My name is Julie-Anne Oke, and I currently work as a Kindergarten teacher at Canberra Grammar School in the Australian Capital Territory. I have worked in numerous early childhood settings including long day care, community-based and mobile preschools; I have visited Reggio Emilia on two study tours and I currently work with the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program. This article will share the beginning of a journey that introduces the process of a ‘Writer’s Workshop’ to a group of children to allow them to see themselves as beginning authors.

My tension

Having been inspired at the 7th International Art in Early Childhood Conference in Bhutan in 2017, I returned thinking I would explore ways to integrate and more deeply embed arts into my literacy program—as is so often the case after being away at a conference in the holidays, you hit the ground running when you get back! The idea sat in the back of my mind waiting to be acted upon.

At the time, I was reflecting on the tensions some of the children in my class were having with the beginning writing process and how we were approaching this task. Again, I found myself wondering how I could bring art as a language to the very complex task of writing for five-year-olds. How could I embed or allow children to employ their own ‘language’, as referred to by Loris Malaguzzi in The hundred languages of children, to allow them to explore another ‘language’ they were grappling to understand?

I found myself wanting to draw on my experience with documenting learning in other early learning settings to help these children reflect on their thinking. At the same time, the Harvard Project Zero,
Making Learning Visible course I had enrolled in was guiding me through a thinking process that was allowing me the space to consider this exact idea. This enabled me to reflect on my practice and has led me to synthesise some of the ideas and thinking, and explore these more deeply. As a result, I am currently embarking on a project exploring these ideas, as a member of a learning group—also known as my Kindergarten class.

**The project**

I decided I would introduce the idea of a ‘Writer’s Workshop’ as a way for individual children to bring their own tensions to our meeting times, and pose their own challenges to the class. The first step I took was to ask the children what they thought a Writer’s Workshop might be.

Their responses included:

- ‘A place to work’ (Harry).
- ‘A place to write’ (Anugya).
- ‘A place to learn’ (Freya).
- ‘A place to fix’ (Lucinda).
- ‘A place to think’ (Aryan).
- ‘A place to care’ (Layla).
- ‘A place to love writing’ (Aarav).
- ‘A place to spell’ (Mackenzie).
- ‘It’s also reading’ (Joshua).
- ‘It’s also patterning’ (Freya).
- ‘It includes maths’ (Joshua).
- ‘It’s responsibility’ (Sarah).

**The next steps**

I asked the children who they see writing in their community, what they see these people writing and what the purpose is of the people they see writing. The children found these ideas a little more challenging. It made me wonder if the children see less ‘writing’ in this digital age.

Then we thought about where writing could be found around the school, and we focused on writing that was done by hand and by children. This led us to their Year 2 Buddies classroom to look at some of their older peers’ writing samples. I heard comments such as, ‘I can read this’, ‘This is very neat writing’ and ‘I want to learn to write a full sentence’. The visit helped the children to see where they were heading on their own writing journey.

Research tells us of the many connections between reading, writing and speaking. To assist me with this project, I was regularly seeking further knowledge and revisiting the research and work of those such as Ann Pelo, Ursula Kolbe, Gill Hope and Pie Corbett. I was also seeking ways to synthesise the understanding from my readings with my understanding of the practices of Reggio Children to improve my teaching writing. I found that I still needed to embed the use of art to motivate and support children’s writing.

For example, the children had a story to write, and they chose to tell this story through painting, felt board characters or puppets. The aim was now to put that story into writing. One child responded, ‘I’ve got too many words in my brain. I can’t get them all out’. As a way of helping this child, I gave her an iPad and a quick lesson in how to video-record her story. She then had her words captured to revisit when writing later.

During the following weeks, we discussed and practised mapping stories before embarking on mapping our own stories. Through this process the children began discussing their difficulties. They shared their work in the Writer’s Workshop and gave each other feedback and suggestions for ways they might approach the task of improving their writing. At this point, the children were encouraged to set small goals for themselves based on writing strategies and tools that had previously been introduced.

More and more ideas are generated each week as we revisit our work, offer suggestions to each other and document and reflect on the documentation.

**In summary**

The work of the Kindergarten children’s Year 2 Buddies had enabled the class to see what they were working towards. The visual provocations enabled the children to articulate their own stories, and sharing their work with others has allowed them to approach unpacking the process of writing with greater confidence.

The children are left with a place to reflect, question, share knowledge and develop new skills of writing. They seek out suggestions from each other and are discovering they can articulate their learning and needs with more ease. In reference to my own experience with this project so far, I am finding more time to document the children’s learning and analyse this to inform my planning. A very supportive, democratic learning group has evolved, along with a new motivation for writing. As the year progresses, I look forward to seeing the outcomes and progression of my Writer’s Workshop in the Kindergarten class.

**Julie-Anne Oke**

Kindergarten Teacher

Canberra Grammar School

---

**ECA RECOMMENDS**

Supporting literacy learning in the early years

By Jenni Connor and Christine Topfer

$16.95

Supporting literacy learning in the early years explores the connections between speaking and listening, reading and writing, and offers practical advice and reflections on how to incorporate literacy learning into everyday practice. Young children learn best when information is embedded in meaningful contexts that make sense to them.

To order or find out more please visit

https://goo.gl/BPevcA

or (free call) 1800 356 900.