Chapter 7 Transitions and Emergent Writers

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7.1 Introduction

Writing is understood to be a creative or conventional means of making meaning, composing and recording messages in ways that can be read. The writing transition to be discussed here is the transition from sign creation to sign use. Children's drawings are an example of sign creation, while standard or non-standard uses of conventional print are examples of sign use. Most children transition from sign creation to sign use in the period of time that includes the year before they start school and the first year of school. This transition is potentially complicated by five areas of possible mismatch between what happens in preschool classrooms and schools in regard to standards, curricula, assessment processes (Kagan et al. 2006 teachers' beliefs about children's print literacy development (Lynch 2009) and differing approaches to writing pedagogy in the two settings. I will consider how the preschool, including the proximal processes or forms of interaction evident within this environment, supports emergent writers; consider how that may be different to the more formal school environment; and examine some of the possible issues for emergent writers as they transition from one environment to the other. While the home environment is recognised as the most influential and ongoing environment (Davis-Kean 2005; Farver et al. 2006; Foster et al. 2005; Hattie 2009; Neuman et al. 2008), it is not the focus of the study discussed here.

7.2 Context

The study informing this chapter is part of an ongoing programme of research, which began in 2007, and focuses on emergent writing and the teaching/learning processes that support this journey. In 2010, the research included an investigation of children's writing during the last 6 months of preschool. Data were gathered from early childhood educators in schools, preschools and long day care facilities and children, over the course of the study. Twenty-three early childhood educators working in preschools or the preschool room in long day care facilities provided the data informing this chapter.

Many Australian children participate in a preschool programme before they start school. Preschools and most long day care facilities offer preschool programmes for children who are 3 years of age or older, but have not yet started school. In Australia, teachers with a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) may teach in a preschool, long day care facility or a primary school. The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2009) reforms are seeking to ensure that early childhood graduates with 4 years of training operate all preschool programmes. It is therefore becoming increasingly more common for preschool teachers to have Early Childhood qualifications at a graduate level. Throughout this chapter, I use the term preschool teacher when referring to those early childhood educators who work in preschools or run the preschool programme in a long day care facility. The first year of formal schooling in Australia has a number of different names including Kindergarten (NSW, ACT), Preparatory (Victoria, Queensland) and Reception (South Australia). Throughout this chapter, I use the term kindergarten, to refer to the first year of school and kindergarten teacher to refer to the teachers who are teaching children in the first year of formal schooling.

7.3 Theoretical Perspectives

Bronfenbrenner (1994) is credited with the development of an ecological model of human development, which considers human development within the context of a number of interacting environments. At least three external environments affect the literacy learning of most young Australian children between the ages of three and six. These environments are the home, the child's prior-to-school setting and the school he or she attends. Each of these environments includes the relevant persons, objects, symbols and opportunities to engage in learning. From an ecological perspective, learning takes place because of interactions between children and other children, children and adults, adults and other adults (e.g. teachers and parents), children and objects, and children and symbols within an environment. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), 'human development evolves through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols

in its immediate external environment' (p. 996). 'Proximal processes' or 'forms of interaction in the immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, p. 996) are therefore the primary engines for development. The interactions that promote learning may be further understood by reference to the work of Lev Vygotsky (1997). According to Vygotsky, development cannot be separated from its social context, children construct knowledge, and language plays a central role in mental development (Bodrova and Leong 2007). What adults or peers point out to a learner influences the knowledge that the learner constructs. The adult's ideas 'mediate what and how the child will learn; they act as a filter in a sense, determining which ideas' (Bodrova and Leong 2007, p. 9) the child will learn.

7.3.1 Becoming a Writer

Writing is about meaning making or composing. It is one of the methods used by humans to record and communicate ideas, feelings, personal reflections, stories, discoveries, history, facts, laws, etc. Writing is complex and entails the interaction of cognitive and physical factors involving the hand, eye and both sides of the brain. Writing has both graphic and linguistic dimensions (Haas Dyson 1985), differing from speech, signing and reading because it leaves visible traces (Tolchinsky 2006). According to Byrnes and Wasik (2009), writing skills rival reading skills in their importance to being successful in school and in life.

