

Research Space

Journal article

The Playful Writing Project: Exploring the synergy between play and writing with Reception class teachers

Smith, K.

The Playful Writing Project: exploring the synergy between young children's play and writing with Reception class teachers

Kate Smith 

Abstract

This study highlights the potential of play to support young children's mark-making and writing and, in turn, shows how writing can become a driver of play. By detailing elements of this symbiotic relationship, the intention was for teachers as practitioner-researchers to deepen their professional knowledge of how best to support young children in meaningful writing activity, thereby countering policy-led reductive understandings of both play and literacy. During a year-long research project, six English reception class teachers gathered photographs, video and multimodal observations of children and used these to analyse how multimodal mark-making and writing occurred as part of play in their classrooms. From this analysis, the concept of 'playful writing' was developed. This identified three interconnecting characteristics that mark-making and writing has as part of play activity: social function, multimodal movement and material possibilities. The findings of the study indicate that young children's classroom play stimulates the multimodal, social and material dimensions needed for the creation of meaningful and transformative writing. The study highlights the importance of harnessing teachers' expertise in paying close attention to children's playful literacy, in order to create a strong knowledge base from which to make the best decisions about literacy practices with young children.

Key words: early years, writing, reception class, mark-making, sociomaterial, play

Introduction

Studies have shown that the exploratory and symbolic features of play provide valuable opportunities for young children to engage in a range of practices that support their literacy development (Cremin et al., 2017; Daniels, 2014; Dyson, 1989, 2003; Genishi et al., 2011; Hall and Robinson, 2003; Saracho and Spodek, 2006). Although these researchers make recommendations about play-based literacy pedagogies, current policy guidance in England conveys mixed messages about the benefits of play for young children's learning (Basford, 2019; Wood and Chesworth, 2017). Simplistic and regressive analyses of both play and literacy have questioned the

educational value and purpose of play in Reception¹ classrooms (Ofsted, 2017), and this narrative has fuelled professional uncertainties about child-led play practices leading to a decrease in opportunities for play in young children's school provision (TACTYC (Association for Professional Development in Early Years), 2017). Dyson (2008) argued over a decade ago that by focusing too heavily on measurable 'basics', and side-lining children's unofficial literacy practices, many children face unnecessary problems in becoming effective writers when they enter school. This problem is crystallised when play-based learning and the opportunities it offers children to explore and experiment as writers are constricted. Rather than being passive recipients of muddled policy leading to restrictive literacy learning, this study positioned teachers as active enquirers into their own classroom literacy practices in order to examine the extent to which unbounded play is able to facilitate mark-making and writing. The research encouraged the questioning of certain orthodoxies in how literacy is taught to young children in schools, orthodoxies that view writing as outcome focused, easily evidenced and universally measurable, steering literacy towards restricted teacher-directed activity. The intention was to foster deeper levels of professional knowledge about early literacy that Reception teachers would then be able to articulate to others.

The synergy between play and literacy

To explore the synergy that exists between play and writing, it is useful to briefly recognise the commonalities that exist in how researchers and theorists have described the processes and functions of both literacy and play. First, play is a culturally framed activity (Gaskins, 2014; Roopnarine, 2015) where children build social and cultural knowledge by engaging in shared activities within specific contexts, thereby aligning it with socio-cultural and situated theories of literacy (Gee, 2004; Smagorinsky, 2011; Street, 2013). Second, both play and literacy involve children using

¹In England, the Reception year is the first year of school for children aged 4–5 years old. The framework for teaching and learning in Reception classrooms is the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2021).

multiple modes of communication from which to build shared meanings (Flewitt, 2017). Children are experts in using multiple languages of expression from which to express, explore and connect thoughts, feelings and imaginings to others (Malaguzzi, 1996, cited in Cagliari et al., 2016). And, third, akin to multiliteracies where children are enabled to exercise agency and express identity through their participation, play has democratic potential; it is a means to listen to, as well as hear, diverse voices as individual and collective expression (Rinaldi, 2006). Rather than being mutually exclusive therefore, play and literacy both offer young children multiple possibilities for participating with others in culturally symbolic activity where different voices and ideas, theories and hypotheses can be heard (Taguchi, 2010).

Karen Wohlwend's (2013, p. 4) research has led her to state that play rather than being separate from literacy is *itself* a form of literacy. Wohlwend argues that literacy for young children can be reconceptualised as a 'play space' where power relationships are renegotiated on children's terms enhancing their access and engagement. Underpinning this argument is an understanding that the multiplicities of play – its expansiveness and inventiveness – offer diverse opportunities for young children to redesign and repurpose spaces and resources. Children's play therefore is a meaningful literacy practice where a variety of communication modes and tools for communication can be used to transform and extend meanings (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010; Pahl, 2002). Wohlwend's (2013) 'literacy playshops' classroom approach explicitly seeks to draw on children's own narratives, encouraging hybrid and media-rich multimodal literacy texts. Literacy play, or playing *with* literacy in this way, provides openings for transformation – a way for young children to alter, renew and even revolt against the given rules (Sutton-Smith, 2001).

Young children's mark-making and writing as a feature of play

To understand more fully how young children's mark-making and writing as a form of literacy is enhanced through play, it is important to examine it as a socio-material-embodied activity, a generative process where materials, spaces and bodies come together in order for the cultural symbolic features of text emerge. These relational aspects will now be explored.

