Supporting Young Writers: A Framework for Understanding Early Writing Development
Front Porch Series Broadcast Call

Gail Joseph: Welcome to another installment of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning Front Porch series. On behalf of my colleagues at the National Center and myself, I'd like to thank all of you for joining us today. We have quite a group listening in. For those of you joining us for the first time, I just want to tell you a little bit about the Front Porch series. The goal of the Front Porch series is to feature national experts who are doing really innovative and applied work to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the domains and, in turn, to improve the outcomes for young children and their families. And today's topic is one that I think is very interesting to a lot of us, which is early writing. And we are joined by Dr. Sonia Cabell.

And so let me tell you just a little bit about our speaker. Dr. Cabell is a research scientist at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and she also — we have the pleasure of working with her on the National Center on some projects. She is most definitely a national expert on children's early literacy and today will be talking about supporting young children's writing as a part of early literacy. She has published numerous articles in top-tier journals and is a frequently invited speaker on this topic. And I personally have been really looking forward to learning more about how we can support this important aspect of children's early literacy development.

So now before I turn it over to our esteemed speaker, let me remind you that, as always, we will save a few minutes at the end to field your questions. But feel free to send those in throughout the presentation using the question bar. And so without further ado, I will turn this over to Dr. Sonia Cabell.

Sonia Cabell: Hello, and thank you very much. I'm excited to talk with you today about how to support young writers in preschool. I will be discussing a framework for understanding early writing development. If a classroom teacher is able to understand how children's writing develops over time, he or she will be better equipped to help children take the next step in their development. Let's review our agenda for today. Today I'll be addressing the following questions. What is early writing and why is it important? How does early writing develop? How can teachers help children take the next step in their writing?

Meet Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller is a preschool teacher, and he has a classroom full of 4-year-olds who love to write. He encourages them to write daily. And as you can see here, he has a small

group of children who are writing. You may be able to see from the pieces of paper on the table that there are nametags like "Vietnam," "Egypt," "North America," "Seattle" on the table. The children are writing about places they want to visit. Mr. Miller talks to the children about what they are writing and observes his students excitedly writing.

Ava and Catherine are the girls to his right and left. Let's think about what their writing looks like. Ava draws a picture and writes a scribble over it. She says, "Ava and Mommy go to Egypt." Catherine's writing looks very different from Ava's. Catherine writes, "I love Pennsylvania." As you can see, Catherine is writing with letters that correspond to sounds and words. And these aren't the only two children in Mr. Miller's classroom. He has a roomful of students who are at different points in their development. Clearly, the same instruction won't be appropriate for helping every child move forward in their literacy development. So how does Mr. Miller help each of these children take the next step in their writing development? We'll come back to Mr. Miller later.

Let's first talk about what is early writing and why it's important for literacy learning. Early writing is a multidimensional construct that includes three things: the mechanics, composition, and orthographic knowledge. Let's talk about each one.

Mechanics are the ways in which children physically or manually produce the writing. When I think of mechanics, I often think of the word "handwriting." Composition includes the messages children are trying to convey with their writing. And as you know, these messages take place within a social context. So the meanings that children attribute to their markings often depend on what's going on around them. For example, a child might show a scribbled paper to a parent and say, "Look, Mommy, I wrote a letter for you. It says I love you." If the child then reread the same letter at another time — maybe she took it to school — she may read it differently. So the social context really impacts the messages children make. And the third aspect is orthographic knowledge, or understanding how the writing system works. These are the marks that children make over time and how these marks grow more sophisticated.

We're going to focus our attention here for this presentation on orthographic knowledge. So orthographic knowledge, or knowledge of how the writing system works, is reflected in the ways in which children's marks get more sophisticated over time. So when I say "early writing" from this point forward, this is what I mean. This includes concepts like understanding what we say can be written down, left-to-right directionality, that letters correspond to the sounds in language, and appropriate sequencing of letters.