Dyson (2001) suggests that 'the act of composing - the deliberate manipulation of meaning – occurs first in more directly representative media, among them gesture, play and drawing', as children create messages using 'multiple symbolic media' (p. 129). An important developmental transition takes place as children realise that speech can be recorded and the marks in books or on the computer mean something (Tolchinsky 2006; Vygotsky 1997). They notice that others around them are making marks on paper, texting on the phone, typing on a keyboard or reading and start to make their own marks on paper, walls or the ground, the computer, tablet or phone. They begin the process by experimenting with drawing and scribble. Scribbles gradually become 'writing like' with linearity, appropriate directionality, individual 'letter like' symbols and non-phonetic strings of letters. Over time, children learn the conventional forms of writing used in their society (Chan et al. 2008). While some theorists argue for a linear progression of writing stages (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Kamii et al. 2001), others suggest that meaning making at this early stage involves multiple forms of media, and children demonstrate considerable variability in their methods of engaging with the writing process (Clay 1975; Kenner 2000; Tolchinsky 2006). Drawing is one of the early forms of meaning making, which may be described as sign creation.

Learning to write is, therefore, a transitional process whereby children move from producing their own creative forms to learning to produce messages using the conventional sign system of their cultural context. Parents, siblings, peers and teachers act as mediators between child and text, assisting the 'young learner's gradual 92 N. Mackenzie

Fig. 7.1 A recipe for broccoli soup by Charlie, aged 4½



transition from assisted to unassisted performance' (Steward 1995, p. 13) although the environment and resources within the environment also play a role. Up to age three, writing and drawing are indistinguishable, nonrepresentational graphic products (sign creation), although between the ages of 3 and 4, action plans for writing and drawing differ, even if the end products look similar (Tolchinsky 2006).

Tolchinsky (2006), argues that 'by the age of four, children's writing already appears as a linearly arranged string of distinctive marks separated by regular spacing' (p. 87) and children create letter shapes based upon those provided in their environment. Children's own names constitute the first meaningful and consistently written text (Tolchinsky 2006), and they use the letters from their names as a repository of conventional letter shapes (Drouin and Harmon 2009; Welsch et al. 2003). If left to their own devices, there is an important period of overlay, when children produce texts, which incorporate a mix of sign creation (drawing) and elements of the sign system they are beginning to learn (Mackenzie 2011). For example, in Fig. 7.1, Charlie (aged 4½) has written a recipe for broccoli soup and shows that he understands the need for letters and words in his recipe. In Fig. 7.2, he has drawn an underwater scene, with little use of letters/words. The two works were both created at home, two days apart. While Charlie was yet to have received any formalised instruction in writing, he showed his understanding of the difference between drawing and writing and had a clear purpose for each.

Fig. 7.2 Underwater sea creatures by Charlie, aged 4½



7.4 Implications for Practice and Research

Early childhood literacy is regarded as 'the single best investment for enabling children to develop skills that will likely benefit them for a lifetime' (Dickinson and Neuman 2006, p. 1). Opportunities for literacy learning come from children's engagement with people, objects and symbols within the environments in which they participate. The process of becoming literate, however, is complex and takes time. A literate person is defined by Wing Jan (2009) as someone who has the 'skills and knowledge to create, locate, analyse, comprehend and use a variety of written, visual, aural and multi-modal texts for a range of purposes, audiences and contexts' (p. 3). An unhappy or traumatic transition into school literacy may lead to frustration, avoidance and an ongoing negative attitude towards school literacy. In contrast, successful early engagement with school literacy often leads to future success and a positive attitude towards school and literacy. Explanations of success or failure to engage with school literacy often refer to children's intelligence (Rowe 1994), background or socioeconomic status (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; D'Angiulli et al. 2004). While intelligence, background and socioeconomic circumstances provide part of the story, it can also be enlightening to examine what is happening in and across the various learning environments in which children are engaged.

