

Chloe's Story

First steps into literacy



Carole Bloch

MIRANDA MIRRI ~~LOLY~~
~~MELISSA~~ ROGER JONAH
NINA
JAMES CATHERINE
BEBE DAVID NANA
PWPW OUPA LAUR
OLMA TARA CHLOE BROD
IVAS BIRTHDAY ALL THE MOMMY
DADDY'S STAR

ABC EFGHIJKLMN O PQRST UVWXY
young children learning

Chloe's Story:

First steps into literacy

Carole Bloch

This little gem of a book is going to transform the lives of many children. The author makes a point of explaining that the pattern of normal life. Learning to read and write is similar to learning to speak and to listen to speech with understanding. We believe that the teacher-educator is not called upon to behave like a corporal on the parade ground. Instead he or she is a sensitive, patient and supportive adult who lets the child try out different strategies until he or she gets it right in the most organic and natural manner.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is its gentle insistence that the development of the ability to read and write cannot be broken up into discrete skills which have to be sequenced according to their supposed complexity or difficulty. If the reading of this book helps to free the educators of our emerging young readers and writers from the debilitating stranglehold of the fallacy of 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' skills, it will have a long way towards transforming our system of education.

Carole Bloch's book is a gem. It is a book that should be read by all who are concerned with the education of our children. It is a book that should be read by all who are concerned with the education of our children. It is a book that should be read by all who are concerned with the education of our children. It is a book that should be read by all who are concerned with the education of our children. It is a book that should be read by all who are concerned with the education of our children.

It is indeed fortunate that our Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town was able to provide Carole with the framework and the opportunity to systematise her thoughts and to take her project to its conclusion.

Neville Alexander
Director, PRAESA
University of Cape Town
April 1977



First published in 1997

© Juta & Co Ltd
P O Box 14373, Kenwyn 7790

ISBN 0 7021 4344 8

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention. In terms of the Copyright Act 98 of 1978, no part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Subediting by Moeneba Slamang
Cover design by Julie Farquhar
Book design and layout by Julie Farquhar
Printed and bound by Creda Press, Eliot Ave, Eppindust 11

Foreword

This little gem of a book is going to transform the way in which teachers in Early Childhood or Junior Primary classrooms facilitate the development of reading and writing by young South African children.

The author makes no concessions to methods and approaches she considers to be dated and fallacious. She insists on acknowledging the fact that literacy, like speech, is woven into the social fabric in such a way that it becomes fixed only to the extent that it forms part of the pattern of normal life. Learning to be literate is related directly to the social purposes for which one wishes to read and to write. Her whole-language approach nudges and often pushes us to understand that learning to read and write is similar to learning to speak and to listen to speech with understanding. We realise that the teacher-educator is not called upon to behave like a corporal on the parade ground. Instead he or she is a sensitive, patient and supportive adult who lets the child try out different strategies until he or she gets it right in the most organic and natural manner.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is its gentle insistence that the development of the ability to read and write cannot be broken up into discrete skills which have to be sequenced according to their supposed complexity or difficulty. If the reading of this book helps to free the educators of our emerging young readers and writers from the debilitating stranglehold of the fallacy of 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' skills, it will have gone a long way towards transforming our entire system of education.

Carole Bloch's courage in publishing the lovingly preserved traces of her (real) daughter's progress as a would-be writer is an index to her commitment and her conviction that drastic action is necessary if we are to transform our classrooms. Although much of what she offers us here has been established theoretically and experimentally in some countries in Europe, America and Asia, even there the practice that should have followed is the exception. She has, therefore, provided us with an opportunity to be pioneers in the most important of all educational domains.

It is not unimportant to mention that the very personal source of this work highlights the contribution which parents can and should make, in particular the contribution which mothers *do* make, to the education of our children, since it remains true that *they* are their most significant teachers.

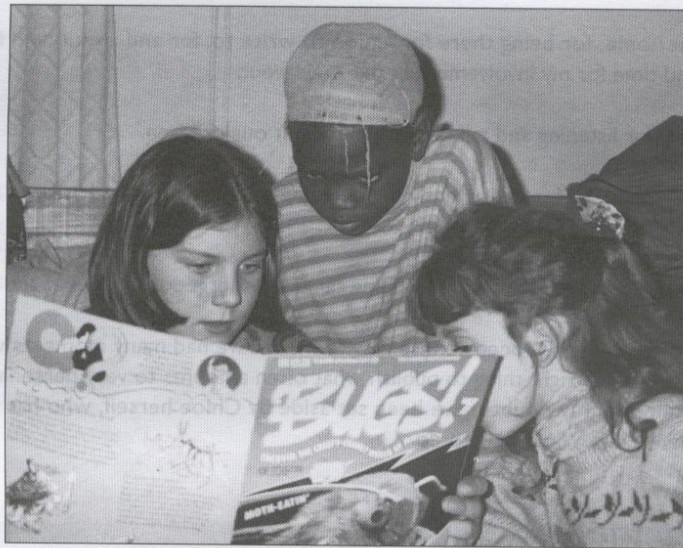
It is indeed fortunate that our Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town was able to provide Carole with the framework and the opportunity to systematise her thoughts and to take her project to its conclusion.

Neville Alexander
Director: PRAESA
University of Cape Town
April 1997

Neville Alexander

Acknowledgments

Many people have supported me through the writing of this book. While I am grateful to everyone involved, I will only thank a few closest to the process:



Chloe and friends

Acknowledgements

Foreword

iii

Many people have supported me through the writing of this book. While I am grateful to everyone involved, I will only thank a few closest to the process:

Tony and Ivan at home, for being there for Chloe to write to, for and about, and for allowing me the space and time for my involvement in this endeavour.

Wilma, my friend, for listening and talking with me about our children.

Gerda and Neville at work for consistently encouraging me through what has been a somewhat lengthy and sometimes frustrating process.

On the book itself, Heila and Dawn for remaining calm and energetic throughout the many drafts.

And Chloe, whose writing has been so inspiring to me. I have had many moments when I wondered whether it was the right thing to publish what often amounts to very personal details of a young child's family life. My doubts have been set aside by Chloe herself, who has always been clear that she thinks it is a fine thing to do.

References

40

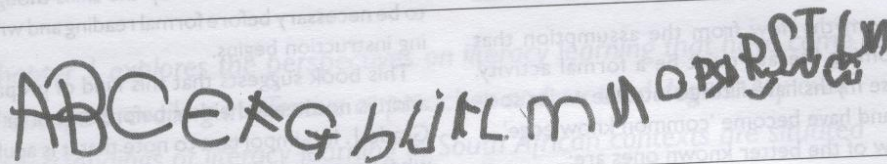
Suggested further readings

41

Contents

Foreword	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
1. Understandings about literacy	3
Research findings	4
Becoming speakers and writers	5
Personal understandings	6
2. Chloe's story	9
Growing up in a print-rich environment	10
Reasons for writing	11
3. Young children reading and writing in South Africa	33
One story among many	34
Exploring further	35
Making changes	36
Suggestions for encouraging meaningful literacy	36
References	40
Suggested further readings	41

Introduction



This book explores how young children become literate by weaving reading and writing into the social and cultural practices of their homes and communities. It centres around one child – my daughter Chloe – as she comes to use literacy as part of her daily activities, and the ways that her family, her home and community environment are part of this process. Her growing insights about writing show that it is both possible and desirable for young children to be far more actively involved in controlling their own literacy development than is generally believed in our country.

While Chloe's experiences arise out of a relatively privileged socio-economic background, studies in other parts of the world have documented similar stories from a range of class and cultural situations. These studies and my own experiences convince me that this kind of approach and the understandings about learning which underlie it are generally relevant, with due regard to social background, when the daily language and literacy practices of children, their families and communities are valued and built upon.

Learning and life are inseparable

While the spotlight is on literacy, the book is also about reuniting learning with life. This is so for at least two reasons. Firstly, I write as

a parent involved in her child's life, a teacher of young children and an educational researcher. All three roles have contributed (and continue to contribute) substantially to the views I presently hold about literacy learning. Secondly, as the book reminds us, reading and writing, along with speaking and listening, are all interrelated aspects of language which people use in various ways in their social and cultural interactions. The lives of young children also include language use as they relate with family and friends.

The book challenges the way reading and writing are generally described as skills which are separate from the purposes people have for written language. In many South African schools, because of this view, the methods used for teaching literacy often end up being little more than sets of exercises which are far removed from the children's interests and real-life experiences with writing and reading.

In many instances, the school system actually prevents large numbers of children from developing the kinds of insights which would enable them to see the value and power that reading and writing have for them in their lives. This happens because of the assumption promoted by most educational institutions that becoming literate must be a formal activity. It is assumed that children's literacy development involves them learning mechanical skills that need to be carefully selected and taught in a

particular order before they can read or write for any real reason.

Mythunderstandings

Many myths flow from the assumption that becoming literate must be a formal activity. These myths have filtered into the wider society and have become 'common knowledge'. A few of the better known ones are:

- Young children should not learn how to read and write before they start primary school.
- Reading must be taught before writing or writing must be taught before reading.
- Small letters are easier to learn than capitals and must be learned first, or vice versa.
- Children must be taught how to form their letters 'properly' before they write for real reasons.

Many Early Childhood Development (ECD)¹ teachers and parents agree that pre-school-aged children develop and learn best in an informal, non-pressurising environment. Often, myths like the ones listed above give rise to a strong concern that most pre-school-aged children would not be 'ready' for the 'formal' learning that takes place in most schools. At the same time, pre-school teachers are expected to make sure that children are sufficiently prepared to be able to manage what will be expected of them on school entry. Therefore 'school readiness' programmes, which emphasise 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' exercises, form a large part of most pre-school curricula.

Many 'pre-reading' exercises are aimed at developing visual and auditory discrimination (being able to distinguish between different images and sounds) and visual and auditory memory. They also include rhyming, letter recognition, and recognising sound to letter

correspondence. Examples of 'pre-writing' skills are tracing over existing shapes, copying, doing patterns and colouring in. It is believed that these exercises develop the skills thought to be necessary before formal reading and writing instruction begins.

This book suggests that this kind of preparation is not needed either before school or in Grade 1. It is important to note that it is adults who have made literacy learning formal for young children, by separating the teaching of reading and writing from the purposeful activities in which children involve themselves.

The examples of Chloe's writing show that *with appropriate support, young children are able to direct and control their own learning*. They make sense of written language as part of their social lives because they have a strong drive to communicate, to solve problems and to play. All these things they do with creativity and imagination. In Chapter 3, I suggest some of the ways that families, parents and teachers can support children's attempts at using written language.

¹ ECD (Early Childhood Development) is the official term used to describe the phase from birth to 9 years of age. It thus involves educators from both the non-formal and formal education systems (educare, pre-school and junior primary).

1 • Understandings about literacy

Chapter 1 explores the perspectives on literacy learning that have come to challenge prevailing ineffective approaches and methodologies. My own understandings of literacy learning in South African contexts are situated within these.



Research findings

Over the past 25 years, there have been important shifts in approaches to literacy, linked to a recognition and a growing positive acknowledgement of the multicultural and multilingual nature of many countries. This has led to research which emphasises the political, social and cultural nature of literacy. Rather than thinking of literacy as a set of neutral skills which can be taught separately and then applied to different situations, it has been understood that there are different literacies which people use for various purposes in their lives. Such research has led away from singling out how to ensure that literacy gets taught to those who 'lack' it, to gathering information about

how reading and writing are used in various communities, and how to build on this information.

The above-mentioned perspective links to what is termed a 'whole-language' philosophy about learning and teaching, which developed in the USA as part of the movement against narrow, skills-based approaches to education. A whole-language approach emphasises the similarities between the different aspects of language. It points to how easy and 'natural' learning is out of school compared with the fragmented nature of school learning, which is driven by what is often seen as 'common sense'.

The main points from the two approaches (adapted from Freeman & Freeman 1992) are summarised below.

Common-sense approach	Whole-language approach
Learning moves from part to whole. ²	Learning moves from the whole to the parts.
Learning is teacher-centred because learning involves the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupils.	Children actively construct knowledge, so lessons should be pupil-centred.
Lessons should prepare pupils to function in society after schooling.	Lessons should have meaning for pupils now.
Learning happens with skills practice and habit formation.	Meaningful social interaction promotes learning.
When learning a new language, oral language must be acquired <i>before</i> literacy is introduced.	In a new language, oral and written language can be acquired together.
When learning a new language, it is best for learning to take place in that language.	Emphasis should be on first-language learning to build concepts and facilitate learning another language.
Bilingual pupils have limited learning potential.	Teachers need to trust in the learners' potential.

² 'Part' refers to the details or mechanical skills involved in literacy learning. 'Whole' refers to the 'big picture', the overall intention of the text, written or spoken.

At the same time, research into young children's language and literacy learning has given rise to what is sometimes referred to as an 'emergent literacy' approach. This centres around how, in literate societies, oral language develops to include written language, and how many young children engage spontaneously with written language before school-going age. The term 'emergent literacy' describes becoming literate as a process, which emerges as reading and writing are experienced and learned in personally meaningful ways. This happens when children come to realise that written language makes sense for them, and they begin to actively construct or build the written language system for themselves.

