

‘Is Swasti A Writer?’: A Young Writer at Home and School

Nidhi Kunwar

Abstract

The developmental perspective of writing argues that young children are competent writers. They are sensitive to print in their environment and love to explore it to convey meaningful messages. On the contrary, conventional writing pedagogy followed in most of our schools assumes that young children are incompetent writers and need to be supported by traditional writing practices. The contrast between the two writing practices creates a dilemma for young children. A private school first-grade child ‘Swasti’s writing samples are analysed to highlight this dilemma. Writing samples of Swasti are discussed and analysed using the framework of developmental perspective.

Keywords: Developmental perspective of writing, bottom-up approach to writing, print environment, writing pedagogy

Introduction

What is writing? In general terms, we define writing as a medium to communicate our thoughts, feelings, and viewpoints. However, questions about teaching writing to young children are answered mainly by worksheets, manuals and instructional models developed on the ideas of the conventional bottom-up approach (sequential teaching of writing). It is further believed that young children lack the competency as writers as they have not yet completely grasped the technicalities of writing skills. In the western context, several research studies have explored children’s writing and documented that young children are competent writers (Avery, 2002; Calkins, 1983; Goodman, 1986; Graves,

1983). However, writing pedagogy followed in our schools is influenced chiefly by the conventional bottom-up approach.

The present article attempts to highlight the contrast between the ideas of developmental perspective and the bottom-up school writing pedagogy with the help of home and school writing samples of a six-year-old girl, 'Swasti'. It is divided into four parts. The first part explains the developmental perspective of writing. The second section describes the bottom-up approach. The third section presents and analyses Swasti's writing samples at home and school from the developmental perspective of writing. The fourth section summarizes the arguments.

Young Children as Writers: Developmental Perspective

The developmental perspective of writing believes that young children are active meaning-makers (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Goodman, 1985). Children who live in a literate society are aware that the print has some specific function (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). For instance, a toothpaste packet states the name of that product, or the shopping list made by parents includes names of things they plan to buy. Children observe how adults use print to note important messages and information in their daily lives. Understanding the role of writing, children attempt to create and convey messages through writing.

Several research studies have supported the milestones of the writing continuum achieved by children before they formally reach the school (Clay, 1975; Goodman, 1986). The developmental perspective outlines scribbling, drawing, and invented spellings as some of the milestones in writing development. The perspective emphasizes that children's writing in all these stages should be accepted as legitimate because it has 'meaning' and is done with a specific 'message' in focus (Harste et al., 1984).

The developmental perspective describes errors as deviations from the conventional print. Deviations reflect the child's attempt to discover the rules of writing. Deviations are not 'failures' of the child; instead, they are progressive as they indicate the child's authentic attempts of exploring writing. Goodman (2014) explains the importance of deviations as 'Scribbling, reversed letters, invented spellings, creative punctuation, and reading and writing miscues are charming indicators of growth towards control of the language processes' (p. 56).

Writing in Early Grades: The Bottom-up Approach

The writing pedagogy followed in many schools is in contrast. Writing instructions start with isolated language units, assuming young children's incompetency to engage with meaningful writing. In preschool, children are trained to practise writing strokes such as sleeping lines, standing lines, and waves. In the first grade, writing instructions involves the practice of isolated alphabets, two, three, and four letter words and combination with matras, and later on sentences and paragraphs. Simultaneously, rigorous copying, accurate spelling, and beautiful handwriting are emphasized. Sinha (2019) observes that copying from the blackboard is so mechanical that young children are often not even aware of the content they are copying. Deviations are treated as errors and are believed to reflect children's failure to understand the writing pattern. Errors are overcome through repeated drills and practices.

The two contrasting viewpoints, development and bottom-up approach to writing make us reflect—Do children have the ability to engage with meaning? The following section attempts to answer this question. Using writing samples of Swasti, the section documents her writing at home and school.

