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Early writing development: kindergarten teachers' beliefs about emergent writing in Qatari preschool settings

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ABSTRACT

Writing often begins during the very early years of childhood; however, some children first learn writing when they begin attending school. Teachers' beliefs about early writing development can influence when and how children learn to write. The purpose of this study was to determine kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the development of children's emergent writing in Qatari preschool settings. A 30-item questionnaire was completed by 93 kindergarten teachers with a range of qualifications, years of teaching experience, areas of specialisation, and preschool teaching level. They were selected from private and government-funded schools in Doha. The questionnaire consisted of four components: mechanisms of writing, concepts of writing, conventions of writing, and composing. The questionnaire responses indicated that teachers hold positive beliefs regarding most emergent writing components, with concepts of writing receiving the highest mean score, followed by mechanisms of writing. The results also revealed statistically significant differences among teachers due to a number of study variables. Based on these findings, the researchers offered a number of suggestions and recommendations aimed at promoting children's emergent writing in Qatari preschool settings and similar contexts.

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Introduction

There is currently a well-established evidence base to show that young children explore the features of writing from a very early age (Stellakis and Kondyli 2004; Bradford and Wyse 2010, 2013). Learning to write is considered to be a developmental and emergent process (Mackenzie 2008). Writing may be considered a manifestation of young children's interests and abilities as they experiment with literacy (Dahl and Farnan 2002). As defined by Head Start, early writing is familiarity with writing implements, conventions, and emerging skills to communicate attitudes and ideas through written representations, symbols, and letters (US Department of Health and Human Services 2010, 15). Early writing is closely linked to early language development and supports the development of early school literacy processes while also helping children to become successful readers and writers (Mackenzie 2008). It also provides many new opportunities for

learning about how languages are written down and how letters, sounds, and spellings of words are formed (Clay 1998).

During the current researchers' involvement in early childhood teacher education programmes in Qatar, they have noticed that although kindergarten teachers may possess a considerable amount of knowledge that contributes to the foundations needed for early reading, they still seem to know little about the skills that contribute to young children's early writing. This is consistent with the underrepresentation of research related to early writing present in the literature.

Although there is a sizeable amount of research on children's emergent literacy, there have been few investigations of early writing whereby writing has been used primarily as a prerequisite to reading and skills that need to be taught in primary grades. As such, the primary purpose of this study was to examine kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the development of children's emergent writing in Qatari kindergartens and to investigate whether a significant disparity exists according to the teachers' demographic backgrounds (e.g. qualifications, years of teaching experience, areas of specialisation, and preschool level). It is important for educators to investigate writing as a process and a skill used to determine what is known about how individuals learn to write and how this can be applied in all classrooms.

Literature review

If children are provided with opportunities to engage in writing activities, they can develop many insights into the functions of written language for themselves (Morrow 2011). Children write with the intention of creating meaning even before they understand the alphabetic principles and despite the fact that their writing attempts are not yet conventional (Bradford and Wyse 2010, 2013). It may be argued that the writing experiences acquired by children before they enter school should be acknowledged, encouraged, fostered, and built upon in children's schooling (Hall et al. 2015), and should also be viewed as an important step for future growth and development (Ihmeideh, Al-Basheer, and Al-Momani 2008).

Ouellette, Senechal, and Haley (2013) concluded that children coming from kindergarten with strong early literacy experience tend to acquire writing skills in the first year of schooling easier than their counterparts who have weak literacy experience. Writing experience in early years has been associated with children's later academic success (Dinehart and Manfra 2013).

Additionally, learning to write has been found to increase children's print awareness, phonological awareness, sense of story, and ability to convey meaning using graphics and print (Mackenzie 2008).

