

Pull Up a Chair and Listen to Them Write: Preservice Teachers Learn From Beginning Writers

NANCY ROSER¹, JAMES HOFFMAN¹, MELISSA WETZEL¹,
 DETRA PRICE-DENNIS², KATIE PETERSON¹, AND
 KATHARINE CHAMBERLAIN¹

¹Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Texas at Austin,
 Austin, Texas, USA

²Teachers College Columbia, New York, New York, USA

This qualitative study was conducted in the context of a preservice teacher education program with a focus on early literacy. The study focused on the insights preservice teachers gained from working closely beside one emergent writer. The authors report on six focus cases and identify five cross-case themes—describing preservice teachers who (a) approached young children's efforts to compose texts with deep appreciation regardless of the child's level of development; (b) deeply valued the time spent near a young writer and described their own learning as emanating both from the writer and the writing; (c) gained an understanding of how literacy emerges/develops, and made efforts to take up the discourse of literacy teachers; (d) talked sensitively about the importance of their teaching moves—the “just right” invitations or steps that enabled children to take risks; and (e) valued the purposeful writing that emanated from children's interests and lives and motivated them to write. The findings are interpreted within Grossman's (2011) framework for reenvisioning teacher education as “practice” supported by representations, deconstructions, and approximations.

For decades, innovative literacy scholars have pulled up a chair so as to look/listen closely as individual learners worked to compose or comprehend texts (e.g., Clay, 1975; Dyson, 1989; Emig, 1971). From such systematic observations, theories of literacy's development and enactments have been constructed that have deeply informed subsequent scholarship. For the purposes of this study, we invited candidates in their first semester of a teacher education practicum to work with students in prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms as a way of gaining insight into literacy acquisition, to inform teaching, and to better understand themselves as teachers (Haverback & Parault, 2008; Hoffman & Roller, 2001; Stump, 2010). The primary focus for this report is on the discoveries and insights the preservice teachers reported (and that we observed) when they pulled their chairs beside one young writer twice each week across the semester. This was not the “hands-off” stance of an external observer/researcher (described by Dyson (2003) as busily and unobtrusively writing on a pad while the children work). Rather, the preservice teachers were positioned not just to

Received 4 June 2013; accepted 14 January 2014.

Address correspondence to James Hoffman, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 406 College of Education, Austin, TX 78712, USA. E-mail: jhoffman@austin.utexas.edu

observe a child at work with literacy, to take notes, and to develop hypotheses, but also to offer the child engaging and appropriate opportunities to write.

Theoretical and Research Base

Only a few decades ago, a prevailing view was that for children to learn to read (or write) they must first recognize that they *couldn't* read or write. As George Mason (1967) put it, following a study of 178 preschoolers, "It appears that one of the first steps in actually learning to read is learning that one doesn't already know how" (p. 132). Other researchers were documenting children's confusions with literacy's skills, terms, and expectations, and contended, as did Mason, that if literacy is a skilled act, its participants must be clear about its demands (e.g., Downing & Oliver, 1973–1974; Templeton & Spivey, 1980). By contrast, other researchers began to construct a view of literacy's "emergence" in young children (see review by Mason & Allen, 1986), offering as evidence myriad and logical examples of children's literate behaviors (e.g., Clay, 1966; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981), and describing their written efforts as legitimate approximations of conventional writing (Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1982). It is Clay's term, "emergent literacy" (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), that became instantiated to recognize the "legitimate, conceptual . . . literacy learning . . . occurring during the first years of a child's life" (p. 28). In the decades that followed, the notion that literacy is both rediscovered and reconstructed by each learner garnered research activity in the form of case studies and ethnographic accounts (e.g., Dyson, 2003; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Rowe, 2008; Wohlwend, 2009). Thus, the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, and in particular its focus on language learning and language use as socially constructed processes (Bruner, 1962, 2002), has led to close descriptions of the ways in which young children take up literate acts long before formal instruction is initiated (Clay, 1975; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). According to Hyun and Marshall (2003), the notion of emergent curriculum has also gained traction, a term sometimes associated (and confused) with developmentally appropriate practices, integrated curriculum, and project learning.

We situate our study in the context of research on teaching and teacher education following Grossman and her colleagues' framework for practice-based teacher preparation (Grossman, 2011; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). Within this framework, three processes are necessarily in place: "representations" of practice, "decompositions" of those representations, and opportunities for authentic "approximations" of practices by the preservice teacher (p. 2837). Representations of practice include the models of practices presented in demonstrations and course readings; decompositions make visible how practitioners understand and reflect on the components of those practices; and finally, approximations provide opportunities for preservice teachers to make instructional decisions with the support of their instructors, mentors, and peers. By understanding more deeply the nature of these approximations—the close-up experiences in the practicum, we hope to contribute to the literature on preservice teacher preparation, demonstrating the potential of teacher candidates' close and sustained observations of learners at work, and then making sense of what they see and hear (Cooney, Williams, & Nelson, 1998) through focused, guided reflections on practice.

In our coursework, preservice teachers both read and talked over the contentions of literacy learning that emerge from opportunities and well-measured doses of support. Their class discussions explored how writers make discoveries about the workings of written language as they write. We worked to guide them toward ever more knowledgeable observations of young "geniuses at work" (as Bissex, 1980, described her son's emergent literacy) by weaving their practicum experiences into class discussions and course lectures. Our

goals were to ensure that preservice teachers would understand and interpret the cognitive, experiential, and linguistic decisions through which children reveal their social worlds and compose meanings that show us what to teach into (Dyson, 1993; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). These processes of representation and deconstruction (Grossman, 2011) are fairly typical of most preservice programs. Our purpose in this project was to extend and enhance how we drew on carefully structured approximations of practice to both complement and inform our course content and discussions.

“Teaching In” to Children’s Literacy

To plan for and receive children’s writing, each preservice teacher prepared and bound a colorful, multipage volume/portfolio intended to collect and give prominence to an individual child’s writing (see Figure 1)—a volume we called “Beautiful Books” (Hoffman & Roser, 2012). The original procedures for producing “Beautiful Books” with children were first presented in a David Espar film entitled *Oral Language: Views of Five Teachers*, and produced decades ago by the California Department of Education (Espar & Henry, 1976). The teacher asked emergent writers to say a word that was “on their mind,” and that they would most like to write and draw. The teacher wrote the requested word onto a word card, inviting the child to provide help if she chose (whether with letter names, forms, or specific sounds). Each learner then moved away to tables or the floor to paste and copy the word into a personal Beautiful Book, and to draw and write further about the picture in the book—as they chose. Later, some of the children dictated a more elaborated story about their picture to the teacher, which she scribed. Finally, they shared their pictures and words and stories with the other children, some even noticing how their work had changed over time, as they turned pages to provide evidence. Both the teacher and the students received the work of their colleagues in appreciative ways that reflect a focus on meaning and expression. To watch this film is to see all of the elements and principles of what Donald Graves would describe as a writer’s workshop years before the writing process movement (Graves, 1983).

