

Without Writing: Not seen, not heard.

Few these days would hold by the old adage that children should be seen, not heard. The silent child, though not demanding much attention, is also not learning to live a full social life. We know that to learn language a child needs to be an engaged participant, learning that language is a way of sharing and doing with others, that language is a way to make meanings and jokes. In learning to speak the child also learns to hear, being pulled further into the interactive world made by language. As we grow up we learn to breathe language, inhaling and exhaling—and thereby become vibrant social people among others.

But we are less likely to see literacy as a matter of give and take. Rather, in school and home, we put far more emphasis on reading. Assessments and assigned curricula foreground reading and arithmetic, but writing is, as a recent report proclaimed, “the neglected R.”

Sometimes you hear that students don’t need to write until they have something to say—until they have read the textbooks and learned all there is. But do we say to a child to be quiet until he or she can give a presidential address? Instead, we prize the first *dada*, *mama*, and *bye-bye*, and we cherish our conversations about our child’s school day, even though we already know pretty well what happens in the third grade. Yet in the world of literacy, if you are not heard, you are not even seen. You become invisible, to be overwhelmed by the reading you are expected to receive and not answer back.

In recent years there has been a worldwide movement, to bring the neglected R back. The National Writing Project has endeavored to make every teacher a teacher of writing, to bring enthusiasm and knowledge of how writing works to their students. This same philosophy is part of the teacher education program at my university and others. Internationally there has also been a resurgence in research in writing, studying how children and adolescents learn to write, how people develop as writers across their lifespan, how reading and writing interact, how the mind grows through engagement with writing, what conditions foster writing development, how teachers understand writing, and what transitions in writing students must make as they move from elementary to secondary school to higher education and the workplace. This research on teaching and learning writing is put into context by research into the role writing has in society and the historical development of all aspects of civilization from law and business to the development of knowledge and educational systems. Doctoral programs nationally are preparing the next generation of researchers to carry this work forward. Major conferences on writing research in 2001 and 2005, 2008, and next planned in 2011 have been bringing together scholars from the Americas, Europe, Australia and Asia.

We need to write and read with high levels of knowledge and acuity to participate in the information society. If our children are to contribute to this society, take important roles, and enter into the global conversation fostered by new media, they must be heard to be seen, they must write as well as read. We need to put the power of writing in each of their hands, so they can speak their minds.