It has been realised that one of the main avenues for young children to explore reading and writing is through play. Through play, children come to grapple with the symbolic nature of written language. The marks we read or make on the page are not meaningful in themselves, but as symbols they represent real meaning. To read and write, we must be able to generate and make sense of such symbols. When young children play imaginatively, they also use symbols by making one thing stand for something else. One object (like a stick) can represent another (like a car), without them having to look alike at all. The importance is that, as they play, children come to invest meaning in objects as signs. What this implies is that imaginary play underlies literacy development.

Becoming speakers and writers

It is widely accepted that parents are their children's first teachers. Mostly, the expertise that parents have is intuitive. For instance, parents do not have to first study how babies learn to talk before becoming parents. Yet parents and babies have a special kind of teaching-learning relationship that results in children who can

speak. The complementary side of being a teacher is being a learner, and many parents tell of the deep learning that took place for them as their baby's speech developed. Babies learn to speak by speaking, and they would not learn if there were not people around them, talking and including them in their conversations.

First words spoken

Young children also learn how to use speech differently for different occasions, and if they engage regularly with speakers of other languages as part of their daily lives, they become bilingual or multilingual as a matter of course.

While this is all very complex learning, adults do not feel that babies and young children have to be 'ready' before they learn how to talk in one or more than one language. If parents waited for a particular age or stage before talking with their children, they would be considered either mad or negligent. Because speech is part of the human environment, we trust that with praise, encouragement and positive feedback, children will learn. And they do, as they observe, listen, interact, practise and play with language.

No one would dream of being negative about a baby's first words, immature as they inevitably are. When toddler Rosie calls out 'Want dat teed!' as she spies her mother making cheese sandwiches, her mother is likely to be delighted at her child's attempt, imperfect as it may sound. She will probably give Rosie an encouraging reply, perhaps something like, 'You want some cheese, do you? Here you are.' She takes her child seriously by trying to make sense of Rosie's intention to communicate. In her reply, she acts as a language model for Rosie by giving an appropriate form of the sentence. She also reinforces for Rosie both that talk is useful for getting what she needs and that she is a successful talker/communicator. Rosie gets a piece of cheese, which is what she wanted in the first place.

First words written and read

Early attempts at reading and writing, which are also language, often receive a completely different kind of response. Comments about children's early encounters with written language are often something like the following:

- 'Oh, she knows that story off by heart. She's not really reading.'
- 'He's only pretending. He can't really read.'
- 'She can't write her name yet. She only knows a few proper letters, and she often gets them back to front. I hope she doesn't have a learning problem.'

Negative comments like these imply that, unlike with speech, parents do not have the confidence to trust in their ability to teach their children about literacy. Nor do they believe that what young children do and learn for themselves as they explore reading and writing can be trusted as 'real' learning. In Chapter 2, Chloe's writing provides but one of many examples which show that this need not be the case.

Personal understandings

By the time Chloe was beginning to explore writing, I had already thought at length about how young children are generally expected to learn to read and write. As a teacher in Britain some time before my own children were born, I worked at a secondary school, with teenagers who could either not read and write at all, or who found it very difficult and hated it. These young people taught me that years of ongoing failure lead to loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and that this causes extremely damaging mental blocks against learning. I noticed how many teachers, known as experts in reading and writing difficulties, persisted in 'teaching the basics'. They repeatedly gave practice in phonics³ and exercises aimed at improving perceptual and fine motor skills, which just did

not help these children either to develop self-confidence or to read and write.

In many ways, for these teenagers, it was too late. They had been failed by a system which could not address their needs. It became important for me to learn about the beginning stages of education when young children become literate, because there is a greater chance of building positive learning foundations at an early age.

Learning from young children

I went to work at a non-formal pre-school, with children aged between two and five, from a range of cultural and class home backgrounds. Interacting with these young children, I noticed the central position imagination and play held in their learning and development. Every event held a story, either murmured quietly to themselves as they painted or played in the sand, or acted out together in the very serious and complex 'pretend' role-plays which they never grew tired of. The stories linked the safe and familiar with the new and strange events in their lives. The children were always at ease with, and in control of, this process.

Children play. They play alone and with each other. They also play with language. They play with the sounds and rhythms of daily communication, with rhymes and with stories. When the oral language which children use so freely in their play in the classroom is extended to include print, it becomes something to play with as well. In my classroom, writing and reading became part of play. Writing and reading materials were used wherever and whenever necessary: doctors write prescriptions; cooks read recipes; family members and friends have birthdays, give and receive cards and parcels, and write shopping lists; drivers read maps; and teachers take registers. The possibilities were endless.

When we learned a rhyme, song or story, I would write it down, in booklets or as posters

³ Phonics is commonly described as the relationship of letters or combinations of letters to their sounds.

2 • Chloes story

for the walls. Some children spoke languages other than English at home and, when I could, I included writing in these languages to be part of the visual environment as well because I wanted all of the children to know that what they knew was important and valued in the classroom. The children became interested and began to read, sharing ideas and giving each other clues about how they were 'doing it'. When I wrote, they wanted to know why I was writing, what it said, what it was for and whom it was for. I showed them what I was doing and answered their questions. They also often tried to write and read for themselves.

No one child approaches learning in exactly the same way as another. Children have different ways of involving themselves in reading and writing, depending on their individual personalities, interests and ways of playing. Some children in my class simply wrote, and then asked me to read what they had written. Others told me what they had written. They were interested in and involved with both writing and reading. It was unnecessary for me to censor engagements in either process. I read and told many stories, and encouraged the children to tell me stories, which I offered to write down for them. We also often made books together.

The languages, people, events, stories and objects from the children's homes and communities were central to the classroom environment and curriculum. The children brought threads of their knowledge, concerns and interests from 'outside' to weave in with what they encountered at school. In this way, they could make better sense of their total home-and-school lives. While sometimes it was appropriate for me to tell the children what to do, or to set up activities and then watch over them, my main role as teacher was to help them to achieve what they were trying to do, and to make suggestions which might enable them to reach a little bit further into new understandings.

Asking questions

Because I had been educated to teach older children, it took some time for me to realise that there were (and still are in many early childhood settings) many restrictive 'dos' and 'don'ts' relating to learning written language in the early years of children's education.

Examples of traditional 'dos' are to instil a love of reading in children and to develop their vocabulary. Parents and teachers are generally aware that reading stories, rhymes and songs to children is an important activity. However, they often understand this as being part of 'reading readiness' and separate from the 'formal skill', learning how to read. Consequently, there is a 'don't' involved. This is the restriction of the extent to which teachers should explore such written language with young children. For instance, it is not seen as appropriate or important for adults to encourage and to write down the children's own ideas and stories, nor are children encouraged to try and write for themselves.

Another well-known 'do' is to show children how to write their names. While children's own spontaneous attempts at writing are often at best ignored and at worst discouraged, the ability to write their name is seen as one of the signs of 'school readiness'. Often this is accompanied by a 'don't use capital letters' restriction. This is because of an idea that children will not be able to cope with more than one version of print at the same time.

My readings about literacy and experience as a teacher led me to doubt these restrictions. Young children want to understand their whole environment and they use whatever helps them to increase their control over it. Far from being confused by the complexities of reading and writing, they are fascinated and full of enthusiasm to 'do it' for themselves. Moreover, young children are not confused by more than one language when it occurs in a context that makes sense to them.

I found that when a print-rich⁴ environment is created, where reading and writing are used in ways that link into the personal concerns of the children, they will either continue with the process or begin to work out what reading and writing is about. They do this using the adults around them: by observing, by asking questions, by trying out things for themselves, by asking for help and by playing. In the same way as children play using oral language to get things done, so they will play with written language, to get things done in different ways.

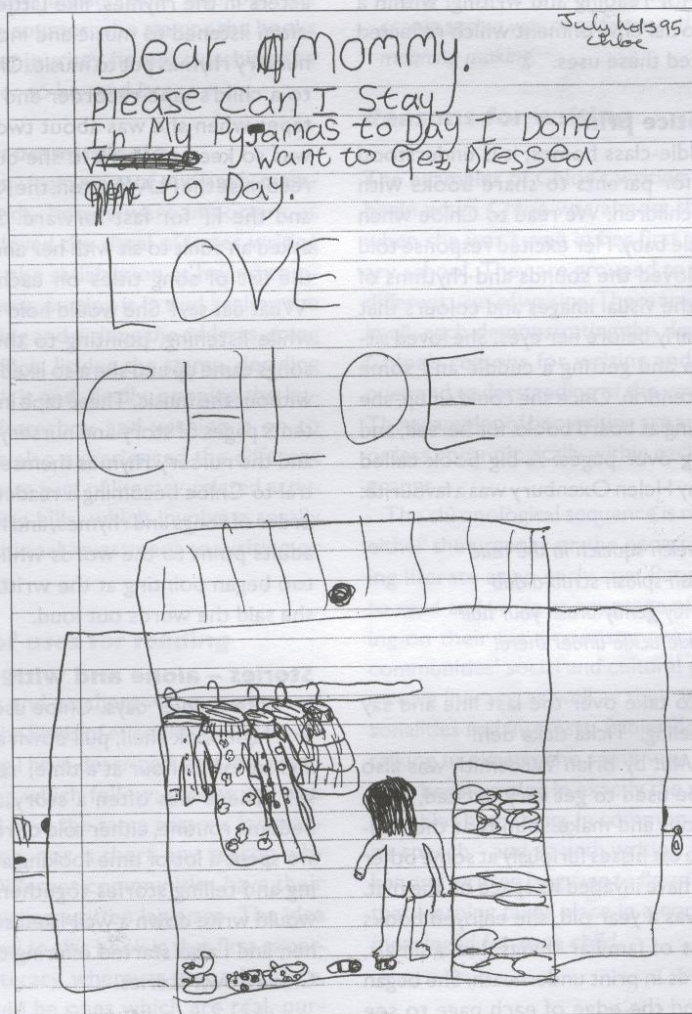
I found, in fact, that there is nothing formal about the way young children develop their understandings about literacy. This is especially clear when they are in an environment which, rather than excluding written language from the children's homes and communities, welcomes and values its different forms and uses.

Through Chloe's early engagements with writing, Chapter 2 highlights an example of such informal learning in one particular family situation.

⁴ A print-rich environment is one which actively promotes the use and display of written language in a variety of ways.

2 • Chloe's story

Chapter 2 records Chloe's writing process. It gives examples of her writing, which illustrate the development of her understandings, strategies and growing competence as she starts to weave written language into her daily activities.



Growing up in a print-rich environment

Like all children, Chloe has been involved, from birth, in a continuous process of making sense of her life. For her, like many children, this has included finding out how written language works, and how to make it work for her. From early on, she found herself interacting with people who included her in their many and varied uses for reading and writing, within a home and social environment which reflected and reinforced these uses.

Babies notice print

In many middle-class homes, it is understood as 'natural' for parents to share books with their young children. We read to Chloe when she was a little baby. Her excited response told us that she loved the sounds and rhythms of stories and the visual images and colours that passed regularly before her eyes. She loved sitting on a lap and getting a cuddle and some undivided attention. Once she could sit up, she started looking at board books for herself, and tried turning over pages. A big book called *Tickle Tickle* by Helen Oxenbury was a favourite:

*Squelch squelch in the mud
Splish splash scrub-a-dub
Gently gently brush your hair
Tickle tickle under there!*

She used to take over the last line and say with great feeling, 'Ticka ticka deh!'

Cat on the Mat by Brian Wildsmith was also special. Chloe used to get very excited, wave her arms about and make sounds at the ending where the cat hisses furiously at some other animals who have invaded its space on the mat. Before she was a year old, she enjoyed books with pictures of familiar things, like animals, with the words in print underneath. She began to peer round the edge of each page to see

what was coming next. There was a sign on her door which said 'Chloe' and this was often pointed out to her. After a while, she would wave her arms about and shriek with excitement when we approached it.

Appreciating rhymes

Chloe grew to love rhymes and soon knew many off by heart. She loved to sing with us, and to play games and pretend to be the characters in the rhymes, like Little Bo-Peep. We often listened to music and included tapes of nursery rhymes put to music. Chloe had access to a child's tape recorder and a selection of tapes when she was about two. Because she was so keen to work it, she quickly came to recognise the PLAY button, the REW for rewind and the FF for fast forward. She also often asked an adult to sit with her and read through the list of song titles on each tape, asking, 'What dat say?' She would hold the tape insert while listening, pointing to the titles as the songs came up and she also liked to 'read' them without the music. These tape inserts, the contents pages of story and nursery rhyme books, and the nursery rhymes themselves were central to Chloe becoming a reader. Knowing the order of songs and rhymes, and having watched adults point to the words while reading, she too began pointing at the written symbols as she said the words out loud.

Stories – alone and with others

In those toddler days, Chloe used to climb up to a high book shelf, pull down a pile of books and sit for an hour at a time, 'reading' to herself. There was often a story as part of the bedtime routine, either told or read. Generally, we spent a lot of time looking at books, reading and telling stories together. Sometimes I would write down a well-liked story I had told her, and I also started offering to write down Chloe's own stories.

