Emergent Writing Scenario: Katrina

Read the scenario. What should the teacher do next?

“This says castle,” Katrina says, pointing to her drawing of a castle in her journal. Katrina is an imaginative young girl who, inspired by story time today, wants to build a castle in the block center. The center is already full, so Katrina must sign up for the next turn, writing her name as a single horizontal scribble. While she waits, she draws a plan for her castle in her journal. Mrs. Jackson provides time in class every day for students to write or draw in their journals and encourages their use throughout the day.

At this point in her development, Katrina has had little experience with print and pays more attention to the pictures in books. Her journal pages contain only drawings, and she draws or scribbles when asked to write. She can recognize her name and about three letters that appear in her name, but she has not yet begun to learn the sounds associated with these letters and does not yet incorporate them into her writing.

There are three important goals for Katrina's writing development. She needs to develop a distinction between pictures and text, start using individual units while writing, and develop her representation of her own name beyond the first letter.

Mrs. Jackson decides to focus on the first goal today and uses the picture book from story time as an example of the difference between pictures and print. "I love your castle, Katrina! Let's look at our book again. Yes, there's a picture of a castle there too! And let me show you one other thing, over here, there is the word castle. See, the book tells the story in two ways — in the pictures and in the writing." Mrs. Jackson coaches Katrina to add some scribbles beneath her picture and praises the result — "It looks like the book now!" She then directs Katrina's attention back to the book, highlighting how each word is made up of letters. She focuses on some words that include the letter k, the letter most familiar to Katrina.

What should Mrs. Jackson do going forward?

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Going forward, Mrs. Jackson will engage Katrina in a dialogue about her journal entries, over time encouraging her to incorporate familiar letters into her writing. Although Katrina's journal does not at all resemble conventional writing at this point, it is the first step toward making print concrete for Katrina. At this point, Katrina's writing development focuses on increasing her knowledge of print; she is not yet ready to integrate phonological awareness or her letter–sound knowledge into her writing activities.

Marvin is playing doctor in a dramatic play center, writing and signing prescriptions for other students in his group. All of Mrs. Jackson's centers include opportunities and materials for writing. Mrs. Jackson encourages students to make signs and labels for their creations at the blocks and clay centers, draw and label animals and plants in the science center, and incorporate writing into dramatic play, for example, taking orders in a restaurant. Centers give children the chance to experiment with writing at their own level in playful, authentic contexts.

Each prescription Marvin writes includes his name, which he writes as MAV, along with a few other characters that look like letters or numbers. As is often the case for young writers, Marvin's name writing is more advanced than his other writings. He remembers what his name looks like from memory rather than writing letters based on the sounds he hears; he doesn't yet understand that Marvin starts with the /m/ sound. Over the course of the week, Marvin has written several journal entries using a combination of M, A, V, and other characters that resemble letters and numbers, as is typical for children at this level of writing development. Judging by the letter-like forms he includes in his writing, Marvin does understand that he should be writing more than three letters, but he isn't sure what to add. Because Marvin's writing does not have any connection to the sounds in the words, the goals for his instruction should push him toward making that connection and developing the alphabetic principle. Marvin needs to make connections between print and sound and use that knowledge to begin to represent beginning or salient sounds in his writing.

When Mrs. Jackson stops by the play center, she praises Marvin: "I like how you wrote your name! Let's write your friends' names on their prescriptions, too!" She then talks to Marvin about the letter M — it is the first letter in his name, and the first sound in his name is /m/. They practice saying "/m/, /m/, Marvin" together while pointing to the letter M. Then Mrs. Jackson asks Marvin which of his "patients" in the dramatic play center have names that start with /m/. With her support, Marvin identifies Maria and Meredith and writes their names down as M's combined with scribbles. With Mrs. Jackson's direction and support, Marvin is also able to identify the /s/ at the beginning of Sam and /l/ at the beginning of Liz. In each case, Mrs. Jackson identifies the letter that makes the target sound and helps Marvin write the letter on the prescription. Marvin is developing an understanding of how letters represent sounds at the beginning of words, a first step toward grasping the alphabetic principle. What should Mrs. Jackson do going forward?

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Going forward, Mrs. Jackson will encourage Marvin to identify beginning and salient sounds and to match those to letters in his writing in play centers and in his journal, embedding this systematic connection in his mind.