Readiness philosophy vs. emergent writing

Despite a general increase in research on reading development over the past 20 years, writing development has received less attention (Nixon and Topping 2001; Morgan and Pytash 2014). Although teachers and parents recognise the importance of reading for young children, they do not know the value of writing for those with emerging literacy skills (Clay 2001). This state of affairs has been influenced by the readiness philosophy,

which suggests that a child's ability to hold a pencil properly is a crucial developmental step in learning to write; therefore, children should not be taught to write until they reach the second or third grades (Teale and Sulzby 1986; Sowers 2000).

The belief that early attempts at writing are not necessary until children become ready to write have led the researchers to abandon the field of early writing (Teale and Sulzby 1986). 'When teachers do not expect children to be able to write, they do not give them opportunities to write, and, therefore they will observe that the children do not write' (Clay 2001, 14). In this context, Morgan and Pytash (2014) pointed out that preparing teachers for teaching writing is not a robust area of research in teacher education programmes when compared with to research on preparing teachers for teaching reading.

The decline in writing in both instruction and research may be attributed to the focus on reading instruction and assessment of reading skills and school performances on standardised tests (Brandt 2001). Bowie (1996) indicated that another possible reason for this decline may be that teachers feel unconfident in their own writing abilities and how to teach writing to children. The International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) stressed in their position statement that 'Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are in school can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain' (IRA and NAEYC 1998, 2). With the realisation of the importance of early writing experiences to children's writing development, early writing research has recently started to receive increased attention and researchers have begun to study various aspects of early writing development (Morrow 2011).

Emergent writing describes the children's early behaviour with written language as well as the tools of writing as well. It develops at different rates through a sequence of stages (Gentry 2005; Puranik and Lonigan 2011). These stages have been described in the work of early literacy educators (Sulzby 1992; Morrow 2011) as follows: drawings, scribbles, letter linked forms, patterned letter strings, invented spelling, and conventional writing. During the emergent writing stage, children experience the writing process with the intention of creating meaning, even before an understanding of the alphabetic principle has developed and despite the fact that their writing attempts are not conventional yet (Bradford and Wyse 2010). According to Zecker (1999), children develop their emergent literacy skills by experimenting with three aspects of written language: (1) the visual or graphic aspects of writing, (2) the symbolic nature of writing, and (3) the different characteristics of various genres.

Emergent writing components

Emergent writing instruction is often a combination of varying degrees of four components (a) mechanisms of writing, (b) concepts of writing, (c) conventions of writing, and (d) composing (Muzevich 1999). These components are important in developing children's emergent literacy skills and reflecting developmental perspectives in writing instruction (Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis 1989).

Mechanisms of writing refer to strategies that young children use in the writing process, such as the manipulation of the instrument of writing using their motor skills, hand-eye coordination, visual sensation associated with letter sounds, etc. Encouraging young

children to write without worrying about the mechanisms of writing is an important step towards developing children's emergent writing skills (Moxley 1982).

Concepts of writing describe children's basic knowledge of how written language works. They include children's awareness of language directions (top to bottom and right to left), knowing the function of spacing and the stop, grasping punctuation marks, understanding of how alphabet letters come together to represent sounds in words ... etc. (Clay 2000). According to Abdullah (2002), young children need to be exposed to concepts of writing through early writing development, as understanding this concept of writing increases their understanding of the function of written language.

Conventions of writing refer to children's abilities to recognise the rules of writing because children view writing as the main communication tool. As described by Sulzby (1992), children's writing takes different types of forms such as drawing pictures, scribbling, making letters, and/or making letter – like marks, invented spelling, etc. Thus, it is very important for children to develop an understanding that their writing could be read by others and so they need teachers to provide them with many writing opportunities to develop their conventions of writing. 'Children also need teachers' assistance in mastering the conventions of writing and in making transition from idiosyncratic symbols to phonetically consistent representation' (Kozulin 2003, 107).

Composing refers to children's independent attempts at writing, including learning the purposes of writing such as making lists, creating emergent stories, writing simple sentences, making shopping lists ... etc. (Sowers 2000). Teachers need to allow children to select their own writing topics and provide them with as many opportunities as possible to help them grow as writers, regardless of the quality of their writings (Morrow 2011).