Gestural and symbolic explanations of young children's writing

Socio-cultural descriptions of young children's mark-making and writing help us to appreciate it as a collaborative gesture (Vygotsky, 1997) and highlight

the importance of children's motivation in instigating writing with others as shared meaningful activity. Dyson's (1997, 2008) research, for example, has shown that young children's writing composition, whether at home, kindergarten or school, is motivated by a desire to share known cultural symbols with their peers. Writing in its earliest form considered as a gesture, or a signalled action, acknowledges that what can often appear to adults as random and accidental scribbles have intention and signify meaning to the author (Matthews, 1999). There is lucidity in children's mark-making actions that demonstrate how it is shaped in principled ways as social meaning making (Kress, 1997). These marks therefore should not be underestimated in terms of effort and competence in how they are generated with others, particularly as it has also been shown that even very young children are capable of using graphic signs as part of their mark-making as a result of social interaction, including conventional inscription systems (Lancaster, 2007). Significantly then, young children have expertise about the symbolic nature of writing systems long before they begin formal education. Importantly, recognising young children's mark-making and writing as a process of shared symbolic thought needs to acknowledge how this operates as a process of distributed thinking, dispersed across children's minds and bodies as well as the tools and material environments that they have to hand (Lancaster, 2014).

Materially embodied explanations of young children's writing

Writing as a material form is clearly representational of cultural codes and symbols and signifies social intention; however, viewing writing activity solely through the prism of human-centred thought can limit understandings about how non-human elements affect its generation. By applying Braidotti's (2019) post-humanist ideas about decentralising human thought in understanding social processes, the body of the child writer, their material form, is able to be foregrounded in providing a locus for meaning making. Taking these arguments forward, children's embodied-material encounters with mark-making and writing are fundamental to understanding literacy practices. Their sensory and physical experiences materialised within external environments shape how they are able to 'know' about literacy. Young children's mark-making and writing can be explored in this way as multiple constituencies *with* bodies and stuff (Braidotti, 2019). Positioning the young child as an embodied writer requires us to examine the relational networks between the human and non-human, and how space, time, tools and movement (both physical and spatial) come together in children's writing activity. This explanation embraces the relational complexities and affective nature of young children's writing and also has the potential to highlight its inconsistencies

and incongruences as it is shaped within and outside of the expected norms.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) similarly proposes that writing, as part of human culture, occurs when “materials confront the creative imagination” (p. 23). His conceptualisation of writing is one where children are continually on the move, looking for perceptual and material sustenance as they go and tracing new pathways or lines as they progress (Ingold, 2007). Barad (2007) explains this human movement as a process of ‘Space-time-mattering’ and the coming together of the human and non-human, as part of material existence. Applied to young children’s writing, it means that writing is created through children’s *intra-actions* – their mutual entanglement *with* the materials around them. Materials matter in how writing is produced. Rather than being inactive they are affective, or as Bennett (2010, p. 3) has described, they have ‘thing-power’. The research of Kuby et al. (2015) noted, for example, that when children were provided with a rich material environment, their writing took on multiple forms; rather than being predetermined, their literate understandings unfolded in the moments that the children were using these materials.

This shift towards the materiality of children’s experiences, as both players and writers, refocuses us towards the significance of the non-human elements of writing (tools, learning spaces and displayed timetables) and the ‘things’ of writing that are so prevalent in its day-to-day production.

Socio-material explanations of young children’s writing

Recently, researchers have been increasingly interested in combining both symbolic and materialist understandings of literacy in order to counter the privilege given to certain forms of text in classrooms. These critical explorations offer deeper insight into the relational nature of multimodal text making and recognise the fluidity that exists in more-than-human literacy practices (Burnett et al., 2014; Kervin et al., 2017; Lenters, 2016). By examining the sociomaterial production of writing in early literacy, skills-based models of literacy based on deficit models of cognitive development can be challenged. Burnett et al. (2019), for example, have argued that by tracing the relations between social and material elements in young children’s text-making activity, it is possible to see the importance of children’s ‘minor’ sociomaterial encounters with literacy and to attend to the significant meaning-making elements of literacy that often go unseen and undervalued in classrooms. This reconceptualisation of literacy also challenges how writing as a series of literacy events is understood. Rather than the ‘event’ being unitised and bounded by the fixed social and cultural situation in which it occurs, Burnett and Merchant (2020) argue for an alternative approach – ‘literacy-as-event’. This approach recognises the

shifting and affective, unpredictable and relational processes of literacy generation, indicating a need to explore these relational dimensions of literacy activity in order to understand how literacy works. This can be done by examining the affective relationships between children and adults, the complex interweaving of different cultures and behaviours, how literacy as a material form takes shape and importantly how each literacy event or encounter links to other events.

The challenges to play-based literacy practices in Reception classrooms

The Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS) in England (Department for Education, 2021) firmly positions play as the primary vehicle for young children’s learning in early years classrooms. It should follow then that children’s early literacy experience in Reception classrooms is embedded within play-based learning. However, the focus for teachers on meeting quantifiable literacy outcomes for children means that play-based practices are increasingly side-lined in favour of more formal teaching methods (Dubiel and Kilner, 2017; Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Ofsted (2017), in seeking to ensure educational ‘value’, have questioned the validity and effectiveness of free-flow autonomous play activities in Reception classrooms. Rather than recognising the importance of play in supporting children’s foundational language and composition of writing, these publications focus instead on writing skills as mere transcription and pencil grip (TACTYC (Association for Professional Development in Early Years), 2017). As children play together in joint open-ended activities rather than as unitary subjects, individual curriculum-specific measurement tools used to determine whether play ‘works’ are problematic. Technical terms such as ‘quality’ and ‘performance’ used in government policy directives are applied to play in an attempt to isolate and pin down its effectiveness. This is fundamentally at odds with an understanding of play as essentially an open-ended, shifting and expansive process (Olsson, 2009). Furthermore, there are contrasting approaches to play as a pedagogical practice leading to a lack of coherence around how to implement a play-based curriculum and associated pedagogical practice within the profession itself (Basford, 2019; Wood and Hedges, 2016). These uncertainties about how literacy can be facilitated through play are concerning given what is known about the benefit of play in supporting literacy.

