

**Written Language Environments  
for Young Children:  
Comparison of Scandinavian, British,  
and American Kindergartens**

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In 1985-1987 observations<sup>2</sup> were made in kindergartens in Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Denmark), Great Britain, and the United States. Based upon these observations, the written language environments are described and comparisons are made. In Scandinavia, the kindergartens for 6-year-olds are generally environments that emphasize social development, oral language, and creative expression through play. Essentially no written language is found. In Great Britain (and in British schools elsewhere), the same interactive play environment also includes written language. Five-year-olds in the reception class of the infant or first school are introduced to reading within the context of storybooks and to writing via story dictation and copying. In the United States, public school kindergartens for 5-year-olds have become increasingly more academic over the past 25 years. However, some developmentally appropriate kindergartens still exist many of which include a print-rich, written language environment in which the 5-year-olds acquire written language naturally. Current research from several cultures suggests that a natural use of written

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language as a part of children's social play environment might be a valuable addition to the kindergarten programs in all of these countries.

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Entre 1985 et 1987, des observations dans des écoles maternelles de Scandinavie (Norvège, Suède et Danemark), de Grande-Bretagne et des Etats-Unis ont été menées. A partir de ces observations, les milieux de langage écrit sont décrits et comparés. En Scandinavie, les maternelles pour les enfants de 6 ans sont généralement des environnements qui favorisent le développement social, le langage oral et l'expression créative à travers le jeu. Essentiellement, on ne retrouve pas de langage écrit. En Grande-Bretagne (et ailleurs dans les écoles britanniques) le même milieu de jeu interactif inclus également le langage écrit. Quant aux enfants de cinq ans, dans la classe de réception, ils sont introduits à la lecture dans le cadre des livres de contes et à l'écriture par le biais de la dictée et de la copie d'histoires. Aux Etats-Unis, ces vingt-cinq dernières années, les écoles maternelles publiques pour les enfants de 5 ans sont devenues progressivement plus académiques. Cependant, quelques maternelles de type développemental existent encore, dont la plupart incluent un enrichissement de l'écriture, des milieux de langage écrit dans lesquels les enfants de 5 ans acquirèrent le langage de façon naturelle. Des recherches courantes provenant de diverses cultures suggèrent que l'utilisation naturelle d'un langage écrit comme étant partie de l'environnement de jeu social des enfants pourrait être un complément valable aux programmes de tous ces pays.

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Entre 1985 y 1987 se hicieron observaciones en jardines infantiles de Escandinavia (Noruega, Suecia, Dinamarca), Gran Bretaña Estados y Unidos. En base a estas observaciones se describen y se comparan los medios de lenguaje escrito. En Escandinavia, los jardines infantiles para los niños de 6 años son generalmente medios que acentúan el desarrollo social, el lenguaje oral y la expresión creativa a través del juego. En esencia, no se encuentra lenguaje escrito. En Gran Bretaña (y en las otras escuelas británicas) el mismo medio interactivo de juego incluye también lenguaje escrito. Se introduce al niño de cinco años a la lectura dentro del contexto de libros de cuentos y a la escritura por intermedio del dictado y de la copia de cuentos. En Estados Unidos, en estos últimos 25 años, los jardines infantiles de las escuelas públicas, para los niños de cinco años, se han convertido progresivamente en más académicos. Sin embargo, todavía existen algunos jardines preocupados por el desarrollo del niño; muchos de ellos incluyen un enriquecimiento del idioma escrito en el cual el niño de cinco años lo adquiere en forma natural. Investigaciones actuales hechas en diferentes culturas sugieren que el uso natural del idioma escrito

**como parte del medio de juego social del niño podría ser un aditivo válido en los programas de jardín infantil en todos estos países.**

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Kindergarten (the year prior to Grade 1) is seen by early childhood educators as an important time in the developmental life of the young child. It is an opportunity for the child to experience a child-centered, developmental program fostering creative expression, oral language, motor skills, and social development before entering school where formal instruction in reading, writing, spelling, and computation will be emphasized. Whether school entrance is at age 5, 6, or 7 years and whether this is the child's only experience in kindergarten or is the culmination of several years in a nursery or child care program, it is an important year. The philosophy that guides the program will determine the type of written language environment in the kindergarten class. Current research and curriculum development suggest that "learning to read and write can be as natural as learning to talk if the right kind of environment can be created" (Taylor, Blum, & Logsdon, 1986, p. 133). Whether this natural written language environment was present was the focus of the observations made in kindergartens in several countries.