Learning to write is an important part of becoming literate, playing a key role in later reading and literacy skills (National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) 2008). If adults working with children in the various learning environments have consistent or complimentary approaches to supporting children as they transition from their own forms of meaning making (sign creation) to conventional forms of meaning making (sign use), children are more likely to feel able to successfully engage with the writing process in all its forms. This requires adults in prior-to-school learning environments to be cognisant and supportive of the ways early writing is approached at school, particularly in kindergarten. Likewise, kindergarten teachers should understand, value and build on the approaches to early writing used in prior-to-school settings. In other words, the more the proximal processes or forms of interaction evident within each environment are supportive of one another, or at least not contradictory, the more likely it is that a child will transition from sign creation to sign use without disruption.

7.5 Learning Environments: Preschool and School

While it is acknowledged that the home and childcare settings are equally important literacy learning environments, the two environments being discussed here are those of the preschool (or preschool room in long day care facilities) and the first year of formal schooling (kindergarten). In Australia, children must be enrolled in school by the age of six, unless parents register with the relevant state or territory education authority to home school their children (Board of Studies, NSW 2011). Some children start school in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, as young as 4 years and 6 months, while others may not begin until they are 5 years and 6 months or older. This age range is a result of the policy which requires children to turn five by July of the year they begin school, a policy of one intake per year (at the commencement of the school year) and a voluntary trend towards delayed entry for some children from higher-income families (Datar 2006). Given the delayed entry to school for some children, this means that preschool teachers may be catering for children from 3 to 6 years of age. This also suggests that children between the ages of 4 ½ and 6 years of age could be attending preschool or school.

Preschools in Australia tend to place an emphasis on care, a healthy environment, play, and child-centred methods, while schools emphasise subjects, knowledge, skills, lessons and student assessments although both are seen as educational institutions (Margetts 2002). These differences have also been noted in New Zealand (Peters 2000), the United Kingdom (Cassidy 2005; Kwon 2002; Stephen and Cope 2003) and Iceland (Einarsdóttir 2006). Emergent writing is fostered within preschool environments through learning opportunities which are 'open-ended, allowing the learner to surprise the teacher and expand any aspect of his or her existing knowledge' (Clay 2001, p. 12). According to the *Early Years Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (DEEWR 2009, p. 38), literacy is the 'capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms'. The EYLF suggests that literacy incorporates

music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing. Children are expected to become effective communicators who can:

- Interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes
- · Engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts
- · Express ideas and make meaning using a range of media
- · Begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work
- Use information and communication technologies to access information investigate ideas and represent their thinking (DEEWR 2009, p. 39)

The processes of emergent literacy or emergent writing are not specifically discussed within the EYLF, and interpretation of the above points is left to each preschool teacher. Learning is defined as 'a natural process of exploration that children engage in from birth as they expand their intellectual, physical, social, emotional and creative capacities' (DEEWR 2009, p. 46). Intentional, deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful teaching is also described in the EYLF (DEEWR 2009, p.15). Early childhood educators are required to 'promote learning' but they are also required to 'teach children skills and techniques that will enhance their capacity for self-expression and communication' (DEEWR 2009, p. 42).

