

Understanding Developmental Perspective of Writing as a Framework for Early Grades Writing Pedagogy

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Abstract

Developmental perspective is a significant framework for early-grade pedagogy. It believes in the agency of young children and highlights their active role in learning writing. The present paper is focused on the developmental perspective of writing. The paper discusses the underlying theoretical framework of developmental perspective and offers educational implications specifically for early-grade writing pedagogy. It also highlights the contrast between the core ideas of developmental perspective and writing pedagogy popularly practiced in our classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Writing plays an enormous role in our lives, thoughts, and world. A literate society like ours depends massively on writing to communicate various types of information and announcement. Writing is an integral part of our lives in various forms and used for multiple purposes such as expressing oneself, recording information, sharing

messages, communicating news, and documenting ideas. Further, writing is closely intertwined in present times, that we cannot neglect the presence of writing in our daily lives (Smith, 1994). Writing, indeed, is one of the most powerful communication tools used by the human race.

As active learners, children recognise the existence and usage

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of writing in their surrounding environment. Their engagement with writing approves their involvement in the act (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1982; Graves, 1983; Strickland and Morrow, 2000).

Research evidence has supported that several milestones of the writing continuum are achieved by children, much before they formally reach the boundaries of school (Clay, 1975, 1982; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1979; Goodman, 1985; Rowe, 2008; Strickland and Morrow, 2000). Supported by parents, young children show interest in exploring the features of writing (Bissex, 1980; Graves, 1983; Tolchinsky, 2006).

Unfortunately, young children's exploration and experimentation with writing get rejected when they get admitted to a formal school. Our schools appear to be inconsiderate of the authentic usage of writing experienced by young children in their lives although in schools, students spend most of their time engaged only in 'writing' for one paper or another in the classroom. However, the nature of this engagement requires serious reflection. It is important to note that our schools mostly perceive writing from a highly limited and conventional framework. Hence, school pedagogy, activities, and assessment are drafted in a highly controlled manner. Regrettably, writing in schools is reduced to a mechanical activity (Graves, 1983; Kumar, 1996; Smith, 1994). This constrained vision of writing can be observed across all school grades.

The effect of the schools' pedagogical beliefs further impacts parents' understanding of teaching writing to their children. Generally, parents provide a lot of space for children to explore writing plentifully at home. It is a common observation to note walls of young children's homes covered with scribbling and drawing highlighting their multiple writing attempts. However, while preparing children for school, parents drastically change their focus and become over-concerned about the mechanics of writing. Preparation for school is equated with practicing structures and forms. This change raises substantial questions about the way writing is conceptualised in schools.

It is important to understand that our pedagogy must be developed from evidence-based research with a strong theoretical understanding. To develop effective writing pedagogy for early grades, it is important to explore several crucial aspects related to writing such as the process of writing development, influences on writing development, the school's concept of writing pedagogy, and alignment of school practices with evidence-based research studies.

The present paper is written to explore these aspects. The developmental perspective of writing is the main focus of this paper. It is divided into five main sections. The first section highlights the basic tenets of the developmental perspective of writing. The second section discusses the classroom implications of the

developmental perspective. The third section summarises the status of writing pedagogy in our early-grade classrooms and evaluates it with reference to the developmental perspective. The fourth section argues for the changes we need to bring to our early-grade education system from the developmental perspective. The last section concludes the argument focused in this paper.

Developmental Perspective of Writing

The developmental perspective of writing is based on the assumption that writing is a natural behaviour in a literate society (Goodman, 1985). The developmental approach does not believe that we learn something only because we are taught about that thing. As Tolchinsky (2006) argued that learning is not created only by teaching, learning happens when children try to explore and comprehend concepts on their own realising its usage in their environment.

The developmental perspective firmly believes that young children who grow up in a literate atmosphere will not delay their learning for the beginning of school instructions to explore writing (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1979; Goodman, 1985; Tolchinsky, 2006). Though explicit teaching about script and other mechanical aspects can positively influence children's understanding of writing, that way of teaching can never be the sole reason behind authentic engagement with writing. It is a reality that the roots of writing start much before a child

attends formal school. A child is an active learner who carefully observes and engages with the usage of writing in life. It can be often observed that young children attempt to explore writing with paper and pencil, create marks and cover walls with their writing attempts even before starting formal school education (Graves, 1983). It is important to note that these writing attempts are created by children with the intention of communicating meaningful messages.