In the library

We went regularly to the local library, which welcomed toddlers and had a wide selection of books for them to borrow. For Chloe, the total event was exciting – having special books called library books with those funny numbers in the front, having a library card with her name on it, looking at and choosing a certain number of books to borrow (toddlers love to count), the awesome sight of so many books, meeting other children, small and big, the librarian at the counter who stamps the books and, finally, the journey home, clutching the precious stories to be read later.

Writing to communicate

As we lived away from many of our family members and friends, letters were important at home. Chloe loved the ritual of letter writing and sending – the satisfaction at having completed the letter, putting it in and sealing the envelope, finding and writing the address, going to the post office, licking the stamp, deciding where to stick it and, finally, popping the letter into the letterbox and wishing it on to wherever. She also experienced the different moods that were part of literacy-related activities, like paying bills, which involve a totally different emotional investment to writing or reading letters.

A variety of uses for reading and writing

Some parents and teachers will recognise and identify with the kinds of encounters with reading and writing I have described, and the examples of writing which follow; others will not. We do not all have the same reasons for reading and writing, nor is there any reason why we should. Different communities have their own ways of using written language. The idea which is central to this book is that first experiences with literacy, wherever they take place, can and should be ones which are real, pur-

poseful and meaningful for all children. As Gordon Wells (1986, 222) writes:

We are the meaning makers – every one of us: children, parents, and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature – parents and teachers – the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making.

Reasons for writing

The examples of Chloe's writing which follow begin when Chloe was almost three and end when she was seven in her first year of primary school. They are grouped to illustrate the different uses of writing. There are seven groups in all, each demonstrating the development of Chloe's reasons for writing and her control over and understanding of the writing process. The examples of her writing are arranged more or less chronologically within each of the seven groups.

The chronological sequence is not to impress either the urgency or the necessity of becoming literate at an early age. People can begin to read and write at any stage of life, depending on their life circumstances, that is, their communities' social and cultural practices that involve literacy, as well as their individual personalities and interests. Babies do not all begin talking in exactly the same way. Nor do children begin writing in exactly the same way. But all babies have things in common as they develop speech – and so with writing. For both spoken and written language to flourish, it is crucial that learning takes place in a context which is meaningful for each child.

A: Writing to name and to label

From a very early age, children start to represent their experiences by drawing. Following on from this, they may make attempts at writing. These often appear as scribbles which are in some way connected to the drawing. Meaningful writing for young children is tied into issues of security and emotional expression. First reasons for writing are often very simple naming and labelling activities, which reinforce self-identity and what exists already. Chloe began to write by experimenting with her own name.

In **Figure 1**, Chloe took the scribbling style she used in her drawing to make hair; and used it outside her self-portrait to make writing. She told me she was writing her name. Once she realised that writing is different from drawing, she set out to write, and told me that what she had done was writing.

In **Figure 2**, the marks which Chloe used to make eyebrows, a mouth and eyes began to

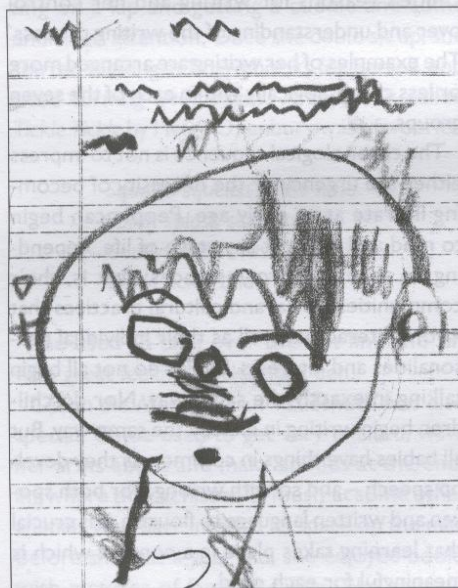


Figure 1: Chloe's first attempt to write her name looks like the marks she has made for hair

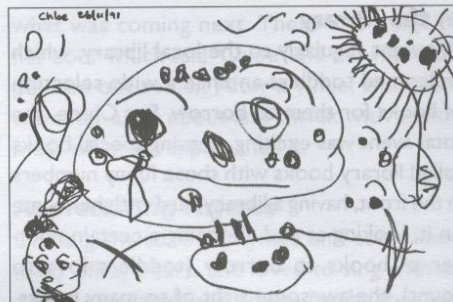


Figure 2: Further early attempts at writing

look like symbols as she repeated them in different places on the page.

Figure 3 is a drawing of Chloe's baby brother. She wrote his name next to the drawing, telling me that it said 'Ivan'. Her word was invented and not in conventional form, and she had made a vital discovery – that we use differently shaped symbols for writing and that these symbols carry specific meaning. Chloe was beginning to develop her concept of print.

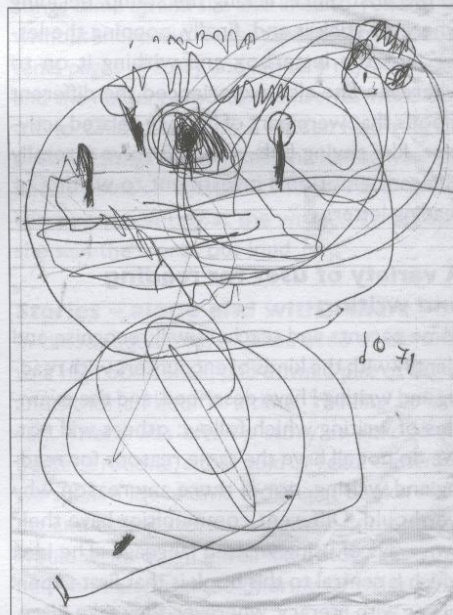


Figure 3: 'Ivan'

Next, Chloe combined her invented symbols with the real letters of her name, though they were back to front (**Figure 4a**). Thereafter, she used only conventional letters for her name, exploring her assumption that for something to be writing, the same symbols need to be repeated (**Figure 4b**).



Figure 4a: Invented symbols and back-to-front letters



Figure 4b: Chloe writes her name



Figure 5: Writing to label content and to communicate purpose (a present, given with love)

Over time, children come to realise that written language, like speech, has certain conventions. For example, children realise that we write from left to right along the page in most European and African languages, that there are spaces between words and that capital and small letters are used selectively. At first, however, their intention is communication: LOVE CHLOE, FOR MY MOM; and self-expression: CHLOE'S MOM (**Figure 5**).

Chloe began writing in different situations, for example, labelling things at home. Before supper, when helping to set the table, she would often label our seats (**Figure 6a**). As her skills increased, she included more information, like the respective ages of her family members, as well as an expression of satisfaction that we were all together (**Figure 6b**)! We can also see that Chloe was developing ideas about punctuation. Although she used a dot instead of an apostrophe, she seemed to

understand the reason for using punctuation in that instance. While her letters by now generally faced the right way, she reversed many of her numbers, possibly because as yet numbers were not that useful to her.

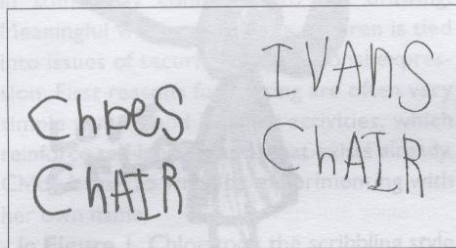


Figure 6a: Labelling places at the table

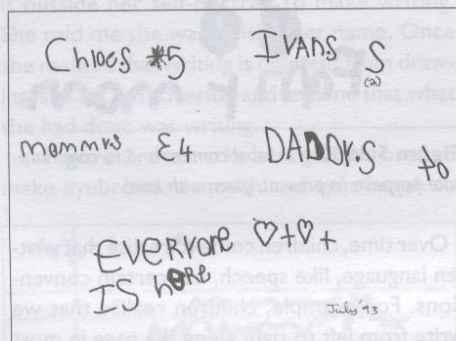


Figure 6b: Including important details

B: Writing to organise daily life

Young children, once motivated, are very keen to behave like writers. Much routine daily writing for the purpose of getting things done involves quite easy, practical activities which inspire young children and which they adapt for their own use.

Chloe enjoyed making lists of people, things, and shopping. A child's own name, a powerful symbol of personal identity, and the names of other important people are usually the first words that children want to read and write. Together Chloe and I wrote down the names of some people who were important to her (Figure 7). Reading and writing can develop

together, and Chloe soon began to recognise and read these words, incidentally beginning to build up a personally significant store of 'sight words'.

Figure 8 shows a different purpose for a list (a shopping list), written alongside me as I wrote mine. Chloe had begun to ask how to spell words sometimes, but also used her own growing knowledge of letter sounds to help herself.

Figure 9 is a general list of things and people important to Chloe and her brother, Ivan. Two years later, Chloe was rereading this list, and rushed off to get a pen, and added the s to

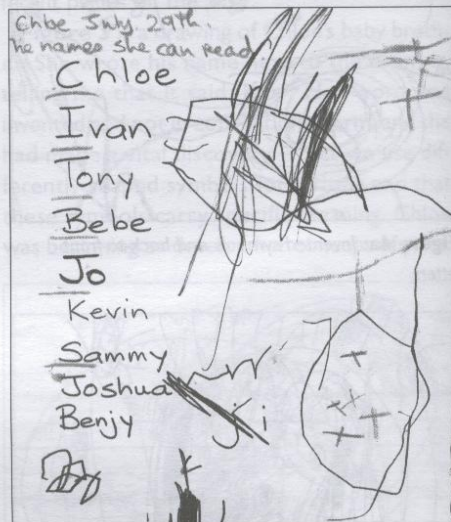


Figure 7: List of important people

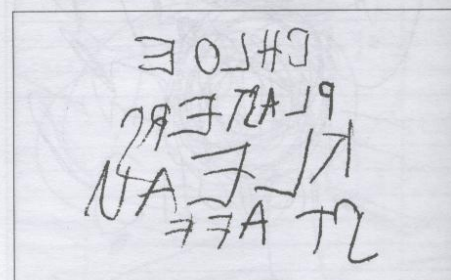


Figure 8: A shopping list – Chloe, plasters, cleaning stuff

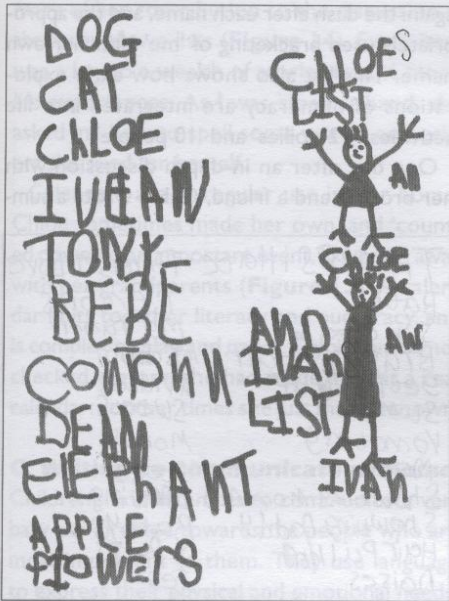


Figure 9: Chloe and Ivan's list of important people and things

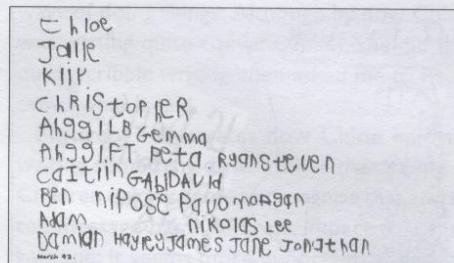


Figure 10: Guest list for Chloe's fifth birthday

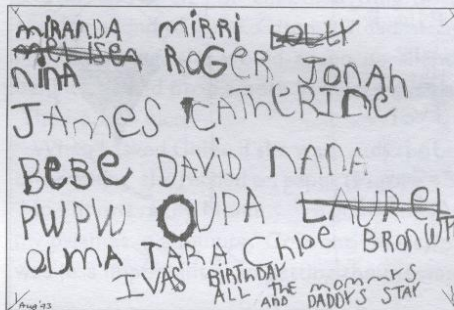


Figure 11: Guest list for Ivan's first birthday

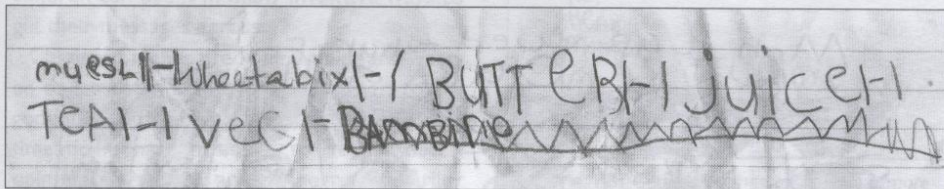


Figure 12: A shopping list

correct her mistake: CHLOES LIST and IVANS LIST. With her extra years of experience, she now knew it was sensible to add the s.

Figures 10 and 11 demonstrate how children's early writing emerges in socially and culturally meaningful ways. They provide further examples of the kinds of lists that feature centrally in some children's lives. Figure 10 shows a list of guests whom Chloe wanted to invite to her fifth birthday. There are two Angelas (ANGGI) and she distinguishes between them by implying their surnames with some key letters: LB for Lightbody and FT for Fulton.