From the very start, the emphasis in schools is on teaching for learning, in contrast to the preschool approach of learning through play (Margetts 2002). In schools, the approach is more structured and planned; children have limited influence over what they get to do and teachers work from a programme that follows a required syllabus or curriculum. Clay (1991) argues that the school also 'represents external evaluation; opportunities for success and failure; the setting for peer group formation and social evaluation; and the initiation of a set of experiences which in adulthood may lead to advancement of economic status' (p. 55). There is also a shift in language, as children become students, as seen in the following excerpt from the K-6 English Syllabus:

Students produce simple texts that demonstrate an awareness of the basic grammar and punctuation needed. Students know and use letters and sounds of the alphabet to attempt to spell known words and use most lower and upper case letters appropriately to construct sentences. Students explore the use of computer technology to construct texts. (Board of Studies, NSW 2007, p. 12)

While preschool teachers gather data through observation and detailed anecdotal records, school systems have a range of assessment tools they use, beginning at school entry. For example, in NSW all kindergarten children are administered the *Best Start Assessment* (NSW Department of Education and Training 2010), when they enter school. The information gathered about children's current literacy and numeracy knowledge and understandings is designed to assist teachers to plan teaching and learning programmes aimed at building on the literacy and numeracy knowledge children have when they begin school.

There is more verbal instruction in schools than there is in preschools along with a more formal focus on literacy, numeracy and the need to use pencils and small equipment. Margetts (2002) suggests that schools provide 'a cognitive curricula approach including restrictions on the use of time which emphasise the

work/play distinction, confining gross motor activities to physical education lessons and playtime, less art and tactile experiences, and less opportunity for imaginative play' (p. 105) than preschools. In school classrooms, literacy instruction is often divided into a number of strands, which are taught discretely: reading, writing, listening and speaking spelling, handwriting, grammar, phonics and phonemic awareness. Literacy instruction may also include viewing, representing and the organised use of technologies that support literacy. In many NSW kindergarten classrooms, the teacher applies the 'Language, Learning and Literacy' (L3) kindergarten classroom intervention, which identifies explicit instruction in reading and writing (NSW Department of Education and Training 2012). These approaches seem likely to continue as the new Australian Curriculum organises English into three strands: Language, Literature and Literacy (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2012) with the literacy strand including reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary development, spelling, handwriting and phonics. In the current era, there is also a sense of urgency in many kindergarten classrooms, as teachers deal with pressures of accountability (Genishi and Dyson 2009), and a contemporary push down of the curriculum (Elkind 2003; Genishi and Dyson 2009) designed to raise standards in literacy (Stephenson and Parsons 2007).

7.6 The Study

The study informing this discussion took place in late 2010 and involved 23 preschool teachers. The participants were all female. Fifteen participants had a Bachelor of Education or a Bachelor of Teaching with a specialisation in Early Childhood Education. The remaining eight participants had either a Diploma of Teaching or Diploma of Children's Services. Two of the participants did not have Early Childhood qualifications. Experience working in prior-to-school settings ranged from 1 to 30 years, with an average of 11 years. Seven participants had experience teaching in schools as well as in prior-to-school settings. Twelve participants were working in community preschools, three in preschools attached to schools and the remaining eight worked in the preschool room in long day care facilities. All participants identified themselves as preschool teachers. Teachers in preschools attached to schools had significant contact with the teachers in the school, attending staff meetings, sharing resources, visiting classrooms etc. None of the preschool teachers working in long day care facilities had close relationships with the schools that their children would attend. The preschool teachers in community preschools had varied contact with the schools their children would attend.

Open-ended interviews, which took between 30 and 105 min, were conducted at venues and times chosen by the participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to the participants for comment. This provided participants with the opportunity to remove or clarify any comments made throughout the interview. A number of participants returned their transcript having added information or

clarified original responses. Data were also gathered from the children although those data are not discussed in this chapter.

