

# Introduction

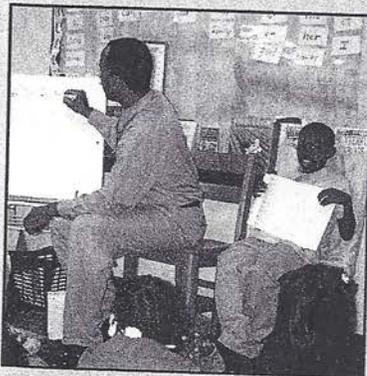
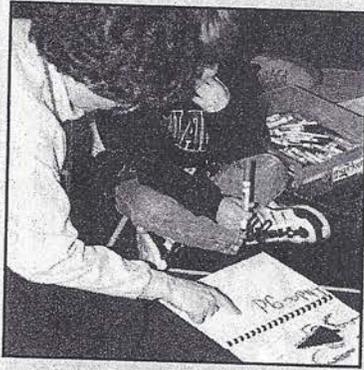
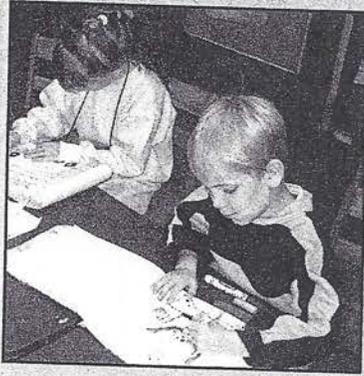
Welcome to the world of young children's writing. As you invite young students to write, you join a growing national movement of teachers who are effectively bridging two seemingly different approaches to beginning literacy instruction. One approach, "the kids need phonics first" method, teaches sound-symbol relationships to beginning readers and writers by having them isolate and combine the sounds in spoken words (Flesch 1955; Yopp 1992). The other approach, the whole language method, provides phonics instruction in the context of authentic and meaningful literacy experiences (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores 1991). Many critics of the whole language method wrongly assume that this type of phonics instruction is, by design, less vigorous and less systematic than phonics-in-isolation instruction.

*Kid Writing* provides an integrated approach in which phonics instruction is a systematic, rigorous, planned, and essential part of the fuller instructional program throughout the school day. In the classroom scenes we describe, the systematicity appears not in the materials used to teach phonics, nor in the order in which sound-symbol correspondences are taught, but in the social interaction between teachers and children and in the attention to children's individual needs and abilities. Children learn phonics as they master other concepts and learn about their world. Teachers measure their students' understanding of phonics and other conventions of writing by looking closely at their writing processes and products.

There has been a call in recent years for focusing on phonemic awareness—the ability to segment the individual sounds in spoken words. This is certainly an important skill for children to develop. While some educators advocate that children engage in exercises such as deleting the initial sound in spoken words (*bit/it*), we have found that it is easier for most children to gain phonemic awareness when this concept is presented together with the naming of letter sounds. This dual learning occurs, for example, when teachers sound out words with children for language experience chart writing, create lists of rhyming words (*at, bat, cat*), and call attention to similarities among the written forms of children's names.

*Kid Writing* invites you into our classrooms to observe how we integrate rigorous phonics instruction into the context of broader literacy instruction across the curriculum throughout the school day. Although we recognize the importance of focusing on phonics along with other conventions of writing during shared reading experiences (Holdaway 1979), *Kid Writing* focuses primarily on teaching phonics in the context of writing. There are two reasons for this approach. First, as teachers with many years of experience, we have found that children's writing offers personal, meaningful, and effective opportunities for phonics instruction. Our colleagues who teach in Headstart programs and in first and second

# Introduction



grade classrooms who are part of a journal writing support group in our school district have had high levels of success in adapting the approach we use in our kindergarten classrooms to their classroom situations. Second, engaging children in writing can begin immediately on the first day of school, can be built in as an important part of a balanced literacy program regardless of other materials used, and involves only the minimal costs of paper and markers.

This book shows teachers how to introduce children to the world of written language through journal writing in a writing workshop format, giving them fundamental writing skills that they can apply for many purposes across the curriculum and at home. After many years of trial and error, we have discovered that the more opportunities children are given to write, the better their writing becomes. We have also found that children's writing improves dramatically when we help them with their writing and teach from their writing. Using the supportive procedures explained in the following chapters, teachers can create opportunities for children to write in response to literature, document science observations, and write notes suggesting how to solve social problems in the classroom. The key here is not to *tell* children how to write, but to *help* them sound out words until they feel confident writing independently. The situation is analogous to a child learning to walk. We hold the child's hand and offer support as long as he or she needs it. The child makes the decision about when to let go.