Ivan's first birthday was another occasion for a guest list (Figure 11). Chloe demonstrated her understanding of the social requirements for a baby's birthday by writing that all the parents should stay.

Figure 12 is a co-written shopping list, laid out in a different way, with an invented punctuation system between each item.

A comprehensive party list for her sixth birthday party included her pet rats (of course!) and the eating utensils (Figure 13). The two Angelas (AGLA) now had only the initial of their surname. Chloe explored punctuation

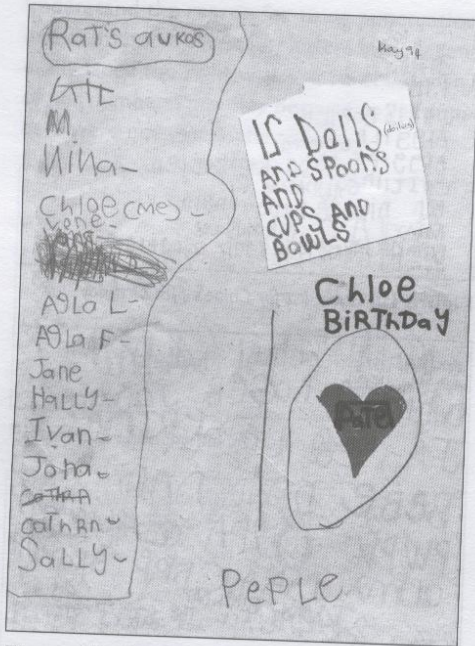


Figure 13: Guest list for Chloe's sixth birthday

again: the dash after each name, and the appropriately used bracketing of 'me' after her own name. This list also shows how early explorations of numeracy are integrated into life activities: '12 doilies' and '10 people'.

One day, after an in-depth discussion with her brother and a friend, Chloe wrote a sum-

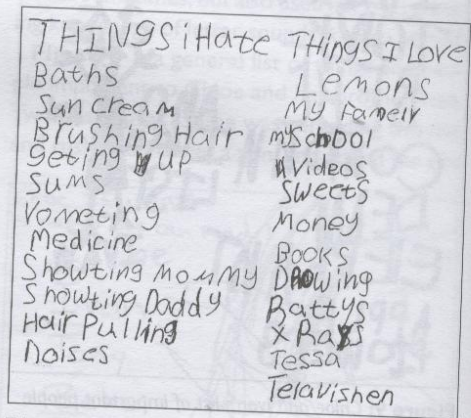


Figure 14: List of likes and dislikes

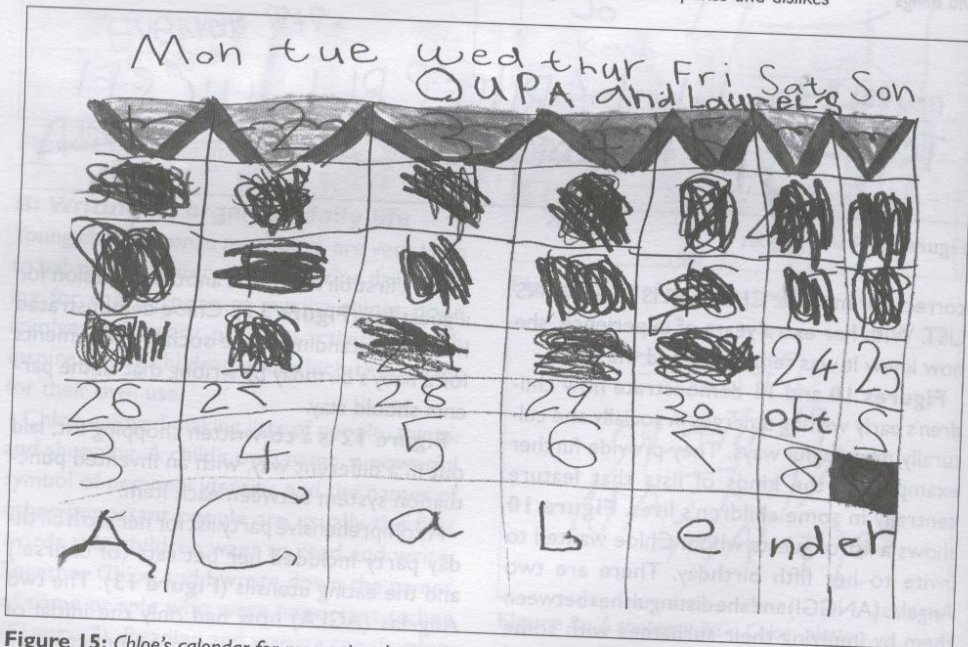


Figure 15: Chloe's calendar for measuring the time preceding an important event

mary of her contribution to the discussion in the form of two lists (Figure 14). Every item was a key to a wealth of stories from Chloe's life experiences. As I was close at hand, she asked me how to spell some words, and others she tried for herself.

Calendars are in regular use in our home. Chloe sometimes made her own, and 'counted down' to an important event, like going away with her grandparents (Figure 15). A calendar knits together literacy and numeracy, and is complex to plan and make. Chloe sometimes checked the one she had made against a real calendar; at other times she just made her own.

C: Writing to communicate at home

Children's first attempts to communicate verbally are directed towards the people who are most important to them. They use language to express their physical and emotional needs, and to deepen relationships. Written forms of communication can enhance this drive, and children can use it in many inventive ways to get their messages across.

Chloe was feeling tired one evening and wanted to leave a message for her father, to say goodnight to him (Figure 16). Children sometimes do not have the energy to use their developing writing abilities and may regress to earlier

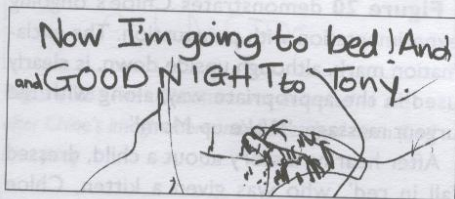


Figure 16: A tired note to Tony

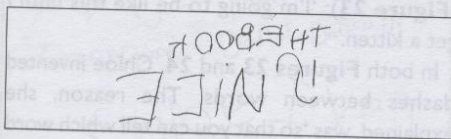


Figure 17: Notes provide a different way to communicate information

ways of doing things. Although by now Chloe was writing quite conventionally, she did this quick scribble writing, then asked me to write down what it said.

Figure 17 illustrates how Chloe enjoyed writing something down rather than saying it. Children quickly come to recognise that a written message has a different impact to a spoken one: it seems more important, and it can be secretive and personal. You can also read it over and over. For Chloe, writing notes became a kind of game. Often, instead of saying something, she would creep up silently behind me and drop a note in my lap such as: 'The book is nice'.

When I asked Chloe if she was ready for bed one evening, she replied on paper (Figure 18): 'No I'm not ready Mommy. I'm going to be in my pyjamas in a minute.' Conventional layout was less important than getting the message

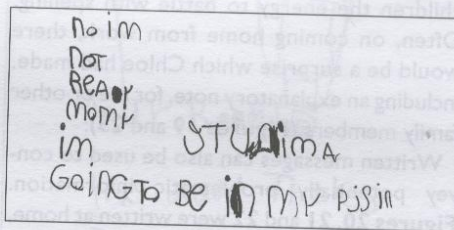


Figure 18: Getting the message across is more important than conventional writing

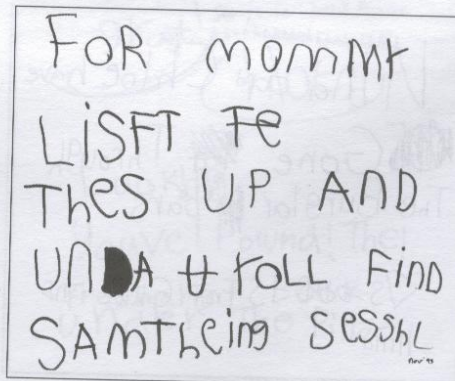


Figure 19: A special note

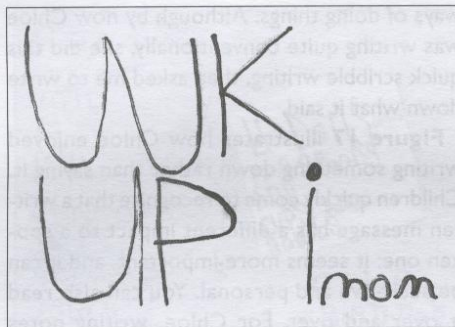


Figure 20: Chloe tries writing a note to get me to hear something I do not want to hear!

written down and, undaunted by the end of the page and by convention, Chloe moved her writing up into the available space so that she could finish, in mirror writing,⁵ what she had to say.

Wanting to say something badly enough gives children the energy to battle with spelling. Often, on coming home from work, there would be a surprise which Chloe had made, including an explanatory note, for me or other family members (**Figures 19 and 25**).

Written messages can also be used to convey potentially problematic information. **Figures 20, 21 and 22** were written at home, and concerned things which Chloe assumed I would deal with better in written than in spo-

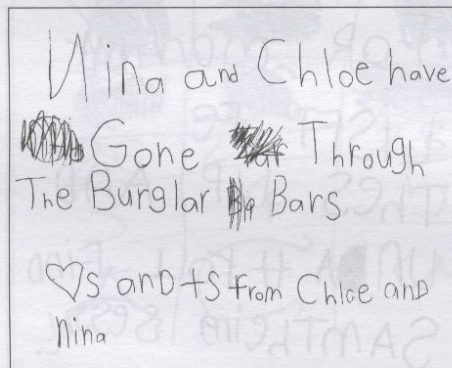


Figure 22: A confession

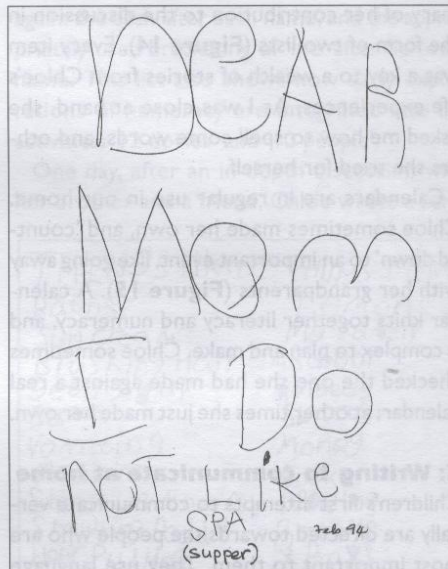


Figure 21: She thinks I do not want to hear that she does not like supper

ken form! **Figure 22** represents two friends doing something 'not allowed'. Nina ran in and out of where the adults were sitting, asking, 'How do you spell "through"? How do you spell "burglar bars"?'. Becoming aware of an unusual silence, the adults went to investigate and discovered this note – and no children!

Figure 20 demonstrates Chloe's ongoing experimentation with punctuation. The exclamation mark, although upside down, is clearly used in the appropriate way, along with the urgent message: 'Wake up Mom!'

After hearing a story about a child, dressed 'all in red', who was given a kitten, Chloe came to me 'all dressed in red', with the note (**Figure 23**): 'I'm going to be like this until I get a kitten.'

In both **Figures 23 and 24**, Chloe invented dashes between words. The reason, she explained, was 'so that you can tell which word is which'. In **Figure 23**, the CE in THCE (this) indicates an awareness of variety and conse-

⁵ Mirror writing refers to writing in the opposite direction to that in which text is conventionally written.

quent experimenting with ways of making the s sound.

In **Figure 25**, the effect of exclamation marks for Chloe is to generate excitement. From her perspective, jelly babies are a great treat, and she plays a game with her father, drawing him into her play with her note.

Notes can also be used as private messages to oneself. I found this reminder (**Figure 26**) under Chloe's pillow one morning.

Writing gives people opportunities for immediate expression even when the person they want to communicate with is absent. Chloe wrote me notes (**Figure 27**) to include me in her game while I was at work and to welcome me home when I returned. The first note was pinned to the front door. The next was in the post box.

On another occasion, having three very important points to make to me stimulated Chloe to write this long note (**Figure 28**).

I M-GOWING
To-be-~~like~~-~~the~~-ute
I get-A-CITte

Figure 23: This ultimatum was delivered to me after Chloe's imagination and desires had been fired by a story

My-Rome-AND
I vans-Rome - DoNot-DoSoB!!!
Chloe Ivan

Figure 24: A 'Do Not Disturb' sign

During the school holidays, this note (**Figure 29**) was a subtle reminder to me that for young children, strict routines can become disturbing, perhaps quite dull and perhaps stressful, and that sometimes they too need to relax!

There is a treasure
Hunt For you dad!
(Tony Kite) It is Swmerc!
on your Bed! i Hope
you Find! ~~it~~
and Happy Hunting!
Love chloe!

To Find The treshaer
you Will Haveta goto.

your Room!

Hay dad! Theres
SumThing on The
Bed! For you
graat. Shh its is Jelly Babies

Chloe!