So why are we focusing on children's knowledge of how the writing system works? It's because it is one of the best predictors of children's later reading success. Let's talk about how children learn to read and develop — break the code of reading, or the decoding aspect of reading. During preschool, children are growing in the knowledge of the foundational skills associated with reading development. So they're not learning to read per se yet, but they're growing in the underlying foundational skills. Two important sets of skills are knowledge about print and knowledge about sound. Print knowledge includes knowing the names and sounds of the alphabet letters, as well as print concepts such as understanding that text moves from left to right on a page from top to bottom. Sound knowledge includes phonological awareness, which is the ability to attend to and manipulate the sound structure of language. This progresses from an awareness of larger chunks of sound, like being able to discern rhyming and beginning sounds in words, to attending to individual units of sound. For example, understanding that the word "dog" is made up of three sounds, "duh-ah-guh."

These early literacy skills come together to help children break the code of reading. So they have a knowledge of how print is working and they have a growing knowledge of how sound is working, and when these two come together, print and sound, students are ready to learn to read. They're beginning readers. This usually happens in kindergarten or first grade. They're able to match speech onto print. So children begin to understand that oral language is made up of smaller sounds and that letters represent those sounds in a systematic way. This is known as the alphabetic principle. They are breaking the code. So the question is: where does early writing fit in this picture?

Writing is interconnected with the other literacy skills, both print knowledge and phonological awareness, or sound knowledge. At first, writing reflects children's understandings about print. And you can see evidence of print knowledge in children who use the letters of their name again and again in their writing with no apparent connection to sound. When Ava was scribbling, we saw the connection to print knowledge. She understood that print was horizontal, moved from left to right. At this point, children don't use any knowledge of the sound structure of language. But as early writing develops, children begin to integrate their knowledge of both print and sound. They begin inventing spellings, and you can see in their writing, just like in Catherine's writing that we saw, that they're representing some of the sound structure of language. And it's a reciprocal relationship. As their knowledge of print and sound improves, so does the writing. And likewise, the more children write and have the opportunity to work on how to spell words, their knowledge of print and sound grows. So we can see literacy development unfolding in children's writing, but we can also see how having the opportunity to write helps children grow in their understandings of print and sound.

Let's look at how writing reflects understandings about early literacy. Writing serves as a window into their knowledge about how print and sound work. Their knowledge is reflected in their writings, so we can learn a lot about what the child knows by looking at their writing. This child's name is Cole. When asked about his writing, Cole said, "I made a story." He pointed to the first sentence, or the first line, that says C-O-E-E-E-L right under his name and said, "This is who the story is about." And then he pointed to another line and said, "These are the places he went." But what can we notice as we observe Cole's writing? He uses the letters in his name. We see the C-O-L-E show up again and again. He also knows that writing goes from left to right, and he knows that letters make up words. Cole's writing reflects his understandings about print. However, it does not yet include any knowledge about sound.

Let's look at another child's writing. This message is by Maria. It says, "Merry Christmas. Ho-ho-ho, Santa." What can we notice about Maria's writing? We see that she has knowledge of letters and sounds. She's beginning to grasp the alphabetic principle, or the understanding that letters systematically represent sounds in the words we speak. And we can see that in the "Merry Christmas." This child's writing reflects her understanding of both print and sound. Although her spelling is not yet conventional for all the words, she's applying her knowledge of sounds. So this is what we would call inventive or phonetic spelling. So not only does writing reflect understandings about early literacy, but writing also helps children's literacy knowledge grow. Through engaging in writing, children are like scientists who are actively forming and revising hypotheses about how written language works. Children's writing can serve as a springboard for instruction and sound. So writing is active. Even very young children are actively creating and testing hypotheses. Children notice the print in their environment and use their experiences to invent and revise ideas about the rules that govern writing, cracking the code of literacy one piece at a time.

For example, a child might believe, based on experience with print and knowledge of the world, that really big animals have a really big representation. So she might spell the word "elephant" with a big and wide scribble and might represent the word "bee" with a very short, tiny scribble. But as she begins to grasp the alphabetic principle, her hypotheses change, and she may later represent the word elephant with an L and the word bee with a letter B. Thus, allowing active exploration in writing with many opportunities to write can help children move forward in their literacy skills. So how can we help support children's writing at an appropriate level?

