

## **WRITING INSTRUCTION IN CANADIAN PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY GRADES: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **L'enseignement de l'écriture aux niveaux préscolaire et primaire au Canada : une revue des écrits**

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#### Résumé de l'article

Cet article résume les résultats d'une revue des écrits portant sur les questions suivantes : Dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'écriture, quelles stratégies se sont avérées efficaces pour développer les habiletés en écriture des élèves de niveaux préscolaire et primaire ? Quelles recherches portant sur l'enseignement de l'écriture ont été réalisées auprès des enfants d'âge préscolaire et primaire ? La recension des recherches canadiennes démontre que peu de projets de recherche portent sur l'enseignement de l'écriture au préscolaire-primaire. Les courants pédagogiques en enseignement de l'écriture se retrouvent au sein des six axes suivants : habiletés, créativité, processus, genre, pratiques sociales et sociopolitique. Bien que les recherches réalisées au Canada représentent tous les axes, elles étaient peu nombreuses. De plus, des problématiques importantes comme le fossé existant entre les communautés urbaines / rurales et les élèves d'origine autochtone / non-autochtones en terme de réussite scolaire ne sont pas explorées.

# WRITING INSTRUCTION IN CANADIAN PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY GRADES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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**ABSTRACT.** This article reports on the results of a literature review addressing the research questions: What strategies for writing instruction have proven to be effective in promoting writing development in preschool-primary aged children? What research on writing instruction has been conducted within Canada on preschool-primary aged children? An examination of Canadian research reveals a significant lack of studies in the area of preschool-primary writing instruction. Theories of writing pedagogy are situated within a framework of six discourses: skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and sociopolitical. While the Canadian research represented all discourses, it was lacking in number and did not yet address such important areas as the literacy achievement gaps between urban / rural and Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal students.

## L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ÉCRITURE AUX NIVEAUX PRÉSCOLAIRE ET PRIMAIRE AU CANADA : UNE REVUE DES ÉCRITS

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article résume les résultats d'une revue des écrits portant sur les questions suivantes : Dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'écriture, quelles stratégies se sont avérées efficaces pour développer les habiletés en écriture des élèves de niveaux préscolaire et primaire ? Quelles recherches portant sur l'enseignement de l'écriture ont été réalisées auprès des enfants d'âge préscolaire et primaire ? La recension des recherches canadiennes démontre que peu de projets de recherche portent sur l'enseignement de l'écriture au préscolaire-primaire. Les courants pédagogiques en enseignement de l'écriture se retrouvent au sein des six axes suivants : habiletés, créativité, processus, genre, pratiques sociales et sociopolitique. Bien que les recherches réalisées au Canada représentent tous les axes, elles étaient peu nombreuses. De plus, des problématiques importantes comme le fossé existant entre les communautés urbaines / rurales et les élèves d'origine autochtone / non-autochtones en terme de réussite scolaire ne sont pas explorées.

Writing, defined as “compositions made up of symbols that communicate meaning to others for particular purposes” (Peterson, 2008, p. 57), is of great importance to the work and social lives of all members of society. Effective writing skills are “not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 11). Despite its importance, writing is considered to be the “Neglected ‘R’” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools & Colleges, 2003, p. 9), with less and less time devoted to its instruction in the classroom (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Students are at a considerable disadvantage if they lack the ability to write well.

Writing skills were last assessed on a national level in Canada in 2002: “At that time, approximately 60% of 16-year olds reached the grade level expectations or beyond and approximately 40% of 13-year olds reached this level” (Peterson & McClay, 2014, p. 20). In order to address writing deficiencies, a focus on laying a strong foundation in writing skills and addressing writing challenges during the primary years is essential (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Cutler and Graham (2008) reported that, “There is a growing consensus that waiting until later grades to address literacy problems that have their origin at the primary level is not particularly successful” (p. 908). By focusing on the preschool-primary grades teachers can build strong foundational literacy skills as well as provide opportunities where children will come to enjoy writing and see the value in it.

Evidence-based instruction in writing will maximize the writing development of all students, as well as minimize the number of those who will experience difficulty in acquiring this skill (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2007). This review uses an analytic framework presented by Roz Ivanic (2004) in order to examine research on writing and learning to write. The framework was developed “over a number of years by working to and fro between evidence of pedagogic practices, evidence of beliefs, and theories of language and literacy” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 224) and provides an effective context for understanding the many approaches and theoretical underpinnings of writing development and instruction. The purpose of the current literature review is to identify what practices have shown to be effective in writing instruction for preschool-primary grade children, and more specifically to examine what is empirically known on this subject in the Canadian research literature. Non-Canadian studies are included in order to get a sense of the field as a whole, allowing deeper investigation of research being conducted in the Canadian context. In order to improve the writing performance of Canadian children it is critical to identify effective, culturally appropriate instructional practices for young, emergent writers.

The goal of this literature review is to investigate the following research questions:

1. What strategies for writing instruction have proven to be effective in promoting writing development specifically in preschool-primary aged children (i.e., preschool to Grade 3)?
2. What research on writing instruction has been conducted within Canada on preschool-primary aged children?