Journal writing provides children with an opportunity to systematically explore written language in the supportive environment in which they are learning by doing for an authentic purpose—to communicate their ideas. Children do this through cooperative learning situations in which reading, writing, speaking, and listening are integrated in natural ways. It is also important for children to watch teachers write and for teachers to explain how they approach the creative process of writing.

The writing workshop format is a learning structure in which teachers and students follow the same basic steps each day. First, a child draws a picture and tells a story about it to the teacher, an adult assistant, or a classmate. Second, the child writes the story, receiving help to sound out words. Third, the adult praises the child's accurate spelling and underwrites the rest of the child's story in conventional spelling. Finally, the teacher teaches mini-lessons to the class based on areas of need that appeared in student writing that day.

Our approach contrasts directly with situations in which children are required to complete worksheet after worksheet, with instructions to "circle the picture whose name begins with the letter *t*" as a prerequisite to writing and interaction with books. In such activities, children often do not see the word written, nor do they actually see the letter appearing at the beginning of the word. This method of teaching is not only developmentally inappropriate and instructionally unsound, but it also

lacks the important component of authenticity. It serves no purpose for the child who sees it as an arbitrary task to be done because the teacher wants it done. In letter-a-week classrooms, literacy learning expectations are set unnecessarily low. Children are often required to spend large amounts of time on letters and sounds they already know without any new or challenging learning experiences. Letter-a-week classrooms are materials-driven rather than child-driven environments and children are subjected to pointless busy work that alienates them from the natural pleasures of language. Goodman says, "We have treated language too solemnly but not seriously enough..." (1986, p. 26). Edelsky et al. (1991, p. 14) highlight the aesthetic qualities of language as an "ever-available object to be played with...." Lytle and Botel (1988) believe that even young children should investigate language.

In striving to incorporate theory from the professional field into our own classroom practices, we have come to understand that children need many opportunities to experience language in much the same playful way that they learn about spatial relationships through using blocks. Children learn about block building by stacking blocks in various configurations and figuring out which ones are likely to stand and which will come crashing down. They learn to build more imaginative and complex structures through experimentation free from criticism of partially successful attempts. Teachers should be creating joyful, experimental environments where children can learn how written language works while coming to understand the varied and critical roles written language plays in their lives.

In phonics-in-use classrooms, children who begin the school year with little knowledge of letter names or sound-symbol relationships become fluent writers, year after year, by using sound-symbol correspondences and other conventions of writing. They begin with help and learn to write independently later in the school year.

The following spontaneous language investigation occurred as Shereese and Tamika\* were engaged in journal writing.

Shereese: What's that?

Tamika: A b.

Shereese: Neat b!

Shereese and Tamika then began singing a nonsense song they created spontaneously.

Tamika: B is for Brad.  
P is for poop.  
P is for poop.  
That's good enough for me.  
P is for poop.  
That's good enough for me.

\* Throughout this book, pseudonyms have been used for young readers and writers. Any name that appears on a writing sample, however, is the author's actual name.

# Introduction

Shereese: [singing animatedly]  
C is for *cookie*.  
It's good enough for me.  
It's good enough for me.

Tamika: S is for *snake*.  
It's good enough for me.  
[singing and giggling] S is for *Sapple*.  
It's good enough for me.

Shereese: C is for *capple*.  
It's good enough for me.

*Kid Writing* treats language much as Shereese and Tamika did—very seriously, yet joyfully and playfully! We further the notion of learning about language by playing with and systematically investigating it. We welcome you, knowing that if you join in this journey into children's writing, creating high expectations for all children, you will meet challenges and experience successes beyond those that previously seemed possible. It's an alternate way of teaching that promises to rekindle your belief in children.

For many children writing is the gateway to understanding how reading works. By continually calling attention to and building upon reading/writing connections and providing appropriate easy reading materials in the classroom, we have helped many children become successful readers. Although our focus is on writing, children's full range of literacy development is on our minds at all times. We strongly believe that fostering early writing success produces literacy success in the overwhelming majority of children.

As many of our colleagues have left the world of workbooks and entered the world of phonics-in-use, their students have become empowered to express themselves and accomplish high levels of literacy learning. A parallel effect has occurred among our colleagues: As they have freed themselves from the dictates and confines of packaged phonics programs, they themselves have become empowered. Change is never easy. As you read the suggestions in the following chapters, please remember that we are sharing our own routes to success. Allow yourselves and your children the freedom to discover your own paths, never losing sight of your teaching philosophy and goals.