Our responses to these Beautiful Book procedures have been influenced by more recent understandings of the complexity of writing growth. Some of the methodologies of language experience, especially those of traditional dictation, have become worrisome to contemporary teachers and researchers (who argue for the pen in children’s hands) (Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005). Even so, sociocultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) acknowledge the need for learners’ languages, backgrounds, cultures, and collective stories to have a centrality of place in classrooms, which are also the *precepts* upon which language experience was built (Clay, 2004; Heath, 1982; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez 1996). To make space for the child’s “just-right” steps into meaning-making on the page, our preservice teachers not only modeled and discussed the shape and sounds of a child’s favorite word, but also invited young children to share the pen (Tompkins & Collom, 2004) to write about that word, as well as to “make books” (Ray & Glover, 2008) as they worked together.

Methods

The particular focus for this qualitative study was to reveal the meanings preservice teachers constructed about learners, literacy, teaching, and themselves as they worked with one prekindergarten or kindergarten child’s meaning-making with written language over the course of one semester.

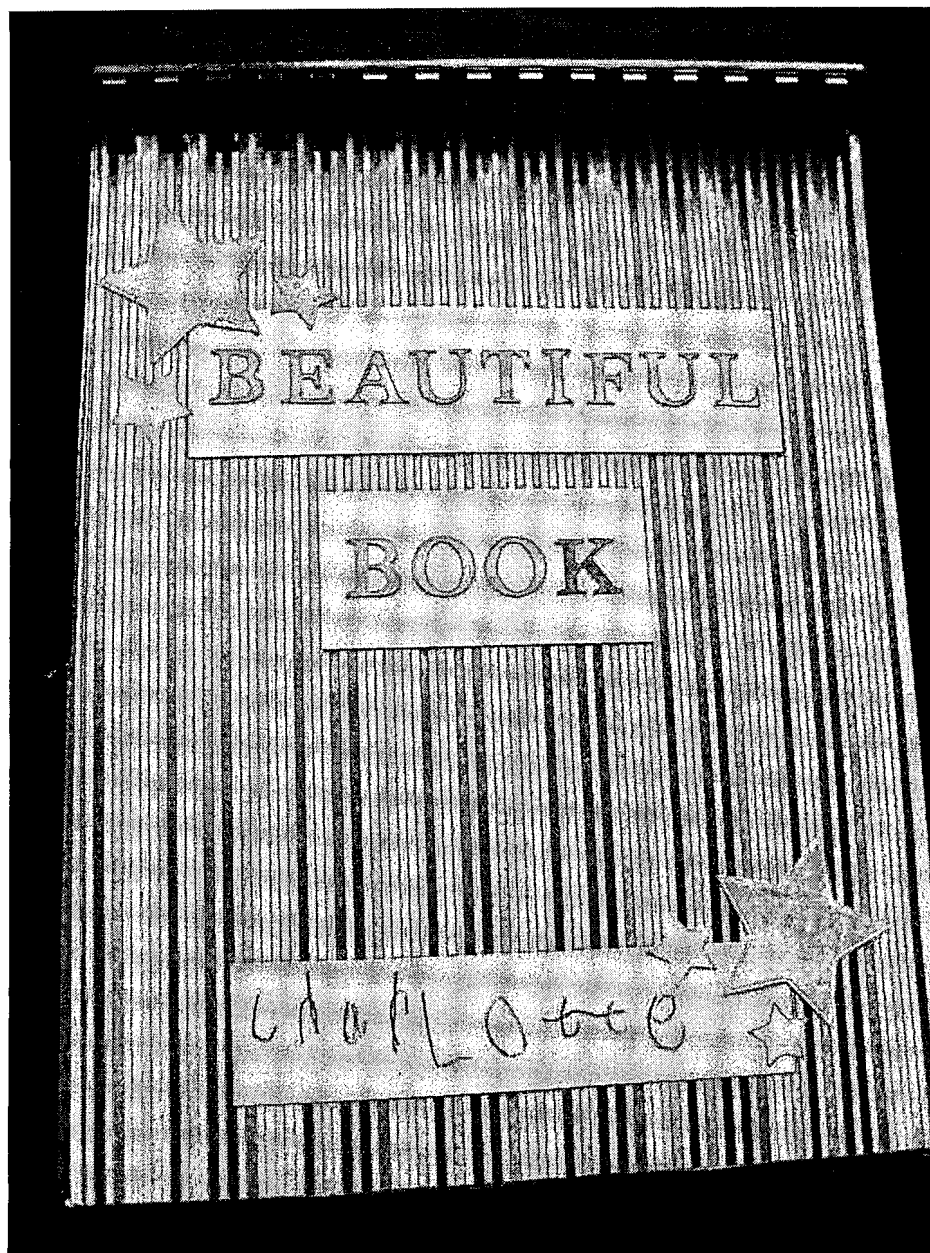


Figure 1. Beautiful Book cover (color figure available online).

Participants

Nineteen preservice teachers agreed to participate in the research associated with this project. These students had enrolled in, by choice, a literacy specialization teacher education sequence at a major university in a large urban area in the Southwest United States. The program's literacy specialization required these preservice teachers to participate in more hours of literacy tutoring with students as well as added additional coursework in literacy theory and pedagogy than did the regular certification program at the University.

All of the teacher candidates were female; 10 were of European American heritage, seven were Asian American, and two were Latina/mixed. Each candidate tutored students of varying age groups (prekindergarten/kindergarten, second grade, and adult) in concurrent practicum experiences. However, as described above, this report focuses explicitly on the preservice teachers' insights into the emergence of literacy among the youngest learners. The preservice teachers were assigned to prekindergarten/kindergarten classrooms in four different schools. A group of university-based researchers who were not directly responsible for the students' instruction observed, filmed, and took field notes during the individual sessions with child writers.