It is difficult to promote children's emergent writing skills without carefully preparing them for early writing instruction (Muzevich 1999). In their joint position statement, the IRA and NAEYC (1998) stressed that an important aspect of emergent literacy is a teacher's demonstration of the writing process and students' active participation in it. Researchers have stressed that acquiring an understanding of the development of emergent writing skills helps teachers promote developmentally appropriate writing practice and learning (Neuman, Bredekamp, and Copple 2000).

The role of early childhood teachers in the emergent literacy stage is crucial since children in the preschool stage will not write conventionally nor will their written work approach the adult level. For that reason, early childhood teacher education programmes, as recommended by Batchelor et al. (2014), should encourage teachers to develop knowledge and understanding about writing and to view it as an important literacy construct beyond handwriting, beyond journaling, and beyond their own past experiences with writing. In this context, Morrow (2011) proposed that teachers need to accept and encourage their children's writing attempts, regardless of whether these attempts consist of drawings, scribbles, creating random letters, or using invented spelling. When children are engaged in their written attempts, it is important for kindergarten teachers to observe, accept their works, and provide them with appropriate responses (Dailey 1991).

The study context

In recent years, the State of Qatar has witnessed a growing interest in children's learning and development. As a result, educational plans, programmes, and curricula have

changed. In 2007, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) (equivalent to the UK's Department for Education or to the US's Department of Education) introduced a new kindergarten curriculum entitled *Early Years Good Practice and Foundation Curriculum*. This curriculum is based on advanced early years theories and practices (SEC 2011). A recent study conducted by Al-Maadadi and Ihmeideh (2014), to assess reading and writing experiences in this curriculum based on developmentally appropriate practice criteria, showed that main literacy components (e.g. phonological awareness, concepts of print, reading aloud, letters and words knowledge, and early writing) were strongly reflected in that curriculum. With this said, however, most of these components in general and in early writing in particular were almost absent from the designed learning units. Moreover, there were few guidelines and instructions related to the kindergarten teachers' roles in helping children develop their emergent literacy ability.

The degree to which emergent writing is supported in kindergartens is dependent on teachers' perspectives, beliefs, or attitudes towards its value and its appropriate place. Previous research (e.g. Cunningham, Zibulsky, and Callahan 2009; Mather, Bos, and Babur 2001) pointed out that early childhood teachers may not promote children's emergent literacy skills because they lack knowledge and expertise. Educational literature shows that teacher beliefs about early literacy learning not only influence the classroom practices, but also shape the perceptions of young children regarding the nature of reading and writing (Wing 1989; Fang 1996).

Research questions

In an effort to better understand kindergarten teachers' beliefs of emergent writing, the following two research questions were addressed:

1. What are the beliefs of kindergarten teachers regarding children's emergent writing?
2. What factors, such as qualifications, areas of specialisation, years of teaching experience, and preschool teaching level, influence kindergarten teachers' beliefs about emergent writing?

Method

Population and sample

The target population for this study was defined as all kindergarten teachers working in government-funded and private schools in Doha, the capital of Qatar, and its vicinity. The accessible population consisted of a total of approximately 823 kindergarten teachers during the academic year 2013/2014. The sample for this study consisted of a total of 123 kindergarten teachers who volunteered to participate in it; this represented 10% of the population. Eighty-nine kindergarten teachers were from government-funded schools (12% of this sub-population), while 43 teachers came from private schools (3% of this sub-population). The kindergarten teachers involved in this study teach kindergarten children at two preschool teaching levels: Level 1 (children aged 4–5) and Level 2 (children aged 5–6). A total of 93 (out of 123) teachers completed the survey (a response rate of 75%). The kindergarten teachers were randomly chosen without knowing their approach

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics ($N = 93$).