During 1985-1987, visits were made to kindergartens and other early childhood education centers in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Great Britain, and the United States. Observations in these kindergartens form the basis for the description and comparisons that follow. The observations were guided by two assumptions about kindergarten children and curriculum. First, children develop and learn in an environment that allows them to be active participants, interact-

ing with the environment to develop physical, social, cognitive, and language skills. Second, both oral and written language concepts can develop naturally in a meaningful, communication environment. Therefore, observations noted activities and opportunities that children had to interact with all aspects of their environment and to acquire both oral and written communication skills naturally.

### **Scandinavian Kindergartens**

Children in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark begin Grade 1 when they are seven years old. The 6-year-old kindergarten classes in Norway and Sweden are generally in separate early childhood facilities (kindergartens for infants - 6-year-olds or for 3 - 6-year-olds). In Denmark they are generally in kindergarten classes housed in the primary school building. The Norwegian and Swedish classes often are vertically grouped with 3 through 6 year olds in the same class. The kindergartens in these countries are child-centered with a favorable child-teacher ratio and usually have good physical facilities and equipment. The orientation is toward the child's social, creative, physical, and oral language development. Materials, activities, adult interaction, and informal assessment all are geared toward this orientation. Typical activities include play in the housekeeping center, building with blocks, art activities with a variety of media, outdoor play, cooking, weaving, use of puzzles and other manipulative materials, music, and stories. Often activities revolve around a theme, such as flags, folk tales, or holidays.

There is very little use of written language even in natural situations in these kindergartens. Picture story books are available, but often stored out of the children's reach. Stories are read to small or large groups by an adult, but children do not often spend time browsing through books on their own. Children's names may be printed on their art work, but often not in a prominent way or even in the manuscript print the child will learn in school. Bulletin board displays and room decorations include children's art work, but rarely are there any captions or printed labels. Schedules and organizational materials may be posted, but usually they are at teacher height and in adult-sized writing. Colored drawing pencils are available as are crayons and markers, but these are all for drawing, not for writing.

Many of the Scandinavian kindergartens offer a special program for 6-year-olds during the winter months between Christmas and Easter. This program, usually once or twice a week for an hour or so, is a type of school readiness program and may include structured workbooks. In many kindergartens, however, the focus of the program is an individual journal kept by each child. These journals often are used for drawing and dictation by the child. For example, the child might draw a picture of her or his family and dictate a sentence about the family members that the teacher would record under the picture.

The primary influence on kindergartens in Scandinavia historically was the Frobelian kindergarten model which focuses on play as the medium of instruction and learning. This influence predominates today and results in the kindergarten having a social, rather than educational purpose (Austin & Dittman, 1975). This emphasis is seen in other aspects of children's life as well. For ex-

ample, children's television programming in Denmark is non-cognitive and slowpaced in contrast to American children's television. Nearly all children in Scandinavia attend public kindergartens. There are, however, a number of private Steiner schools which follow the philosophy of no intellectual activity until age seven. Kindergartens make extensive provisions for children with handicaps (physical, mental, emotional) and for children speaking another language. These provisions include special teachers for the handicapped and native language instruction as well as second language immersion for the linguistically different children. However, unless the individual teacher does so, no special provisions are made for gifted or academically accelerated children.

Scandinavian kindergartens, in general, do not have a rich written language environment even though opportunities for natural use of print for communication are prevalent. A research study on written language development in Norwegian kindergartens (Nurss, 1987a) provided an opportunity to assess children's interest in written language. Children in six kindergartens were asked to draw a picture, write their name, tell about their picture, and write something about their picture. The task of drawing was, of course, a familiar one. The task of writing was not as familiar. Many children's first response was to say they couldn't write. However, when encouraged, they usually tried, especially the 5- and 6-year-olds. Data were collected in the fall, winter, and spring of one school year. By spring, growth was seen in both tasks. Many of the 6-year-olds were using invented spelling and were eager to write something about their picture. The teachers were cooperative and interested, but most did not attempt to have the children do any writing

during the regular class activities. However, one teacher provided the children access to paper and pencils during their socio-dramatic play time. They began to make tickets to use on their train and later to write letters to the researcher between her visits to the kindergarten. Another teacher, not in the research study, invited the researcher to her kindergarten to see what two of the boys were doing with writing. These boys (one 5 and one 6 years old) were engaged in making murals and writing story captions along with their pictures. They used invented spelling, writing freely as they talked and drew. Their activity was catching. Soon other children were also drawing murals and several were attempting to write captions on their work as well. Although it was not encouraged widely, written expression was easily incorporated into the social, creative play activities in these kindergartens.