Materials

The tools the teacher candidates prepared to receive children's writings and drawings were called "Beautiful Books" (described above). While the teacher in Espar film used just one book and one writing format (space) for the child to explore, we expanded the construct of a Beautiful Book to include additional spaces for writing. Each preservice teacher bound colorful pages into a large volume designed to lie flat on the table. Some pages were of construction paper, others of scrapbook paper, while still others had been folded so as to construct "pockets" that held stapled-together pages for making books of varying sizes. The Beautiful Books were designed to offer different invitations to write, i.e., a section for favorite words (allowing for teacher modeling); a section for drawing, talking, and sharing the pen (allowing for scaffolding); and a section with pockets holding the small four-to-six page books to encourage story planning, writing, drawing, and reading (exploring writing and its tools). The preservice teachers, then, were prepared to invite children to talk, draw, write, and read—in the ways of young children (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Further, the preservice teachers brought markers, colored pencils, crayons, scissors, trade books, and other tools of writing and book making, as well as a journal to keep observational notes on children's writing.

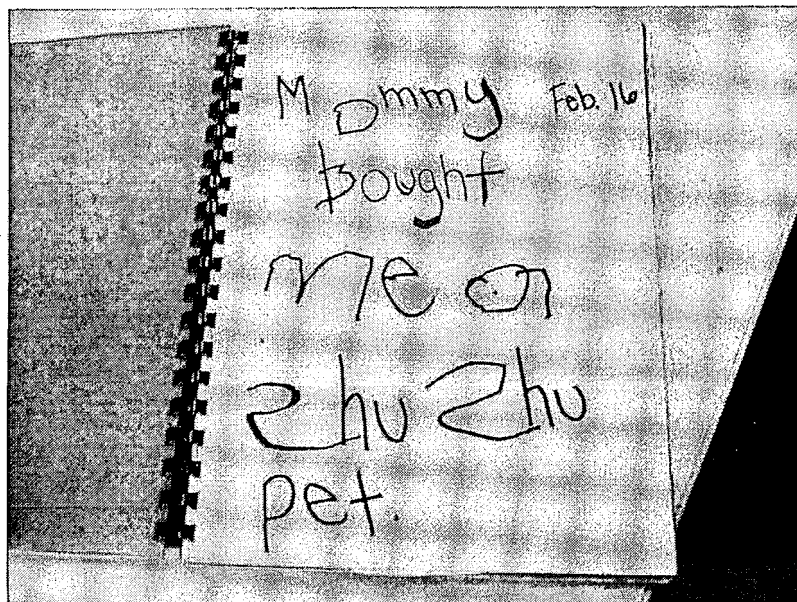


Figure 2. Sharing the pen (color figure available online).

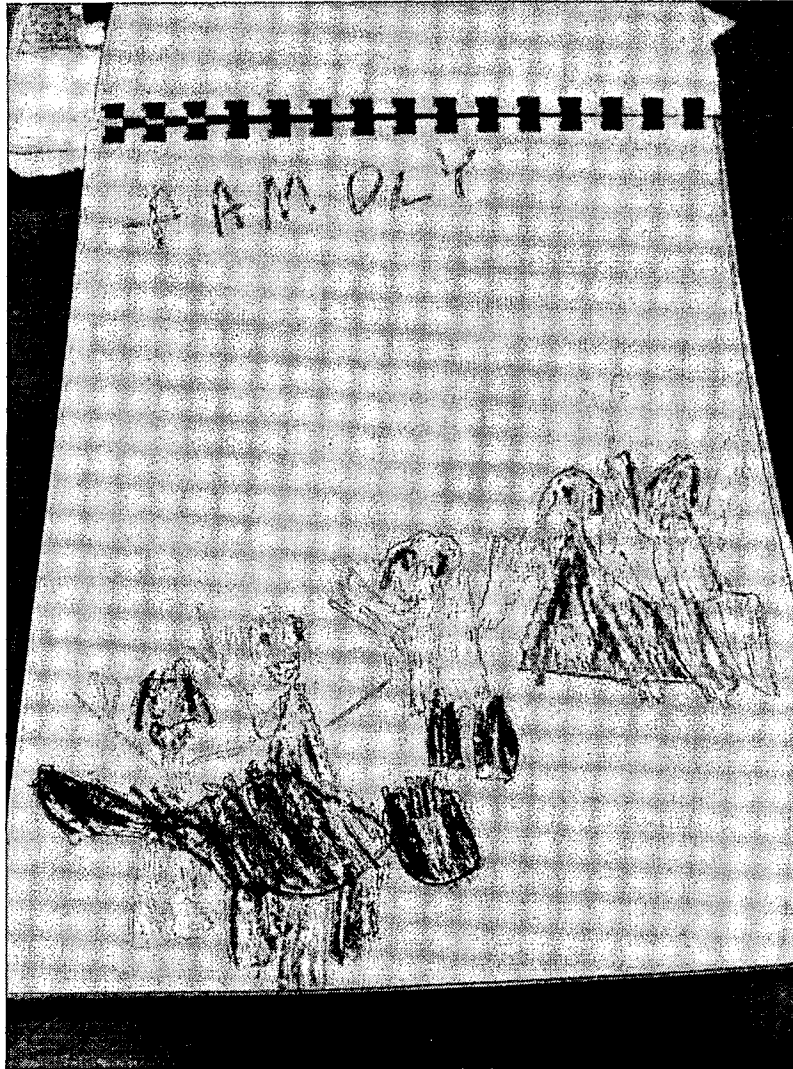


Figure 3. "Copying" a favorite word (color figure available online).

Procedures

All students ($n = 19$) enrolled in a first-semester teacher education sequence with a specialization in reading/language arts agreed to let university professors and teaching assistants observe them closely as they worked with a prekindergarten (ages 4 and 5) or a kindergarten child (ages 5 and 6) whether in the corner of the room, at a hallway table, or in the library. Each also agreed to be video-recorded at regular intervals, and to be interviewed at semester's end as they reflected on the tutoring experiences. For 12 weeks, the preservice teachers invited the assigned child to write twice weekly in sessions of 20 to 30 minutes. Both during and after the writing sessions, these teacher candidates kept descriptive and reflective notes on the child's oral language, writing, interests, and print awareness.