A common assumption about writing is that it progresses with attention to letter-sound correspondences, forming alphabets, then words, and complete sentences. However, research suggests that children's familiarity with writing develops at numerous levels concurrently (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Sandbank, 2001). In addition, throughout this development, the knowledge acquired at one stage assists learning at all other stages. Young children are attentive to the presence of print in their surroundings and are aware of the fact that this print conveys messages to adults. They also spot how adults utilise print to communicate in their daily lives. Understanding the utility of writing, children also try to engage with writing. Studies have evidenced that even before going to school, young children show confidence in their abilities as writers and display knowledge about the functions of writing observed in their lives. (Goodman, 1989; Graves, 1983).

Before becoming conventional writers, young children pass through different milestones, namely, drawing, scribbling, and invented spellings. Although these milestones are far distant from the correct format of writing, these examples are evidence of a child's progressive writing development. Goodman (1985) described this development as an ability to create such messages which highlight the control and exploration of a writer. He argued that development does not always mean better conventional writing; rather, it means the writer's progress towards independent explorations (p.18). There have been numerous research studies of children's emergent writing such as Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984; Teale and Sulzby, 1986. However, most of these studies traced a common development pattern along different milestones such as drawing, scribbling, and invented spellings. Each of these areas is widely researched, explored, and accepted as 'legitimate writing' attempts by young children. These are identified as legitimate because they are created by children with the intention of meaning-making. Hence, meaning is the core of these exploration attempts.

To summarise the section, writing development in young children is a multifaceted progression. Young children are active learners and play a key role in developing their understanding of writing. This development appears in a continuum and children achieve its various

milestones naturally. Now, the next section will discuss the educational implications of the developmental perspective for writing pedagogy.

Implications of Developmental Perspective for Early-Grade Classrooms

The developmental perspective of writing offers some significant implications for early-grade classrooms. It argues in favour of a supportive and trustworthy classroom environment filled with multiple opportunities for engaging with writing. Drafting a positive classroom environment requires deep visions and a clear understanding of the developmental approach by the teacher. This section discusses educational implications derived from the developmental perspective of writing for our early-grade classrooms. These implications emphasise the significant role of teachers, parents, and the classroom environment. Further, it supports pedagogy which considers deviations as developmental and acknowledges children's lives as a resource for writing classrooms.

Role of Teachers

A supportive teacher can contribute meaningfully to the child's development as a potential writer. Recognising the need for a protected classroom and opportunities for interaction, a teacher can design several activities to encourage the young students' meaningful engagement with writing. Avery (2002) shares that a teacher

dealing with early writers must believe that young children can write, young children want to write and young children have required rich experiences and interest for writing. A developmental perspective teacher will firmly believe in her students' ability to write and will design the classroom environment and activities accordingly.

Ray (2004) in her article, 'Why Cauley Writes Well: A Close Look at What a Difference Good Teaching Can Make', explored the factors which enabled young writer Cauley to progress notably. She highlighted the significant role played by Cauley's teacher by focusing on crucial factors such as the selection of topics, the role of discussions, giving space to experiences, and reading. The teacher's progressive vision of writing supported Cauley's development as a budding writer. It means that the teachers' role is highly influential in supporting young children's writing development.

Supportive Writing Environment

Early-grade classrooms must offer unlimited opportunities for authentic engagement with reading and writing to their students. Numerous activities such as writing corners, morning messages, buddy journals, and class library must be the core features of a classroom influenced by the developmental perspective. The connections between reading, writing, and talking are extensively explored in such classrooms (Perkins, 2012; Strickland and Morrow, 2000).

Emig (1983) used the term 'enabling environment' to describe such supportive writing classrooms (as cited in Avery, 2000). She shared that the classroom enabling environment must be secure, organised, personal, unobtrusive, and full of opportunities for literacy engagement. Teachers play a significant role as they create a positive and supportive classroom environment for writing. Further, children in this environment have multiple playful opportunities to practice writing. Hence, our early grades must ensure an enabling environment for young children to engage freely with writing.