As a response to the precariousness of play in Reception classrooms, where it is increasingly disconnected from literacy as an outcome orientated activity, this study has sought to highlight the synergetic benefits between each. To do this, explanations of young children’s writing as embodied discursive-material intra-action (Barad), and play as multimodal expression where materials and spaces can be repurposed (Wohlwend), have been adopted in order to unwrap

the relational dimensions between language tools, bodies and materials that enable the generation of written symbolic texts (Burnett). These theoretical conceptualisations were further intensified when Froebelian principles were also 'put to work' alongside them. This is explained further in the next section.

Methodology

Six teachers took part in this year-long project as practitioner-researchers focusing on the literacy events that occurred as part of everyday classroom play practices, specifically child-initiated play. During this period, the practitioner-researchers documented the children's writing activities using photographic, video and written observations. They also collected the children's writing artefacts and kept a reflective diary of writing events in their classrooms. This gave the practitioner-researchers the opportunity to examine *what* mark-making and writing was taking place, *where* it occurred, *when* it happened and *how*. They then met once a month to share their data and explore *why* mark-making and writing was generated in these different ways, as well as reflect of their own role in this process.

Practitioner research or practitioner enquiry is an approach to improving educational practice through methods of reflection in order to link an individual's professional experiences to the issues that face communities of practitioners (Lofthouse, 2014). It enables practitioners to take a critical approach to school priorities by engaging with theory and literature, supporting an understanding of the complexities of policy and practice (Mitchell and Pearson, 2012). Importantly, practitioner research places the researcher in an informed position from which to contribute meaningful interpretations of educational practice (Lofthouse et al., 2012). As an important part of continuing professional development, practitioner research also has the potential to provide a greater influence over wider school cultures and policies (Caena, 2011).

Within the study, the practitioner-researchers needed to have professional access to the field, deep levels of pedagogical understanding and positive relationships with the children in their care. However, their participation ran the risk of them locating further understandings solely based on their own particular context. There was also the risk that their influence could have been limited by senior management oversight. Therefore, it was important that the practitioner-researchers selected for this study were in a position of authority in their schools having been recommended by headteachers who regarded them as experts within their team with potential to influence policy within their schools and beyond.

Eleven meetings were held altogether. All of these meetings were recorded by the principal investigator (PI). This regular dialogical space provided opportunity for co-constructing joint knowledge about pedagogy as a community of learners (Wenger, 2009). It was also

necessary to unpick the diverse and sometimes conflicting views that the practitioner-researchers held to counterlocalised and exclusive ideas about literacy learning. The first session therefore focused on theoretical principles, ethical considerations and methods of data capture. These were initially led by the PI in order to develop research skills and theoretical knowledge of early mark-making and writing. During these sessions, the practitioner-researchers selected appropriate methods to investigate their practice and considered their own values related to play and writing.

The play pioneer Friedrich Froebel's principles of play (Froebel Trust, 2020) were examined within these sessions as his writings on play as self-direction, self-expression and creative exploration supported expansive and multimodal understandings of literacy. Froebel's ideas also emphasise that play is a socially driven movement between the child's inner and outer world aligning it with socio-material perspectives on how literacy is facilitated. Froebel's principles prompted the practitioner-researchers to reflect on their own ideas about play and writing and provided a framework to examine the subsequent data that were captured. Froebel believed that adults should focus on the minutiae of the child's self-activity, the fine details of children's play activity (Bruce, 2005) in order to identify the connections (the relational elements within play activity) and provide insight into children's learning. He wrote,

Hence to the thoughtful adult this little play may become a mirror which reflects the essential law of life; a point of departure and comparison, through which the phenomena of life may be interpreted; a bridge, which shall connect the inner being of the child with the external phenomena, and conversely shall interpret external phenomena to the heart and imagination of the child. (Froebel, 1987, p. 193)

Adopting this idea, the practitioner-researchers took into consideration the small and fleeting elements within children's play, paying special attention to the unplanned encounters that children had with mark-making and writing within their play.

A majority of the practitioner-researchers group discussions related to when, where and how young children were writing as part of their play, leading to the emergence of themes that could be revisited during each meeting. This was the beginnings of data analysis – a process that traced *the associations* that existed between the children's discursive interactions with others and their material intra-actions in their everyday play activity that enabled mark-making and writing activity. Patterns began to emerge that indicated the strength of certain associations within children's writing play. Further analysis by the PI mapped these initial associations or relationships onto the recorded data from the discussion between the practitioner-researchers. This helped to identify more clearly the language used by the practitioner-researchers to describe these events.