First, we need to understand children's development. The following framework is a way to categorize the levels of writing young children produce. And this framework is taken from an article — you see the reference there — in press with "The Reading Teacher." We present four

levels of writing development that are typically seen in preschool children. A single classroom might have all levels represented at the same time. These levels are drawing and scribbling, letters and letter-like forms, salient and beginning sounds, and beginning and ending sounds. Again, this is a framework designed so that teachers can categorize children's writing into one of these four larger categories. Within each category, there is a range of writing ability. But again, we're using this framework in order to help children — to understand where children are and then help them take the very next step in their development. So let's talk about each level.

At first, children's drawings are their writings. Then they begin distinguishing drawing from scribbling. Scribbling changes over time from directionless to moving from left to right. Children who are drawing and scribbling may not yet understand that writing is related to speech. So when they listen to a storybook read aloud, children may not understand the written words also carry meaning beyond the illustration. Children may know a few letter names, such as the first letter in their name, and they may also just be beginning to rhyme, but they are just at a beginning stage in their literacy development. Next, children begin to write with letter-like forms and a few letter shapes. They then produce strings of letters that do not correspond to the sounds of the message they are trying to convey. These letters are often letters in their names. So remember Cole? Some of Cole's writing is at the bottom, where he's writing the letters in his name that don't correspond yet to any sounds. In the middle representation, you see some letters mixed with letter-like forms mixed with numbers. This is common for children to include numbers and letters.

In fact, in the book "Words Their Way" by Bear and colleagues, they refer to this as "symbol salad." In terms of children's other literacy development or knowledge of print and sound at this level, children understand that print carries meaning, but they don't yet understand that letters represent spoken sounds in words in a systematic way. They're growing in their knowledge of print and sound, but they have not integrated these areas yet. Children then begin to represent the salient sounds they hear in spoken language. Often the beginning sound in a word is the most prominent. So a salient sound is one that really sticks out to a child because of the way it sounds in the word or the way it feels on the lips or the tongue or in their mouth. So for example, this will — again, this will most often be the first sound, beginning sound in a word, but sometimes it's a middle sound. Like in the word "elevator," the V is prominent because of the way it feels on the lips, and they might write that word with a V. Or in the word "baby," they might write a B not only because it's the beginning sound, but it's where the lips come together to articulate the letter name.

In this child's writing, they've written, "I play with Carson." Now, just to clear up any confusion, the Y, although it looks like it's the end of the word "play," really this child is writing the Y for

the word "with" because when you say the letter name Y, you hear the "wuh" sound, and children use a letter name strategy to write. So this child has represented the I for "I," P for "play," Y for "with," and then she's written several of what seems to look like a good representation of Carson's name. And Carson's another child in the class, so she may have seen his name a lot or might be copying from something in the room.

This is the first point in development that children are integrating knowledge of both print and sound. They are starting to grasp the alphabetic principle. Children begin to mark word boundaries by representing beginning and ending sounds in words. At this point, children consistently write with spaces between words. They generally do not represent middle sounds in words. So this child is writing "hop" with H-P and "bat" with B-T. When children are writing with beginning and ending sounds, they are able to freeze-frame a word in their mind and they know where words begin and end in print. So they are often at this point beginning to read. So you wouldn't necessarily see this until — if you see this at all among preschool children, you'll see this at the end of the year. But then in some preschool classrooms, because children, there's a range of literacy learning, a lot of times I get the question, "Well, what is next?" And the next step is children will then consistently write with beginning, middle, and ending sounds in a word. They may not represent all the sounds in the word, but they'll represent something for the middle vowel sound. It may be incorrect at first, but that's the very next step.

I do want to say a word about name-writing development, because when we look at children's names, sometimes children can write their name completely, such as Aerin here in this example, but write another word, like "sleep," and not have any letter sound correspondences that match to what she's saying. So this child, Aerin, would be in the letters and letter-like forms. She does not yet grasp the connection between the print and the sound. Because when children write their names, they use a different strategy than when they write other words. They remember their names as pictures because they see their name so often in their environment, and it is very personally important to them, as are all of our names. And so they don't sound out their names. So names are consistently written at a higher level than other words. So when you evaluate children or think about what level they're in, you want to consider writing samples that are not just their name, because their name can lead you to think they're at a higher level than they really are.

So how can teachers help children take the next step in their writing? We'll talk about two ways. First, teachers can identify children's goals based on their level of development. And secondly, they can use appropriate strategies to support these goals. Let's talk about identifying goals for each child. And when we talk about this, I want you to think about scaffolding children's writing just above where they're performing. This is in keeping with the Vygotsky

zone of proximal development. We just want to scaffold, take them to the very next step. If they're drawing and scribbling, we can't expect them to write with beginning and ending sounds overnight.