### **British Infant Schools**

Children ages 5, 6, and 7 years in Great Britain attending Infant School are usually grouped together in vertical age groups. In some areas, they attend First Schools for 5-8 year-olds, arranged into two groups, 5-and 6-year olds and 7- and 8-year olds. The entrance or reception class is similar to kindergarten in that the 5-year-olds are expected to participate in the school activities and routines, taking time to adjust socially to the new environment. Facilities vary from older school buildings that have been renovated to new purpose-built buildings. Equipment and activities spill out of the classrooms into hallways, common rooms (library, lunch room, gymnasium), and outdoors. Programs are also child-centered, although there are apt to be more pupils per teacher than

in Scandinavia. There are a wide variety of hands-on activities, including a housekeeping center, cooking, art, book corner, music, creative dramatic play and movement, outdoor play or indoor exercise, oral language, woodworking, needlework, mathematics using manipulative materials, and performances for assemblies. Activities also often revolve around a theme, such as frogs or local community history.

A major difference between the Scandinavian and British programs is in their written language environment. The British classroom is full of meaningful print. There are schedules and organizational print (class lists, names on cubbies or coat hooks, daily plans), labels on equipment and in storage areas, directions for activities, captions and names on children's work, and recorded dictation (group news, individual stories, journals). Writing materials are available to the children for use at any time, and writing is encouraged in connection with art, mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. It is assumed that even the very youngest children are interested in and will use written communication, just as they are interested in and use oral communication. Opportunities are made available for them to see others (teachers and older children) using written language and to participate as much as they desire. A similar approach to beginning literacy has been described for reception classes in Australia (Holdaway, 1979) and New Zealand (Clay, 1975).

As the children display an interest in writing and reading, they are given simple story books (Books with captions under the picture that can be "read" by understanding the picture; books with repeated or predictable patterns; and "big" books, enlarged versions of picture story books that can be read easily by a

group of children). The teacher reads the book to the child and invites the child to read along. Gradually the child masters that book, reading the print in its meaningful context. Later the child will be introduced to the words out of context as well as to basic principles of phonics. However, the emphasis for the 5-year-olds is on understanding the connection between spoken and written language, acquiring print concepts, being able to use story structure and context clues to "read" a story, recognizing whole words in meaningful contexts, and beginning to develop phonemic awareness. Similarly in writing, children dictate phrases, sentences, and stories and read them to the teacher and other children. They are encouraged to trace the words and later to copy them below where the teacher has written. Free writing is not encouraged until the children can recognize and write several words correctly. It is assumed that children will move at their own pace with the teachers providing the stimulation and materials at the next level. Thus, some kindergarten-aged children will develop extensive reading and writing skills while others will not do so for another year or more.

While the philosophy of creative expression, learning through play, and development of social and oral language skills is fundamental in the British schools, the use of written language is also very important. Print is literally everywhere. Children are encouraged to use meaningful written symbols to communicate, and yet, there is very little direct instruction. Many child-teacher interactions focus on what the child has initiated in connection with print. Specifically, the teacher takes the cue from the child and uses the teachable moment to advance the child's interests and knowledge. Some examples of free writing and invented spelling are found in

these classrooms, although a lot of children's writing is actually copying from an adult's recording of their dictation.

The British reception classes make excellent use of natural opportunities for written, as well as oral, language within a creative, play-oriented environment. Adaptations of the British program were observed at an International School in Norway, in a public school kindergarten in Sweden, and in several private schools in the United States. In each instance, modifications were made to fit the local population and situation, but the model of introducing 5-year-olds to written language through hands-on activities was followed. Written language samples were also collected by the author from children in the British International School in Norway. These children were asked to do the same writing task as the Norwegian children. Their approach, however, was very different. They either asked how to spell words (to have a model to copy) or used words they already knew how to spell. They were eager to write captions on their pictures, but preferred to dictate them to an adult and then copy them. However, by the spring of the year, several 6-year-olds were attempting to spell on their own and were being encouraged by their teacher to do more free writing. When the researcher went into their classroom she was always surrounded by children eager to write, and she always went away with a stack of pictures and stories. Writing was clearly fun for these children.