During the final two sessions, the PI led workshops to identify conclusions from the analysis. These conclusions demonstrated links between the Froebelian concept of connectedness, where play allows children to form connections with the world, and meaningful learning needs to be experienced as a connected 'whole' (Lilley, 1967), with theories that recognise literacy as socio-material-embodied events. As a result, a definition of 'playful writing' was developed to inform early childhood pedagogical practice. Finally, the practitioner-researchers evaluated their own professional development and the new knowledge they had been gained through their engagement with the project.

Ethical considerations

An ethic of care (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) was taken towards all the practitioner-researchers and the child writers in the design of the project, with consideration given to how best to listen effectively to the children's diverse expressions from which to gain new knowledge (Clark, 2011; Davies, 2011). These ideas were introduced by the PI during the first meeting together with procedural ethical codes of practice (Bertram et al., 2016). From this, the practitioner-researchers adopted careful listening practices and sensitive observations, which helped them to recognise the discursive interactions and the material intra-actions between adults and children, children and each other, and the space and materials within the classroom. The children's participation in the project, their actions and voices as writers, were central in the generation of the data that were subsequently discussed during practitioner-researcher's meetings.

BERA (2018) recommendations for seeking voluntary informed consent and protecting data were followed. These procedures as well as the rights of participants to withdraw were communicated by letters to practitioner-researchers and the children's caregivers. Although it was not possible for data to be anonymised when shared in the group sessions (as this included photographs and video of children), confidentiality was agreed by all adult participants and children's privacy was closely monitored. Data were subsequently anonymised and kept secure by the PI.

Helpfully, written observations, photographs and video are common practices in early years classrooms to document learning and evidence development, and it was customary practice for the practitioner-researchers in this study to share these with the children they worked with as a way of discussing and extending learning with them. Therefore, the children and the practitioner-researchers were familiar with these methods being embedded within everyday classroom activity. These choices of research tools minimised the risk that normal everyday mark-making and writing practices would be disrupted and have an adverse effect on children's participation in literacy events.

Findings and discussion

From the analysis of the group sessions, the practitioner-researchers were able to identify distinct features of mark-making and writing as part of children's play that supported children's engagement, enjoyment and motivation to write in diverse, multimodal and creative ways. These features were shaped into three broad characteristics that were used to frame the concept of 'playful writing'. The notion of 'playfulness' was adopted as an alternative to teacher-led writing activities that had specific targets attached to them – playfulness being a quality that emerges spontaneously without preconceived intentions (Lieberman, 1977).

The project determined that *playful writing* could be identified by having

- social function;
- multimodal, affective movement; and
- material possibilities.

These three characteristics highlight the qualities that are needed to ensure playful writing becomes a feature of early literacy education. The practitioner-researchers were also able to pinpoint two aspects of their role that supported these characteristics, firstly, by developing initial sensitivities to children's play, and secondly, by creating environments that encouraged and facilitated, or nurtured, *playful writing*.

Playful writing: social function

The study gathered many examples of children's mark-making and writing within play that illustrated the importance of it having a social function – a way for children to participate as social players in their play worlds, with the meanings assigned to the writing derived from its practice within the context of play (Street, 2013). Stimulated by their own interests, children exploited the social functions of writing, both within parallel and collaborative play, using a range of graphic marks to represent their ideas and engage others (signs, symbols, letters and numbers).

As an example, photographs and annotated observations of children playing a game jumping over large blocks showed how it had initially been started by a few children but spiralled into a complex social event as children began to keep a written score. At the beginning of the game, one child decided to keep a score of the players' jumps on the white board with a series of ticks. This action led to other children joining in and keeping their own score cards, writing down ticks on old receipt rolls. This in turn led to the 'jumpers' reading the scores to check that they were accurate, supporting purposeful reading as well as writing. Another child joined in the play and began to score using ones and zeros, and then one of the other scorers took this action one step further by writing down the names of who was in or out of the game. The children's desire

to play together meant that the text making was adjusted and modified – transformed rather than being fixed to any prescribed rules (Kress, 1997).

The rules assigned to the mark-making in this play were created in relation to its changing social function reflecting how the rules of writing in society shift in response to social change. The children's mark-making and writing also altered to extend and transform the play in order to increase the players' participation. There was a correspondence between the developing challenge of the play for the 'jumpers' and the growing complexity of mark-making for the 'scribers'. The seriousness of the children's endeavour was significant; the writing had to be accurate, checked and accountable to the experience of the group. What emerged here was that the children's play had created a bridge that supported them in the complex and demanding practices of writing (Myhill and Jones, 2009). This playful mark-making and writing emulated the shifting collaborative and cultural purposes of writing.

In another example, a group of children used chalks to draw lines on the playground to represent roads initially to play with 'cars' on. As the play developed, they decided that they also needed signs to tell other children how to navigate the road, when to stop and how to stay safe as road users. The writing and mark-making was used to share important communicative aspects of the shared narrative that was emerging within their imaginative play. As a collaborative narrative, the story telling the children were engaged with needed to allow for embellishment and extension, which it did. The narrative of the play encouraged the children to use symbolic representation, and the signs and symbols adopted were then used to drive the play forward (Engel, 2005).

The adoption of mark-making and writing within group play enabled these children to become more socially adaptive to the needs of the group, more responsive to each other as players and more creative in finding ways to expand the play for everyone, and as a result, the play continued for longer periods of time. Mark-making and writing had a fundamental role in sustaining play as a social event (Hall and Robinson, 2003). In turn, the actions of the play supported the shared symbolic meanings of mark-making and writing for the children involved.