SELECTION AND INCLUSIONARY CRITERIA OF RELEVANT STUDIES

A meticulous review of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and ProQuest Education Journals databases was undertaken in order to retrieve relevant studies. These databases were chosen because, although not explicitly Canadian, they are prominent widely used databases for educational research and literature supporting the theory and practice of education. Search terms included a variety of combinations of key terms: *writing*, *early writing*, *emergent writing*, combined with *instruction*, *teaching*, and *intervention*. In addition, an electronic search of four key peer reviewed journals relevant to the field of study (*Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Journal of Writing Research*, *Written Communication*, and the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*) was conducted. Bibliographies of these studies were then reviewed in order to identify additional relevant resources which were then included in the database. The inclusionary criteria set for the current review are set out in Table 1:

TABLE 1. *Inclusionary criteria set*

Criteria	Clarification
English-language peer reviewed articles Research conducted within Canada	
Published between 1980 to the present	To capture literature produced during a time of increased productivity in research on writing. In the 1980s views of writing moved from a focus on technical skills and the written product, to an understanding of the cognitive / social processes involved in writing (e.g., Flower & Hayes, 1981, Nystrand, 1982). The 1990s introduced a more comprehensive observation that writing is embedded within social / cultural / historic contexts (e.g., Nystrand, 2006; Prior, 2006).
Primary research	E.g., not a review or opinion piece
Age range of participants in the study ranging from preschool-primary aged children	I.e., ages 3-0 to 9-0; or preschool-Grade 3

The review revealed only 11 Canadian studies that met the criteria. All of these Canadian studies were examined to reveal what is empirically known and not known about effective writing pedagogy in the context of preschool-primary grade Canadian classrooms. Due to the lack of Canadian research,

a selection of relevant research from non-Canadian sources is discussed to illustrate the different theoretical frameworks currently being used in writing and the teaching of writing in preschool-primary grade settings. Table 2 in Appendix A provides a summary of the focus, findings, and discourses of the 11 Canadian studies.

## EFFECTIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY FOR PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY GRADE CHILDREN

Writing and learning to write are complex tasks. A review of the literature reveals a multitude of differing theories of writing and a variety of pedagogical techniques for teaching writing. Ivanic (2004) presented an effective framework for understanding and analyzing this information in which connections “are drawn across views of language, views of writing, views of learning to write, approaches to the teaching of writing, and approaches to the assessment of writing” (p. 220). Underpinning the framework is Ivanic’s (2004) view of language which consists of four interdependent layers: 1) text, 2) cognitive processes, 3) event, and 4) sociocultural and political context. This model is visualized using four concentric rectangles with *text* (i.e., the linguistic elements of language) being the center, embedded within and inseparably linked, with mental and social characteristics. The next layer, *cognitive processes*, identifies the mental processing of meaning-making that is implicit within the production and comprehension of language. The third layer, *event*, describes the specific social context of the language use (e.g., purpose, social interaction, time, and place). The final layer, *sociocultural and political context*, refers to the larger context of culture and encompasses “the socioculturally available resources for communication: the multimodal practices, discourses and genres which are supported by the cultural context within which language use is taking place, and the patterns of privileging and relations of power among them” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 224). Ivanic’s model is useful in that it offers a comprehensive view of language, addressing not only the text itself but the multitude of factors in the production and comprehension of the text.

Through this multi-layered view of language, Ivanic (2004) provides an effective framework for identifying six discourses regarding writing and the learning of writing: (1) skills discourse, (2) creativity discourse, (3) process discourse, (4) genre discourse, (5) social practices discourse, and (6) sociopolitical discourse. *Discourses of writing* are defined by Ivanic (2004) as “constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and the sorts of approaches to teaching and assessment which are likely to be associated with these beliefs” (p. 224). Each of these is explained in turn.

### *Skills discourse*

The *skills discourse of writing* instruction focuses on the learning of the rules and patterns of writing conventions in a decontextualized manner. Explicit and prescriptive teaching of punctuation, spelling, and grammar is emphasized and assessment practices centre on accuracy and correct usage of these conventions. As symbolized by the smallest unit of Ivanic's multi-layered view of language, these skills, although important, represent only a small part of good writing (Ivanic, 2004; Peterson, 2012). Underlying the skills approaches to writing instruction, though, is the belief that the correctness of the letters (e.g., "phonics"), words (e.g., sound-symbol relationship), sentences (e.g., syntactic patterns), and text formations (e.g., cohesion within paragraphs) constitutes good writing. The skills discourse (as per Ivanic) is identifiable in "references to 'skills', spelling, punctuation and grammar, in expressions such as 'correct', 'accurate', 'proper', 'learners must / should', in the explicit and prescriptive teaching of rules, and in an emphasis on accuracy in assessment" (Ivanic, 2004, p. 228).

*English-language Studies (exclusive of Canada).* Campbell's (1994) study in a grade 1 classroom showed that instruction in syntax and grammar helped students move from written forms that were closer to spoken language to writing more complex sentences. Also aligned with this skills discourse is the work of Berninger et al. (2002). They examined teaching spelling alone and in combination with composition skills with struggling writers in grade 3, theorizing that problems in written expression may stem from students' inability to spell the words that are necessary to express ideas. "Increasing spelling skill may improve written expression because children's spelling becomes recognizable by others, leading to increased motivation to communicate using written language" (Berninger et al., 2002, p. 291). They found that instruction in spelling alone as well as spelling combined with composition increased compositional fluency (however, the combined treatment showed the greatest effect).

*Canadian studies.* A Canadian study by Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005) emphasized the importance of teaching writing along with emerging reading skills and highlighted the positive impact of a school-supported family literacy program. Parents of first-grade students were invited to participate in workshops where they learned to, among other things, support writing activities at home. The workshops emphasized how children learn to write, the importance of encouraging invented spelling, playing with letters (e.g., ordering, identifying, making words) and the creation of a box of personal words and an alphabet book. The introduction of a dialogue journal activity showed the importance of communicating a message: "by putting the journal in an easily accessible place, writing short messages on various subjects, questions, sweet messages, congratulations, jokes and secrets" (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005, p. 262). Although the functional aspect of the dialogue journal implies a *social practices* discourse to writing, the assessment criteria for the study indicated that the

accuracy of writing conventions was the focus for improvement (i.e., skills discourse). The measure of writing achievement “consisted of a written narrative rated on seven aspects: (1) content of information, (2) sentence structure, (3) vocabulary, (4) spelling, (5) handwriting, (6) length of the text, and (7) total score” (p. 265). The results of this study indicated that the family literacy program had a positive impact on writing scores. “In particular, children produced texts with better sentence structure and spelling and a more precise and varied vocabulary. Their texts were longer than those of all other children” (p. 269).