Acknowledging Children's Rich Lives as a Resource for Writing

The developmental perspective firmly believes that young children are interested in writing. Hence, schools can use this interest as a medium to create opportunities for young children to write about their lives. Calkins (1986) emphasised that children have immense experiences. They come to school with their thoughts, memories, and feelings. Hence, for teaching writing, children's life experiences can be employed as input. As young children use writing to share about their lives; then writing becomes a highly purposeful act for them. 'Voice' starts emerging in the writing of students; which makes writing worthwhile for the writer as well as the reader (Graves, 1983). This understanding suggests that writing must provide young children with

opportunities to engage with topics that are connected with their lives. Classrooms must be a trustworthy place to write about oneself without the fear of judgment and evaluation.

Deviations in Developmental Writing

In classrooms governed by the developmental perspective, errors or deviations are considered substantial learning indicators. Deviations reflect that the child is attempting to explore writing. These attempts can sometimes be correct, while sometimes incorrect. Whatever the outcome, deviations reflect that the child is attempting to explore writing and hence, these attempts are precious. Goodman (2014) considered deviations as significant for a child's writing development and rather described deviations as charming indicators of a child's growth toward control of written language. It implies that an early-grade classroom environment must be secure, trustworthy, and support risk-taking to enable these 'charming indicators' to exist.

Classrooms that focus excessively on errors, hamper the child's ability to write freely. Teachers who are excessively worried about proper correctly written work finally create students who resist writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983, 1986; Graves, 1983). Goodman (2014) too declared that restricting children from committing mistakes makes children insecure and avoid risk-taking. This outlook negatively impacts

children's writing. Opportunities for free engagement with writing enable children to develop as potential writers and hence, must be provided in every classroom.

Involving Parents

The significance of involving parents or caregivers has been acknowledged by the developmental perspective of writing. A developmental classroom identifies parents and family members as supportive, approachable, and perfect audiences for young writers. Involving parents and other family members can motivate children to engage with authentic writing with sensitive audiences for real purposes. Skibbe, Bindman, and Hindman (2013) highlighted the positive impact of parents' graphophonemic and print support in the development of preschoolers' writing. Further, the negligible focus of parents on errors in children's work motivated young children to function autonomously while writing. Pole (2015) studied the influence of involving family members as writing pals in a yearlong letter-writing project on the writing of her kindergarten students. The result showed drastic improvement in children's writing. Numerous similar studies have highlighted the impact of including family members in preschool and kindergarten levels writing activities.

To summarise, the above section has discussed five main implications derived from the basic tenant of the developmental perspective on writing.

Needless to say, when a progressive teacher combines her theoretical understanding of developmental perspective with her creative ideas, an exceptional classroom filled with the energy of young writers can get created. Now, the next section will focus on our Indian classroom context and will discuss how writing is approached in our early-grade classrooms. The section will outline the nature of writing pedagogy popularly followed in our classrooms. Thus, highlighting the contrast between the implications of developmental perspective and our pedagogic practices.

Writing in Early Grade Classrooms

The previous sections have highlighted the basic tenets of the developmental perspective and offered implications for implementation in early-grade classrooms. After understanding the core concept of developmental perspective, it is important to evaluate the writing pedagogy followed in our early-grade classrooms and review our practices through the lens of evidence-based research work.

In our context, writing is largely viewed as a product-oriented act. The writing practices followed in our schools are mostly conventional and restricted. Across different grades in the school, writing is taught as an act of perfectly copying the given work in beautiful handwriting without any errors (Kumar, 1996; LiRIL, 2017). Such traditional writing practices not only dominate pedagogy practices but

also influence learning indicators and assessment parameters.

In early grades, writing is introduced to young children in a restricted and mechanical manner. The structured and rigid patterns of writing are practiced as a ritual right from early grades. Writing assignments focused on unlimited practice in isolated units are presented to young children. These assignments generally follow a specified sequence such as joining dots, making standing and sleeping lines, isolated alphabets, two-letter words followed by three-letter words, and so on. Deviations in writing are assumed as child's failure to understand the concept. Further, to target deviations, writing exercises based on drill and practice are given to children. The entire energy of the young child is directed toward writing perfect shapes in beautiful handwriting in standard notebooks. Our early grade pedagogy mostly aims at providing perfection in copying. Any space for opportunities for risk-taking and experimenting with writing is not permitted.

