

# Writing Our Way to the Post Office: Exploring the Roles of Community Workers with Four-Year Olds

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Imagine the excitement and anticipation of four-year olds walking into their classroom in which a new “center” is under construction. A plastic tarp hides the site, and a sign reads, “Work in Progress.” The scene generates intense speculation among the children: it might be related to one of the existing centers in the room (SIDEBAR A), or to one of the books they’ve heard read aloud, or it might be something entirely new. The conversations continue throughout the week. The teachers encourage these speculations, giving very few clues, but heightening anticipation in their dialogue with the children.

Welcome to the Post Office Unit of Study at a suburban Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) classroom in Farmingdale, New York City (SIDEBAR B). Teachers set up the Post Office Center in late January (well before Valentine’s Day) and then expand and adapt it in response to student activity all through February and into March. The goal of this unit is to help young children explore the jobs of people employed in a post office (e.g., the postal worker, the postal clerk), to understand the role of the customer, and to consider the impact of this work on our everyday lives (Visit [www.uspsconnection.com](http://www.uspsconnection.com)). The unit also helps children begin to understand the interconnectedness of human beings and their endeavors, and the responsibilities and privileges that come with this interconnectedness. For example, the postal worker has a responsibility to deliver letters in a timely way, and letter-writers come to expect that their letters will be delivered in a timely manner. Letter-writers also have responsibilities: They must write a name and address and put a stamp on a letter so that it can be correctly delivered.

The Post Office Unit is constructed so that children can explore potentially abstract concepts like communication (specifically, how letters and packages get from one person to another) in authentic, concrete, and multimodal ways. The unit also provides rich opportunities for children to engage in social interactions, develop language and literacy, and practice fine-motor skills. The activities strengthen executive functions such as self-regulation and focused attention. Students practice routines and responsibilities, follow directions, and make some decisions for themselves about where to go and what to do. They extend and enrich their friendships through “letter-writing,” while also experiencing

ways in which postal workers help the community.

## Modeling and Demonstrating

Finally, the day arrives when the “construction” tarp is removed to reveal what appears to be a post office! While students may admire it, they cannot yet play in it. The teachers have set up boundaries with barricade tape. After children curiously explore the perimeter, teachers call them to morning meeting, where they enlist the children’s help in figuring out what the new center is and what some of the activities might be. The adults (a teacher and aide) role-play the postal workers’ jobs and model the process by which a letter gets written, mailed, and successfully delivered.

While modeling positive behaviors, teachers often insert examples of errors that thwart conventions, making the contrasts dramatically and humorously observable. (For example, after a teacher role-plays writing a letter, sealing it in an envelope, addressing and stamping the envelope, and walking it to the mailbox, she might throw the letter next to the mailbox instead of depositing it inside. Or, as she is demonstrating the postal worker’s job of sorting the letters into the appropriate mailboxes, she might stuff a handful of letters into a single mailbox.) The drama enhances children’s ability to perceive, consider, and choose between alternatives. When a teacher asks whether the erroneous behavior is what they should do in the center, there’s a chorus of “No’s” from the children and much laughter.

The role-play of appropriate behaviors makes explicit both the roles that the children will take on and the central role that post offices play in delivering communications from one person to another. The silliness of the “errors” help young children with limited attention spans to remain focused on what the teacher is saying—and to internalize the rules for behavior being discussed.

## What is an Address?

If the role-play about the post office is limited to the one act of mailing a letter, that would diminish some of the real benefits to children, like developing their ability to communicate their ideas, develop friendships, and, in turn, gain some real understanding of how community workers help us. Thus, the teachers start with the understanding that young children do not always clearly

understand abstract concepts like “communication through mail.” They can touch the envelope and see the stamp, but what exactly happens once the letter is out of sight? Teachers look for ways to make the process more visible and concrete. For example, young children should learn their own home address, but what exactly IS an address? Answering this question with a short field trip is fun. During a tour of the school’s immediate neighborhood, students see building numbers, the school’s own sign and address, and the nearest street sign.

Teachers use the monthly “Parent Newsletter” to encourage parents to take their child to the street corner nearest their home and point out the street sign, emphasizing the initial letter of the name of the street they live on. Parents may also point to the house or apartment number of their own residence, as well as to the mailbox or slot where the postal worker leaves letters. Parents are also encouraged to point out other street signs as they walk or drive in the car, and to take note of USPS employees, buildings, and trucks, as well as images, letters, and numbers on postage stamps.

After the field trip, the teacher can introduce a new transitional activity: she asks each child to identify one part of her or his address before entering the center. Over the next few weeks, she slowly builds toward the child being able to recite his or her full address. A basket holds large laminated index cards printed with each child’s address. Holding up one card (while pointing to the word on the card), the teacher says, “Elijah, can you tell me the name of the town you live in?” A week or so later, the teacher asks children to recite their street name and house or apartment number. Finally, she holds up cards at random and asks, “Whose address is this?” Interestingly, most children can identify not only their own, but almost all of the other’s children’s addresses before the conclusion of the Post Office Unit. These activities build children’s interest in sight words and extending their focus and memory.