### *Creativity discourse*

The *creativity discourse of writing* also emphasizes the written text; however, content and style are the main focus rather than linguistic features. The mental processes of writers are involved as they engage in meaning-making. Within the creativity discourse, writing is associated with the belief that children will learn to write by writing and therefore, should write as much as possible (e.g., Graves, 2004). Ivanic (2004) discussed two sub-beliefs within this view of learning to write. First, “the opportunity to write on interesting, inspiring, and personally relevant topics” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 229) encourages more writing and thus, development as a writer. Second, good writing is modeled by examples (implying implicit learning), and these models provide a stimulus for writing. Most of the written content is derived from personal experience (e.g., places, events, topics of interest) and result in a personal narrative. Feedback on writing provides opportunities for growth. Good writing is identified as that which adheres to modelled literature and is assessed for content, style, and its ability to arouse the “interest, imagination or emotions of the reader” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 230). This discourse includes approaches referred to as “whole language” and “language experience” and can be identified in references to “‘creative writing’, ‘the writer’s voice’, ‘story’, ‘interesting content’, [and] ‘good vocabulary / words’” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 230).

*English-language studies (exclusive of Canada).* Genishi, Stires, and Yung-Chan (2001) discussed the benefits of adopting the creativity discourse within a prekindergarten classroom. The writing center was a frequent choice among the children in this class. The teacher observed:

I believe their enthusiasm comes from both the pleasure of making marks on paper and from the response they get. I recognize that the “writing” will take a number of different forms that include scribbling, drawing, random letters, or invented spelling. All of it is appropriate, and I accept it according to the levels of the children’s literary experiences and development. (p. 406)

The teacher responded with encouragement and support to the children’s drawing or writing, making suggestions for additional details. With the understanding that preschoolers use a variety of symbols for making and expressing meaning, the teacher’s goal was to help “students eventually gain control over these forms of expression so that they can use them most effectively” (Genishi et al., 2001, p. 410).

*Canadian studies.* Conducted during the heyday of the whole language approach (which has been associated with the creativity and process discourses), Gunderson and Shapiro (1988) observed two grade 1 classrooms in order to provide support for whole language instruction. Students were provided many opportunities to write within a writing-rich environment and in response to theme-based units of study. The skills discourse was also apparent in teachers' instruction in phonics relationships and spelling. Students showed "tremendous growth in writing ability" as evidenced by the production of a large volume of writing, increased vocabulary, and moving from producing "strings of letter forms.... [to] writing fairly understandable text with many conventional forms of spelling, spacing, and punctuation" (Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988, p. 434) within the span of three months.

Another Canadian study by Juliebo and Edwards (1988) at around the same time examined the effect of topic choice on narrative writing. Drawing on previous research the researchers posited that the opportunity for students to choose their topics would result in the production of higher quality compositions. Contrary to expectation, the longitudinal study spanning grades 1 to 3 revealed that when students choose their own topics, they did not necessarily produce better texts than with a directed topic.

Many children in the preschool-primary age range are just beginning to be able to articulate their language and literacy experiences through written tasks. Kendrick and McKay's (2004) study used drawings to investigate the ideas about reading and writing of Canadian children in grades 1 and 2. Drawings are an early representation of experience and stimulate the impulse to create stories (Vygotsky, 1978). As observed by Newkirk (2000), "primary-school children regularly break into print by making elaborate drawings with a label at the bottom — print literacy being pulled in the wake of the visual" (p. 297). Upon being shown the drawings created by their students, the teachers in Kendrick and McKay's (2004) study were "overwhelmingly surprised that their students were able to express complex understanding of reading and writing, which were apparently not evident in classroom language arts activities" (p. 123). These unique texts created by the children in the study are characteristic of the creativity discourse of writing and learning to write.

### *Process discourse*

The *process discourse of writing* utilizes the writers' mental processes during writing (e.g., decision making) and combines them with the practical processes of planning, drafting, revising, and editing (i.e., the processes and procedures for the development of written composition). Ivancic (2004) claimed that the cognitive processes involved are learned implicitly, while the practical processes of composing text are responsive to explicit teaching and feedback. Assessment of this aspect of writing is difficult as the cognitive processes involved in writing are really only a means to an end (i.e., a successful written product). This



discourse is revealed in “verbs and verbal nouns such as ‘plan’, ‘draft’, ‘revision’, ‘collaborate/ion’, ‘editing’, in other expressions referring to more sophisticated subtleties of the composing process” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 232).

*English-language studies (exclusive of Canada).* The process approach to writing instruction has been shown to be effective in the development of writing in multiple studies. Chase (2012) reported that kindergarten students effectively utilized the revision process during a study of birds. With the understanding that drawing is a part of emergent writing, the teacher had the students complete a minimum of four drafts; the culminating projects resulted in detailed and sophisticated scientific drawings of owls. Drawings were successfully used as a story-planning strategy in a class of grade two students who struggled with writing, as reported in a study by Dunn (2011). Studies have also found that with the addition of instruction in self-regulation strategies students with behavioural disorders can benefit from instructional practices within the process discourse (Adkins & Gavins, 2012; Graham, Harris & Mason, 2005; Harris et al., 2012).