In addition to viewing and discussing the original film featuring *Beautiful Books*, the preservice teachers were introduced to theoretical perspectives on young children's literacy

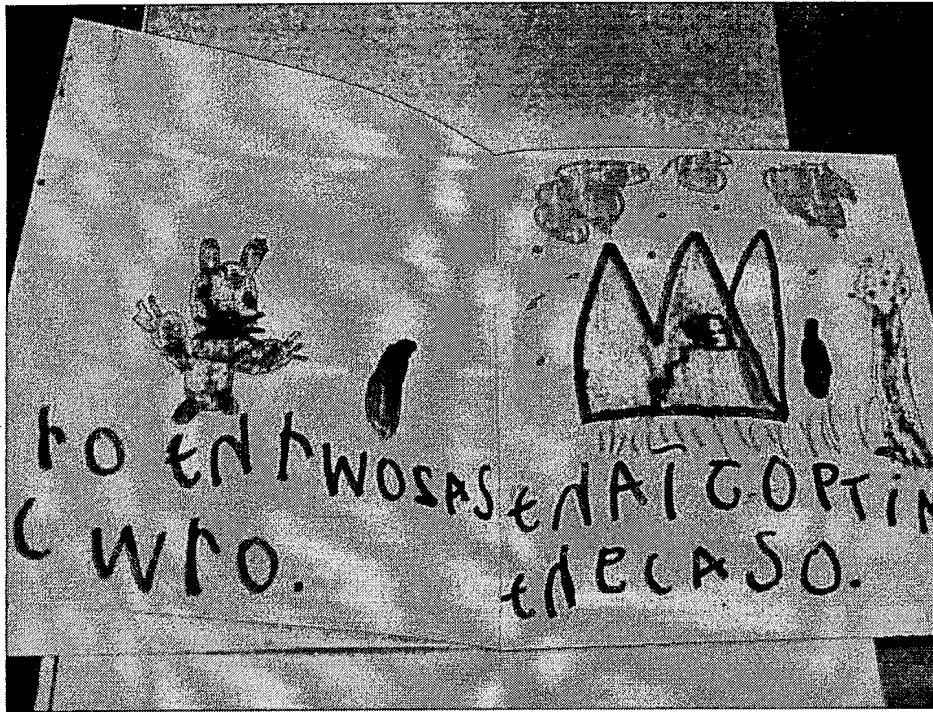


Figure 4. Book-making (color figure available online).

development through their course readings, lectures, and seminars. In university seminar sessions, the teacher candidates discussed professional readings related to emergent literacy, inspected video clips of young children at work, shared experiences, problem-solved, conjectured over child writing they had *not* seen produced, and observed and decomposed representations (Grossman, 2011)—demonstrations of practices of teaching literacy. Class seminars served as spaces to develop understandings around literacy development in general. Additionally, biweekly seminars were dedicated to whole group debriefing of the Beautiful Book experiences. During these sessions, preservice teachers discussed successes and problems, and decomposed video clips of participants working with young children talking, drawing, and writing. University students were observed at least once every 2 weeks by field-supervisors who supported their work in the field. On some occasions, the field-supervisors took on the role of observer only—taking field notes on patterns of interaction. On other occasions, the field-supervisors were interactive within the tutoring context—modeling strategies for supporting writing in the Beautiful Books. There were postobservation conferences with the preservice teachers to address questions and concerns as they were encountered. The field-supervisors collaborated with the course instructors in the seminars to offer information or engage in discussions around issues surfacing in the field placement.

Selection of Cases

Although we continuously collected data on all 19 participants across the semester leading up to the final interview, two considerations led us to focus on a subset of cases rather

than the entire group. The first consideration was pragmatic: The volume of data already collected was enormous. As we moved forward in the study to consider all of the data transcription and data analysis needed along with follow-up interviews, we decided that a focus on a few cases would permit a closer inspection of experiences. The second consideration emerged from the data: Although there was variability in the responses to the experience, there were some patterns that allowed us to choose participants who seemed to represent clusters of responses. At the end of the data collection period (after 12 weeks), we selected six preservice teachers as focal participants for a more intensive analysis of the artifacts collected during the semester. To identify the representative cases, the research team first revisited each set of child-produced materials, teacher reflection journals, and video-recordings, making notes related to the nature and amount of child writing, the focus and content of participants' reflections, as well as the range of observed strategies and teacher moves that invited, supported, or responded to children's message making. The research group met to compile notes and suggest focus cases, attending in particular to the qualities that characterized the teacher candidates' strategies and types of support, as well as to making close descriptions of the young children's work including the variety of responses to writing invitations and formats. The final case set, then, was drawn to provide for a range of preservice teachers' insights into young children's writing, notions of literacy development, decision bases for scaffolding understandings, as well as ways these teaching candidates reflected on their own efficacy after close work with a single child (Haverback & Parault, 2008).

Final Interview

The six focal participants were interviewed individually at the end of 12 weeks. The final follow-up interview (averaging 20–30 minutes) was structured so as to discover: (a) what the preservice teachers had learned about a particular child as a literate being; (b) the evidence they used as indicators of child growth; and (c) their perceptions of how close observation of young children's demonstrations of literacy informed them as teachers. Further, because each participant approached the support and mediation of a child's writing differently (although the Beautiful Book tool remained constant), we tailored individual questions based on each teacher's patterns of practices. For example, we asked only Gwen this question: "You helped [child's name] hang on to her words by repeating her exact language before and while she wrote. Can you tell us more about this, and how you think it might help a young writer?" To provide a concrete referent for Gwen's reflective response, we projected a carefully chosen clip from her own video footage that illustrated the specific question. In addition, we provided each interviewee with the child's writings and drawings, as well as her own notes, to draw on during the interview.

Data Sources and Analysis

For each case, data sources included: (a) the written work of each tutored student (the "Beautiful Book" pages and inserts); (b) a minimum of four video-recordings of tutor-student sessions; (c) the tutors' written observations and reflections on the writing; (d) field notes taken during both seminars and tutoring sessions; and (e) a transcription of the final interview.

Members of the pre-K/kindergarten research team examined all data sources independently. Toward selecting the case study participants, each researcher independently examined both teacher and child artifacts, making analytic notes. These notes were intended

both to describe and evoke the case, including what seemed to distinguish it as an intriguing display of a teacher/child dyad at work. Thus, the researchers produced descriptive indicators of the preservice teachers' insights and understandings, as well as the young literacy learners' accomplishments, interests, strategies, and approximations, as revealed in the field notes, through the Beautiful Book pages, and in the video data. For example, one note tracking a young writer/illustrator's content shift read: "Moved from animals as topics (for the first four entries) to *Mulan*."