Variable	Frequency and percentage of total (93)
Qualifications	21 Diploma degree (22.6%), 72 bachelor degree (77.4%)
Area of specialisation	44 Early years-related specialisation (47.3%), 22 general education (23.7%), 27 early years-unrelated specialisation (29%)
Years of teaching	40 Below 5 years (43%), 22 (5–10 years; 23.7%), 31 more than 10 years (33.3%)
Preschool teaching level	28 Level 1 (30.1%), 65 Level 2 (69.9%)

to the teaching of writing and even without knowing their level of interest in writing. [Table 1](#) shows the respondents' characteristics relevant to the study described here.

Instrumentation

To investigate kindergarten teachers' beliefs of emergent writing in Qatari preschool settings, a survey questionnaire was developed by the researchers. A comprehensive review of the literature concerning early writing development was used as a source for designing the questionnaire. The survey questionnaire consists of two sections. The demographic section asks for respondents' demographic characteristics, such as qualifications, years of teaching experience, and areas of specialisation. The second section includes 30 items related to kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the development of emergent writing skills. The 30 items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranged as follows: 5 = always, 4 = often, 3 = sometimes, 2 = seldom, and 1 = never. These components were as follows: mechanisms of writing (seven items), concepts of writing (eight items), conventions of writing (eight items), and composing (seven items) (see sample questionnaire items in [Table 2](#)).

Validity and reliability of the instrument

To ensure the equivalence of meaning of the items between the Arabic and English versions of the questionnaire, translation and back-translation were employed by the researchers who are bilingual in English and Arabic. The purpose was to ensure that the meaning of the items was close to the original version. After the translation process, the instrument was given to a group of six referees at Qatar University to assess its validity. Furthermore, the instrument was field tested, with 15 kindergarten teachers who were not included in the sample. Changes indicated by the validation panel and field test were taken

Table 2. Sample questionnaire items on teachers' beliefs of children's emergent writing.

Component	No.	Sample item
Mechanisms of writing	3	Allow children to experiment with different types of writing instruments
	12	Encourage children to write without a worry about the mechanism of writing
Concepts of writing	7	Develop children's awareness of language directions (top to bottom and right to left)
	30	Develop children's understandings of the function of empty space in establishing word boundaries
Conventions of writing	9	Recognise that writing for children means drawing pictures, making letters, and/or making letter – like marks
	28	Provide many writing opportunities for children to prepare them to become successful readers
Composing	14	Allow children to select their own writing topics
	21	Encourage writing for specific purposes (i.e. letters, notes, lists, poems, class book, and stories)

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for the emergent writing components.

Component	Mean	Standard deviation	α
Mechanisms of writing	4.10	.82	.88
Concepts of writing	4.28	.71	.89
Conventions of writing	3.52	.76	.80
Composing	3.16	.71	.81
Total	3.77	.47	.87

into consideration during the development of the instrument, as some items were added and others removed. In terms of reliability, the internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) was used for each component and for the total number of components. Their calculated alpha coefficients ranged from .80 to .89 (see Table 3), which indicated that the reliability levels were satisfactory in all components (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991).

Data collection

The study was conducted over one academic semester (February–May 2014) at private and government-funded schools in Doha. Official permission from the SEC to administer the questionnaire to the respondents was obtained. All respondents were met either on the kindergarten's campus or on the Qatar University's campus where they attend training programmes. They were asked to participate in the study, informed about the aim of the study, and encouraged to respond truthfully to all items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was thoroughly explained ahead of distribution. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and that their identities would not be divulged under any circumstances. After delivering the questionnaires to the kindergarten teachers, an appointment was made to collect them three to four days later.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics using the mean scores and standard deviations were utilised to answer the first research question concerning kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's emergent writing. To answer the second question, concerning differences between teachers' beliefs about children's emergent writing and demographic characteristics, Independent *t*-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed.

Findings

Findings pertaining to the first research question

The first research question was related to kindergarten teachers' beliefs about emergent writing in children. To answer this research question, means and standard deviations were used. As shown in Table 3, the overall mean score for the scale was 3.77, indicating positive beliefs toward emergent writing in early years. The concept of writing dimension had the highest mean (4.28), followed by the mechanisms of writing dimension (4.10), and the conventions of writing dimension (3.52). The composing dimension had the lowest mean (3.16).

