It's all in the name : early writing: from imitating print to phonetic writing

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8 EXPLORING EVERYDAY PRACTICES: EARLY WRITING ACTIVITIES IN DUTCH FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

The results of our studies into effects of learning to write one's name (chapters four, five and six) presume that writing one's own name initiates informal instruction and thus contributes to children's reading development (see also Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Shatil, Share, & Levin, 2000; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004; Welsch, Sullivan, & Justice, 2003). In a Canadian study it appeared that children learn to read in first grade with less difficulty when their parents read to them and engage their children in activities such as writing their name (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Weigel, Martin and Bennett (2005) reported that preschoolers' active engagement in literacy and language activities is associated with their print knowledge. Canadian upper- and middle-class parents mention the writing of their own name as their children's most frequent literate activity (Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006). From a questionnaire, Evans and colleagues (Evans, Fox, Cremaso, & McKinnon, 2004) concluded that only 43% of parents felt that the school had prime responsibility for literacy development among 6- to 8-year-old children. The authors concluded that the majority of these parents actively coach their children to read and write. Interviews as part of the Baltimore Early Childhood Project (....."How do you feel about the responsibility of the school and the home for children's learning to read and to write") showed that only 31% of parents and 27% of teachers believed that the school was primarily responsible for children's reading development; many parents (53%) and most teachers (73%) stressed that both home and school played a role in learning to read (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005). Is this also true for the Netherlands? Do Dutch children have as much experience with reading and writing at home as Canadian children? Do parents notice children's reading and writing attempts and do they respond to those? Or do parents chiefly rely on school when it comes to reading and writing? In this concluding chapter we describe research into activities that may stimulate writing for young children. We pay in particular attention to *1.* how Dutch parents perceive their role in teaching reading and writing, *2.* writing activities of Dutch children at home and in school, and *3.* variety across cultures. Does the Netherlands differ from other western countries like the United States and Canada (Harkness & Super, 1993)?

Learning to write at home

Assuming that cultural practices are motivated and sustained by parental belief systems (Harkness & Super, 1993), parents of first and second grade children

were asked about how responsible they felt for their young children's literacy (Van der Kooij, unpublished report). The educational level of the 125 [1] parents varied from low educated (at most Vocational Training for 12-16 year-olds (VMBO), $N = 30$) through somewhat higher vocational education (MBO, $N = 50$) to college or university level ($N = 43$). The parents were asked to indicate developmental areas that they considered as their main responsibility. Similar to the procedure followed by Evans and colleagues (Evans et al., 2004) parents were asked to make a choice from nine areas: literacy, numeracy, language development, moral education, creativity, physical education, general education, health and hygiene, and computer skills. Selecting three out of nine areas, Dutch parents seldom (6%) chose literacy. This outcome meant that they scored significantly at below chance level and indicates that Dutch parents believe that becoming literate mainly is the school's responsibility. When asked to indicate areas that are the school's main responsibility, literacy was selected by most parents (88%). Do parents, in spite of this, initiate activities that are related to early literacy such as name writing? The parents in Van der Kooy's study reported that preschoolers do not write their name, but kindergarten children do so frequently, and children in first grade very often write their name. Age was statistically significant, χ^2 (2, $N = 102$) = 169.4, $p < .001$. The higher the educational level of the parents, the more they are inclined to engage preschoolers and kindergarten children in reading and writing activities. Low-educated parents denied that their children make attempts to write their name in preschool age and they rarely observed kindergarten children write their name. By contrast, higher-educated parents reported some name writing in preschool age and regular attempts beyond five. Parents' levels of education caused a statistically significant effect, χ^2's (2, $N = 104$) = 5.77, p's < .05. By the time children begin first grade and receive instruction in reading and writing, this difference vanishes: all parents report that first grade children frequently write their name at home.

Schools in the Netherlands do not encourage parents to support writing activities of young children. We used a Dutch adaption of an American questionnaire (Baumann, 2000) to compare Dutch teachers' ideas with those of teachers in the United States (Both & Bus, 2004). A substantial proportion (38%) of the 102 Dutch preschool- to second-grade teachers did not encourage parents to initiate writing activities. Neither did they choose one of the three options presented in the questionnaire ("I send letters home explaining language/reading instruction and providing tips how parents can help," "I regularly give students books to take home and read with their parents," and "I invite parents to special meetings at which we explain how they can contribute to their child's literacy"), nor did they come up with any other similar initiative. Teachers informed parents about how they can stimulate their children's literacy principally through a parent-teacher evening (33%). In so far Dutch teachers advised parents they urged them to read aloud to them (99%) or encouraged parents to let their children read to them (64%); only 24% encouraged parents to write with their children at home ("I encourage parents to have their children write something that matters.").

[1] Two parents' education level was missing.