The research group met to share the independently constructed notes for each pair. Through inductive methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researchers arrived at descriptive codes for the Beautiful Book work, including content of the child's writing; sources of ideas (wellsprings or territories for writing); quantity of writing; and developmental description of the writer. Using the preservice teacher's notes, as well as the researcher's field notes and artifacts, the research group also produced categories of teacher moves, including reflection on child's displayed interest, response to children's signals for support, acknowledgement of areas of confidence, and attempts to extend oral language. From these extended descriptions, the research group examined and discussed each teacher-child pair across codes so as to identify six preservice teachers as focal cases *who seemed to vary on* indicators of emerging theories of writing development, scaffolding techniques, and the evidence of relationships taking shape around the work in Beautiful Books. The focal participants and their tutoring partners are briefly described in Table 1.

The final interviews for the six cases were completely transcribed and, again using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, the researchers analyzed transcriptions using a constant-comparative coding process to identify and cluster themes, and to ensure the themes reflected the data as a whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Next, the researchers developed narrative descriptions of the themes so as to capture the essences of the codes and also convey the connections across data sources.

Findings

The study's central question focused on the insights preservice teachers gain from working closely beside one emergent writer. From the compilation of evidence, it appeared that preservice teachers, like the builders of grounded theories, seemed to learn from the opportunity to "sit long" beside a learner to discover the learner's resources and intents, to make sense of the learner's attempts and refusals, and to understand more about what the learner brings and what he/she wishes to take away. From the close inspection of the coded transcripts, the research team derived and supported five inductive cross-case themes that seemed to represent what preservice teachers spoke directly and indirectly to in reflecting on their close and continuous work beside an individual child in the presence of a flexible and inviting tool—the Beautiful Book.

Theme 1: Preservice Teachers Approached Young Children's Efforts to Compose Texts With Deep Appreciation (and Even Wonderment), Regardless of the Child's Level of Development

Across interviews, the six case teachers professed amazement at what young children could do with writing, as well as profound respect for the children's thinking, language, and creations on the page. As the preservice teachers turned the pages of the Beautiful Books created by the children with whom they worked, they used terms such as "amazing"

Table 1
Focal Participants

Preservice teacher pseudonym	Identity statement	Kindergarten focus student		
		Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity
Hillary	I identify as a Latina, specifically Cuban American. I was raised upper middle class with exposure to my father's side, upper class. I am married with one child.	Nina	F	Hispanic
Lily	I am a 21-year-old Chinese American woman.	Kalei	F	Anglo
Ginny	I am an Asian American woman raised in Texas by first generation immigrants from Taiwan. We spoke English, Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Cantonese growing up.	Alexandra	F	Hispanic
Deanna	I am a 22-year-old Filipino/Pacific Islander and White. My mother is originally from the Philippines, but moved to the US when she was 4. We were raised in poverty.	Jackson	M	Hispanic
Kristen	I am a White female. Both of my parents born and raised in Poland. My parents immigrated to the US before having children.	Finn	M	Anglo
Gwen	I am a White woman.	Michelle	F	Hispanic

(Deanna); "really interesting" (Gwen); and "very, very creative" (Ginny). One preservice teacher, Lily, had a kind of head-shaking wonderment at her student's creativity and imagination. Many times, Lily admitted, she would ask herself: "How did she (Kalei) come up with this crazy story?" Lily described Kalei as both a skilled artist and storyteller. Deanna told us: "I *never* knew what would come out of his head." And Kristen enthused: "He had so many great ideas. . . . He just had amazing vocabulary and all these words."

From an example in which admiration seemed more measured ("She's very, very quiet. It's really hard to hear her"), the preservice teacher nonetheless pointed toward the child's remarkable memory for where words appeared in the classroom, and her memory for words she had previously written. All the teachers praised the efforts, the imagination, and the joyful work of the young writers ("She loves books"; "He loves doing this."). Perhaps because of fewer established markers or expectations for what young writers can do, the preservice teachers seemed to adopt flexible stances toward the writing, as well as toward the writer. There seemed to be little, if any, deficit labeling, such as "He can't yet write"; or "She doesn't know her letters." Instead, there was a general stance of "look what this writer can

do.” The teachers pointed toward details of the children’s drawings, their work on conventional letters, and their initial forays into sound/spelling correspondences as examples of moments worth celebration and even exultation. These young learners failed to disappoint their teachers in any way—regardless of the variability of their experiences or the labels children had already been assigned:

My teacher assigned her to me as a below grade level but whenever they had story time she was so . . . she knew everything about that book. That teacher could ask like, “What was the main character . . . what were they doing?” She knew everything, you know. It was just crazy.

Regardless whether the students felt the children entered the tutoring sessions joyfully or with more hesitancy (“He would rather draw than write”), each described the beginner as a creative, inspired, near “genius at work” (Bissex, 1980).

Theme 2: Preservice Teachers Deeply Valued the Time Spent Near a Young Writer, and Described Their Own Learning as Emanating Both From the Writer and the Writing

Each preservice teacher also shared insights gained from working closely with a young writer. Deanna explained that without sitting next to Jackson, she would never have been able to understand his composing. During her interview, she shared:

I don’t think there’s any way anybody could learn about a young writer without sitting next to them. ‘Cause actually getting to sit down with them, and watch them, and, like, see how they progress, I don’t think I would have been able to figure it out.

The preservice teachers seemed to recognize they were deeply informed by the seemingly simple act of watching a child compose. Gwen described in detail her student Michelle’s remarkable memory for the spellings of friends’ names. These new teachers recognized they knew the child as a learner and a strategist because they had observed closely. Hillary felt her proximity to Nina during the composing process enabled her to “validate what she [Nina] was attempting,” and “allowed me to see *how* she wrote.” Ginny shared that, “It was very interesting to know what was going on in her [Alexandra’s] head” during the rehearsal and drafting of each story. Deanna used the space (and its resultant insights) to invite her student, Jackson, to elaborate on his topics and generate plans based on what she observed that she would not have understood apart from knowing the child. Overall, the preservice teachers agreed that sustained observation of one child, a “luxury” many teachers don’t have, provided opportunities to experience the theories and strategies they learned in class, as well as to develop and refine a repertoire of strategies in response to their child’s interests and needs.