*Canadian studies.* Peterson and Portier (2014) focused on the effects of peer and teacher feedback on student writing in a grade 1 class. The teacher in the study “modelled and provided examples of effective feedback and good writing in whole-class and small-group lessons and in her own one-on-one verbal feedback on student writing” (Peterson & Portier, 2014, p. 237). Students engaged in formal peer-feedback sessions and, as a result of teacher modeling and feedback, provided useful suggestions for revision of each other’s work (with a focus on content rather than on writing conventions). Regardless of writing ability, all students were able to contribute useful feedback. Examination of initial drafts and subsequent revised writing resulting from peer and teacher feedback revealed that students incorporated many of the suggestions from their peers in the revised product. Indeed, “students took advantage of the opportunity to learn through revising, as they revised their writing in response to 90% of teacher and peer feedback” (Peterson & Portier, 2014, p. 255).

### *Genre discourse*

The *genre discourse of writing* focuses not only on the product but also emphasizes attention to the specific purpose of the writing within a particular social context (i.e., the writing event). Good writing is not only correct, but also “linguistically appropriate to the purpose it is serving” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 233). Explicit instruction has shown to be useful in identifying the linguistic features of different types of text in order to effectively reproduce them (Graham & Harris, 2005). In the genre approach, the

“target” text-types [e.g., narrative, expository] are modelled, linguistic terminology is taught in order to generalize about the nature of such texts, and learners are encouraged to use this information to construct (rather than “compose”) their own texts in the same genre. (Ivanic, 2004, p. 233)

Student assessment within this discourse focuses on appropriacy: the application of appropriate linguistic characteristics to their particular written product (i.e., to achieve the identified purpose in the specified social context). This discourse of writing is identified “by references to linguistics, names for text-types such as ‘Recount’, linguistic terminology such as ‘nominalisation’, ‘passive’, [and] references to ‘appropriacy’” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 234).

*English-language studies (exclusive of Canada).* Quality models of literature were read, examined for literary techniques, and used as inspiration for writing by a class of seven-year-olds in a study by Dix and Amooore (2010). It was found that “children were highly motivated by the literature. They enjoyed listening and talking about the stories, becoming engrossed in elements of the narrative structure as the plot was played out” (p. 147). Enhanced oral language vocabulary and sentence patterns, and the ability to describe and compare in greater depth was evident as the children engaged with the stories. The literature provided effective models for quality written work and the development of a metalanguage of writing techniques emerged within the classroom. The children borrowed from the literature and took ownership of appealing phrases, applying them appropriately to their own writing. “These young authors were excited and motivated to write, they were keen to apprentice themselves to expert writers” (Dix & Amooore, 2010, p. 148).

*Canadian studies.* Pantaleo (2010) examined how the narrative competence of students in grades 3 and 4 in a Canadian classroom were developed through reading and writing metafictional texts. In the course of the research the students individually read 10-12 contemporary picture books containing metafictional devices and completed a written response to each. They then participated in small group discussions (listened to, and talked with others about the texts) and whole class activities (explicit instruction in metafictional devices) before creating their own written work with metafictional devices. Pantaleo (2010) reported that “the students’ written responses to the picture books, their conversations throughout the research, their own books, and their interviews about the latter, revealed that the students had learned a great deal about literary and artistic codes and conventions by participating in the research” (p. 275). As characterized by the *genre discourse* to writing, this success resulted from explicitly learning the features of different types of writing and the purposes they served in specific social contexts.

### *Social practices discourse*

Within the *social practices discourse*, the writing event itself is important (as opposed to a focus on the writing processes or the linguistic features of the event as seen in the process and genre discourses respectively). Here, the text and the composition processes are inseparable from the social writing event and social purposes / context for the writing itself. Writing is considered as a collection of social practices: “patterns of participation, gender preferences, networks of support and collaboration, patterns of use of time, space, tools,

technology and resources, the interaction of writing with reading and of written language with other semiotic modes, the symbolic meanings of literacy, and the broader social goals which literacy serves in the lives of people and institutions” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 234). Purposeful participation in the social context of the writing event and meeting relevant / meaningful social goals via writing leads to the implicit learning of writing. Learners are provided with an authentic writing task (real-life or simulated, for example, preparing a resume, sending an email, cross-curricular learning) and taught explicitly how to create a written product to meet the requirements of the identified context. Within this discourse, good writing is determined by its effectiveness in achieving its specific social goal. This discourse is recognizable by references to “events, contexts, purposes and practices, to people, times, places, the technologies and material resources of writing, to the visual and physical characteristics of texts” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 237).

*English-language studies (exclusive of Canada).* Grade 3 students in Britsch’s (2005) study with e-pals “gained a sense of audience and choice, the kind of control that is essential for real writing” (p. 128). A study by Frank (2001) showed that teachers who are also writers / authors themselves often ground their practices in the social construction of what authors do, thus creating an environment where students can try on these social practices. In this study of second-grade students,

we observed Elliott discovering how to look like a writer when he sat on the author’s chair and was identified as an author. We saw how he acted as an author when he took his book to Kinkos to publish and how he talked like an author when he explained how to draw from the work of other authors. (Frank, 2001, p. 501)

These studies exemplify the social practices discourse as the writing was embedded within a real-life context with a genuine purpose.

