, kids start to see with how sounds and print work together. Just as kids begin to learn that the letters on a page tell the reader what to say, kids begin to understand that they can record what they have to say in writing. The first way kids express what they have to say is through their drawings. Do not think that their drawings are unimportant or that they are just cute. At this stage, drawings ARE kids' writing.

Me: Educators understand that children learn best when they are able to build on what they already know. Kindergarteners come to school knowing how to express themselves through the use of talk and drawing. Writing however is new for most children. Children need to know that they can communicate their ideas by both drawing and writing during journal writing time.

When children draw, their drawings help:

1. create a starting point that is motivating for them to talk and eventually write about.
2. hold students' ideas - drawing their ideas is much faster at this stage than writing their ideas. Once ideas are drawn, students can use them for reference when attempting to remember what it was they wanted to put down in writing.
3. increase young writers concentration and confidence
4. bridge connections between home and school

Mackenzie: In most Kindergarten classes, journal writing includes both drawing and writing.

We will explain the stages of beginning writing in the next, and final video. The video was actually made over a year ago so you might not recognize me! But before you watch that video, there are four things you might want to know when your Kindergartener is learning to write.

Me:

1. Contrary to what was taught years ago, writing should not be viewed as an individual exercise, especially for beginning writers. Talk plays an integral role in learning to write. Emergent writers gain knowledge about writing by observing and interacting with experienced writers, such as their teachers or parents.
2. Writing should have a purpose and audience. Encourage your young writer to write notes, grocery lists, cards, mini booklets that others will read. Be sure to provide writing materials and time for your child to explore with them. Notepads, felts, paper, cards...make it exciting and fun!
3. Young writers need a nurturing, supportive environment. Regardless of the level or stage of emergent writing, children need to believe they are writers. Any attempt to write should be acknowledged and celebrated. Acknowledging children as “readers” and “writers” strongly impacts their ability to see themselves in these roles!
4. Remember that multiple processes and skills are required to get ideas from children’s brains to their pencil and paper. First, beginning writers must formulate ideas to write about. Next they have to think about the words they want to use to convey their ideas. Then the children have to identify the sounds they need by stretching out a word. They also need to associate the letters that make the sounds and recall the actual letter or letters ... all while trying to identify the different sounds in a single word. Only recently have these learners discovered that marks make meaning and that letters represent sounds in spoken words. It is truly amazing how much learning these young writers accomplish in a year!

Mackenzie: P.S. Stay tune for younger, cuter me...and the best video of the bunch!



## **Video #4 Script**

Mackenzie: Hey Moms and Dads. In Kindergarten play is work, so writing is really hard work.

Me narrating: There is a lot going on developmentally when kids enter Kindergarten and begin to learn to write. Hopefully learning the stages of emerging writers will open your eyes and help you look closer at your child's writing.

Mackenzie: In the beginning my writing looks like this. It's not scribble. So stop thinking that...but I know some of you still do!

Me narrating: Although often misinterpreted as scribbles, this IS their writing. Kids are able to orally tell you about a picture, with a few words. In our classrooms we teach our students that when writing their drawings tell the story and their pencils tell the same story.

Mackenzie: As time goes on I begin to use squiggles and shapes. A circle for a head and lines for arms and legs.

Me narrating: In addition to shapes appearing students are now able to tell their story with simple sentences, adding more if prompted. Although no physical signs of what some consider real writing are visible, story structures and characterizations are developing in their minds.

Mackenzie: You can really start to a difference now. Mommy starts with a "m-m-M" and Kenzie starts with a "k-k-K".

Me narrating: You will now start to notice simple drawings with more detail. Students are able to isolate beginning sounds. Most words are represented by a single letter. This is a big step. Not only are students able to hear the initial sound, they are now able to recognize what letter makes the sound and how to represent that letter in writing.

Mackenzie: Here I've drawn a queen, her crown, she's sitting in a limo...as you can see there is a lot going on in my writing and drawing.

Me narrating: You will note the increasing detail in the writer's work at this stage. Students are able to hear the beginning and end sounds and even some of the middle letters in words like queen.

Mackenzie: Before you know it we're telling our stories with our pictures and our pencils. We know our alphabet by now and we can write all the letters. Sometimes we don't get the right letters for the sounds we hear- but that's ok...it's actually still pretty awesome!

Me narrating: Kids are working extremely hard at this point in development. Notice *Me n mi mom*, or here where the student sounds out *Me chrapping a leprucon*, "ch-ch-trapping".

Mackenzie: So you can see moms and dads, writing in Kindergarten is pretty hard work. Take the time to ask us what's going on in here...cause you might be pleasantly surprised!

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