Theme 3: Preservice Teachers Seemed to Gain Understanding of How Literacy Emerges/Develops, and Made Efforts to Take Up the Discourse of Literacy Teachers—Talking in Specific Ways About Young Children’s Demonstrations of Growth

From working next to an emergent reader/writer, the six preservice teachers not only gained an understanding of how literacy develops, but took up the discourse of literacy teachers when speaking to their students’ growth. The case teachers noted children’s increased

willingness to take the pen during the interactive writing, as well as to “write it all on (their) own” (Deanna). The teachers also noted that as the children gained confidence, they were more willing to take risks. They pointed out instances in which children initiated invented spellings, writing, for example, “just the sounds she heard” (Ginny). In the discourse of teachers, Hillary observed that her student “was really good with associating sounds with letters.”

In the same ways, tutors worked through their own misconceptions and confusions. Early on, for example, several tutors puzzled over the children’s work with the small books, interpreting them as places for the children to write their stories conventionally. During the final interview, Lily explained her dawning understanding of the importance of talk and illustration as precursors to child writing. Once Kalei started to talk and draw, Lily explained, space was opened up for all the rest.

Across cases, the preservice teachers identified shifts in writing confidence, in oral storytelling, in an increased sense of story structure, and in children’s stamina for writing. Each preservice teacher was able to point specifically to areas of child growth, and to articulate that growth in the parlance of teachers of literacy.

Theme 4: Preservice Teachers Talked Sensitively About the Importance of Their Teaching Moves—The “Just Right” Invitations or Steps That Enabled Children to Take Risks With Their Literacy Within a Net of Safety

Through the Beautiful Book experience, the preservice teachers examined their own roles as supporters of a child’s discoveries about print. The case teachers described teaching moves they made (and how hard the decision-making was that underlay those moves). In each instance, the teachers wrote and spoke about their concerns for ensuring the appropriate place, pace, and amount of help they provided children—particularly for those children who hesitated or signaled a need for help. They reported their teaching decisions were made in the moment, and were based upon what “felt” comfortable, appropriate, and sensible at the time. They shared their concerns about when to laud children’s effort, when to supply help, and when to correct misperceptions: “I struggle with that because I’m not sure if I’m not supposed to do . . . because if he says something wrong, I don’t want to say, ‘Well, I heard a z, too.’” Even so, their teaching decisions “in the moment” appeared to have footing in their beliefs and knowledge about emergent writing development. For example, each described her role as appreciatively receiving children’s writing efforts by responding to its creator’s intents and meanings. In addition, each showed us they weighed (and later reflected on) what teaching moves or nudges might best serve a young writers’ growth in a particular situation. Further, all case teachers described their primary task as helping children with what *they* were trying to accomplish with their writing. That is, the preservice teachers showed us they knew the difference in instruction that supported what a child was attempting (e.g., coaching a sound-letter correspondence when a child had begun to record some initial sounds on paper) versus teaching skills or strategies the child had not yet experimented with (e.g., recommending a capital letter when the young writer hadn’t yet noticed capitals at work in sentences).

The teachers reported awareness and intent to honor what Gwen labeled “the very fine line” between nudge and push (Glover, 2009)—a line she told us she wanted to go nowhere near. Gwen explained this trepidation: “I think that there’s . . . such a fine line that I feel really nervous about going anywhere near it, because I don’t want to be the one that turns this kid off from [writing] forever.”

At times, the teachers provided indirect help, anticipating the possibility that unreasonable writing expectations might contribute to a child’s “shutting down” or “becoming

frustrated.” For example, Kristen decided the *h* “was enough” for Finn on a given day, i.e., that the effort Finn produced to get the letter-sound *h* /*h*/ on paper was a sufficient accomplishment for Finn at that moment in his writing life.

Ginny described her efforts to take a step back to “get out of the way” of the writer. “Just step back and let her do it,” as she explained:

I actually didn’t help her that much when she was writing. I wanted to give her her own space. If she needed help, she could ask me, but I wanted to see what she could do rather than me telling her what to do.

These kinds of decisions about appropriate help foreshadow the ones these teacher will continue to make in writing conferences throughout their careers. That is, the ways in which these preservice teachers weighed the nature and amount of instruction they provide a fledgling writer mirrors how experienced teachers engage in problem-solving—from gathering evidence through close observation across tasks, taking anecdotal notes, critically reflecting, adjusting instruction, and closely observing the effects. We saw evidence of each teacher observing closely, adapting environments, bringing in alternative materials, and responding to both children’s verbal and nonverbal signals for help (e.g., a pencil poised but frozen). For example, Kristen recognized Finn’s need for extended think time: “. . . so I gave him time and when he was ready, he would do it.” When Ginny noticed Alexandra was no longer writing thoughts—just words—she initially theorized Alexandra might have perceived the Beautiful Book work as becoming “repetitive.” Nonetheless, Ginny continued to observe the child closely through this truncated writing phase until she was able to pose a substitute hypothesis: i.e., her abbreviated writing period may have been connected with what Alexandra perceived she was missing in her classroom when she left her friends to write with Ginny (for indeed, what this experience provided in closeness of teacher, it lost in absence of friends).

The preservice teachers described their practices (and reported changes in those practices) as they coached a child with generating writing topics, when they “stretched words into component sounds,” or took notes from the child’s oral storying with the intent to prompt the writing with the child’s own language. The teachers consistently attempted to provide the right amount of instructional nudge—the carefully constructed scaffold.

Theme 5: Preservice Teachers Valued the Purposeful Writing That Emanated From Children’s Interests and Lives and Motivated Them to Write

One of the most pervasive tenets of contemporary writing instruction is that the topics and themes children mine for their writing should emanate from the children’s own experiences, interests, language, and intentions rather than be artificially imposed by curriculum guides. A second assumption is that students should find authentic purposes and audiences for their writing. Through the Beautiful Book procedures, the preservice teachers in this study were offered a vehicle to encourage young writers’ self-selection of words and topics from the children’s own life experiences. In addition, the sessions provided a regular time to write, and an appreciative and supportive audience. All tutors noted the children were most engaged when they found their writing meaningful, manageable, and satisfying. Deanna told us, “He liked that he could write whatever . . . and I could help him if he needed it.” Ginny explained that although there were competing influences for Alexandra’s attention back in the classroom, “She was happy drawing and writing in the Beautiful Book.”

At the beginning of the project, the preservice teachers were often so eager to help young writers who seemed hesitant that they eagerly provided topic suggestions. For example, a teacher candidate suggested: "I have boots and you have boots. We could write about that." Ginny described an initial strategy she used with the prekindergarten child (Alexandra) to help Alexandra find favorite words to draw and write:

She couldn't . . . she had a hard time thinking up words to draw, or to write, so I would give her, like, a list of words, like, what about bird, and then . . . what about hamster? And then I started naming off these animals or these things, and then she, like, "I like hamsters." I have a hamster at home, so she drew a picture of her hamster at home.