*Canadian studies.* McKee and Heydon (2014) orchestrated authentic writing tasks in their *Intergenerational Digital Literacies Project*. Elders from a local rest home were paired with kindergarten children to work on multimodal projects that included the use of art, singing, and digital technologies. The overarching goals were to meet literacy curricular objectives and to cultivate community connections. The results of the study indicated that “the modality of the projects and the reciprocal intergenerational relationships forged in and through text-making afforded children opportunities to improvise and refine their print literacy practices as part of multimodal ensembles” (McKee & Heydon, 2014, p. 1). As characterized by the *social practices* discourse,

writing or reading within the ensembles was thus not practicing print literacy just to satisfy the desires of the teacher or move up a level as can often be the case in school...; rather, it was about satisfying the interests and ends of the child participants in relation to others within a *dialogic*. (McKee & Heydon, 2014, p. 25)

### *Sociopolitical discourse*

Closely aligned to the *social practices discourse* is the *sociopolitical discourse of writing*. This discourse is also concerned with the writing context, but additionally claims that writing “is a sociopolitically constructed practice, has consequences for identity, and is open to contestation and change” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 225). Within this discourse, learning to write involves the development of awareness as to “why different types of writing are the way they are, and taking a position among alternatives” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 225). These beliefs about writing adopt approaches such as “critical literacy,” whereby learning to write involves explicit teaching of sociopolitical justifications and consequences. Within the sociopolitical discourse, “Teachers encourage students to create texts that challenge and subvert conventional ways of thinking about the relative status of particular groups; texts that construct more powerful identities for all members of society” (Peterson, 2012, p. 268). Heffernan, Lewison, Tuyay, Yeager and Green (2005) stated that critical literacy is necessary because typical classroom literacy seldom leads to insight into how people are empowered, or disempowered, through the use of language within various social systems. This discourse is revealed in references to “politics, power, society, ideology, representation, identity, social action and social change” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 239).

An exemplary study within the sociopolitical discourse was conducted by McCloskey (2012), who reported that growth in critical literacy can be nurtured even at the preschool level. During interactive conversations and book making at the community writing center, a group of preschoolers “reconceptualised jail from being a place where ‘bad’ people are taken to a place that people are sometimes placed because they perform acts of social justice” (McCloskey, 2012, p. 369). As one of the preschoolers drew pictures of a classmate in jail for bad behavior, an authentic and meaningful conversation occurred with another classmate where she exclaimed, “Well guess what? My mom has gone to jail for um, for two times...because she was fighting for justice and they had to break up the row and the police put her in jail” (McCloskey, 2012, p. 375). The researcher continued to scaffold this perspective in order to support new learning. The result was preschoolers reframing their drawings of people in jail “as perhaps people who were standing up for issues of social justice” (McCloskey, 2012, p. 376). McCloskey (2012) suggested that an instructional approach for fostering critical literacy is simply allowing space for these discussions and practices to occur.

**Canadian context.** During her time reading stories to children in an elementary school in inner city Toronto, Canada (characterized by low income and high multiculturalism), Lotherington (2005) discovered that *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* was a class favorite. Grounded firmly in an ethnographer’s stance, she was curious about the appeal of this classic tale:

I started to wonder what made Goldilocks so attractive to these children. She was present in the story as a rather naughty little girl with pretty blonde hair, a colour I noted to be conspicuously absent in the gene pool of the children attending Main Street School. She was walking alone in the woods, an absolute no-no for urban children, who are often locked in their high rise apartments with the television on when parents are not available. What did a lonely cottage in the woods look like to children who lived in high density, publicly subsidized housing? They would not have seen a bear in Toronto, though the city is plagued with urbanized raccoons. And what on earth is porridge?

I asked the teachers what the children might understand of Goldilocks and her life in the woods, and the common link was thought to be the break-and-enter theme of the traditional tale. Rather horrified, but unsure of whether this was ultimately good or bad, I decided that it was time to digitally edit Goldilocks, to bring her into the 21<sup>st</sup> century of contemporary urban Toronto. (p. 111)

In a school whose mandate it was to increase opportunities for social equity for its students, the retelling of a traditional tale was expected to produce exciting new literature that reflected the variety of cultural identities present within the class. As Wolf (2004) points out, “The fairy tale has always been a critical site for shifting perceptions” (p. 180). Lotherington (2005) and Lotherington and Chow (2006) describe the process of rewriting Goldilocks in a grade 2 classroom. The researchers wanted the children to retell a traditional story grounded within the students’ individual contemporary reality. Significant to the concepts of *representation* and *identity* (as characterized within the sociopolitical discourse), an ideological shift was found in “listening to a teacher remark on the courage of a young child to color the face outlined on his screen brown – something she would never have had the bravado to try when she was in school as a minority student” (Lotherington & Chow, 2006, p. 248). Contrary to the expectation that the culture reflected within the retellings of Goldilocks would mirror the urban, multicultural reality of the children, most of the stories reflected the dominant culture of the students: digital and pop culture. For these students *culture* was Yu-Gi-Oh, Pokemon, and a Canadian television network: YTV (Lotherington & Chow, 2006). By bringing a sociopolitical discourse lens to the study, the researchers were able to invite the students to “reframe time-tested Eurocentric stories” (Lotherington & Chow, 2006, p. 248).

The sociopolitical discourse was also evident in a study by Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, and Cummins (2008). The authors call for a redefinition of the cultural and linguistic capital of Canadian immigrant families from a deficit model to a model where the global, national, and personal resources of these families are valued and hold power / knowledge within the curriculum. The success of their research project, which consisted of kindergarten students (in conjunction with their teacher and families) creating and publishing Dual Language Identity Texts can be seen in the following excerpt from the study:

Within this English-only, Eurocentric Canadian curriculum, the place Zohreh [a student whose parents were born in Pakistan] might be able to carve out for herself would be defined in relations to *who she is not* or *what she can not do*. This deficient or belated fractured identity is the familiar identity of 'the kid who can't speak English', 'the immigrant kid', the 'New Canadian' or 'the ESL kids'.... On the other hand, this project allowed for the shift in the constellation of power / knowledge / authority / identity in the curriculum: the composite identity defined by Zohreh's mother as she helps her daughter author her multi-layered autobiographical book is powerfully positioned in relation to a global vision of all she is, all she *can do*, all the communities of her active *memory, belonging and participation*. (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 286)

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This review of the literature provides some answers to the questions: What strategies for writing instruction have proven to be effective in promoting writing development specifically in preschool-primary aged children? What research on writing instruction has been conducted within Canada on preschool-primary aged children? Each question is re-visited in turn.