Playful writing: multimodal, affective movement

In the play observed, marks and symbols were assigned meaning as part of a dynamic multimodal exchange that also included gesture, speech and bodily movements (Mavers, 2011). Many of the children's artefacts generated as part of their play were an amalgam of marks, drawings, symbols and signs. Observations showed that these were often shaped through playful conversations between children and adults. Drawing as part of these writing ensembles was viewed positively by the practitioner-researchers as a crucial way in which children could 'share their

worlds' with others in different spaces, both inside and outside. This overlapping multimodal production supported the function and purpose of writing for children in their play (Kress, 2010; Mavers, 2011; Pahl, 2002). The practitioner-researchers did not seek to separate these modes but instead intuitively recognised how play was a way of opening up rather than closing down children's multimodal expressions and therefore enriching their writing.

As a result of the pace of play and the desire of children to move the play into new realms, playful writing was also observed to be brief and transient. Unlike teacher-planned writing events, the mark-making and writing observed was often impulsive and spontaneous, with no predetermined outcomes. This transitoriness enabled children to change the meanings contained in their writing by altering its function, a process of semiotic redesign where the compositional arrangements of the children's texts were altered in order to realise different textual meanings (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, writing was changed from a secret message to a sticker in response to the play changing from adventure role play to a socio-dramatic school scenario. Children also abandoned their writing and then revisited it again to redesign and make it more useful for another play experience. This 'recycling' of writing involved movement – a repositioning in different spaces with different materials, corresponding with Karen Wohlwend's (2008) research from which she has surmised that,

Children engage in movement through time and space as they play. It is a dimension in which children are able to transform modes and transcend the expectations within school literacy discourse. (p. 133)

Another characteristic of playful writing was rooted in the pleasure of actually doing it – its affective quality, the writing action affecting the writer and those around them in pleasurable ways. Playful writing provided children with feelings of excitement as well as togetherness, for example, when they wrote cards for each other, or created treasure maps together. It is possible to make links here to Huizinga's (2014) argument that play has intrinsic value in the joy it brings, not only to children but also to the adults working with them. In the discussion groups, the practitioner-researchers talked of their sense of 'wonder' in what the children were doing. Writing as part of the children's play could be viewed as an affective movement with emotional consequences and a shared affective experience for both adult and child. These observations align with what Huizinga (1955) describes as the subjective experience of play – something premised upon an intense relationship with others (cited in Singer, 2013). This also supports the notion of reciprocity that exists in Froebel's ideas where play is valued as a means to enable adults and children to create a closeness and insight into each other's experience (Lilley, 1967).

The fluidity of playful literacy, together with its affective qualities, were often challenging for the practitioner-researchers to articulate (Truman et al., 2021). These less recognisable features moved unexpectedly into focus, and as MacLure (2013) has argued, the bodily and sensational aspects of language often deny representation. However, close observations of the multimodal movement of play by the practitioner-researchers focusing on the fine details of 'this little play' (Froebel, 1987) or 'literacy-as-event' (Burnett and Merchant, 2020) provided an opening to explore these *moving* and often unexplored aspects of literacy that are significant in generating writing.

Playful writing: material possibilities

In playful writing, children actively sought out different resources and different spaces sometimes in ingenious ways, highlighting how writing is a coming together of space, materials and time (Barad, 2007). However, the self-initiated and imaginative choices the children demonstrated in the materials they decided to use were also bounded by what was available. Their opportunities to be playful as writers were dependent on whether the resources lent themselves to multiple uses. The elemental make-up of the materials themselves, or the liveliness of their molecular structure (Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2007), affected children's intra-action with them and therefore the playful possibilities that were animated.

Analysis of how children engaged with the properties of materials showed that the freedom to adapt a simple material – it being unrestrained in how it was used – was not enough for children to want to play and write with it. An experimental activity designed by the practitioner-researchers to see how children would respond given smooth, blank folded pieces of paper showed that the children did not afford much time and energy to these open-ended materials. The constituent elements of these materials, rather than presenting transformative possibilities, narrowed the playful writing activity, and instead, other materials were sought by the children to support play opportunities. It could be that the children needed more scaffolding in how they could imaginatively use these pieces of paper, but more interestingly, it indicated that the properties of the materials used by the children needed to 'say' something to them in the moment of their play – that writing materials have a vitality that is not fixed but momentarily encountered (Taguchi, 2010). The practitioner-researchers deduced from these observations that children were dependent as players and writers as much on the material environment that they intra-acted with as other factors and that the materials significantly affected the production of both play and writing. As Kuby and Crawford (2018 p. 29) write, "materials do not always act or do the same thing – it depends on their entangled relation with other materials (human and nonhuman)".

Furthermore, the practitioner-researchers were able to identify exactly how materials might act upon children's thinking as writers. For example, one teacher set up a space station role-play area with pencils covered in silver foil. She noted that as the pencils acquired different meanings through their material changes, the children's meanings in their writing changed. The material qualities of the 'space pens' affected the desirability of the children to write about space adventures, leading to high levels of motivation and engagement. It is possible to infer from this that playful writing is materially inspired and that what is commonly referred to as 'the non-human' (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019) is intertwined with playful thinking. Playful writing involves, as Rautio and Winston (2015) note, "complex entanglements of congregational, socio-material activity, rather than only individual and interactional (human to human) activity" (p. 22). It relies on adaptive materials, and its other characteristics (social function, multimodal and affective movement) are dependent on these to move narrative play forward.