Similarly, Kristen described Finn, a child with "great ideas," who nonetheless started slowly when it came to finding topics for writing: "When we first started writing, he would just look around, and so I tried to say things like, 'Well, we can write a story about this or this.'"

Across cases, as the tutors seemed to learn more about the children with whom they worked, the support they provided with topic selection seemed to connect with previous conversations the writing pair had engaged in. When Deanna's prekindergarten writing partner, Jackson, initially appeared to resist writing in one of his handmade small books, Deanna produced a more interest-centered invitation. Because she had listened to Jackson talk repeatedly about the antics of his jokester brother, a consummate cut-up, Deanna invited Jackson to consider the possibility of using a small book as a place for a "comic" to write his jokes. She explained: "Obviously, Jackson's jokes weren't conventional jokes. But what he thought was a joke, I'd say, 'Okay! Try that.'" Similarly, preservice teacher, Lily, noticed her student, Kalei, talked frequently about having to live temporarily with her grandmother because Kalei's mom was sick. Lily told us she recorded this topic in her anecdotal log so as to remember that the topic might interest Kalei for writing.

When working with eager writers, the preservice teachers seemed willing to give more space for children to propose their own important words and topics. Kristen told us she and her prekindergarten child talked "about things that Finn was doing." The pair's conversations ranged from their talk about the roly-polies (pillbugs) that crawled across the hallway to the bouncy castle that would be the surprise for his birthday party. Kristen summed it like this: "I just think that if I would have told Finn what to write about or what to do, it wouldn't have gone anywhere."

Talk, of course, was the most free-flowing conduit for learning about the child's interests. Lily said of Kalei, "That's how I learned about her, because she would always tell me about her dog and her mom and her Nana (grandmother)." Although children wrote from their lives and experiences, the preservice teachers noted the children's topics both stretched and changed. Hillary told us that home and family were the initial launch pads for Nina's ideas for story. But by project's end, Nina "started to branch out into more and more ideas instead of just her immediate family." Across cases, the preservice teachers were helping children understand their interests were valid, and constituted the "stuff" of writing. "Toward the end," Deanna mused, Jackson would "just want to write, and I'd be, like, 'Okay!' and get out of the way."

As the result of making their marks, choosing their writing tools, telling their stories, and drawing, most children's enthusiasm for the Beautiful Books was high—either because children who were initially hesitant became more convinced, or children who were already choosing to write were further captivated by the inviting array of markers and papers. The close attention paid to the interests and writing purposes of each child seemed to sustain

young children's motivation to produce writing. From their close-up and willing partners, the preservice teachers seemed to draw insights about trusting young children to produce topics, widening their perspectives on what counts as writing, and closely noting the lives from which writing topics emerge.

Conclusions and Implications

To better understand the *nature* of the insights preservice teachers develop during tutoring experiences with young children, we asked: What do teachers come to understand from up-close, continuous observation of one learner at work? At semester's end, we asked the student interns to describe both the evidence of change in the child's work, as well as their own shifts in understandings about the teaching of literacy as garnered from work with a young writer. Through close inspection of cases, we posed that the teachers learned a great deal about the developmental aspects of learning to write. Teachers reacted with surprise and delight at what young learners could do—regardless of *what* the learner could do. There was no evidence of negative or deficit thinking when it came to describing the emergent literacy behaviors of pre-K/kindergarten children. Instead, there was recounting of the strengths, talents, and gifts, with the most frequent adjective being “amazing.”

We discerned, too, that our preservice teachers were encountering their first chance to ponder the roots of literacy—the children's and their own. Researchers who have investigated preservice teachers' attitudes toward writing and writing instruction have shown that attitudes were shaped before they began their teacher education programs (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; Norman & Spencer 2005). We had no direct way to link these teachers' positive interpretations of young children's work as being related to their own feelings about writing. Even so, we found the evidence of fresh and positive looks at writing as these teachers worked with older children and adults (Mosley Wetzel, Martínez, Zoch, Chamberlain, & Laudenheimer, 2012).

After several weeks of close observation and work beside a young child, the teachers came away extolling the value of time spent learning from a learner. We gained further evidence of the teachers' own learning from the examples of children's understandings they supplied, as well as from the precision with which they identified and discussed evidence of a child's literacy growth. The teachers spoke to the writers' resources, interests, intents, skills, strategies, and changes. They voiced appreciation for their time spent with the child—even when they were unsure at the outset “just what to do.”

There was great interest in the production of Beautiful Books among the writers' classmates (who didn't experience the Beautiful Book tool): “I would come in the classroom,” Gwen told us, “and the other kids would see the books in my bag, and they were, like, ‘why don't we get to do that?’ It almost broke my heart.” We acknowledge that a close-up encounter with a single child and the production of one's own tools are not reflected in many classrooms today. Long and close looks run counter to the pressures on teachers to deliver curriculum aligned with accountability measures and manifested in commercially created materials. Even so, there is still much to be learned from teachers pulling up chairs to learn from children.

The significance of our work with the preservice teachers in this early childhood experience is tied to a reconceptualization of teacher education offered by Grossman and her colleagues (Grossman, 2011; Grossman et al., 2009). As described by Grossman (2011) the practicum experience under scrutiny in this study provided preservice teachers with opportunities to engage in the processes of representations, decompositions, and approximations. These approximations had the qualities of “deliberate practice” in challenging components of teaching, to try out “pedagogical simplifications” of practice, to receive

“specific and targeted feedback,” to inquire into spaces where there is much to learn through careful observation, and to reflect on experiences with colleagues (Grossman, 2011, p. 2840).

Our findings affirm the importance of these qualities in the learning of our preservice teachers surrounding early literacy. Viewed programmatically, our findings suggest that representations, deconstructions, and approximations should not be viewed as a linear sequence or progression through a program—as is the case in many teacher education programs—but rather as processes that constantly interact, sometimes overlap, to inform one another. The fact that those of us teaching the methods courses and supervising the field experiences participated in the biweekly seminars interacting with the preservice teachers shaped our course content in response to the struggles encountered and successes realized. The categorization of representations, deconstructions, and approximations, while revealing important distinctions in teacher education, must not be interpreted as a rationale for dividing our programs.