### *Effective strategies for writing instruction for preschool-primary aged children*

Until recently, instructional practices reflected the common belief that children were not yet ready to write upon entering kindergarten; "Meaningful instruction in writing was reserved for the first grade when the act of teaching writing was considered developmentally appropriate" (Heskial & Wamba, 2013, p. 53). Ivanic's (2004) *discourses of writing and learning to write* can provide an effective framework to examine research on writing and learning to write. The research shows that writing can be encouraged and developed within preschool settings by providing enjoyable opportunities to engage in conversations about writing, and creating writing, symbols, and drawings that reflect a variety of topics (e.g., Genishi et al., 2001; McCloskey, 2012).

### *Canadian research on writing instruction*

All of the Canadian studies that met the initial criteria were examined. This could be a limiting factor of this review as all studies were treated equally, regardless of the quality of research design and conclusions drawn.

**Discourses used.** An examination of the 11 studies reveals a good variety and number of discourses are being utilized within Canadian classrooms. However, these only represent 11 different classrooms at one point in time. Peterson (2012) analyzed the grade 6 curriculum across Canada in order to identify the presence (or lack thereof) of Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing and writing instruction within the curricular objectives. Her analysis revealed that, with the exception of Saskatchewan, the most prevalent perspective in specific curricular outcomes in all of the provinces and territories is the process discourse. Influential to a lesser degree are the creativity and genre discourses, except in

Saskatchewan where the predominant discourse is genre. The social practices and skills discourse are marginally influential, and the sociopolitical discourse is non-existent in all but the Northwest Territories and Saskatchewan curriculum outcomes. Regarding general curricular outcomes Peterson (2012) found that, “all of the curricula contain elements of the process and genre discourses. None of the general outcomes refers to sociopolitical discourse tenets and none of the curricula have elements of all discourses in their general outcomes” (p. 275).

Peterson (2012) speculated that since the sociopolitical discourse is a more recently developed concept and that it requires “teaching practices and understandings that go beyond teaching skills, creativity and genre conventions to examine issues of identity, power, ideology in students’ writing, and to encourage students to bring about social practices through writing” (p. 279) the implementation of this discourse may seem intimidating. It is encouraging to see that Canadian researchers and teachers (e.g., Lotherington, 2005; Lotherington & Chow, 2006; Taylor et al., 2008) are willing to engage in these new methods and investigate their value. An analysis such as Peterson’s (2012) on primary grade curriculum objectives would be informative as to its theoretical foundations.

*Time frame, geographic location, participants.* It is also encouraging to see that most of the Canadian research is current. With the exception of two studies (Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988; Juliebo & Edwards, 1988) all of the research was conducted within the last 10 years. This shows promise that writing instruction is on the “research radar” and is deemed important and something that must be investigated. Of concern, however, is the lack of research in geographically rural areas. All of the Canadian studies were undertaken in large, urban centres. Since a considerable amount of our population lives in rural Canada (depending upon the definition of rural, 19%-30% of Canadians, Statistics Canada, 2013), coupled with the disconcerting findings that rural writers are displaying weaker writing skills on writing assessments than their urban counterparts (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006), it is imperative that we investigate how writing development can be improved for students in rural Canada. The academic success of many young Aboriginal children is also of great concern as the existing literacy achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is further compounded by these students living in geographically remote areas (Alberta Education, 2008). Although Lotherington (2005), Lotherington and Chow (2006), and Taylor et al. (2008) addressed the multicultural nature of Canada with a focus on children from immigrant families, none of the studies examined Aboriginal students. Due to the large (and growing) Aboriginal population in Canada (OECD Directorate for Education, 2004), research must also focus on how to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing (Hare, 2012; Kovach, 2009) and methods of providing more culturally responsive and equitable education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Peterson (2012), drawing on a sociopolitical view of writing, suggests that “writing curricula should



be sensitive to the social and cultural contexts within each province, state, or country, and that curriculum developers should not strive for a universal curriculum” (pp. 261-262). Further studies are needed to address these gaps in the research literature.

**Socio-cultural context.** A common theme throughout most of the Canadian studies was recognition of the socio-cultural context of writing. Peterson and Portier (2013, 2014) frame their studies within the theoretical foundation of social constructivist theory. Social constructivist learning (founded by Vygotsky, 1978) describes learning as the result of constructing new understanding and knowledge during the process of actively participating in social interaction with others (Brown, 2005). Peterson and Portier (2014) theorized that the use of peer and teacher feedback to revise written work

reflects values, understandings and beliefs constructed as they write and talk about their writing in classrooms and also through interactions that take place beyond the classroom. Through interactions with their teachers and peers and through reading and writing a wide range of texts, students come to know what they can do with written language and visual images, and they construct understandings about written language. (p. 238)

This idea of literacy as a social practice was also a central finding of the study by McKee and Heydon (2014). The intergenerational social activities within the literacy events of their study “allowed participants to share what was of import to them, and the participants drew on the modes and media that could help them accomplish the purpose of their communication” (McKee & Heydon, 2014, p. 25).

In addition to being a local, positioned social practice, writing is also cultural (Heskial & Wamba, 2013). Children bring with them their “socio-cultural identity, political status [and] linguistic heritage” (Heskial & Wamba, 2013, p. 55) to every writing task. The meanings attributed to literacy, the purpose and function that it serves, and the manner in which literacy is taught and learned is dependent upon the socio-cultural context (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim, 2010). This was exemplified in the Canadian study by Taylor et al. (2008) in the rich and varying Dual Language Identity Texts created by kindergarten students and their families. Making these family-school connections was also shown to be important in the development of writing in the study by Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005).