Look!
Youve! Fownd! The!
Theshare! Look
under The Pillac

Figure 25: Notes as clues in a treasure hunt

D: Communicating further afield
Filling in forms

Children often learn by example and they will naturally seek out opportunities to recreate aspects of adult life. Having watched me and others go about chores which often involved writing in different ways, Chloe began to join in. As a result, she has filled in innumerable forms requesting personal details, an activity which she has always enjoyed. She filled in bank slips, asked me to send off for free samples from magazines, collected tokens from breakfast cereal boxes, and generally filled in her name and address wherever it seemed appropriate! Junk mail, particularly when there was the prospect of winning a competition, also provided Chloe with an incentive to write and gave her another example of why people write.

Figures 30 to 33 are examples of this form filling at different stages of writing. In Figure 30, Chloe used her available knowledge of writing. She knew the letters of her own name and that one needs to repeat the same symbols for writing to be meaningful. The writing

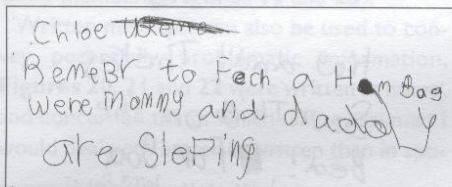


Figure 26: A reminder to eat a humbug while Mummy and Daddy are sleeping

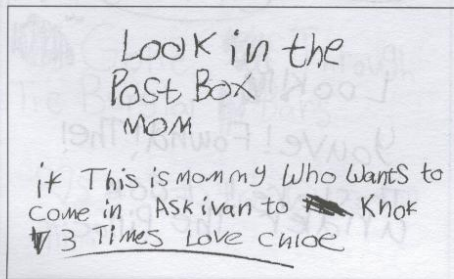


Figure 27: Messages to me in my absence

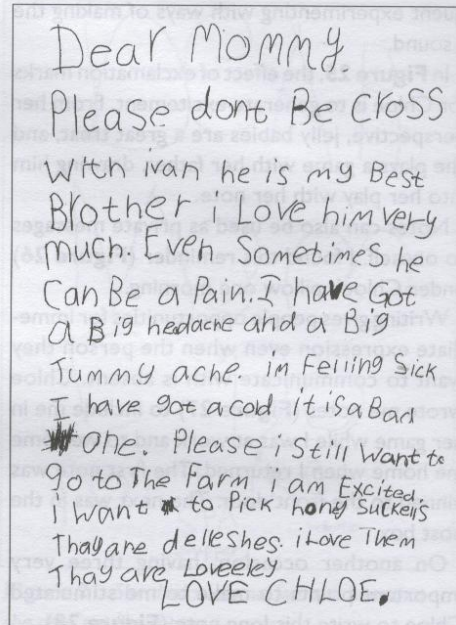


Figure 28: A way to convey important information

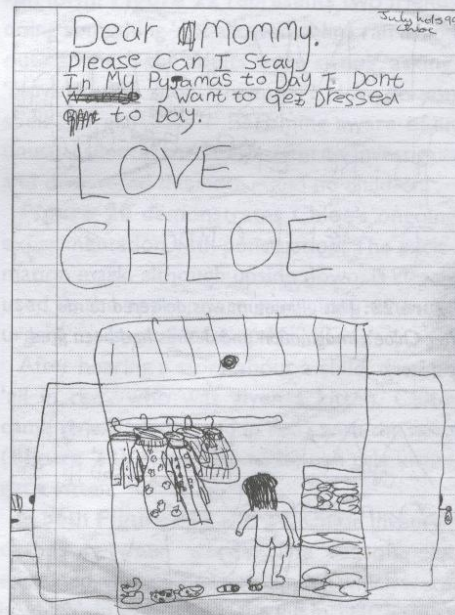


Figure 29: An appeal for flexibility

in **Figure 31** is quite legible, though her use of capital and small letters is totally mixed up. By the time she filled in the form in **Figure 32a**, she managed to complete it in a conventional way, and she also prepared the envelope (**Figure 32b**) for the form. In the next competition she entered, I did the writing for her, so that she could fully express her 'wish for the day' with which the Spur Steak House was enticing her (**Figure 33**).

Correspondence

A wide variety of audiences have received letters from Chloe, among them relatives and friends. She has also written to characters who are part of the cultural practices that her family has shared with her. Such letters to the fairies, Father Christmas and the Easter Bunny are woven into her play and imagination.

Figure 34 is a letter that Chloe wrote to Father Christmas. She knew that we start with D (for Dear) and she ended with LOV[E] CHLOE. To write the string of letters, she made use of her available knowledge about letter formation, sounds, and how we arrange English writing in a horizontal line and work

Figure 32a: Yet another competition

Figure 32b: Addressing the envelope – further incidental writing practice

Figure 30: Inspired by the chance of a free ticket

Figure 31: Entering a competition

Figure 33: I assist Chloe when she needs to express herself more fully

sometimes used the first and last letters for definition as she knew how to relate some sounds to particular letters. She knew the *ing* combination since I had often pointed out such regularities to her as we read or wrote together. She also knew how to spell 'Tony' and 'Chloe'. The middle letters of the rest of the words were selected from letters she knew but did not yet fully understand.

When her father was away, Chloe wrote to him, to express how much she missed him (Figure 37). She tried a question mark (back to front), and one word per line as in a list.

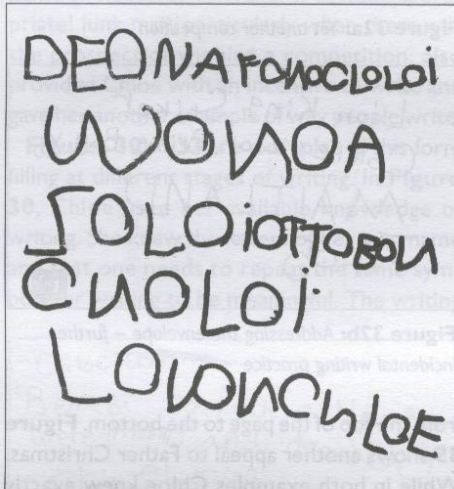


Figure 34: Letter to Father Christmas

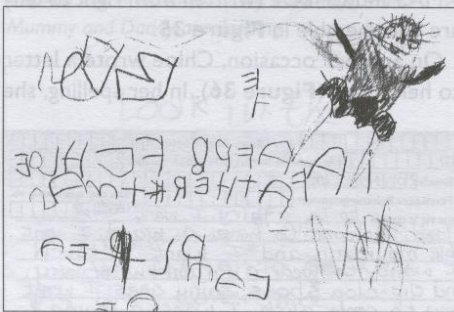


Figure 35: Another letter to Father Christmas, three months later

Letters can be a constant source of inspiration for writing and reading. When children write by themselves, the letter will obviously be less detailed, but when someone else does the writing for them, a lot more detail can be communicated. Children then have the oppor-

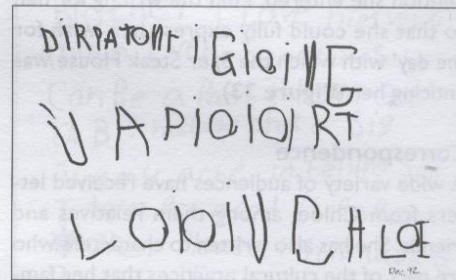


Figure 36: Letter to Tony – 'Dear Tony, I'm giving you a present, Love Chloe'

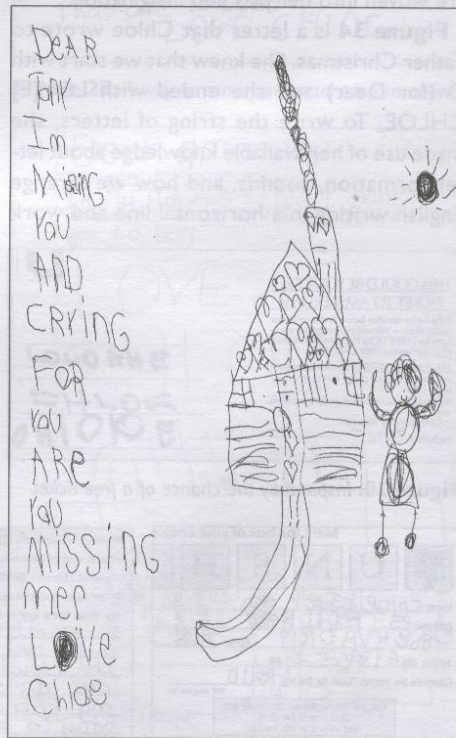


Figure 37: Another letter to Tony

16th January '92

Dear Jasmine,

I hope that you had a nice Christmas. What did you get for Christmas? I fell off my bed and hurt my arm and I had to have a X-ray and now it hurts a lot, and I've got kittens. Do you know what they are called? One is called Scamp and that kitten is a girl. Now do you know what the other one is called? The other one is called Storm and that one is also a girl. And do you know what the other one is called? Dorothy. And that one is also a girl. And the other one is called Watermelon and that one is a boy. And there's another one that is called Spun and there were 6, but one died and that one was called Sand and I was very sad, but it's alright, cos now we've got 5. Please write back to me. I remember that you've got blonde yellow hair but I think that you've grown your hair a bit longer now.

love Chloe

Figure 38: Dictating letters – learning by example

tunity to see what experienced writers do (Figure 38) and they are also able to express in writing their oral language competence.

Chloe loved to write to the fairies and they loved to write back to her! In Figure 39, she wrote to ask a favour (with all the words joined up): 'Dear fairies, please can you pull out the winter grass?' (with all the words joined up): 'Dear fairies, please can you pull out the winter grass?'

DEAR FAIRIES PLEASE CAN YOU PULL
OUT THE WINTER GRASS LOVE CHLOE



Figure 39: A letter of request to the fairies

SAMMY JASHUA BENJY SARFAS
33 RUGBY PLACE
BRIGHTON BN25JB
ENGLAND

Figure 40a: Addressing a Christmas card envelope

Kideo PO Box
LINDON
2104
~~Kideo~~ Kideos

Figure 40b: Copying an address from the television

Having real reasons to write leads children to find out about practicalities, such as noting the address to where a letter should be sent (Figure 40a). Chloe read the address off the television and wrote it down so that she could send a letter to Kideo's Natasha and Mr Chinwag (Figure 40b).

A birthday card for Ivan who was turning three, shows how Chloe, aged five, was by then generally writing from left to right, and most of her letters were facing the right way (Figure 41).

Sometimes an impending disaster for a child can be resolved by writing a letter. Chloe lost her tooth which was supposed to go in her slipper for the tooth mouse or fairy (we weren't sure which). So she wrote a letter instead

(Figure 42) and got a reply too (Figure 43), which clarified that it was a mouse. She was amused by the fact that the mouse could not spell her name!

Using a typewriter or computer (by themselves or by dictating what they want to say to someone) allows young children relief from the physical effort of writing, allowing more energy for composing the text (Figures 44 and 45).

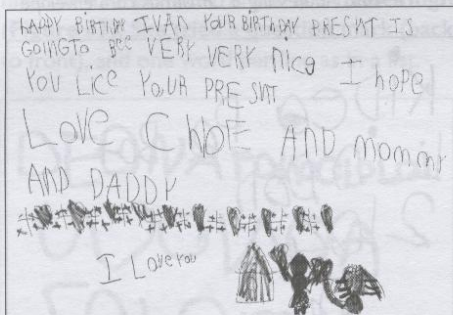


Figure 41: A birthday card for Ivan

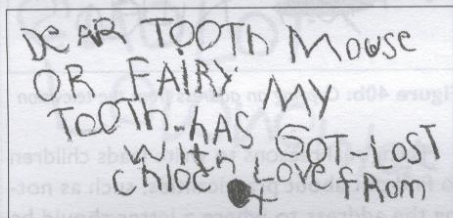


Figure 42: Letter to the tooth mouse

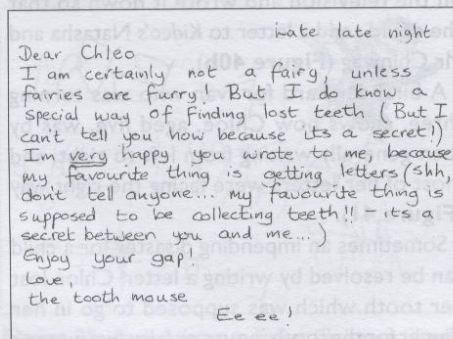


Figure 43: Letter from the tooth mouse

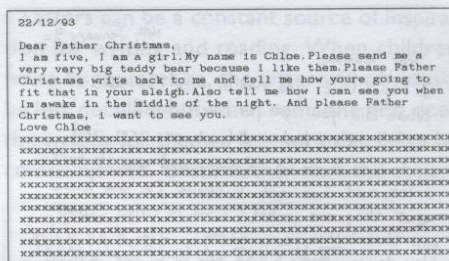


Figure 44: Using a typewriter

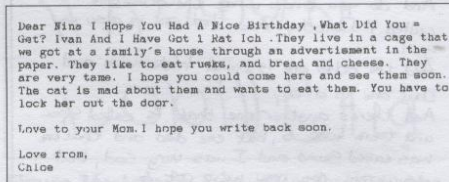


Figure 45: Another typed letter, three months later

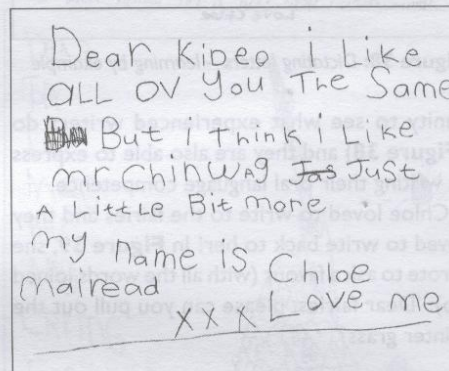


Figure 46: Writing without formal instruction

Despite never having had any formal handwriting instruction, Chloe developed her writing into a completely legible and conventional form before formal schooling (Figure 46). For really special occasions, she wrote in a particularly decorative way (Figure 47).