Enabling a playful writing environment: the adult role

The practitioner-researchers demonstrated a remarkable tenderness towards the children's writing process. They used the words 'compassion' and 'sympathy' to describe their responses to the children's challenges and difficulties as writers. This sensitivity helped them to consider dialogue with children as having pedagogical value: a way in which they were able to exchange positions rather than taking prescribed views of children's needs in order to know and understand them (Buber, 1965, cited in Noddings, 2012). The practitioner-researchers spoke often of the importance of 'being in the moment' with the children, of close observation, or tuning into children's activity to appreciate the meanings that were being formed. As one practitioner-researcher expressed, "It's all about the process, not the outcome, it's about finding the meanings for the child that are there".

To focus on the meanings of writing as a process, a moving series of interconnected events or socio-material-affective encounters shifts the gaze from seeking evidence of literacy skills and knowledge being performed to the literacy activity that is momentarily happening. This is a perspective where literacy emerges as a relational field that young children exist within, rather than one where children and teachers are expected to have authority over (Hermansson and Saar, 2017). The practitioner-researchers examination of this process helped them to acknowledge a range of individual writing trajectories within their classrooms and the diverse and creative ways that all young children have of mark-making and writing.

The group highlighted the value of being playful with the children, although they also acknowledged the difficulties of not having enough time to play. They

agreed that it was important to find the balance between making too many suggestions that challenge and support children's learning, and not disrupting play processes, or "getting in the way of something spontaneous". One practitioner-researcher described what they did with children in their classroom as 'seed planting', correlating with Froebelian notions of the adult as nurturer and the child as having pathways of natural development. Another identified the need to "know when to skip in or out" of children's play. Surprisingly, the Froebelian principle "the right of children to protection from harm or abuse and to the promotion of their overall well-being" (Froebel Trust, 2020) was selected by one practitioner-researcher as an important starting point in how she supported children's playful writing, arguing that adults should protect children's rights to be free from judgements about their writing that may affect their happiness and, therefore, their motivation to write.

Paradoxically, even though the practitioner-researchers placed a high value on play in the work they did with children, they all agreed that they avoided using the word play itself to describe what they did to others, instead adopting words and phrases such as 'learning', 'discovery learning' or 'exploring'. This was in response to the measures of accountability that framed the pedagogical language they felt was able to be used in schools. As one practitioner-researcher explained,

I do tend to say "what are you learning to do?" rather than "what are you playing?" and that comes from people looking in, who may come and ask the children "what are you learning?" What it comes down to is the children need to say what they are learning for the powers that be that may come in and ask them.

All the practitioner-researchers understood the risk of being judged negatively by powerful regulatory bodies as a result of the language they used with children, illustrating how policy and inspection frameworks influence the cultures of play within schools, including how practitioner-researchers are able/or not to enact play practices. If language is restricted, then play possibilities that support literacy could potentially be undermined.

The practitioner-researchers were very aware that they held complex and competing ideas about play and had conflicting and uncomfortable relationships with the pedagogical practices they espoused (Wood and Hedges, 2016). However, as a result of the research, they had begun to view themselves as advocates of writing within play-based pedagogy and started to ask more specific questions about this approach, for example, whether there was such a thing as 'guided' playful writing or whether as Rautio and Winston (2015) argue, this would negate the essentially playful movement necessary for affective, socially meaningful and materially intra-active mark-making and writing to be generated.

Conclusion

The study has shown that through close examination of playful writing, insight can be gained into the relational qualities needed for its generation. The three playful writing characteristics identified: social function, multimodal movement and material possibilities, can be adopted by teachers of young children as a starting point in their planning and resourcing for writing as part of a rich literacy curriculum. Having shown that playfulness gives children the intensity and purpose to write, teachers could also embrace elements of playfulness in their practices by embracing intuition and impulsiveness, being spontaneous play partners and recognising the joy this can bring to the classroom.

Reflective and intelligent classroom practices develop as a result of teachers as practitioner-researchers interrogating the 'taken-for-granted' narratives within literacy policy and early years practice. Given time to reflect and question literacy practices, this group of teachers were able to create a sophisticated and values-based approach to the literacy teaching of young children that could be communicated to others as a working model that can enhance literacy practices. Reception teachers are in a unique position in a primary school to do this. Their pedagogical practice differs from other teachers, allowing for diverse insights into children's literacy learning. Rather than being discounted, this expertise should provide leverage from within the profession and be recognised by policymakers and regulatory bodies.

Froebel (1888) draws our attention to the importance of the 'thoughtful' adult in being able to recognise the connections that exist within the unity of learning. As shown here, the teachers, in the role of practitioner-researchers, had the capacity to closely attend to the specifics of their work. What they discovered was a fascination with how children's thoughts are conceived within the material world as they play through different spaces and time and how these are then formed into representational marks. It is by looking closely at the details of this process that we will be able to unravel the importance of materially symbolic play activity in the formation of writing. Observing the materiality of shifting multimodal literacy events helps us to understand how children *think with* materials in multiple ways and so disrupt and challenge conventional formalised teaching methods that can restrict young children's literacy experience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Froebel Trust for funding this project as well as the teachers who participated and gave their time so generously in bringing the study to life.