### **A Reason to Write**

Learning is enhanced when children can tie interesting school activities to their own life experiences. The teachers start this Post Office Center well in advance of Valentine’s Day because they want the children to be motivated to attempt the act of writing. At this age, young children’s writing skills are only emerging. While some children are very eager to participate, for others the enthusiasm builds more slowly, especially for those children whose earlier experiences with writing have been neither fun nor successful. To engage these students voluntarily in writing, there has to be a reason that will attract them. For example, after building an airport in the Block Center, children are usually more open to writing a sign for it than to completing a worksheet that asks for the same information. When reasons to write are offered over a period of time, fine motor skills can be refined more effectively—and happily.

Provisioning the center initially includes making use of the usual materials and setting (e.g., postal worker clothes and mail bag, toy cash register, paper, pencils, stamps, stickers, and a mail

cubby for each child). We also add a puppet theater as a post office “customer window,” a scale for weighing packages, and a tricycle for delivering the mail. Teachers download images of U.S. Post Office labels, insignias, etc. and reproduce them to lend a feeling of authenticity to the center.

### **Weighing Packages on a Scale**

As the teacher dismisses children from morning meeting, she invites them to visit one of the three centers in the room. At the Post Office Center, students begin to learn the purposes of the

#### **Sidebar A: The Pre-K Activity Center**

A center is a designated space, within the pre-kindergarten classroom, where children can explore—for themselves and at their own pace—materials and activities that fit a theme. A center might house picture books, blocks, puppets, or art supplies. Other centers may contain the tools of a trade such as bread baking or house painting. A center can go through many transformations during the year, and there may be three or four centers set up simultaneously in a large classroom. In this article, we describe a post office—but this same space will become an apple orchard, an optometrist’s office, a veterinarian’s office, and a campsite over the course of the school year.

Three to four children can visit a center at one time, and (if there are several centers) students are allowed some choice as to which center they visit on any particular day.

In this classroom, each center displays four entry tags. If a tag is available, a student can put it on (with a loop of string around the neck) and enter, returning the tag to its post upon leaving. Children become quite adept at regulating their own visits to the classroom centers, knowing that they will have a turn at each.

#### **Sidebar B: The UPK Classes: A University/School Collaboration**

Eight Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) classrooms are staffed through a collaboration between Farmingdale School District in Farmingdale, New York, and the Early Childhood Teacher Education Program of Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Once certified by New York State, graduates of Hofstra’s program may interview for teaching positions for their first one or two years of teaching. Following similar philosophy and curriculum (acquired at Hofstra and based on Doris Fromberg’s “Dynamic Themes Curriculum”), teachers collaborate with each other and the mentoring staff to provide learning experiences for young children that will “function as conceptual organizers . . . that can help children integrate learning across subject matter.” [Doris Fromberg, *The All-Day Kindergarten and Pre-K Curriculum: A Dynamic Themes Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 70.]



post office jobs. They begin to comprehend how the letter they wrote and dropped in a mailbox might reach the friend to whom they wrote. After the center has been open a week or two and children are accustomed to the work that happens there, a weighing scale and packages are added. The scale is a real attraction, and the teacher creates a reason for a package to be mailed. (It's a real reason, with a real package. For example, it's her mother's birthday, and she is mailing her a small, framed photo.) The children watch the teacher wrap the frame in bubble wrap at the morning meeting, help her write a very short note, put it in the box, tape the box, and add the address label and return address. Later, during center time, the teacher becomes a customer and hands the box to the "postal worker" who, after weighing it ("weigh" is a new vocabulary word), copies the number on a teacher-created "mailing slip" with large spaces for the number and child's name. The "postal worker" then gives the receipt (a new vocabulary word) to the customer (another vocabulary word), and drops the box in the appropriate bin.

Many action-oriented children who tend to avoid activities that involve writing actually vie for the position of postal worker. They are willing to do the writing, just so they can play the role of postal worker.

Simon: "Here's your receipt, Jayden."

Chloe: "Let me weigh it. OK, that's 5."

Kayla: "Next customer."

### **Delivering Letters and Packages**

Many of our children don't have tricycles at home, and even those who do clamor for a turn to be the mail delivery person, a role that has grown over several years of teaching this unit. The tricycle is decorated to look like a postal vehicle. It is parked near the Post Office Center. Inside the classroom, it's used only for mail deliveries; children respect this boundary because they respect the role.

"Mail Carrier" is added to the list of classroom jobs that rotate from one child to another every day. A line of red tape on the floor marks the "road" the driver must take. At the end of the

day, as children gather for the closing circle, the assigned Mail Carrier heads to her post, clocks in (finds her time card, writes her name, and replaces it in the file box), puts on her helmet, slings the mail bag (filled by the day's postal workers) over her shoulder, and pedals to the children waiting expectantly on the carpet to see if anyone has sent them mail. The role has been designed so the child learns to follow directions and sequence steps independently, and the reluctant writer is brought on board voluntarily in order to participate in the active role-play. (Not every child receives mail every day, but the teacher is careful to see that a child who isn't getting much mail does get some, via a note from the teacher or a "secret friend." Any obviously overlooked child should provoke some observation of that child's social behaviors and, perhaps, some adult guidance for that child in establishing friendships.)