Table 4. Results of the *t*-test according to qualification.

Component	Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Concepts of writing	Diploma's degree	21	3.6548	.78949	−2.953	.004*
	Bachelor's degree	72	4.2378	.79809		

**p* < .05

Findings pertaining to the second research question

The second research question investigated whether there were statistically significant differences among kindergarten teachers' beliefs in emergent writing according to demographic characteristics. The following four variables were examined: (a) qualifications, (b) areas of specialisation, (c) years of teaching, and (d) preschool level. To examine the differences among kindergarten teachers regarding qualifications and preschool teaching level, a *t*-test for an independent sample was used, while a one-way ANOVA was performed to examine the differences among kindergarten teachers in the areas of specialisation and years of teaching.

Kindergarten teachers in this study were divided into two categories: teachers who hold a diploma degree (a qualification granted by a community college and typically completed over 2 years of full-time study) and teachers who hold a bachelor's degree (a qualification granted by a university and typically completed over 4 years of full-time study). As shown in Table 4, the results of the *t*-test indicated that there were statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level regarding concepts of writing between kindergarten teachers with a diploma degree and teachers with a bachelor's degree in favour of bachelor's degree holders. However, there were no significant differences between kindergarten teachers with a diploma degree and teachers with a bachelor's degree on other components, nor on the total of the scale. With regard to years of teaching experience, the results of the one-way ANOVA showed that there were no statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level on all components, nor on the total of the scale concerning years of teaching experience. With regard to the areas of specialisation, the results of the one-way ANOVA showed that there were no statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level between the study's components. Finally, the results of the *t*-test (Table 5) indicated that there were statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level between kindergarten teachers who taught Level 1 (children aged 4–5) and teachers who taught Level 2 (children aged 5–6) in favour of those who taught Level 2.

Discussion

There is no doubt that kindergarten teachers' beliefs about early writing development can influence children's abilities to learn to write. Therefore, exploring the beliefs of Qatari kindergarten teachers about children's emergent literacy skills was the primary objective of the present study.

Table 5. Results of the *t*-test according to preschool teaching level.

Component	Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
The total	Level 1	28	3.5341	.40624	−3.300	.001*
	Level 2	65	3.8733	.47355		

**p* < .05

Across the whole sample and all emergent writing components, the results indicated that kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the development of children's emergent literacy were positive. It seems apparent that kindergarten teachers are aware of the development of writing in early years. This result is consistent with the work of Muzevich (1999), who indicated that kindergarten teachers held strong positive beliefs and perceptions regarding the importance of early writing and were emergent writing oriented. It is worth mentioning that after Qatar's educational reform initiative (Education for a New Era) started in May 2001, the Qatari early childhood curriculum has witnessed changes and emergent literacy components were included in *Early Years Good Practice and Foundation Curriculum* (SEC 2011) and were later reflected in kindergarten teachers' beliefs.

Kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the development of emergent writing were higher when related to concepts of writing, followed by mechanisms of writing and conventions of writing. Most early childhood teachers expose children to letters, words, and books to help them develop their early writing skills. The reason behind this may be due to prevalent beliefs about teaching writing in early years, which assumed that in order for children to learn how to read, they must acquire pre-reading and writing skills, such as concepts of writing and mechanisms of writing (Sulzby and Teale 1991; Morrow 2011).

However, composing ranked as least important among kindergarten teachers' perceptions. This result reflects the fact that teachers place little value on composing compared with other emergent writing components. This result may be because teachers might still teach writing in the same way that children are taught at the primary stage, which places more emphasis on academic skills. However, kindergarten teachers may still place emphasis on the fact that children should master some readiness skills before being involved in the writing process. Even when children are involved in writing activities, writing is restricted to formatting letters, with some reading readiness skills taught in a developmentally inappropriate way (e.g. writing on the line, copying the teachers or textbook models through worksheets). This result was supported by the work of Ihmeideh, Al-Basheer, and Al-Momani (2008) who found that teachers who teach writing in an inappropriate way were more readiness reading philosophy-oriented in their perceptions.