References

- BARAD, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. London: Duke University Press.
- BASFORD, J. (2019) The Early Years Foundation Stage: whose knowledge, whose values? *Education* 3-13, 47.7, pp. 779–783.
- BENNETT, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. London: Duke University Press.
- BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 4th edn. London: BERA. Retrieved from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018> [Accessed 26/4/21].
- BERTRAM, T., FORMONSINHO, J., GRAY, C., PASCAL, C. and WHALLEY, M. (2016) EECERA ethical code for early childhood researchers. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 24.1, pp. iii–xiii.
- BRAIDOTTI, R. (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity.
- BRUCE, T. (Ed.) (2005) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today*. London: Sage.
- BURNETT, C. and MERCHANT, G. (2020) Literacy-as-event: accounting for relationality in literacy research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 41.1, pp. 45–56.
- BURNETT, C., MERCHANT, G., PAHL, K. and ROWSELL, J. (2014) The (im)materiality of literacy: the significance of subjectivity to new literacies research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35.1, pp. 90–103.
- BURNETT, C., MERCHANT, M. and NEUMANN, M. M. (2019) Closing the gap? Overcoming limitations in sociomaterial accounts of early literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 20.1, pp. 111–133.
- CAENA, F. (2011) *Education and Training 2020 Thematic Working Group 'Professional Development of Teachers'*. Literature Review: *Quality in Teachers' Continuing Professional Development*. European Commission. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2011-2013/teacher/teacher-competences_en.pdf [Accessed 26/4/21].
- CAGLIARI, P., CASTEGNETTI, M., GIUDICI, C., RINALDI, C., VECCHI, V. and MOSS, P. (2016) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A Selection of His Writings and Speeches 1945–1993*. London: Routledge.
- CLARK, A. (2011) Breaking methodological boundaries? Exploring visual, participatory methods with adults and young children. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19.3, pp. 321–330.
- CREMIN, T., FLEWITT, R., MARDELL, B. and SWANN, J. (2017) 'Introduction', in T. CREMIN, R. FLEWITT, B. MARDELL, J. SWANN (Eds.) *Storytelling in Early Childhood: Language, Literacy and Classroom Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–12.
- DAHLBERG, G. and MOSS, P. (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- DANIELS, K. (2014) Cultural agents creating texts: a collaborative space adventure. *Literacy*, 48.2, pp. 103–111.
- DAVIES, B. (2011) Open listening: creative evolution in early childhood settings. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 43.2, pp. 119–132.
- DE (2021) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)*. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974907/EYFS_framework_-_March_2021.pdf [Accessed 26/4/21].
- DUBIEL, J. and KILNER, D. (2017) *Teaching Four-and-Five-Year Olds: The Hundred Review of the Reception Year in England*. London: Early Excellence. Retrieved from https://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/EX_TheHundredReview_Report.pdf [Accessed 26/4/21].
- DYSON, A. H. (1989) *Multiple Worlds of Child Writers: Friends Learning to Write*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- DYSON, A. H. (1997) *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Media, and Classroom Literacy*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- DYSON, A. H. (2003) *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write: Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- DYSON, A. H. (2008) Staying in the (curricular) lines: practice constraints and possibilities in childhood writing. *Written Communication*, 25.1, pp. 119–159.
- ENGEL, S. (2005) The narrative world of *what is* and *what if*. *Cognitive Development*, 20.4, pp. 514–525.
- FLEWITT, R. (2017) 'Equity and diversity through story: a multimodal perspective', in T. CREMIN, R. FLEWITT, B. MARDELL, J. SWANN (Eds.) *Storytelling in Early Childhood: Language, Literacy and Classroom Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 150–168.
- FROEBEL, F. (1888) in E. MICHAELIS, H. K. MOORE (Eds.) *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel* (Trans. London: Swan Sonnenschein).
- FROEBEL, F. (1987) in J. JARVIS (Ed.) *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten or His Ideas Concerning the Play and Playthings of the Child* (Trans. London: Edward Arnold). Retrieved from <http://urweb.roehampton.ac.uk/digital-collection/froebel-archive/pedagogics-kindergarten/Chapter%2011.pdf> [Accessed 26/4/21].
- Froebel Trust (2020) Froebelian principles. Retrieved from <https://www.froebel.org.uk/froebelian-principles/> [Accessed 26/4/21].
- GASKINS, S. (2014) 'Children's play as cultural activity', in L. BROOKER, M. BLAISE, S. EDWARDS (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*. London: Sage, pp. 31–42.
- GEE, J. P. (2004) *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- GENISHI, C., DYSON, A. H. and RUSSO, L. (2011) 'Playful learning: early education that makes sense to children', in E. BEATRICE, A. GOODWIN (Eds.) *Promoting Social Justice for Young Children*. London: Springer, pp. 59–70.
- HALL, N. and ROBINSON, A. (2003) *Exploring Writing and Play in the Early Years*, 2nd edn. London: David Fulton.
- HERMANSSON, C. and SAAR, T. (2017) Nomadic writing in early childhood education. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17.3, pp. 426–443.
- HUIZINGA, J. (2014) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. New York: Martino Fine Books.
- INGOLD, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- INGOLD, T. (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- JEWITT, C. (Ed.) (2009) *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- KERVIN, L., COMBER, B. and WOODS, A. (2017) Toward a sociomaterial understanding of writing experiences incorporating digital technology in an early childhood classroom. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 66, pp. 183–197.
- KRESS, G. (1997) *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy*. London: Routledge.
- KRESS, G. (2010) *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge.
- KRESS, G. and VAN LEEUWEN, T. (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- KUBY, C., RUCKER, T. and KIRCHHOFFER, J. (2015) 'Go be a writer': intra-activity with materials, time and space in literacy learning. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 15.3, pp. 394–419.
- KUBY, C. R. and CRAWFORD, S. (2018) Intra-activity of humans and nonhumans in Writers' Studio: (re)imagining and (re)defining 'social'. *Literacy*, 52.1, pp. 20–30.
- LANCASTER, L. (2007) Representing the ways of the world: how children under three start to use syntax in graphic signs. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 7.2, pp. 123–154.
- LANCASTER, L. (2014) The emergence of symbolic principles: the distribution of mind in early sign making. *Biosemiotics*, 7, pp. 29–47.
- LENTERS, K. (2016) Riding the lines and overwriting in the margins. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 48.3, pp. 280–316.
- LIEBERMAN, N. (1977) *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity*. London: Educational Psychology.
- LILLEY, I. (1967) *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings*. London: Cambridge University Press.