Writing in pre-school and kindergarten

From observations in nine kindergarten groups Bus and Both (1997) concluded that kindergarten children were indeed stimulated to write, but that teachers mainly highlighted form features of writing and not the function of writing or letter-sound relationships. During observations lasting five hours per class spread over three mornings, they noted only incidental interactions that prompted children to think about alphabetic-phonetic writing or the spelling of words. Teachers emphasized the visual aspects of writing and gave feedback when letters were written in reverse or upside down. Baumann's questionnaire (Baumann et al., 2000) revealed similar outcomes (Both & Bus, 2004). Compared to American children, Dutch preschoolers and kindergarten children relatively rarely receive instruction in the alphabet and letter-sound relationships. The results show a statistically significant difference in the time spent on the reading instruction of children (e.g., reading out loud, reading in groups, practising writing, and learning letters), using and practising reading (e.g., choosing one's own book to read and seeking information in books), and other activities such as verbal games, writing stories, and inventing spelling. U.S. teachers spend almost twice as much time giving reading instruction compared with Dutch teachers; 140 versus 80 minutes per day, respectively. It may be that these results are somewhat exaggerated as Dutch teachers may have a narrower definition of reading instruction than American teachers; for instance, Dutch teachers may not consider the time that is spent on reading to the class or talking about authors of children's books as reading instruction per se. Yet the conclusion that few Dutch preschool or kindergarten teachers teach how to read and spell still stands. For example, only 27% of pre-school and kindergarten teachers taught letter-sound combinations during writing activities ("phonic skills are presented and taught through children's writing."). However variations between classes were substantial. For instance, some classes revealed many examples of functional writing activities.

Some examples of activities that stimulate functional writing and reflection on the alphabet.

Bus and Both (1997) concluded that the most important stimuli for pre-schoolers and kindergarteners to write and think about content were play centers equipped with plenty of familiar literacy-related objects (e.g., paper, pencils, postcards, diary, calendar) and being given tasks such as writing a book. For instance, Alison, a pre-schooler, sitting in a well-equipped play center, said "I'm going to write," and took a sheet of paper and began writing capital letters and the number 5. Another pre-schooler, Dominique, given the task of writing a book, made a catalog so that "people can see how much things cost." These writing activities stimulate the imitation of writing as well as reflection on purposes of writing, but they may not promote knowledge about writing as an alphabetic-phonetic system as children rarely appear to produce invented spelling in such settings (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). We rarely came across activities that stimulate reflection on the relationship between letters and sounds. "What Can You Show Us," an American

project meant to elicit students' demonstration of their knowledge about a large-print text displayed on a chart or in a Big Book, often revealed print-oriented responses besides meaning-oriented responses (Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996). The advantage of the former responses provoked by inviting volunteers to step before the class and show something they know about the text, is that they offer ample opportunity for teachers to teach phonemic awareness (see Figure 1). A practical study carried out by a teacher in a Dutch kindergarten classroom with mainly at-risk children, confirmed that "What Can You Show Us" can generate a large number of references to letters from the child's name (personal communication Elly de Jong, 9 November 1999). An eight-minute video (produced by Malmberg, BOA Productions, 1999) demonstrates that during a single group session Ikram recognized the word 'ik' ['I'] using the letters from her own name, Bilal recognized the letter 'b' from her name in words like 'bibberig' [trembling] and 'bang' [scared], Joao found all the 'I's, Navita heard that the letter 'b' made the same sound in 'bang' and 'bibberig', Jeffrey turned 'muis' [mouse] into 'vis' [fish] by hiding the 'm', Miriam pointed out the 'm' from her name whereupon other children reacted by pointing out that Mehmet and McDonald's also begin with 'm', and the youngest pre-schooler indicated three other 'm's in the text. Note that in this session almost all letters that the children recognized were related to the first letter of their own name.

Figure 1. A 10-minute, whole class lesson in Mrs. Poremba's kindergarten (Richgels, Poremba, and McGee (1996).

Dear kindergarteners, It is fall! Fall is apple time We picked up an apple On a tree. Yum! Yum! Love, Uncle Wally	Mrs. P: Would somebody like to tell us about the letter? Eric: Two apples in one tree. Mrs. P: You noticed two apples in one tree. You want to come up and show us that, Eric? Eric: And love. Mrs. P: Come on up and show those important parts. Mrs. P: And you said you noticed something else, Eric. Eric: (pointing) Love Mrs. P: You noticed love also. Thank you Eric. Mrs. P: Nathan, would you like to come up and show us something you need us to see? Nathan: (pointed to the K in Kindergartners and the K in KP written in the corner of his name collar to identify him as a member of Mrs. P.'s kindergarten. Mrs. P: Okay, turn around and show us what's on your collar. Okay, what did you notice, Nathan? Nathan: That's right here and that's right there. Mrs. P: What do you think that is Nathan? Do you know what that is? Children: *K* Nathan: *K* Mrs. P: a *K* Child: *KP* Mrs. P: And you noticed— Nathan: a *K* up there Mrs. P: a K up there in the first part, the very first letter in that big, long word. Thank you, Nathan. (Several more demonstrations followed....)