The participants discussed how they were starting to work with the EYLF (DEEWR 2009), but none mentioned the expectation of 'intentional, deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful forms of teaching' (DEEWR 2009, p. 38) when asked to share their approaches to supporting emergent writing. This is consistent with the earlier findings of David et al. (2001). Instead, processes for supporting children's exploration of writing at preschool included the following:

- The provision of a variety of writing implements (as part of a writing centre, literacy corner or to support role play activities)
- · Modelling drawing and painting
- Encouraging children to draw their experiences
- Modelling words and letters (in particular writing children's names on their art works)
- Teaching children how to write their names, if and only if a child indicated to the preschool teacher that they wished to learn to do this for themselves
- Making cards to celebrate occasions (e.g. Mother's Day)
- Acting as scribe for children

The study findings suggest that preschool teachers see their role as providing opportunities for children to explore writing through play, but not to proactively seek or initiate opportunities to interact with them in ways that might assist them to move along the writing continuum.

Within our creative play area we set up an office or a restaurant or something like that . . . we've always got heaps and heaps of the old blank pads or old forms . . . (Study participant)

This is consistent with the findings of Cassidy (2005): 'Children are encouraged to initiate their own learning activities and to explore and develop their intellectual, physical, emotional, social, moral and communication skills with play as the medium for development' (p. 144). However, this seems counter to Vygotsky's notion of how adults (or peers) support children's learning and contrary to Steward's (1995) notion of how a more experienced other (parent, sibling, peer or teacher) acts as a mediator assisting 'young learner's gradual transition from assisted to unassisted performance' (p. 13). Only two participants indicated that they ever took a 'teaching' approach with older children who showed a particular interest in learning more about letters and words. They were quick to explain that this only happened on rare occasions. There were no expectations that children would have achieved any specific writing benchmarks or standards before leaving preschool, although being able to write their own name was desirable. The following participant's description of the writing journey children take in the year before they start school is representative of the comments made by most participants.

It will start off and it will be just your little scribbled jottings and then you'll notice that they're writing letters, strings of letters and then towards the end of the year they'll be writing words. . . (Study participant)

It would appear that the preschool environment is a place for children to explore writing, if they wish, when they wish and how they wish.

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7.7 Challenges and Issues

An emergent writer is destined to find that the supports and challenges within the school environment are quite different to that of the preschool. The discontinuities experienced as children move from one environment to another may be stressful, and although Einarsdóttir (2006) suggests that most children adapt quickly to the social demands of school, an unsuccessful transition into school literacy may lead to 'frustration, avoidance and an ongoing negative attitude towards school literacy' (Mackenzie et al. 2011, p. 284). Moyles (2007) argues that the vital element in all transitions is the 'teachers', practitioners' and parents' skills in understanding how the change affects the individual child' (p. xvi). The adults involved should, according to Moyles (2007), be on the same wavelength in order to support the transition, as new 'curriculum expectations ... build on ... children's previous learning experiences and understanding' (p. xvii). For this to occur, preschool teachers need a thorough knowledge of what is expected of emergent writers when they begin school. Likewise, kindergarten teachers need to understand how writing has been approached and supported in the preschool, and wherever possible, parents should have knowledge of what is expected of their young writers in both contexts. The sharing of knowledge between the three contexts would help to support emergent writers as they transition from preschool to school. However, while preschool teachers generally maintain regular and detailed observational records of children's cognitive, affective and behavioural progress, 'this rich information is rarely passed-on or effectively communicated to staff in the primary schools' (Thomson et al. 2005, p. 196). Kindergarten teachers have little, if any, contact with preschool teachers and minimal opportunities to discuss children with parents at the time of enrolment in school. This can create major challenges and issues for children.

When asked about the transition from preschool to school, participants often replied that this was something that schools organised through parents and rarely involved them. They were not aware of what happened in the "transition programmes" but they knew that they had children attending a variety of different transition programmes leading up to Christmas. Participants from preschools attached to schools had significant contact with teachers in the school. They attended staff meetings, shared resources and the children visited classrooms quite regularly. Despite this contact, they had very different attitudes and approaches to early writing. None of the preschool teachers working in long day care facilities had close relationships with the schools that their children would attend. Preschool teachers in community preschools had varied contact with the schools as illustrated by the following comment.