- LOFTHOUSE, R. (2014) Engaging in educational research and development through teacher practitioner enquiry; a pragmatic or naïve approach? *Education Today*, 64.4, pp. 13–19.
- LOFTHOUSE, R., HALL, E. and WALL, K. (2012) 'Practitioner enquiry', in A. BRIGGS, M. COLEMAN, M. MORRISON (Eds.) *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*. London: Sage, pp. 170–187.
- MACLURE, M. (2013) Researching without representation? Language and materiality in post-qualitative methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26.6, pp. 658–667.
- MATTHEWS, J. (1999) *The Art of Childhood and Adolescence: The Construction of Meaning*. London: Falmer Press.
- MAVERS, D. (2011) *Children's Drawing and Writing: The Remarkable in the Unremarkable*. London: Routledge.
- MITCHELL, N. and PEARSON, P. (2012) *Inquiring in the Classroom*. London: Continuum.
- MYHILL, D. and JONES, S. (2009) How talk becomes text: investigating the concept of oral rehearsal in early years' classrooms. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57.3, pp. 265–284.
- NODDINGS, N. (2012) The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38.6, pp. 771–781.
- Ofsted (2017) *Bold Beginnings: The Reception Curriculum in a Sample of Good and Outstanding Primary Schools*. London: HMCI. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/663560/28933_Ofsted_-_Early_Years_Curriculum_Report_-_Accessible.pdf [Accessed 26/4/21].
- OLSSON, L. (2009) *Movement and Experimentation in Young Children's Learning – Deleuze and Guattari in Early Childhood Education*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- PAHL, K. (2002) Ephemeria, mess and miscellaneous piles: texts and practices in families. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 2.2, pp. 145–166.
- RAUTIO, P. and WINSTON, J. (2015) Things and children in play: improvisation with language and matter. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36.1, pp. 15–26.
- RINALDI, C. (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- ROBERTS-HOLMES, G. (2014) The 'datafication' of early years pedagogy: 'If the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30.3, pp. 302–315.
- ROOPNARINE, J. (2015) 'Play as culturally situated: diverse perspectives on its meaning and significance', in J. L. ROOPNARINE, M. PATTE, J. E. JOHNSON, D. KUSCHNER (Eds.) *International Perspectives on Children's Play*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill, pp. 1–9.
- SARACHO, O. N. and SPODEK, B. (2006) Young children's literacy-related play. *Early Child Development and Care*, 176.7, pp. 707–772.
- SINGER, E. (2013) Play and playfulness, basic features of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21.2, pp. 172–184.
- SMAGORINSKY, P. (2011) *Vygotsky and Literacy Research*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publications.
- STREET, B. (2013) Literacy in theory and practice: challenges and debates over 50 years. *Theory Into Practice*, 52, pp. 52–62.
- SUTTON-SMITH, B. (2001) *The Ambiguity of Play*, Revised edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- TACTYC (Association for Professional Development in Early Years) (2017) *Bald beginnings: a response to Ofsted's (2017) report, Bold beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools*. TACTYC. Retrieved from <https://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bold-Beginnings-TACTYC-response-FINAL-09.12.17.pdf> [Accessed 26/4/21].
- TAGUCHI, H. L. (2010) *Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.
- TRUMAN, S. E., HACKETT, A., PAHL, K., MCLEAN DAVIES, L. and ESCOTT, H. (2021) The capaciousness of no: affective refusals as literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56.2, pp. 223–236.
- VYGOTSKY, L. S. (1997) 'Prehistory of the development of written language', in R. W. RIEBER (Ed.) *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky: The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions*, Vol. 4. New York: Plenum, pp. 131–148.
- WENGER, E. (2009) 'A social theory of learning', in K. ILLERIS (Ed.) *Contemporary Theories of Learning*. London: Routledge, pp. 209–218.
- WOHLWEND, K. (2008) Research directions: play as a literacy of possibilities: expanding meanings in practices, materials, and spaces. *Language Arts*, 86.2, pp. 127–136.
- WOHLWEND, K. (2013) *Literacy Playshop: New Literacies, Popular Media and Play in the Early Childhood Classroom*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- WOOD, E. and CHESWORTH, L. (2017) 'Play and pedagogy', in J. PAYLER et al. (Eds.) *BERA-TACTYC Early Childhood Research Review 2003–2017*. London: BERA, pp. 49–60.
- WOOD, E. and HEDGES, H. (2016) Curriculum in early childhood education: critical questions about content, coherence, and control. *The Curriculum Journal*, 27.3, pp. 387–405.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Dr Kate Smith, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK.

email: kate.smith@canterbury.ac.uk