A Young Writer Swasti

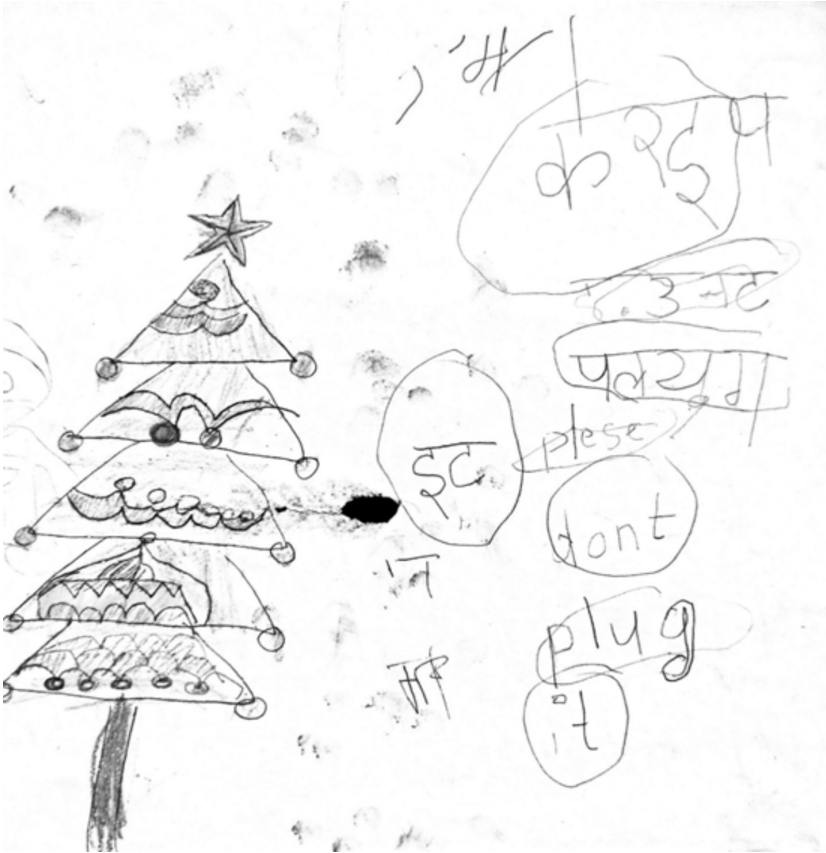
Swasti is a six-year-old girl who studies in the first-grade private English medium school. She belongs to a middle-income group family. Her parents are well-educated and work in government institutions.

Swasti is an enthusiastic writer. She loves to engage with writing and communicate her messages. Now, I will share Swasti's home writing and school writing samples to demonstrate her competence as a writer.

Home Writing Sample 1

Swasti draws a Christmas tree and decides to paste it on the front door of her house. However, she is concerned that adults might peel off her drawing and throw it away. Hence, she decided to write a message for adults (Writing Sample 1).

Writing Sample 1 : Home Writing Sample



From sample I, we observe that Swasti wanted to request adults not to remove her drawing from the front door.

- She wrote her message in two languages. In Hindi, she writes '*kripya don't palyug it*' and in English she writes '*please don't plug it*'. I asked Swasti about this writing
- When asked what is the meaning of 'plug / palyug' in her message. She replied, '*Jaise park me likha hota hai kii don't pluck flowers isiliye maine likha hai ki meri drawing ko pluck nahin karo. Darwaze par hi rehne do*' (as it is written in parks - "don't pluck flowers", I have written "don't pluck my drawing. Let it be pasted on the door"). It is crucial to notice how Swasti understood the meaning of the word 'pluck' and used it in her message.

- When asked why she has written in two languages, she replied 'Park mein bhi toh aise hi likha hota hai.' (It is written like that in the park.).
- When I asked why she used words like 'Kripya' (please), she replied, *Maine park mein aisa dekha tha. Thoda pyaar se bolna hota hai* (I saw it like that in the park. We have to speak with some love).
- Swasti's family praised her for the writing and did not remove her drawing as instructed by her.

Home Writing Sample -2

In the sample shown in writing sample 2, Swasti has written a letter to her friend. She wanted to thank her for all the fun they had while doing a specific job.

Writing Sample 2: Home Writing Sample

मा ना वउ कलाम
कलरइ शउकरया
जउ वउ कलाम
देने केले
दउसरे दइन हमने
कइतने मीने
कइये

(*'Maine woh kaam kar liya. Shukriya. Jo woh kaam देने के लिये. Doosre din humne kitney mazze kiye'*) (I have done that work. Thank You. For giving me that work. The second day, we had so much fun).

- It is essential to observe the letter-sound correspondence displayed

by Swasti in her writing sample. She even uses the Urdu word 'Shukriya' in the correct context.

- Further, on receiving this letter, Swasti's friend was delighted and thanked her. She responded to her by writing back.

To summarize, the home writing samples of Swasti offer significant observations.

- They strongly support her sensitivity to print in her environment. The writing sample (1) shows that Swasti has carefully noticed how messages are conveyed on the notice boards at the park. She used the tone, vocabulary, and format observed in the park's notice boards to write her message.
- Similarly, writing samples 1 and 2 highlight how Swasti uses her letter-sound correspondence to script her messages.
- Further, one can notice the difference in the register used by Swasti according to the audience. The first writing sample is addressed to adults, while the second sample is addressed to her friend.
- Swasti's writings display her intention to communicate. The child is using writing to express her thoughts.
- Deviations or approximations in Swasti's writing highlight her thinking. It shows how Swasti is using her knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to construct her message. The spellings may not be conventionally correct, but they highlight Swasti's efforts in making words.

Goodman (1985) explains that deviations are "important moments in writing development. Development does not always result in a better product. It is related to an ability to generate a message that shows that the writer is in control and is exploring ways of expressing meaning" (p. 18). Swasti's writing samples support Goodman's observations.