This knowledge of literacy as a socio-cultural act can guide writing pedagogy within the preschool-primary grades. Preschool children bring to the classroom an orientation to learning that is grounded in play and discovery (McCloskey, 2012). Much of the “work” of children this age is “play”; it is the primary mode through which children “explore, organize, and stretch their understandings about the world” (Dyson, 2008, p. 305). Hansen (2007) described how play is reflected in the revision process of writing:



When children see their drafts as invitations to play, they often totally remove parts and transform drafts into pieces of writing with far more zest than they originally possessed. Just as children naturally rework playdough, they naturally rework their writing. Revising...is what they do; a crayon can change a bear into an alien at will. Children use writing as a flexible, recursive process before they have ever heard of revision. (p. 33)

Prior (2006) commented that, "Writing emerges out of far-flung historical networks, and the trajectories of a particular text trace delicate paths through overgrown sociohistoric landscapes" (p. 64). It is these networks and landscapes we must navigate in order to gain an understanding of effective writing instruction.

**Teacher feedback and assessment.** As Peterson and Portier (2013; 2014) have shown, teacher feedback has proven to have a positive effect on student writing. Quality feedback, however, must be grounded in knowledge of the writing process and requires an element of assessment. How do teachers assess writing? This confusion is evident in one grade-three teacher's questions:

Here I am looking at three very different pieces of writing. How do I make sense of these writings? How do I understand some of the major differences between these writings? How do I evaluate each of them? What criteria do I use? Do I evaluate each of them with the same criteria? (Bintz & Dillard, 2004, p. 114)

The teacher in Bintz and Dillard's (2004) study also stated: "The criteria [for assessment] I value most are influenced by my own experiences as a student writer myself as well as my experiences teaching" (p. 115). Research reveals that many teachers feel unprepared for teaching writing (McQuitty, 2012). It is well-known that teaching practices impact children's development, and these instructional practices are a direct result of teachers' beliefs (Lynch, 2010), and teachers' levels of competency (Hibbert, Scheffel, Rich, & Heydon, 2013). In order to gain a better understanding of the instructional and assessment practices of teaching writing utilized by Canadian teachers, Peterson, McClay, and Main (2010) conducted a national study of practices occurring in middle-grade classrooms. A study such as this at the preschool-primary level would provide relevant baseline data on the current state of these practices and would provide direction for professional development activities in evidence-based writing instruction and assessment practices. Although stated over a decade ago, the following still holds true:

The most useful component of the tool kit for all literacy educators may not be the mastery of a particular method, but rather a vision of the future of literacy, a picture of the texts and discourses, skills and knowledge that might be needed by our students as they enter new worlds of work and citizenship, traditional and popular culture, leisure and consumption, teaching and learning. (Luke & Elkins, 1998, p. 4)

## CONCLUSION

Ivanic (2004) suggested a comprehensive approach to writing pedagogy, incorporating all four layers of the multi-layered view of language, and utilizing teaching practices from all six discourses. Realistically, Ivanic (2004) noted, specific teaching lessons / units might incorporate two or more approaches, while all six might be integrated within a whole curriculum.

Illustrative of a comprehensive approach is the Canadian work by Peterson and Portier (2013). These researchers challenged the unpromising results of previous research on the benefits of teacher feedback. They argued that teacher feedback can be a powerful tool for teaching writing in elementary classrooms if the feedback is directed at content and style rather than focused on errors in writing conventions and language use. Indeed, their study on feedback and student writing revision revealed “remarkable improvements” (Peterson & Portier, 2013, p. 39) in the writing of grade two students. In viewing this study within the framework of Ivanic’s (2004) discourses of learning to write an eclectic approach to instruction is revealed: skills discourse (e.g., mini-lessons on writing conventions), creativity discourse (e.g., many opportunities for writing), process discourse (e.g., revision after collaborative feedback on content and style), genre discourse (e.g., highlighted features of published writing), and social practices discourse (e.g., published student work for classroom library). The predominant discourse was the process discourse of writing with the goal of explicit instruction (via regular teacher feedback within one-to-one conferences) being “to encourage students to write more elaborate, descriptive stories, and to view revision as a natural part of their writing processes” (Peterson & Portier, 2013, p. 32). Within the process approach (Graves, 2004) used by the teacher, the teacher’s own love / knowledge of writing, the abundant amount of time spent writing, student topic choice, and a supportive / trusting writing environment proved significant in the improvement of student writing. Peterson (2012) pointed out that:

Creating a more comprehensive writing curriculum that includes social practices and sociopolitical discourses does not have to involve making extensive additions to, nor deleting large portions of existing curricula. Instead, it might involve reframing the objectives to combine the skills, creativity, process, and genre discourses with the more socially oriented discourses. (p. 280)

To summarize the overall research, each group of studies, within each discourse, made its own claim for the effectiveness of the approach. Thus, studies characterized by the skills discourse made claims about explicit instruction in spelling and syntax / grammar being tied to positive improvement in writing. The creativity discourse was observed by researchers to increase the meaning-making and enjoyment of writing as children chose their topics and symbols for written expression in a preschool setting. Within the process discourse, explicit teaching in the practical processes of pre-planning planning, drafting, revising, and editing seemed to result in higher quality writing. Utilizing the

genre discourse through the exposure and study of quality literature provided inspiration for writing and produced richer written products. Writing with an authentic purpose, as characterized by the social practices discourse, resulted in greater writing productivity and more highly motivated writers, as well as ownership of the identification of being authors. Even preschoolers, studies showed, can engage in the critical literacy of the sociopolitical discourse as scaffolded conversations, changing perceptions, and written products reframed an ingrained stereotypical concept.