### American Kindergartens

While local conditions dictate variations in the programs for 5-year-olds within each of the countries already discussed, there are more similarities from school to school than there are dif-

ferences. Both the smaller size of these countries and the influence of the national Ministry of Education contribute to these similarities. In the United States, the size of the country, the lack of a federal education curriculum or policy, and the diversity of the state and local education agencies and policies makes it difficult to find a common program at any level, including kindergarten. However, it is probably safe to state that over the past 25 years there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of early education in all 50 states and a parallel increase on the academic nature of kindergartens. Typically children enter public school at age five in order to attend kindergarten. Public school kindergarten was formally a half-day program, emphasizing social development, oral language acquisition, and creative expression. Research on the ability of young children to learn, the compensatory and equal opportunities for education movements, the emphasis on excellence in basic education, and the importance of accountability as measured by test scores have all contributed to a change in the American kindergarten curriculum. In many places the first grade curriculum has been pushed down into the kindergarten. Group paper-and-pencil or workbook instruction in phonics, penmanship, mathematics concepts, and reading words, followed by achievement testing of these skills is common. The result is a decrease in children's self-selection of activities, in use of manipulative materials, and in traditional kindergarten activities such as socio-dramatic play, block building, outdoor play, and creative activities.

Fortunately, early childhood educators all over the country have been resisting these changes, and one can still find many public and private kindergartens that encourage developmentally ap-

propriate practices for kindergarten, as endorsed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1986). In many of these situations the oral language emphasis has been supplemented with a print environment to encourage the natural development of written expression (Schickedanz, 1982). Children are not only encouraged to dictate stories for the teacher to record, they are also encouraged to use writing themselves, whether it be scribbling, letter-like symbols, or invented (phonemic) spelling. Writing is used for classroom organization (attendance, jobs, calendar), communication (notes, news, letters), directions (recipes, instructions for making things, labels for where to store things), and activities (socio-dramatic play, journals, art captions, stories, pupil-composed books). In some instances, a simple word processing program for the classroom computer allows the child to write stories on the computer as well as by hand. Books and writing materials are easily accessible to the children, stories are read frequently, and children share their writing with one another (Klein & Schickedanz, 1982; Martinez & Teale, 1987; Taylor, Blum, Logsdon, 1986).

Some American kindergartens can be described as print-rich, whole language environments in which children are encouraged to develop both oral and written language naturally in the context of play and social interaction. In these settings the children's total developmental needs are addressed, including opportunities for them to develop literacy in a meaningful manner. With respect to this, a study comparable to the Norwegian study mentioned above was conducted in an American prekindergarten (Nurss, 1987b). These children quickly became interested in writing and would run up to

the researcher asking what they were to write that day! The teacher increased the amount of language experience activities done with the children and introduced the use of a simple word processing system on the classroom computer. It, too, was used for story dictation. The children eagerly dictated and read their stories, but they did not increase their use of spontaneous writing in their play activities.

### Conclusion

Current research in several cultures suggests that meaningful written language can be acquired in a natural way by young children (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Holdaway, 1979; Martinez & Teale, 1987; Taylor, 1982; Sulzby, 1986). These studies suggest that the introduction of meaningful written language into the kindergarten does not have to change the nature of the program. That is, the social, interactive play emphasis can and should be retained along with children's natural development of written expression. More research is needed to investigate the theoretical differences that underlie the language dictation and natural writing emphases. While these approaches are not contradictory, they represent a different analysis of the beginning writing process. Proponents of the language experience/dictation approach find it important to separate the physical act of writing and spelling from the creative act of composing. They suggest that children need to be freed from penmanship and spelling in order to devote attention to composing until such time as they can physically write easily and can spell enough words not to be frustrated in their composition attempts. Programs such as Breakthrough to

Literacy (using word and letter cards to be combined into sentences) and IBM's Writing to Read (using the computer to write the story) allow the child to compose without having to write (although they still must spell in the Writing to Read program). Very little research is available to answer the question of which approach works best. A recent study (Zurn, 1987) of handwritten and computer-generated stories, however, suggests that kindergarten children write longer stories (are more fluent) with the word processor than they do by hand. More research is needed to investigate the effects of dictation compared with writing your own story and inventing your own letter symbols and spelling.

It appears that meaningful written language could be added to the Scandinavian kindergartens. An increase in free writing, encouraging invented spelling, could be added to the British reception classes. Finally, a developmentally appropriate curriculum which includes meaningful use of written, as well as oral, language could be reintroduced into American kindergartens. In each instance, the kindergartens observed had strengths that can be shared with other countries to the benefit of young children everywhere.

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