We talk with X School a lot and they listen to us about things like children's strengths and needs and who would they best be grouped with or not grouped with . . . Y School has not been open to that sort of communication. (Study participant)

According to a number of participants, most conversations between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers are conducted by telephone. They claimed that it

was rare for kindergarten teachers to visit their preschools, but if they did, it was usually only to find out if there were any children with physical, learning or behavioural problems.

They don't really want to know about the kids . . . it's just if X has fine motor difficulties or other problems . . . now I suppose that's maybe the time factor or something but it's a bit disheartening for us because the preschools would love to have them [Kindergarten teachers] come in . . . to see the kids here. (Study participant)

In a few cases, the preschool and local school did have a positive connection, sometimes facilitated by the close proximity of the local school and/or the interest of individual staff. Where this did happen there seemed to be a very positive two-way communication although this had not lead to a common understanding or complimentary approach to emergent writing.

The kindergarten teachers come here and they actually become familiar with the children, they do a little activity with the children here and read a story . . . and then in term 4 we go to the school and take the children into the classroom and they meet the teachers and the parents are able to come along . . . (Study participant)

According to a number of participants, it is impossible to work closely with all of the schools that their children feed into. One preschool had children transitioning to 12 different schools, making coordination with kindergarten teachers unworkable.

We find it hard because we feed so many schools, we visit X School, because it is the closest but we couldn't go to all the potential schools. (Study participant)

None of the participants could talk confidently or knowledgeably about how the schools in their area approached literacy instruction. Most referred back to what they thought happened based upon their training or the experiences of their own children. Discussions with participants about transition to school focused on social issues, although when pressed to discuss transition issues related to literacy, most said they wanted their children to know how to recognise and write their names on entry to kindergarten. The following comment is representative of those made by participants when they were invited to discuss what they thought schools expected from them in regard to emergent literacy:

It is quite tricky; we get different feedback from different schools. Some schools don't want us to do too much because they're worried that we might do it in the wrong way or a different way to the school. (Study participant)

Other preschool teachers talked about running their preschool sessions a little more school like leading up to Christmas (Australian school years run from February to December), although only two had actually been into a school classroom in recent times to see what was happening in the first year of school. The school-like approach tended to revolve around the reading of picture books to the whole group, completion of worksheets focused on phonics or the use of commercial phonics programmes. It is evident from the data that the participants involved in this study were uncertain of approaches to early literacy instruction in schools.

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7.8 Future Directions

Each year, thousands of children move from a preschool environment to a school environment and most start school with anticipation, excitement and expectation. Their challenge is to successfully transition from 'one set of rules, understandings and expectations to quite a different set' (Elkind 2003, p. 43). Such a big step should be scaffolded to ensure that children make the shift safely. The writing transition is only one of the many transitions taking place as children move from preschool to school. However, given the important role of writing in a child's literacy learning future, it is arguably worth consideration. Children, by the very nature of their ages, individual interests, the environments they are part of and the opportunities they have experienced, will be at different stages on the writing continuum when they start preschool and then again when they begin school. It seems likely that in Australia there will be children in their final year of preschool, who may want to explore the conventions and structures of text in ways that go beyond self-exploration. Likewise, there may be children in kindergarten who need time and opportunity to explore writing in a more play-based approach. To cater for this overlap requires a greater understanding of the writing transition from both sides of the school gate.

Preschools do not need to become kindergarten classrooms. Nor do kindergarten classrooms need to mirror preschools. Shared understandings of what it means to be literate and how children become literate, some shared approaches to emergent writing and some shared knowledge of the learning journeys of children prior to school would support the writing transition. By bringing together, the teachers from the two external environments that interact as a child begins school, and creating some congruency between the proximal processes within each, continuities may be created and shifts may be supported, which would sustain the emergent writer. Given that preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers have similar, if not the same, qualifications, it should not be difficult for these two groups of professionals to share an understanding of how to support children as they make this important transition from sign creation to sign use.

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