The overall research on writing instruction in the preschool-primary grades (given the studies included within this review) provides a base for developing empirically sound writing pedagogy in classrooms. The 11 Canadian studies reviewed suggest that Canadian teachers are already incorporating a variety of instructional ideologies and practices within their teaching repertoire. Studies like the ones examined in this review provide an optimistic picture of writing instruction in Canada and set the stage for future additions to the empirical evidence in the teaching of writing. Results of large-scale writing assessments are showing that many Canadian students are struggling to achieve basic skills in writing (Peterson & McClay, 2014). If students are to develop successfully as writers Canadian educators must build a strong foundation of evidence-based practices that are socially and culturally appropriate to the students they are teaching. Due to the fact that writing is such a complex process, a comprehensive approach along the lines that Ivanic (2004) suggests is called for. Multiple discourses must be incorporated within an effective writing program, with a high quality program aiming to at some point incorporate all six discourses.

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## APPENDIX A

TABLE 2. *Summary of the focus, findings, and discourses of the 11 Canadian studies*

Study	Focus of investigation	Main findings	Discourse(s) identified ( <i>predominant</i> discourse)
Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988 (British Columbia)	Observations of whole language program with the purpose of supporting the whole language approach to instruction	Gr. 1 students showed “tremendous growth in writing ability” (p. 434)	<i>Skills</i> (e.g., phonics relationships, spelling) <i>Creativity</i> (e.g., writing in response to themes, writing-rich environment)
Juliebo & Edwards, 1988 (Alberta)	Examined the effect of topic choice on narrative writing	Longitudinal study from grades 1-3 revealed, contrary to expectation, that when students choose their own topics they did not produce better texts than with a directed topic	<i>Creativity</i> (e.g., topic choice)
Kendrick & McKay, 2004 (British Columbia)	Used drawings to investigate the ideas about reading and writing of children in grades one and two	Children were able to express complex understanding of reading and writing within their drawings (which are early representations of print)	<i>Creativity</i> (e.g., drawings represented the authors’ creativity and topics which interested them)
Lotherington, 2005 (Toronto, Ontario)	Creation of culturally inclusive stories (rewriting Goldilocks)	Contrary to the expectation that the culture reflected within the retellings of Goldilocks would mirror the urban, multicultural reality of the Gr. 2 children, most of the stories reflected the dominant culture of the students: digital and pop culture	<i>Process</i> (e.g., explicit teaching of setting, characters, ending), <i>Genre</i> (e.g., examined published writing) <i>Sociopolitical</i> (e.g., creation of culturally inclusive stories, representation, identify)
Lotherington & Chow, 2006 (Toronto, Ontario)	Creation of culturally inclusive stories (rewriting Goldilocks)	Contrary to the expectation that the culture reflected within the retellings of Goldilocks would mirror the urban, multicultural reality of the Gr. 2 children, most of the stories reflected the dominant culture of the students: digital and pop culture	<i>Process</i> (e.g., explicit teaching of setting, characters, ending), <i>Genre</i> (e.g., examined published writing) <i>Sociopolitical</i> (e.g., creation of culturally inclusive stories, representation, identify)
McKee & Heydon, 2014 (Ontario)	To explore the effect on print literacy as a result of multimodal, intergenerational opportunities	The multi-modal, intergenerational projects enabled the kindergarten participants to create and improve a variety of print literacy practices within authentic writing events	<i>Social practices</i> (e.g., authentic writing tasks)

(continued)

TABLE 2. Summary of the focus, findings, and discourses of the 11 Canadian studies (continued)

Study	Focus of investigation	Main findings	Discourse(s) identified ( <i>predominant</i> discourse)
Pantaleo, 2010 (British Columbia)	Examined how elementary students' experiences with picturebooks containing metafictional devices developed their narrative competence	Grade 3 and 4 students "written responses to the picturebooks, their conversations throughout the research, their own books, and their interviews about the latter, revealed that the students had learned a great deal about literary and artistic codes and conventions by participating in the research" (p. 275)	<i>Process</i> (e.g., explicit instruction in the content and form) <i>Genre</i> (e.g., examined, responded to, and wrote picturebooks containing metafictional devices)
Peterson & Portier, 2013 (Ontario)	Impact of teacher feedback on student writing revision	Gr.2 students made "remarkable improvements" (p. 39) in their writing as a result of extensive/frequent teacher feedback on content and style	<i>Skills</i> (e.g., mini-lessons on writing conventions), <i>Creativity</i> (e.g., many opportunities for writing), <i>Process</i> (e.g., revision after collaborative feedback on content and style), <i>Genre</i> (e.g., highlighted features of published writing) <i>Social practices</i> (e.g., published student work for classroom library)
Peterson & Portier, 2014 (Ontario)	Focused on the effects of peer and teacher feedback on student writing	Gr. 1 "students took advantage of the opportunity to learn through revising, as they revised their writing in response to 90% of teacher and peer feedback" (p. 255)	<i>Skills</i> (e.g., feedback on writing conventions), <i>Process</i> (e.g., revision after peer and teacher feedback on content and style), <i>Genre</i> (e.g., highlighted persuasive text)
Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005 (Montreal, Quebec)	Examined the impact of a school-supported family literacy program on student writing (and reading)	The results of this study indicate that the school supported family literacy program had a positive impact on writing scores of first grade students	<i>Skills</i> (e.g., focus on writing conventions) <i>Social practices</i> (e.g., family dialogue journal)
Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008 (Toronto, Ontario)	Examined the effect of creating Dual Language Identity Texts on student / family cultural identity	Findings from this kindergarten class suggest that "as family and teacher conceptions of literacy were extended beyond traditional monolingual print-based literacy, home literacies associated with complex transnational and transgenerational communities of practice were legitimated through their inclusion within the school curriculum" (p. 269)	<i>Sociopolitical</i> (e.g., creation of culturally inclusive stories, representation, identify)



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