Designing her own birthday party invitation (Figure 48) provided another incentive to write. This task also involved some problem solving about what information to include to ensure that guests actually arrived!

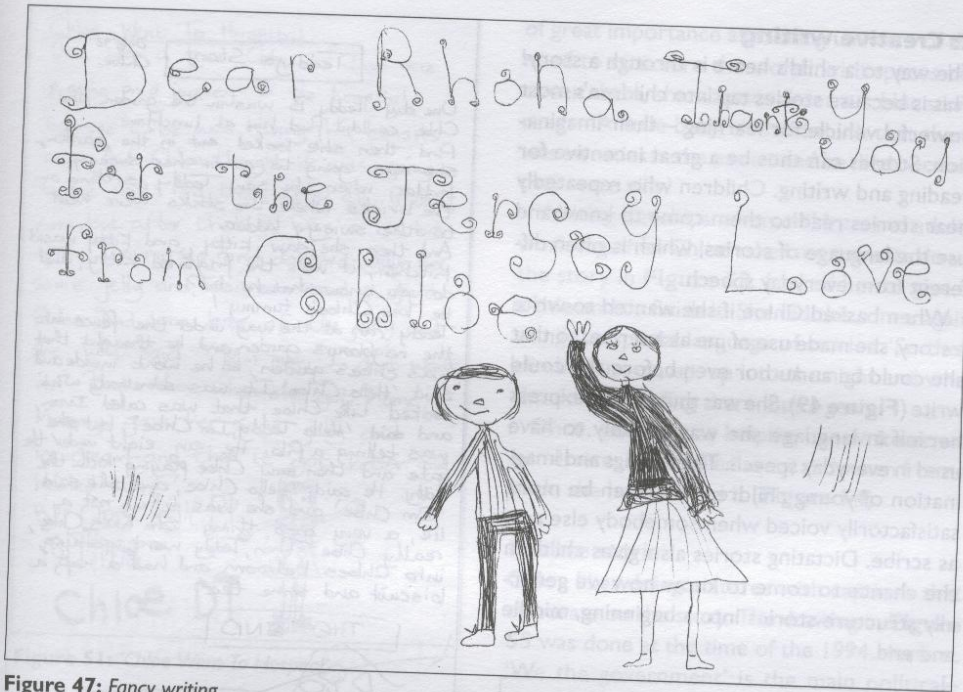


Figure 47: Fancy writing

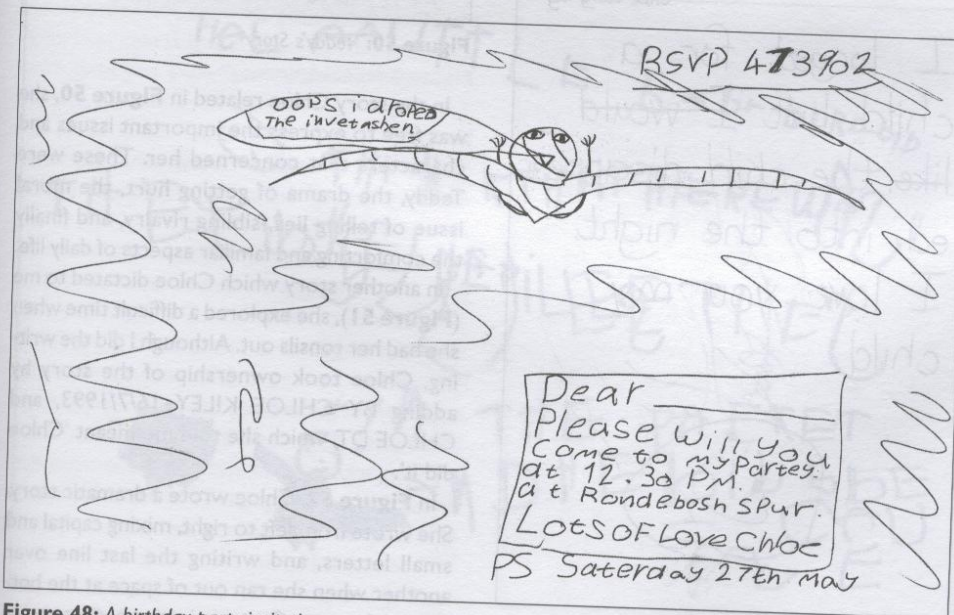


Figure 48: A birthday party invitation

E: Creative writing

The way to a child's heart is through a story! This is because stories tap into children's most powerful vehicle for learning – their imagination. Stories can thus be a great incentive for reading and writing. Children who repeatedly hear stories read to them come to know and use the language of stories, which is often different from everyday speech.

When I asked Chloe if she wanted to write a story, she made use of me as a scribe, so that she could be an author even before she could write (Figure 49). She was thus able to express herself in language she was unlikely to have used in everyday speech. The feelings and imagination of young children can often be more satisfactorily voiced when somebody else acts as scribe. Dictating stories also gives children the chance to come to know how we generally structure stories into a beginning, middle and end.

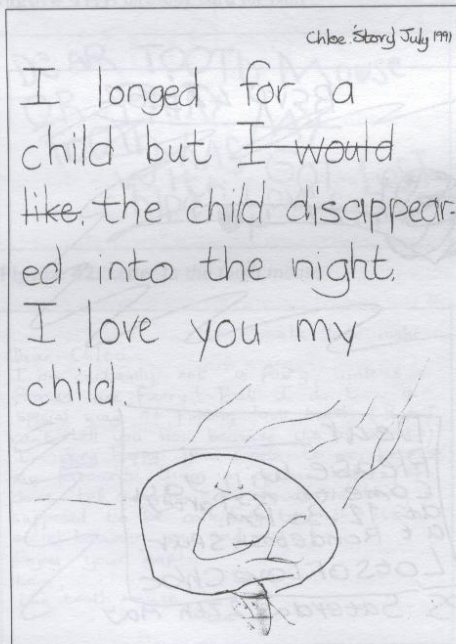


Figure 49: Chloe's first story

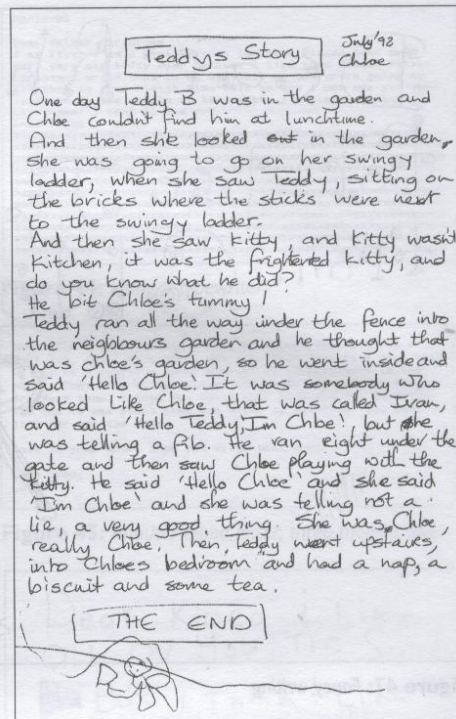


Figure 50: 'Teddy's Story'

In the story Chloe related in Figure 50, she was free to express the important issues and characters that concerned her. These were Teddy, the drama of getting hurt, the moral issue of telling lies, sibling rivalry, and finally the comforting and familiar aspects of daily life.

In another story which Chloe dictated to me (Figure 51), she explored a difficult time when she had her tonsils out. Although I did the writing, Chloe took ownership of the story by adding BY CHLOE KILEY 16/7/1993, and CHLOE DT, which she told me meant 'Chloe did it'.

In Figure 52, Chloe wrote a dramatic story. She wrote from left to right, mixing capital and small letters, and writing the last line over another when she ran out of space at the bottom of the page. Communicating her story was

Chloe Went To Hospital
 Once upon a time Chbe and Ivan were
 p going on a journey to the hospital,
 because Chbe was having her tonsils
 out. And Chloe thought it was going
 to be sore. And then, after all, it wasn't
 sore, but after that it was a bit bit
 sore. The nurses and doctors gave her
 some jelly and ice-cream and custard.
 Chloe had one bite of the jelly and
 she just said 'Mm mm, I dont want
 it.' But then when she got home,
 Mommy gave her some jelly and
 ice-cream and then it got better and
 healed up.
 BY chloe KIEPP
 16/7/1993
 Chloe DT




Figure 51: 'Chloe Went To Hospital'

of great importance and, being unaware of the need to structure the words with spaces between them, she was not deterred. Her story reads: 'A little baby bird did think that there was sweeties in the packet and he died because they were pills.'

Writing develops when children and adults work together. Chloe asked me to write down the story in **Figure 53**. I asked her to give it a title and to finish it. She did this, once again using the special language of stories: 'So they climbed up, up, up, up into the night and who should be standing there, but a genie.'

Once, when I was helping her write down her dream, I was called away, and when I came back, she had finished it (**Figure 54**).

Picture stories

Chloe likes doing pictures with captions that elaborate on the story. The drawing in **Figure 55** was done at the time of the 1994 election. 'We the government' is the main political-

A slightly later
 HEL AALITTLE BABY BIRD DID
 THINK THAT THERE WAS
 SWEETIES IN THE PACKET
 AND HE DIED BECAUSE
 THEY WERE PILLS




Figure 52: A cautionary tale

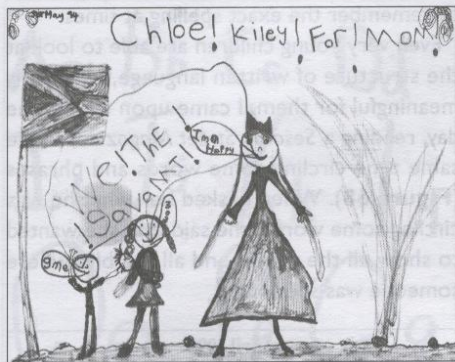


Figure 55: 'We the government'

pleted to her satisfaction. At this stage, Chloe was not aware that the symbols need to face the same way, nor was she able to form them all correctly.

In Figure 61, we see Chloe's work at a phase where everything she wrote was reversed into perfect mirror writing. Because she didn't yet see the need for spaces between words, the writing is hard to read.

A slightly later alphabet (Figure 62) and an even later one (Figure 63) show her progress with time and experience. As Chloe finished writing out the alphabet shown in Figure 63 for her brother, she noticed her z was back to front, and informed her brother, 'Don't worry about the z, it's only a little mistake.'

Spelling

As the physical act of writing became easier, Chloe focused more on how to spell. Figure 64 shows two attempts at trying to spell the word 'kitchen'. By this time, Chloe was aware of the *ch* letter combination: the *ch* sound in kitchen, different from the *ch* in Chloe and the *ch* in Bloch, her middle name. Examples like these present a challenge to young children. If they are given support and encouragement by those around them who are literate, they are able through trial and error to sort out and gain control over extremely complicated



Figure 56: 'Telling On!'



Figure 57: A joke book

sound systems in language. This observation leads one to question the value of practices in schools where teachers sift through and simplify what they present to children.

Figures 65 and 66 show further attempts that Chloe made at spelling. Chloe continued to try out spellings to see if she could get a word to 'look' right (Figure 67). She often noticed when it did not look right, and commented on this, but she was probably unable

to remember the exact spelling at times.

Even very young children are able to look at the structure of written language, when it is meaningful for them. I came upon Chloe one day, reading a *Sesame Street Magazine*, at the same time circling some words and phrases (Figure 68). When I asked her why she was circling some words, she said that she wanted to show all the names and all the bits where someone was speaking.