Enthusiasm about the center grows by the day and more children get involved. As parents hear the children's enthusiasm, some of them mail post cards to the school. Others send small packages with notes inside. The teacher receives these deliveries from the Mail Carrier during the closing circle and reads them aloud. In ways like these, the purpose of the unit becomes central to the classroom and has a unifying effect on the children, supporting Dewey's belief that school should reflect a community of citizens working together.<sup>1</sup> The center also makes explicit the interconnectedness of the community: parents, teachers, students—and professionals of all sorts, including postal workers.

### **Connecting to Other Activities**

Other centers in the room house tasks that relate to the Post Office Center. For example, at a different center, children protect an object by encasing it in bubble wrap. Children learn a



new vocabulary word, “fragile.” Most children take great care with this job and are very serious about how they approach it. Their engagement and focus often surpass their attention span during teacher-directed activities, supporting Lev Vygotsky’s observation that, during role-play, young children display a maturity beyond their usual behaviors.<sup>2</sup> It takes time, of course, and practice for children to develop many of these skills, but peers help. When one child began bursting plastic bubbles with indiscriminate enthusiasm, another child at the table leaned over and cautioned, “Careful, careful, the mail is fragile.”

### Developing Social Skills

As children observe the Post Office theme develop and expand day after day, most begin to want to write letters, and the teacher provisions the Writing Center with words and phrases written large on laminated paper, words that students might want to copy (e.g., “Dear \_\_\_\_\_,” “I love you.” “How are you?” “I am fine.” “Love, \_\_\_\_\_”). On the table is a large metal ring, holding a card with every child’s name and a small image of that child. Those who want to write a note to a particular classmate can independently look up the child by image and copy the letters of the name. (An added advantage of this method is that, by April, almost all children can “read” each other’s names.) Children frequently ask the teacher how to write a particular word, and the teacher will write it in front of the child, sounding it out as she does so. Others at the table frequently take note and attempt to use the new word. Also on the table is an envelope template, showing where to put the name of the recipient, the name of the sender, and the stamp. These activities further develop the child’s independence, ability to focus attention, and skills in sequencing and following directions.

In time, the Writing Center can get so busy that a second table has to be opened. Children who are not yet writing are encouraged to draw pictures to mail and to write whatever parts of their own name that they can. The teacher or another child can step in to help write the name of the recipient on the envelope. Sometimes, there’s great collaboration between the emergent writer and a more-capable peer:

Jayden: “Teacher, how do I write ‘Love’?”

Chloe is writing her letter at the same table. She looks up, reaches across the table, and hands the requested word card to Jayden.

Chloe: “Here it is. See? L-o-v-e. Love!”

At other times, a child may request help writing a complicated phrase like, “I like you. Will you come to my house to play with me tomorrow?” The teacher first writes the phrase on a sentence strip and observes the child’s reaction. If the child is interested and able to copy the words, then the teacher drifts away. But, if the child expresses frustration, the teacher offers help and either guides the child along when the tasks stalls or asks, “Would you like me to write that for you?” If the child agrees, she will model sounding out the words as she writes, and read it back to

the child when she has finished.

That learning was occurring became clear when parents asked teachers if the Post Office Center could continue a bit longer into the month of March. Children were asking to write letters “to mail” every night at home. They wanted to know how to spell words, and were using new vocabulary words like “customer,” “fragile,” and “deliver.”

### Conclusion

A well-developed and well-planned Post Office Unit clearly has the potential to develop children’s skills and ideas in developmentally appropriate and powerful ways. It also provides children with multiple opportunities to make sense of the role of community workers and community spaces in bringing people together.

But the post office is more than a collection of things in the room. What makes it all come alive is the teacher’s skillful encouragement and enthusiasm. Watching the teacher’s symbolic play and role-playing, the children become enthralled with the post office theme. Over several weeks, they eagerly enter the Post Office Center to live, revisit, and expand the story themselves... until they begin to lose interest in it, which indicates that they are ready for a bigger challenge. Then they discover a new surprise greeting them under a tarp on a Monday morning. 🌈

### Notes

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1938/1997).
2. L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, E. Soubberman, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1978).

### Children’s Literature Cited

Although these teachers do use several non-fiction books, the fictional *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* is a favorite. Children can relate emotionally to the main character, which draws them into more complex understandings of feelings and friendship, the perspectives of others, and the value and purpose of writing and mailing letters.

Gibbons, Gail. *The Post Office Book: Mail and How It Moves*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1986.

Owen, Ann. *Delivering Your Mail: A Book About Mail Carriers*. New York: Picture Window Books., 2003.

Spinelli, Eileen. *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

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