Demographic variables and group differences

The second research question investigated whether any statistically significant differences exist between the means of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about emergent writing in kindergarten children in relation to differences in demographic characteristics. With regard to qualifications, the results indicated that statistically significant differences exist at the (.05) alpha level in favour of the kindergarten teachers with bachelor's degrees. This result might be explained in light of the kindergarten teachers' education programmes, as programmes involving bachelor's degrees may be more likely to expose students to the development of literacy in their courses. This result is not unexpected, as the SEC has introduced a number of educational reforms, one of which is the enhanced programme of professional learning for staff employed in schools (SEC 2009). Almost two-thirds of the teachers in Gilbert and Graham's (2010) study reported that their university teacher preparation programmes did little to prepare them to teach writing in an appropriate way. Moreover, the results indicated that there were no statistically significant

differences at the .05 alpha level with regard to years of teaching experience. This finding differed from the results of past research (Hindman and Wasik 2008; Mackenzie, Hemmings, and Kay 2011; Simmerman et al. 2012) which suggested that teaching experience was found to be significantly related to teachers' attitudes and beliefs of early literacy development. For instance, Simmerman et al. (2012) found that teachers with more years of teaching experience emphasised the mechanics of writing more than their colleagues with fewer years of teaching experience. This may be caused by the same circumstances found in the Qatari preschool settings in terms of pre-service training programmes and on-going professional development provided by the SEC.

Additionally, the results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level with regard to area of specialisation. This was not expected, since previous research (Snider and Fu 1990; Vartuli 1999) found that kindergarten teachers with early years-related specialisation are more likely to hold appropriate beliefs and practices than their counterparts without the same specialisations. According to IRA and NAEYC (1998), policy-makers should require specialised early childhood preparation in order to achieve developmentally appropriate literacy experience.

Finally, the results indicated that there were statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level with regard to kindergarten level between teachers who teach Level 1 and those who teach Level 2, in favour of those who teach Level 2. This result was expected since kindergarten teachers who teach Level 2 children are more likely to expose them to early writing activities as they may assume that Level 2 children have mastered the readiness skills for conventional orthography. This is consistent with the view of Randolph and Robertson (1995, 76), 'If we do not begin early writing activities with children, we are contributing to the anti-writing attitudes some children may develop later'.

Conclusion

Although kindergarten teachers in this study believed that children should be exposed to early writing experience, their opinions differed regarding which emergent writing components are the most important to use. The organisations that administer early years education (the SEC in this context) should play a crucial role in emphasising all emergent literacy components in early years settings. The kindergarten teachers expressed the need to prepare their children to write from very early ages, but they appear to lack a cohesive theoretical basis for what their children need in order to start their journey towards writing. In this regard, professional development is important to provide kindergarten teachers with adequate knowledge about early literacy practices. Moreover, early childhood education study plans at universities need to be reviewed so as to ensure that these programmes include all emergent writing elements, such as composing to promote children's emergent writing skills. It is important to identify when and how children should be exposed to each component.

This research suggests the need for further investigation using qualitative studies to obtain a complete picture of the development of children's emergent writing skills, as perceived by teachers, principals, and children themselves. Another fruitful avenue of research could be to examine the effect of teachers' beliefs on children's emergent writing abilities through experimental approaches. This research could be done by assessing children's writing abilities in an experimental group (taught by emergent

writing-oriented teachers, in comparison to children in a control group (taught by readiness philosophy-oriented teachers. Finally, this study should be replicated throughout the country by comparing kindergarten teachers from diverse backgrounds to increase the understanding of emergent writing development in different backgrounds and regions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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