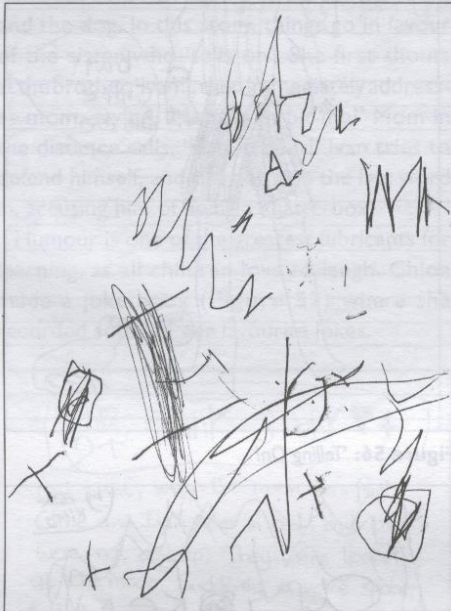


Figure 58: Working at writing

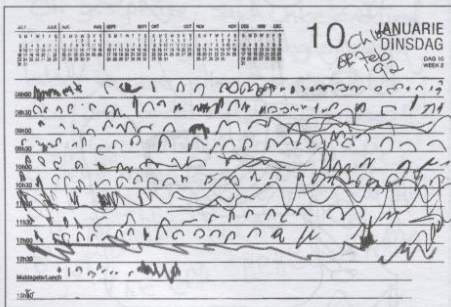


Figure 59: Working at writing, seven months later

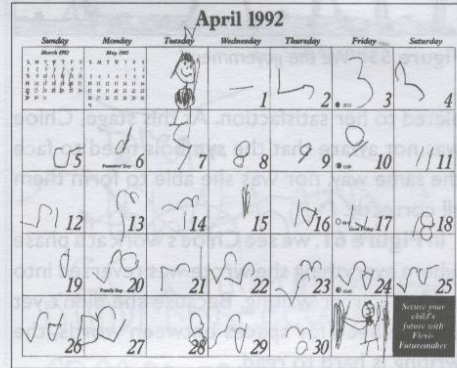


Figure 60: Working at numbers

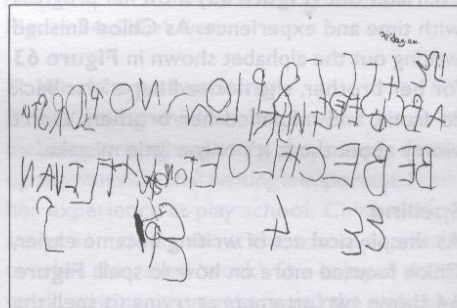


Figure 61: Mirror writing: numbers 1-10, the alphabet and her family's names and ages

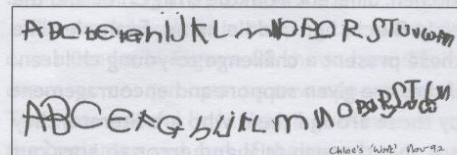


Figure 62: Further work on the alphabet

Aa Bb Cc Dd
 Ii Jj Kk Ll
 Oo Pp Qq
 Uu Vv Ww

Figure 63: Even further developments

gicnd opm
 no jodis
 (OTO)

Figure 64: Trying to spell 'kitchen'

BAFIY	VOWY 1st try
BAFIY	VERY - 3 gave
BAFIY	math math 1st try
BAFIY	MUCH
BAFIY	
BAFIY	

Figure 65: Chloe works at the word 'butterfly' and gets 'BAFIY'

Figure 66: After attempting to write the words 'very' and 'much', she asked for and was given the correct spelling

Yonget APPE Juose
 youn
 ? yoeget
 yonget
 - - -
 James

Figure 67: Spellings for a menu

Telly watched Herry and his family open their gifts. He could hardly wait to see what they thought of them. He was trembling with excitement!

Herry and his family thanked Telly very much for their presents. But Telly had learned something special that didn't worry him at all. "You were right, Herry," he said. "It's fun to be given presents. But it's even better giving them to other people!"

Herry unwrapped some crayons and was very pleased. So was Telly, because his gift had made Herry happy.

THE END

Figure 68: Beginning to notice the structure of language

G: Writing in play

Nina, a good friend of Chloe's, slept over for the night. Sleeping arrangements, once decided, became a game for some time, with the children drawing and labelling pictures (Figure 69) and then finding different reasons to obey or disobey the written instructions.

The 'shop' game was developed over some months. There were many different kinds of shops: 'mixture of things' shops, clothes shops, book shops, food shops, shoe shops and toy shops. Through the process, Chloe came to

some useful understandings about numeracy and about the psychology of selling. At first, though she mostly got her numbers to face the right way, she overpriced the goods. She had a shop, then a sale, and then a cheap sale (Figures 70 to 72).

Arriving home from work, some parents are treated to a 'show'. This script from a ghost play involves two parts, one for a child and one for a ghost. The script illustrates vividly the sheer pleasure that writing can give to young children (Figure 73).

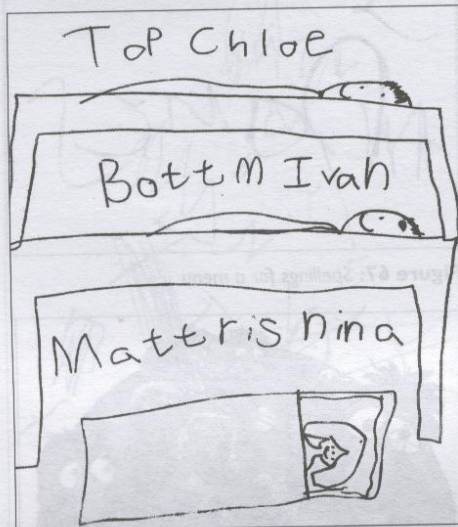


Figure 69: An instruction for sleeping arrangements

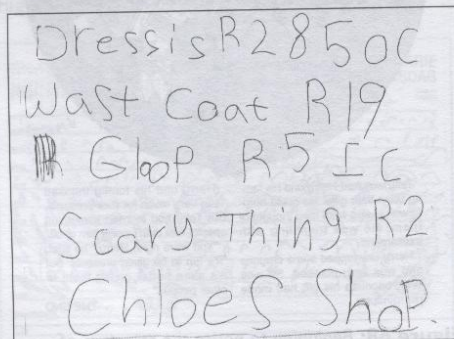


Figure 70: Chloe's shop game

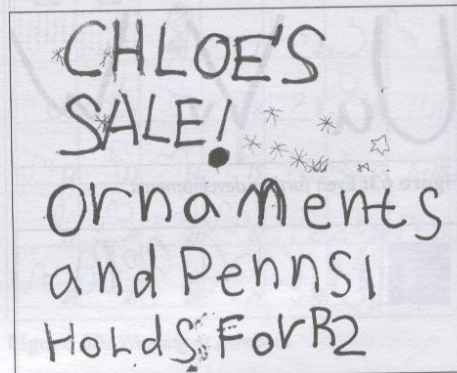


Figure 71: Her sale

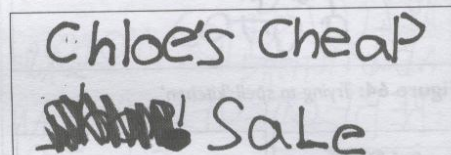


Figure 72: Her cheap sale

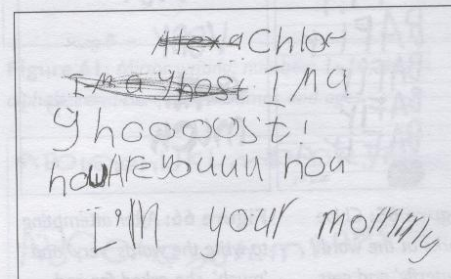
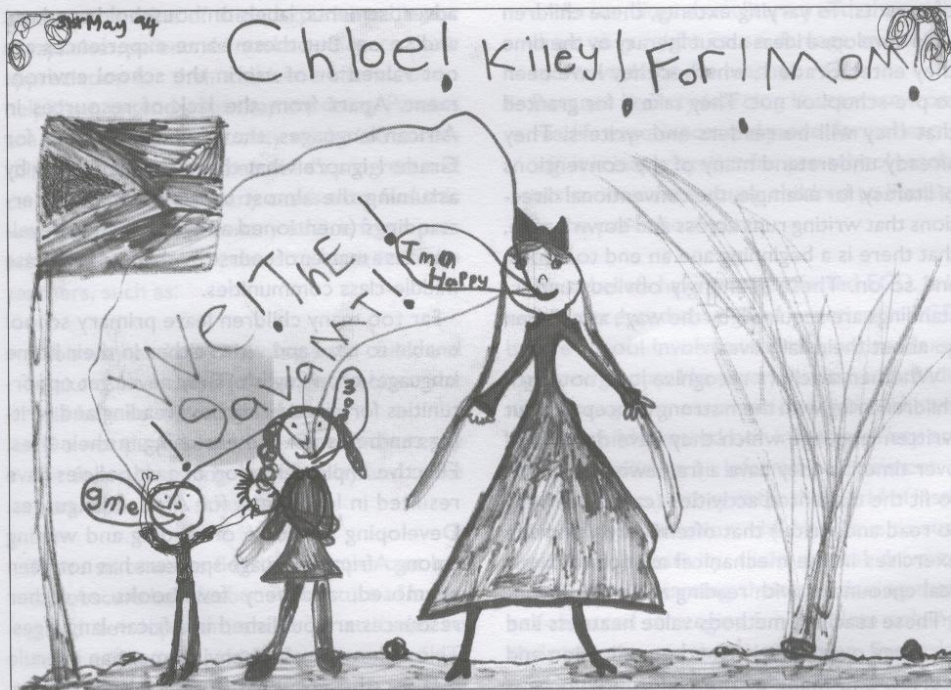


Figure 73: Script for ghost play

3 • Young children reading and writing in South Africa

Chapter 3 focuses on the broader South African situation and suggests ways of approaching literacy development involving children, their families and their teachers. It gives ideas for teachers and parents to support young children's writing in the classroom and at home.



One story among many

Chloe's attempts at writing give us a picture of one particular child's engagements with literacy within the social and cultural web of her life.

In school, there are many methods used for teaching reading and writing. Most methods succeed for children like Chloe, whose expectations of reading and writing are similar to those promoted by the schools they attend. Chloe is in a similar position to many other children from middle-class homes who engage frequently with adults and other more experienced children who use written language in a variety of ways. At school, teachers and children share a common language and understandings about their reasons for using written language.

Teacher expectations generally match those of parents. To varying extents, these children have developed ideas about literacy by the time they enter Grade 1, whether they have been to pre-school or not. They take it for granted that they will be readers and writers. They already understand many of the conventions of literacy, for example, the conventional directions that writing runs across and down a page, that there is a beginning and an end to books, and so on. These seemingly obvious understandings are acquired 'by the way', as children go about their daily lives.

Whether teachers recognise it or not, such children bring with them strong concepts about written language which they have developed over time. So they have a framework in which to fit the disjointed activities (called 'learning to read and write') that often merely provide exercises in the mechanical aspects of their real encounters with reading and writing.

These teaching methods value neatness and accuracy over creativity, communication and stories, and many of the children who have already developed concepts about written language are not actually inspired to become

ardent readers and writers. They usually do, however, come to achieve the basic level of literacy required from them by the school system.

However, many children throughout the world do not even achieve this.

Most young South African children, along with millions of others around the world, live in multilingual homes and communities where oral language is used far more than written language. Reading and writing are used in different ways from the generally middle-class 'norm' described above. Their knowledge and considerable multilingual skills are not valued in the school curriculum, nor are their expectations and understandings of written language. Many children have experience of listening to stories and seeing environmental print, the print of the built environment: road signs, advertisements, labels on household products and so on. But these home experiences are not valued or of use in the school environment. Apart from the lack of resources in African languages, the teaching methods for Grade 1 ignore what these children know by assuming the almost invisible set of understandings (mentioned above) which is developed as a matter of course by children in literate middle-class communities.

Far too many children leave primary school unable to read and write either in their home language⁶ or in English. They never get opportunities for discovering how reading and writing can be useful and enriching in their lives. Effective implementation of past policies have resulted in low status for African languages. Developing a culture of reading and writing among African-language speakers has not been promoted, and very few books or other resources are published in African languages. This makes the wider environment an infertile one for the growth of reading and writing. Inappropriate teaching approaches add significantly to an already difficult situation. At a

policy level, there are many positive signs for addressing this situation. South Africa's constitution (1996) embraces multilingualism, and this implies the development of African languages. Such policies should be accompanied by changes on the ground.

Exploring further

Families want the best for their children and know, to be successful in school and beyond, it is crucial to get to grips with literacy.

Parents have often asked me what I did with Chloe to 'get her' reading and writing. They say that they wish that they could help their child who is very keen to read and write, but they do not really know what to do. Often their children are having many varied and worthwhile literacy-related experiences. However, because the value of these experiences is not always clear, parents do not know how to show appreciation for their children's efforts, or to help them extend what they are doing. Parents are often anxious that they might 'do something' that will hinder their child's progress and cause confusion. In many cases they feel this way because of cautionary advice from pre-school or primary teachers to leave it to the teachers, such as:

- 'You may end up confusing your child, and make the teacher's job harder, because she will have to undo bad habits.'
- 'Do not push your child. She is not ready for formal learning. Let her play and make sure that she is school-ready.'

These statements flow from important but often obscure beliefs about the nature of learning and development, and from attitudes to reading and writing which I have touched on. I will explore these further because of their substantial influence on both teacher education and development, and on the involvement

of families and the community in education.

The following are commonly believed:

- Young children are not able to arrange and control their own written language learning. Therefore teachers have to choose, arrange and simplify what is to be learned, rather than finding out what children already know about literacy and 'bring' with them into the classroom situation. The implication here is that the children's own experience and their ability to learn from it cannot be valued or trusted.
- There are specific methods to teach reading and writing correctly, and only an expert knows these. Parents cannot help because they have not had the specialised training and thus do not have the expertise.
- If parents who are not experts share their understandings about literacy with their children, they might cause damage and make more work for the teacher.
- Because literacy learning is separate from real life experiences and part of formal learning, it is inappropriate for pre-school teachers to introduce young children to literacy in the pre-school years.

