

Learning to be a writer: why play matters.

The influential developmental theorist Lev Vygotsky wrote that *'In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.'* (1967, p.16). Like Vygotsky, practitioners and parents know the important role that play has in motivating children, and the sense of achievement that playful activity can provide. Interestingly, to be a successful writer children need to have similar experiences to those associated with play. As a writer, a child needs to be able to test their skills through trial and error, explore their ideas imaginatively and create something that provides a sense of accomplishment.

These links between play and writing have been explored recently in a research study with a group of reception teachers called 'The Playful Writing Project'. The aim of the project was to identify how writing in the first year of school benefits from being carried out in a playful way and provide an understanding of the key features of playful writing practices.

An important starting point for the teachers was to consider their own adult writing experiences: why, when and how they wrote. This provided them with an insight into the social purpose of writing and how it provides opportunities for individual expression. The group then identified principles from Friedrich Froebel's work that they associated with both play and writing. These were self-direction, self-expression, and creative exploration (Froebel Trust, 2016). Finally, the diverse ways in which young children bring together different modes of communication to express themselves and represent their thinking e.g. drawing, mark-making, gestures, speech, symbols, were also considered (Kress, 2010; Mavers 2011).

With all of these ideas in mind the teachers in the project carried out research in their classes by conversing with the children, making observations, taking photographs and videos, and collecting the writing artefacts that the children made. The group then met every month over the period of a year to discuss the 'data' and reflect on the drawing, mark-making and writing activity that was going on in their classrooms. The findings provide an insight into the qualities of playful writing and its importance in encouraging early literacy, with three significant features being identified. These characteristics will hopefully help practitioners understand how they are able to support children in being and becoming effective writers and communicators.

What is playful writing?

First, playful writing, like all writing, has a social function.

The teachers found that it was common in collaborative play for children to respond to each other and extend their play using communicative marks (signs, symbols, letters and numbers). As an example, a group of children using chalks outside to draw lines on the playground to represent roads decided that they also needed to create signs to tell others in the class how to navigate the road: when to stop, and how to stay safe as road users. The children brought together writing, drawing and speech in this activity as a way to symbolise important communicative aspects of the play. These overlapping multimodal expressions encouraged others to engage in their ideas. By incorporating writing with other modes of language the children were able to be more creative in finding ways to expand the play for everyone, and as a result continued to play and write for longer periods of time. This corresponds with Hall and Robinson's (2003) findings that children write to pursue and sustain their play. As one teacher described it, children are *'spurred on by each other in playful writing'*.

Second, playful writing is spontaneous and involves adaptation.

In the study, children would often change the meanings contained in their writing by altering its function, for example a piece of writing starting out as a secret message would suddenly become a map, or even a sticker. The children would revisit their writing and redesign it, to make it more useful for another play experience. This 'recycling' of writing involved movement around the classroom and outside space to access different environments and materials. Playful writing was frequently an impulsive, rapid and unstructured affair with no planned outcome. However the teachers recognised the great value it had as it brought the children the joy, demonstrated for example in the children's feelings of excitement as well as togetherness as they wrote cards for each other. This aspect of playful writing is significant because it recognises the transformational qualities of writing as well as the pleasurable affect it can have.

Third, playful writing is a materially rich experience.

Materials were a key aspect of the children's writing activity. The children actively sought out different resources and different spaces to write, both inside and out, in sometimes ingenious ways. However, the self-initiated and imaginative choices the children demonstrated in the materials they decided to use was also restricted by what was available. The ability to be playful as a writer was dependent on the resources which may, or may not, lend themselves to being afforded multiple uses. For example, when the teachers decided to experiment and strip back materials, providing only smooth, blank folded rectangles of white paper to play with, although greetings cards were produced, little else was. The limitations of the material narrowed the play and writing opportunities, and other materials were sought out by the children independently to extend their communication and play.

Materials were also important in acting upon children's thinking as writers. As part of a space station role-play area for example, the pencils were covered in silver foil encouraging the children to write as space explorers. The pencils therefore acquired a different meaning through their material changes – they had become space pens, to write about space adventures!

How can we support young children's playful writing?

By identifying the characteristics of playful writing as having a social function, as being spontaneous, and having a material dimension, the teachers were able to pinpoint two aspects of their role to enable these features to occur. First by developing sensitivities to children's play, and second by creating environments that encouraged and facilitated, or nurtured, these writing opportunities.

It was agreed that a writing rich environment should value each child's unique voice and allow for diverse opportunities for this to be expressed. Children's choice and autonomy in their writing should be encouraged as this provides ownership and authorship within the play. Space to play with writing also needs to be created. As one teacher said, children need *'time to get on and formulate ideas ... to be left to it'*.

Adults being 'in the writing moment' with children through close observation and 'tuning in' to appreciate the meanings that are being formed, is also fundamental. One teacher stated this very clearly when she said, *'It's all about the process, not the outcome, it's about finding the meanings for the child that are there'*. This search for meaning should be used to frame sustained shared

questioning with children, to scaffold and extend their interests. *'I wonder if...'*, as well as *'I wonder what...'* are important questions to ask as a way of increasing children's writing opportunities. There is however, a need to find the balance between making suggestions that challenge and support children's learning as a writer as well as facilitating children's autonomous play.

Significantly, the teachers in this study noted how playing alongside the children provided a 'togetherness', or a reciprocity that gave them, as adults, a delight and satisfaction in their professional role. This subjective dimension of play has also been identified by Huizinga (cited in Singer, 2013), and should not be underestimated, as it can be a powerful tool to motivate both adults and children as writers. In essence, if children are supported to become 'a head taller' in their writing, then so will the adults who support them in their practice.

Finally, it is important to remember that when young children play they are engaging in sophisticated and complex thinking, practicing and refining physical skills, exploring the world through materials and their senses and connecting emotionally to others. The same can be said of writing, and therefore play is an excellent starting point in providing valuable writing experiences for children.

Ideas and activities to encourage playful writing

- A resource area from which children can 'self-serve'. To include notepads, pencils, scissors, tape, crayons, whiteboards, chalk, letter magnets, clipboards, sticky notes, envelopes, post cards, rolls of paper, paper of different sizes and colours, etc.
- Giant chinks and blackboard paint. These are easily transported and are quick and easy for children to use on different surfaces/furniture, e.g. for mark making on floors, walls, tuft spots, benches, posts, etc.
- The back of old wallpapers. Use these to cover low areas of walls so that children can freely and spontaneously 'graffiti' on them. Children are thrilled when they know they can write on the walls!
- Sticky notes. These are quick and easy to use, fit in hands and pockets and can be stuck in different places. An extension of this could be to have a message area where children and adults can leave messages for one another.
- UV pens. As they are 'invisible' they can be used anywhere. Use a UV torch to reveal the children's messages.
- 'On the go' box. Fill a plastic carry box with a variety of writing equipment. This makes resources mobile and available for children to take with them as their play moves. Children's zip-up lunch bags also work well for these too.

For more information about The Playful Writing Project contact Dr Kate Smith, kate.smith@canterbury.ac.uk

For further reading

Hall, N. and Robinson, A. (2003) *Exploring Writing and Play in the Early Years*. 2nd edn. London: David Fulton

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