So here are some of the goals. If children are drawing and scribbling, the goal would be to use individual units while writing. The goal also might be to expand name writing from the initial letter to the complete name. When children are in letters and letter-like forms, the goal is to represent salient sounds in words, or beginning sounds in words, and also to help children make connections between the print and the sound, because they're not yet doing that. When children are representing salient and beginning sounds, the goal is for them to write with beginning and ending sounds in words. We want them to hear more sounds in the words. And when they're at beginning and ending sounds, the goal is to include the middle vowel sound and to write complete words. You can see that each of these goals is just one step higher than where they're functioning.

Now we'll talk about appropriate strategies to support writing in each level of development. For children in the drawing and scribbling level, we want to encourage name writing. This might include signing in for centers or signing their own work. They often will not be able to write a full representation of their name. In addition, name writing serves as a valuable springboard in helping children learn about print. The letters in children's names, as we said earlier, are very important to children and often the first thing — the first letters that children will learn, especially the first letter in their name. We also want to include writing during dramatic play for children, as well as writing down the words children speak, because this shows them that the words we say are connected to the words we write down.

For children in the letters and letter-like forms stage, remember the goal is to help them identify salient or beginning sounds. So here's a child; you can see their writing. This child's name is Tyrone, and you can see that he is writing the letters of his name over and over again. So something that you can do to encourage his writing development is to brainstorm a list of words that start with the same sound. Play phonological awareness games that have to do with beginning sound. And encourage children to write their names during play. And draw attention to names starting with the same letter. Encourage them to attend to not only their name but other children's names, as name, again, has shown to be a powerful tool for learning. And learning of beginning sounds would be very appropriate using names.

Appropriate strategies for children who are writing with salient and beginning sounds could be to include writing into play activities such as making labels and signs. Working with them one-on-one, you would emphasize the ending sounds or stretch out sounds in words to help

children hear more sounds in a word. And play games to recognize the ending sounds. And finally, for children in the beginning and ending sounds level, you want to encourage children to write longer messages. As they're writing sentences or longer messages, they have more opportunity to work out the sounds that they're hearing. Encourage them to write down all the sounds that they hear in a word. Stretch out the sounds and draw their attention to the middle sounds in words.

In each of these levels, praise children for what they're doing right, what they're — their writing does not have to look like an adult writing. And the more children can be comfortable with that, the more they'll explore their writing. And that's exactly what you want them to do. You want them to be actively engaged in trying to figure out how print works and how sound works and how these understandings come together.

So let's go back to Mr. Miller. Remember Ava and Catherine from the beginning? Well, Mr. Miller recognizes that Ava is in the drawing and scribbling level of development, and his goal is to help her write with individual units. He knows that Ava can write the A in her name when she signs in to center, so Mr. Miller encourages Ava to write the words "mommy" and "Ava" by labeling them on the picture next to the drawings. He accepts what she produces, encourages her to — if she begins to scribble for her own name, he might point out a name — her name on a label and say, "Where's your name, Ava?" And she finds her name, and then ask her again to write it. Mr. Miller recognizes that Catherine is in the salient and beginning sounds stage. Remember, she wrote, "I love Pennsylvania." His goal for her is to encourage her to hear other sounds in words. So for Catherine, Mr. Miller encourages her to say the word "Pennsylvania" slowly. He asks her, "Are there other sounds you hear?" Catherine writes down an L. He also might isolate the first syllable of Pennsylvania, "Penn," and encourage Catherine to hear the final sound. And he might say the word like "Pennnn. What else can you hear in 'Pennnn'?" And really encourage so she can really hear it. And it's those sounds that are continuous, like "nnnn" and "mmmm" and "ssss" that become — that are much easier for children to hear. So starting with sounds like that is a good way to go.

So in summary, supporting children's early writing development is important for their overall literacy learning. Because children enter preschool at different levels of development, it's helpful to have a straightforward framework for understanding and scaffolding this development. So it's my hope that this presentation provided you with some knowledge to start you going in this direction. Thank you very much.