Now in the next section, I will share Swasti's school writing samples.

School Writing Samples

In Swasti's school, writing is taught through the bottom-up approach. Writing assignments are written on the blackboard for children to copy. Even in creative tasks such as picture composition, which is a part of the writing syllabus for first-graders, children are expected to write in

the correct form only. One day, the teacher shared a picture and asked students to write about it. Swasti took up the assignment enthusiastically. She came up with writing sample 3.

Writing Sample 3: School Writing Sample



She has written,

1. *Bahut saare pakshi hai.* (There are many birds)
2. *Wahan par bhalu baitha hai.* (A bear was sitting there)
3. *Wahan par sab khana kha rahey hai.* (Everybody is eating food there)
4. *Sab bahut khush hai.* (Everyone is happy)
5. *Moorni wahi par aayi hai.* (A peahen has come there)

I discussed the school writing sample with Swasti.

- I asked why she wrote 'bahot' and not 'bahut' in lines 1 & 2 . She explained '*Hum aise hi toh boltey hai, jaisey bahot mazaa kiya*' (We

speaking like this. For instance, we had a lot of fun). Similar argument was shared for the spellings of 'hua' as 'huwa' (line 2) and 'khush' as 'khosh'.

- In line 5, Swasti writes 'aayi' (to come) without using varna- 'aa'. Instead she uses matra- 'aa'. She explains '*Aawaz wohi aa rahi thi' toh maine aise likh liya'* (there was a similar sound, so I wrote it like that).
- For the spelling 'paraey' used in lines 2, 3 and 5, Swasti explained '*Mujhey do spelling aati thi . Toh maine usey mila diya. Jaisey aap upar ka chod do toh isey 'par' padh saktey hai aur agar aap peechey waley letter ko chod do toh isey 'pey' bhi padh saktey hai. Dono sahi hai'* (I know two spellings, so I merged them. For instance, if you leave the top one, you can read it as 'par' and if you leave the last letter, you can read it as 'pey'. Both are correct).
- Swasti correctly used purnaviraam (full stop) to indicate the end of a sentence. She shared '*Maine apni storybook mein dekha hai'* (I have seen it in my storybook).
- Discussions with Swasti highlight her exploration with print and her detailed observations. It is important to note that Swasti has accurately described the picture and displayed her developing writing abilities. Her knowledge of punctuation marks is also worth noticing. However, it is equally important to note that Swasti got a 'C' grade for this writing in school.

Discussion

The contrast between Swasti's home and school writing samples highlight the missing element in school writing pedagogy. The school writing pedagogy overlooks the potential of young writers and starts from teaching meaningless isolated units in writing, while children at home are already exploring and engaging with meaningful writing.

The developmental perspective of writing emphasizes that young children are active meaning makers. Learning about writing is 'natural' in a writing enriched culture, and children from a young age observe, generate rules, form hypotheses, and use writing to express their messages (Goodman, 1986). Swasti's home writing samples reflect her potential as a competent writer. On the contrary, her school writing sample shows her as a below-average writer and gets her a 'C' grade. At home, Swasti's family members praised her writing and accepted her approximations.

In its contrast, her writing in school is not acceptable as it does not meet the precise spelling requirement of the conventional classroom. Further, Swasti was advised by the teacher to avoid silly mistakes as it denotes her failure. She was asked to write correct spellings ten times.

Children in the supportive home context use writing as a medium to communicate their messages through different developmental milestones. On the other hand, schools reject the developmental journey and expect young children to achieve the level of conventional writers in their first attempts. Such unrealistic expectations make young children doubt their abilities and restrict their exploration of writing. As a consequence, the independent writers at home become the dependent writer in school.

Several researchers in their work have critiqued this contrast. Graves (1983) emphasized that 90 per cent of children believe that they can write before coming to school. However, as soon as they start studying in school, they start thinking that they cannot. Bissex (1980) compared and contrasted the writing of her son Paul at home and school in her book *Gyns at Wrk*. She finds that Paul's writing attempts are focused on conveying messages at home while his writing attempts at school were conventional. The dominance of traditional pedagogy of writing practised in school makes young children believe that their writing style is not acceptable at school. Dyson (1980) highlights this understanding of a child in her study where a kindergarten child Freddy explains to her, *'I used to write, but not anymore, I come to school now'* (p.30). It is disappointing to note that schools develop such a restricted concept of writing in young children's minds.

The writing development undergoes a process, and schools must evolve their instructional model for early grades based on this process. Ignoring the developmental continuum and imposing conventional writing pedagogical ideas will not benefit the school or young children. Frank Smith (1994) has also stated that "neither the brains of students nor the nature of writing will change for the convenience of schools" (p. 226). Reflection and revision of school writing pedagogy are required so that at home and school, young children like Swasti are acknowledged as writers.

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Nidhi Kunwar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Her interests are language education, literacy and writing research.

nidhikunwar80@gmail.com