Further, through our work in this project, we discovered that approximations in practice sometimes became reshaped into representations. In many ways, this is similar to the process of artifacts created in the context of one activity taken on the form of a tool for future activity. When videos, descriptions of practice from students’ or field-supervisors’ notes, or artifacts of tutoring become a shared focus for discussion, these artifacts took on the qualities of representations and tools for learning. As with the previous point, too much attention to categorization of activities might disrupt or inhibit this important process of transformation. It would be important for future researchers to examine this quality of approximations being reformed into representations in other aspects of teacher education.

We caution teacher educators who might want to incorporate or extend our efforts in their own teacher education programs. It would be impossible to recreate this experience in the form of an added assignment to a course syllabus: Rather this experience must be embedded in a larger programmatic vision. While our research focused in particular on the field experience, we would argue that the literacy-focused program—with its related course assignments and experiences, the observations in classrooms by supervisors and researchers, and the extended opportunities to engage in conversation around experiences—includes essential conditions for success. This first semester experience must also be contextualized in our program’s three-semester sequence. These “close encounters” are just first steps for our preservice teachers, followed by two additional semesters of intensive work in field-settings working with readers and writers.

We challenge teacher educators to adapt our methods and create even more powerful experiences for preservice teachers around learning to write and learning to support writers. We also encourage other teacher educators to continue to research in this area with a focus on how the understandings gained through this kind of experience are taken forward into teaching (e.g., Bauml, 2011; Caudle & Moran, 2012). The appreciative stances and the responsive teaching strategies taken by these preservice teachers are as new to them and fragile in nature as they are to young learners they worked with, but may stand in stark contrast to the “reality shock” of dominant deficit discourse and atomistic curriculum expectations our students may encounter as beginning teachers (Mahmood, 2013).

References

- Bauml, M. (2011). “We learned all about that in college”: The role of teacher preparation in novice kindergarten/primary teachers’ practice. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 32, 225–239.

- Bissex, G. (1980). *GNYS at WRK: A child learns to write and read*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1962). *A study of thinking*. New York, NY: Science Editions.
- Bruner, J. S. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Calkins, L., Hartman, A., & White, Z. (2005). *One to one: The art of conferring with young writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Caudle, L. A., & Moran, M. J. (2012). Changes in understandings of three teachers' beliefs and practice across time: Moving from teacher preparation to in-service teaching. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 33(1), 38–53.
- Clay, M. (1966). *Emergent reading behavior*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Auckland Library, New Zealand.
- Clay, M. (1975). *What did I write?* Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann.
- Clay, M. (2004). Talking, reading, and writing. *Journal of Reading Recovery*, 9(1), 1–15.
- Cooney, M. H., Williams, K. C., & Nelson, J. (1998). Understanding the child's perspective: Preservice teachers see the classroom with new eyes. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 19, 219–225.
- Downing, J., & Oliver, P. (1973–1974). The child's conception of a "word." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 9, 568–582.
- Dyson, A. H. (1989). *Multiple world of child writers: Friends learning to write*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (1993). *Social worlds of children learning to write in an urban primary school*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Emig, J. (1971). *The composing processes of twelfth graders*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Espar, D., & Henry, L. (1976). *Oral language: Views of five teachers*. Variation Film and KTEH/Channel 54. Office of the Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools, California State Department of Education.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before schooling*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Glover, M. (2009). *Engaging young writers—Preschool–grade 1*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Goodman, Y., & Altwerger, B. (1981). *Print awareness in pre-school children: A study of the development of literacy in preschool children*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Program in Language and Literacy.
- Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Grossman, P. (2011). Framework for teaching practice: A brief history of an idea. *Teachers College Record*, 113, 2836–2843.
- Grossman, P., Hammerness, K., & McDonald, M. (2009). Redefining teacher: Re-imagining teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 15, 273–290.
- Hall, A. H., & Grisham-Brown, J. (2011). Writing development over time: Examining preservice teachers' attitudes and beliefs about writing. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 32, 148–158.
- Haverback, H. R., & Parault, S. J. (2008). Preservice reading teacher efficacy and tutoring: A review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20, 237–255.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). *Ways with words*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffman, J.V., & Roller, C. (2001). The IRA Excellence in Reading Teacher Preparation Commission's report. Current practices in reading teacher education at the undergraduate level in the United States. In C. Roller (Ed.), *Learning to teach reading: Setting the research agenda* (pp. 28–44). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hoffman, J. V., & Roser, N. L. (2012). Reading and writing the world using Beautiful Books: language experience re-envisioned. *Language Arts*, 89, 293–304.

- Hyun, E., & Marshall, J. D. (2003). Critical inquiry into emergent-oriented curriculum practice. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 24*, 37–50.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). *The dreamkeepers* (2nd ed.). Chichester, NH: Wiley.
- Mahmood, S. (2013). “Reality shock”: New early childhood education teachers. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 34*, 154–170.
- Mason, G. E. (1967). Preschoolers’ concepts of reading. *The Reading Teacher, 21*, 130–132.
- Mason, J., & Allen, J.B. (1986). A review of emergent literacy with implications for research and practice in reading. *Review of Research in Education, 13*, 3–47.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1996). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice, 31*, 132–141.
- Mosley Wetzel, M., Martínez, R. A., Zoch, M., Chamberlain, K., & Laudenheimer, K. (2012). Becoming responsive literacy teachers in an adult literacy tutoring practicum. *The Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, 61*, 297–313.
- Neuman, S., & Roskos, K. (1993). *Language and literacy learning in the early years: An integrated approach*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Norman, K. A., & Spencer, B. H. (2005). Our lives as writers: Examining preservice teachers’ experiences and beliefs about the nature of writing instruction. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 32*(1), 25–40.
- Ray, K. W., & Glover, M. (2008). *Already ready. Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rowe, D. (2008). Social contracts for writing: Negotiating shared understandings about text in the preschool years. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(1), 66–95.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage Publications.
- Stump, S. L. (2010). Reflective tutoring: Insights into preservice teacher learning. *School Science and Mathematics, 110*(1), 47–54.
- Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Temple, C., Nathan, R., & Burris, N. (1982). *The beginnings of writing*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Templeton, S., & Spivey, E. (1980). The concept of word in young children as a function of level of cognitive development. *Research in the Teaching of English, 14*, 265–278.
- Tompkins, G., & Collom, S. (2004). *Sharing the pen: Interactive writing with young children*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing gendered identity texts through Disney Princess Play. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44*(1), 57–83.