Preschool Children’s Understanding of the Graphic Features of Writing

Author
Jennifer Mortensen, Family Studies & Human Development, University of Arizona
Melissa Burnham, Associate Professor, University of Nevada, Reno

Purpose
This project examined 2, 3, and 4-year-old children in a university campus child care setting to assess their understanding of the graphic features they use in their emergent writing. Specifically, this study was designed to explore what these children have to say about the features they use in their writing to make it look different from their drawing.

The Article
Little is known about children’s understanding of the graphic features they use in their own writing, in terms of what they can express through conversation. This study investigated which graphic features children could verbally identify when comparing examples of their own writing and drawing. Nearly all children in this sample used various graphic features to distinguish their writing from drawing, and children used more graphic features than they were able to identify through conversation. Certain graphic features, such as conventional letters, were especially frequent in children’s conversations, even if not actually present in their writing. Examining children’s use and understanding of the graphic differences between drawing and writing provides early childhood educators with deeper knowledge of how children perceive their own emergent writing, and emphasizes the importance of facilitating conversations about writing in the classroom.

What this Means for the Field
The findings of this study suggest that children are able to discuss the features of their writing, as well as discuss the features they perceive to be important, even if they cannot produce conventional examples. Early childhood teachers should be sensitive to this, and openly ask children about their knowledge of writing as a notational system. This may provide teachers with greater insight to their students’ thought processes during writing.

Citation

Contact
Dr. Melissa Burnham: mburnham@unr.edu; 775-784-7012 or visit www.unr.edu/education