It is a sad reality that a majority of our early-grade classrooms have nothing substantial to engage young children constructively. Most of our preschools and kindergartens have highly formal, structured, and restricted set-ups. It is a common observation that early grade classrooms hardly have interesting and relevant grade-specific print (Kunwar, 2022). Classrooms are mostly filled with big

varnamala and *barahkhadi* charts fixed much above the level of children. An exclusive focus on handwriting and mechanics is recognised as the sole target area for early-grade pedagogy. The probabilities of meaningful engagement with print in classrooms are unfortunately rare. Unfortunately, such a product-oriented perspective of writing restricts the possibilities of children's experiences. The intensity of restriction can be understood from the fact that even expressive activities such as drawing are pre-decided. A single picture is given to children and even the colours to be filled are explicitly mentioned (Kunwar, 2022). Young children are just expected to follow the instructions of the teacher.

If we closely analyse we will find that our pedagogic practices largely perceive young children as passive learners thereby contradicting the basic tenets of a developmental perspective. The teaching methods expect students to follow a standardised framework thus, restricting any scope for young children's exploration with the print. Meaning exists as a neglected variable in the teaching of writing. Focused on mechanics, perfection, and error-free work, schools expect young children to excel in the art of 'copying' as writing. Hence, a huge gap between ideas of the developmental perspective and our early-grade pedagogy is visible.

It is important to understand that the result of such a conventional approach to writing is highly damaging for our young children as it does not provide any scope for exploration and

engagement with authentic writing. This limitation is challenging for all children, however, it is more dangerous in the case of first-generation learners. Children belonging to low socio-economic status and first-generation learners get restricted opportunities and assistance in literacy from the family and therefore, depend totally on school for literacy development (Sinha, 2010). Hence, the dominance of structured writing pedagogy in schools can pose grave challenges for these children.

THE WAY FORWARD

Understanding the developmental perspective and analysing our early-grade classroom pedagogical practices with reference to this research framework draws our attention to significant areas in our context.

Firstly, it is important to recognise the agency of our teachers. Multiple innovative policies and programmes targeting school education can be launched; however, the success of any initiative will depend ultimately on how teachers will implement those ideas in their classrooms. It implies that for bringing substantial changes in our early grade literacy pedagogical practices, we must empower the agency of our early grade teachers. We need to create teachers who have a strong theoretical understanding and awareness of evidence-based research. To create such teachers, we need to seriously work and review our early grade teacher education programmes. The pre-service and

in-service programmes must be revised by including well-defined courses on literacy education. Specialisation courses focused on writing and reading should be made an integral part of the teacher-education curriculum.

Secondly, the early-grade curriculum should be revised focusing extensively on evidence-based re-search practices. As highlighted by National Education Policy (2020), reading and writing in early grades is a significant area and hence, focusing on foundational literacy is the need of the time. The policy has recommended the development of an early grade curriculum with a renewed emphasis on foundational literacy. Hence, it is necessary to review the curriculum and provide adequate space for the implications of evidence based research frameworks such as the developmental perspective of writing.

Thirdly, it is important to understand that redesigning the early grade writing pedagogy from a developmental perspective may raise questions regarding the applicability on account of differences in the Western and Indian contexts. Sinha (2010) accepted the possibility of difference, however, also contended that it is not 'appropriate to dismiss the body of research, especially when this area has not been explored at all in educational literature' (p. 125). Justifying traditional pedagogical practices merely on account of convenience in our context and ignoring evidence-based research findings is a serious mistake. The writing pedagogy framework must be decided on

the basis of the latest research trends and implications on how young children learn to write. As Frank Smith rightly remarked that 'neither the brains of students nor the nature of writing will change for the convenience of schools' (Smith, 1994, p.226). Hence, acknowledging and targeting the mismatch between evidence based research and our pedagogy should be the focus of our efforts.

CONCLUSION

The developmental perspective offers crucial insight into the writing development of young children. By understanding the basic tenets of the developmental perspective, we can design early-grade writing pedagogy in a comprehensive and purposeful way. Several developmental research studies have pronounced young children as active learners and highlighted their significant role in learning writing. The developmental perspective offers noteworthy implications for creating a positive and supportive early-grade classroom environment. However, the gap between our early-grade writing pedagogy and the underlying framework of developmental perspective is quite evident. This mismatch is a serious concern that requires immediate action. Reviewing the early grade writing curriculum and redesigning our early grade teacher-education programme with a special focus on literacy education is the requirement of the time. This redesigning will strengthen our early-grade classrooms and acknowledge our young writers.

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