Note. Left the shared letter, right the discussion between Mrs. Poremba and her students.

Educational innovation: some trends

Children with low scores on emergent literacy skills run a greater risk of reading problems (Bus, 2005). Struggling beginning readers do not catch up when emergent literacy lags behind (Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005). As a consequence of such findings educators tend to pay more attention to emergent literacy from an early age. What kind of literate activities emerged in Dutch schools from the insight that emergent literacy predicts later literacy? There is, for instance, a trend towards stimulating developmentally appropriate instruction for pre-schoolers and kindergarteners *(Ontwikkelings Gericht Onderwijs [Developmentally-focused education])* in the domain of literacy (Janssen–Vos, Pompert, & Vink, 1991). Pre-schoolers are stimulated to explore reading and writing in the context of dramatizing. Children play, for example, 'garage' elicited by posters of various auto brands, an appointment book, advertisement, and paper to write invoices (Janssen–Vos & Pompert, 2001). Kindergarten children engage in functional writing activities such as making books (see Janssen-Vos, Pompert & Vink, 1991). Analyzing the manuals for instruction we were unable to find examples that describe how teachers can challenge their students to reflect on the process of writing. A basic assumption seems to be that children will spontaneously ask for help: "Is this correct?" or "What does this say?" The Expertise Center – a center aimed at educational innovation of reading and writing instruction - designed prototypes of lessons to stimulate writing and phoneme awareness activities in kindergarten classes (van Kleef & Tomesen, 2002 [a], 2002[b]). They suggest that teachers develop daily routines that include talking about letters and how they sound in words. For example, a teacher helps a student to write the word 'jaar' [year] by asking "whose name in the class begins with the letter 'j'?" (Van Kleef & Tomesen, 2002 [a], p. 224). The 'ABC wall' is introduced to link sounds to their written form. On the wall are posters for each letter of the alphabet including drawings and/or words of referents that start with a particular letter (or sound). One suggestion is to add the names of the children in the class.

Cultural diversity

Parental beliefs about literacy differ and so do their beliefs about child rearing. Studying parents' beliefs about 'intelligence', Harkness and Super (1993) found that parents all over the world choose to describe children in terms of intelligence, but that the construct 'intelligence' varies among cultures. American parents highlight aggressive and competitive aspects of intelligence. By contrast, in a Kipsigis community in Kenya the connotation of intelligence was 'helpful and responsible behaviour.' Intelligence for Dutch parents was associated with 'individual enduring effort, directed by strength of will and organized by clarity of purpose.' Harkness and Super summarized Dutch parents' view on development as: "Don't push" (Harkness & Super, 1993). Dutch and American parents also differ in their beliefs about early stimulation. Examining how critical "stimulation" is for Dutch parents, Rebelsky (1967) concluded that regular feeding and sleeping is considered as more important than playing. She observed that "even if a Dutch parent sees a child awake and looking around, she or he is not likely to respond

because of fear of spoiling the baby or because of the belief that a baby in this age range should sleep and not play or stay awake." This belief in the 'three R's' - *rust* (rest), *regelmaat* (regularity) and *reinheid* (cleanliness) may be outdated now. Nonetheless, in a more recent study Super and colleagues (Super, Harkness, Tijen, Van der Vlugt, Fintelman, & Dijkstra, 1996) concluded that regularity and rest still were highly valued in the Netherlands.

Conclusion and discussion

"Don't push" could be considered many Dutch parents' credo regarding the development of literacy. Overall we have the impression that in kindergarten Dutch children receive very little instruction in the alphabet and how letters and sounds fit together. Parents are not encouraged to support writing at home. Probably many parents and teachers of young children classify such activities as 'pushy' because they run ahead of systematic instruction in third grade and beyond that. Given our studies of name writing reported in this dissertation, it is our opinion that parents and teachers thus underestimate the pleasure that young children derive from writing attempts and the importance of implicit instructions in letter-sound knowledge, for example in how to spell one's name, for the development of phonemic awareness. Emergent literacy skills facilitate beginning reading instruction and raise the chance that children become proficient readers (Bus, 2005; Spira et al., 2005).

It is encouraging that educational innovation projects for young children create opportunities for activities that stimulate writing, as well as opportunities to talk about the alphabet and how letters sound in words. In this way kindergarten children are taught some letters of the alphabet and how writing works, for example, by learning to write their name in a similar way to what some children (mainly from higher educated families) do at home. Children need these opportunities to develop emergent literacy skills. They do not start to think phonetically being completely on their own (Van Kleef and Tomesen, 2002a).