These beliefs have greatly affected ECD. It is widely accepted that good practice in ECD before school involves informal, active learning through play. However, the 'school-readiness' programmes mentioned before are neither child-centred nor informal. They are formal activities in an informal environment.

In many ways, as they enter the world of institutionalised education, children have to suspend their creativity, their natural drive to integrate their learning, their questioning, their self-directed strategies for problem solving, their initiative and their imagination. Every day in our schools, opportunities for developing the great learning powers which young children have are diluted or lost.

Furthermore, at a certain level, both parents and children are forced to take a significant step backwards. Parents are their children's first teachers. They intuitively help babies in every possible way to develop oral language. They trust in their babies' ability to learn. They marvel at the ease with which babies and young children select and memorise at an astonishing rate a vast vocabulary, often in more than one language, as they become speakers. Sooner or later, this relationship gets damaged or severed when children go to pre-school or to primary school. Parents and children lose confidence in their teaching-learning partnership as the 'system' fails to recognise these attributes. Sadly, many parents become insecure about the significance of their role in their children's learning.

Making changes

There is not necessarily a 'right' age for learning how to read and write. Becoming literate begins when a child or adult engages with written language in socially meaningful ways. There is no good reason why this should not be initiated with young children at home or at pre-school. I have discussed how most pre-school teachers are reluctant to welcome literacy into their classes or to encourage play with literacy. Such teachers need to update their information. With new insights into literacy development, they can make sure that, rather than inadvertently preventing young children from exploring written language, they find ways to weave the different literacies from 'out there' into play and other activities in classrooms.

Most teachers in South Africa work with very large classes and inadequate resources. It may at first sound unrealistic to suggest using an approach which starts with individual children, trying to find out how literacy fits into their lives and working with ways to develop and extend this. But if we seriously want to

give all children the chance to become literate, rather than taking short cuts which will prove expensive in the long term, teachers have to meet the challenge.

A key to this involves a change in attitude towards parents and community involvement in education. Space needs to be found for family members and the wider community to share in the responsibility of helping children with literacy, both inside and outside the classroom. Parents and teachers need to recognise and act on the fact that communities provide invaluable resources for reading and writing. They generate reading material in the different languages spoken by the children, reasons for writing and people who can tell and read stories.

The change needs to go further, however, to a flexibility towards the requirements of literacy learners of all ages. While the focus of this book is on young children's literacy, it is clear that it is within families and communities that real engagements with written language occur. Literacy programmes can be developed with the needs of family members in mind, irrespective of age. Rather than isolating generations from each other, family literacy programmes can focus on the common concerns of adults and children.

Suggestions for encouraging meaningful literacy

Children gradually come to understand the conventions of written language as they compare and adjust their own writing to that of more experienced writers. In the same way as toddlers come to refine their speech so that they are better able to make themselves understood, children realise that they need to write conventionally for others to read what they have written.

In-depth research into young children's writing progression led Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982, 277) to note that

[w]e must let children write, even in a writing system different from the alphabetic one; we must let them write, not so they invent their own idiosyncratic system, but so they discover that their system is not the conventional one, and in this way find valid reasons to substitute their own hypotheses with our conventional ones.

This takes many encounters with different uses and forms of written language, and involves reading and writing as well as talk about reading and writing. Children need to talk about print with those who are more experienced, thereby learning which conventions are used in which contexts.

A flexible approach

Young children begin to write when:

- They realise that they can use writing to achieve something they want to achieve.
- They are given opportunities to write for real reasons in the language or languages they feel 'at home' with.
- Their attempts are recognised as worthwhile by the important people in their lives.
- They interact with more experienced writers who help them or who act as models and mentors, like the way apprentices learn their trade from skilled workers.

The rules need not be fixed when children write purposefully because:

- Sometimes the child writes.
- Sometimes the experienced writer writes down what the child says.
- Sometimes they co-write something – like a list, story or letter.
- Sometimes the child tries the spelling alone.
- Sometimes the child asks how to spell a word.
- Sometimes the child initiates something, and

asks for assistance.

- Sometimes the experienced writer makes a suggestion for writing something.

Creating a print-rich environment

While the suggestions that follow are addressed to teachers in classrooms, they have value for home situations as well.

To begin to weave literacy into daily classroom life, create an appropriate print-rich environment at school. Start by thinking of the ways you use reading and writing in your life and which language or languages you use. Chat with the children and their families about how reading and writing are useful for them, and which languages they use in different situations.

For instance, families may read religious texts, newspapers, magazines, books, train timetables, recipes, leaflets, street signs or other environmental print. They may write letters, notes, shopping lists, and fill in bank forms. They may do all of these things, some of them, or none of them. They may have reasons for reading and writing which you have not thought of before. Children may have experienced some print in one language, and some in another. They might go to the library regularly, or might never have been into one. Gathering this kind of information helps you to begin with what your learners know and bring to the class, and it also helps to make parents feel welcomed. In this way, both home and community life are linked with the school, and parents' literacy with that of their children. It also gives you information about how to extend the literacy-related understandings children bring to class and how you can help them explore these understandings in their play.

Provide tools for writing, such as pencils and paper, and different reading materials. These can include newspapers, magazines, junk mail (such as the leaflets from supermarkets with pictures of different groceries and their prices), recipes, competition entry forms, train time-

tables and story books.

Invite parents to spend time in the classroom, working alongside you with the children. Parents who speak, read or write more than one language may be able to help with literacy in more than one language (biliteracy and multiliteracy). They can interpret and translate, or write stories and rhymes in another language. Make it clear to parents who cannot read and write that they are not redundant – oral language feeds written language. Telling stories and talking about stories and other projects has immense educational value.

Ask parents and children to collect and bring in grocery packaging to use in play. Play with the children. Children learn and develop more when adults interact with them than when they are just given something to play with and then left alone. Offer ideas to extend what the children are doing in their play. If, for example, the children are pretending that they are at the hospital, supply paper and pencil and information about how to write a prescription for medicine. In this way, you will be a model for them to learn from and they will discover a different reason for reading and writing.

Emergent writing is normal

A child may write something which you cannot read, either because the letter formation is not conventional or because it is a string of letters which do not make sense. She may ask, 'What does it say?' or 'What did I write?' Judge the situation for yourself. Try and work out what it is that the child is trying to achieve in the particular context. If, for example, you know she is writing a letter to a real person, you can write down what she is saying under what she has written. If she is playing, make up something 'letter-like' and read it aloud. If she knows something about the relationship of letters to their sounds, and has written a string of disconnected letters, like *ooipogloofop*, you could read that out and you might find that

this stimulates a very amusing game. Sometimes children tell you what 'it' says; other times they are satisfied with telling you that it is 'just writing'.

As children concentrate their energies in self-expression and communicating something meaningful, the physical skill and muscular co-ordination needed to form the distinct symbols of conventional writing develop almost incidentally. Gradually, unconventional symbols are replaced by conventional writing.

Mirror writing and letter reversal

It is useful to remind ourselves (and to share this information with children) that there are different ways of positioning written language. One system of Japanese writing, for instance, moves from right to left. So does Arabic and Hebrew writing. Also think for a moment about the symbols *b*, *p*, *d* and *q* (or *n* and *u*). The same symbol is used for different letters. Their difference lies only in the way that each letter is placed in relation to other letters on the page. Often parents and teachers worry about this 'problem' of reversals and fear that when children write letters back to front this might be an early sign of dyslexia. The remedial measures often involve repetitious exercise of the 'faulty' letters in isolation and do not help the child to experience the relationship between letters. It can also harm self-esteem, motivation and confidence, and distract children from trying to make sense in their writing.

Some children take longer than others to recognise the significance of writing conventions. They may reverse letters at first, and they sometimes also write from right to left when the conventional system works from left to right. With experience and time they realise that letters and words are always positioned in one way and in a specific relation to each other. For many children this may be the first time they have to organise their actions in this way. Few, if any other, experiences in their lives

thus far will have had similar strictures imposed on them! It is only with use, and in an understandable context, that children become 'at home' with writing.

For a long time Chloe did perfect mirror writing. She is left-handed and was writing from right to left. While every now and then I would point out to her that people would be able to understand what she was writing better if she wrote from left to right, mostly I left her to write the way she felt comfortable. I felt sure that with time, she would come to write conventionally – and she did.

Punctuation is part of the process

Punctuation helps readers to make sense of a piece of text. If you are a writer, you are also a reader, and punctuation assists you to express your intention and makes what you have written easier to read.

Punctuation also brings writing to life for children. They are excited when they realise that written language 'talks' and can be loud and firm or soft and gentle, so that 'Please come here!' is very different from 'Please, come here ...'.

You do not need to wait for a particular time to begin pointing out how punctuation functions in reading or writing. Gradually, as children work out the complexities of written language in their encounters with print, they test and refine their ideas about how to use punctuation. Often they may do something totally unconventional, such as inventing new symbols (like the dashes between words in **Figures 23** and **24**), or forming a punctuation mark incorrectly (like the upside-down exclamation mark in **Figure 20**). Adults can take such activity as signs of creativity and progress. The children are busy working out for themselves what punctuation is all about, rather than just repeating what they have been shown.

Finally

All young children need regular opportunities to use written language in ways that make sense to them. Children want to be readers and writers for real reasons, interacting with both accomplished readers and writers and those less experienced than themselves. They also need to talk and reflect with older children and adults about their own reasons for writing – their own stories and stories they have heard, in the languages which best express what they feel and mean.

Children need to have their questions about print answered. Many adults try to provide appropriate answers to the questions that children ask in other areas of their lives, but when their questions concern literacy, it is taken that they need instruction, whereas what they need are answers!

None of this has to do with 'pre-skills', any more than first words or first steps are 'pre-talking' or 'pre-walking'. It is all part of a process which contributes to giving people various ways to express themselves, and to communicate their needs, desires and ideas, both to themselves and to others.

References

Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996.

Ferreiro, E & Teberosky, A. 1982. *Literacy Before Schooling*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Freeman, Y S & Freeman, D E. 1992. *Whole Language For Second Language Learners*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Wells, G. 1987. *The Meaning Makers*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Oxenbury, H. 1987. *Tickle Tickle*. London: Walker Brooks.

Wildsmith, B. 1982. *Cat On The Mat*. London: Oxford University Press.

Emergent writing is normal

A child may write something which you cannot read, either because the letter formation is not conventional or because it is a string of letters which do not make sense. She may ask, 'What does it say?' or 'What did I write?' Judge the situation for yourself. Try and work out what it is that the child is trying to achieve in the particular context. If, for example, you know she is writing a letter to a real person, you can write down what she is saying under what she has written. If she is playing make up something 'letter-like' and read it aloud, if she knows something about the relationship of letters to their sounds, and has written a string of disconnected letters, like *noyofopofap*, you could read that out and you might find that

Suggested further readings

Bissex, Glenda L. 1980. *GNYS at Work: A Child Learns To Write And Read*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

A detailed exploration by a mother/researcher of her son's writing development. Her ideas about the teacher within each child are particularly useful to help teachers trust in children's own learning abilities.

Taylor, Denny. 1983. *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning To Read And Write*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

This book pioneered research into the varied literacy events and practices within the lives of middle-class American families.

Taylor, Denny & Dorsey-Gaines, Catherine. 1988. *Growing Up Literate*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Research exploring the literacy practices within American inner-city working-class families, challenging the myth that children from poor families have no relevant experiences with written language prior to school entry.

Hall, Nigel. 1989. *Writing With Reason*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

A book which challenges educators to enable children to become authors, writing for real purposes from the very beginning.

Paley, Vivian Gussin. 1981. *Walley's Stories*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

This is one of several extremely valuable books written by a teacher of young children who uses her pupils' own stories as the central component of the curriculum.

Chloe's Story **First steps into literacy**

Chloe's Story: First steps into literacy will interest teachers and teacher educators, parents, and others who wish to deepen their understanding of early learning and development.

The premise of the book is that literacy is directly related to the social purposes for which one wishes to read and write. Children's first experiences with literacy should be real, purposeful and meaningful to them. All children have a strong drive to communicate, play and solve problems and, with appropriate support, they are able to direct and control their own learning. It is the task of parents, teachers and others to provide this support.

The reader follows the path of a child as she begins to use writing to communicate, first with the members of her immediate family and then with the wider community. Examples of her spontaneous writings are included in the text to illustrate the different uses writing can have for a child. The examples are accompanied by commentary explaining their context and they show the development of the child's control over and understanding of the writing process.

The author advocates a whole-language approach, in which literacy is not regarded as an issue separate from the acquisition of speech, but is woven into the normal life of the child. Children are encouraged to try out various strategies, as they do when learning to speak, and are assisted by parents, teachers and others in using writing to express what is meaningful to them. In this way, children come to recognise and value the power reading and writing have for them in their lives – an approach, it is hoped, that will ultimately contribute to the literacy of all.



Juta
1853

ISBN 0-7021-4344-8



9 780702 143441