

Research report, Wester Coates Nursery School, Edinburgh

Symbolic representation – how do we, outdoors, support the development of ‘writing’, through play?

If self-reflection constitutes part of a ‘research project’ then the community at Wester Coates Nursery School (WCNS), Edinburgh, fulfilled that role admirably!

Although shorter practitioner inquiries had previously been undertaken, the setting, at the start of this project, remained relatively inexperienced in carrying out practitioner-research. Once embarked upon, the project helped us focus on an area of practice about which we had been wondering. **However** the overwhelming impact came not just from the conclusion, but from the increased collaboration, and subsequent extension of skills and collective knowledge of staff members. The learning curve was steep, at times stressful and challenging, but overall, a positive and satisfactory experience, resulting in evolving practices to benefit children.

The main aim of the research was to explore mark-making, within an outdoor early years’ context, questioning whether it led to the emergence of early writing. The research was carried out at WCNS – a kindergarten which, post-covid lockdowns, operates largely outside, follows Froebel’s principled approach whereby play features strongly and the daily emphasis is on free-flow practice and child-led exploration. Valuing childhood as a stage in its own right - and not as a preparation for the next phase of life; building strong relationships; respecting the significance of creativity and the power of symbols, and fostering a deep engagement with nature form the basis of how, each day, children are supported and nurtured.

FIRST STEPS

Through observation, photographic evidence and professional dialogue, practitioners queried whether children were developing mark-making skills in their outdoor play and set out to determine the accuracy of this thought.

An initial audit was undertaken listing mark-making potentials. ‘Freedom with Guidance’ was frequently debated, and confidence in allowing children to follow their unique creative interests unhindered and unhurried, increased. It was important to keep in mind our strong belief that learning is holistic, hopefully unrestricted by time or practice constraints, and therefore mark-making could not or should not be enforced. It became apparent some children - those who regularly chose traditional mark-making tools (paper, crayons, paint...), and liked to model-make, design, draw or paint - became frustrated as the elements worked against them.

To mitigate we made sure sheltered areas were provided, and further ensured natural materials such as charcoal, and sticks were readily accessible. At that point, with the audit undertaken and subsequent small changes to resources and spaces, we turned to literature to expand our knowledge.

READING

To research relevant information, it was necessary to look at literature about Froebel, his principles and current practice, plus literature about both 'the outdoors' and 'emergent writing'. Initially texts by Bruce, (2021); McNair, (2021, 2020); and Brehony, (2016) advised Froebelian approaches. Texts on emergent writing came from Clark, (2014); Bruce and Spratt (2011); Matthews, (2003); Meek (1991) and Froebel, (1886), and texts on outdoor experiences from Barkham, (2020); Tovey (2017); Solly (2015); Knight, (2012) and McNair (2012), informed the research.

The readings, and the sharing of content when time allowed, provoked much professional dialogue.

The following Froebelian quote resonated with us:

'My kindergarten will be an institution where children instruct and educate themselves and where they develop and integrate all their abilities through play, which is creative self-activity and spontaneous self-instruction.'

(Froebel, in Lilley 1967:92)

and from it we took confirmation that our concept of regarding children as competent reflected one of Froebel's aims.

Further to that, texts on the outdoors emphasised both health and physical benefits, and learning - echoing guidance from The Scottish Government's 'My World Outdoors' and acting as an antidote to the NHS's voiced worries over obesity and sedentary life-styles.

Solly (2015) defines the outdoor environment as one that:

'...should be open ended, but also provide areas or zones just like the indoors which then easily enable different sorts of play and learning to take place'

(Solly, 2015:72)

The literature around emergent writing proved to be the most enlightening for us, with the following quote from Margaret Meek acting as a light-bulb moment with regard to our understanding and interpretation of 'mark-making' and 'writing'.

'A mark, a scratch even, a picture or sign made by one person which is interpreted and understood by others may be regarded as a form of writing.' (Meek, 1991:18)



Picture by child age 3 combining chalk and stones



Traditional mark-making resources, - created outdoors, child age 4

Meek's definition reinforced the idea of any marks...*all marks*...scratches on stones, imprinted marks in wet sand, water sprayed on walls etc. as writing, and widened our thinking. Also, at that point we verbalised the distinction between writing in the sense of 'creating and recording text', and 'handwriting' (Tassoni, 2022) ie, recognising the writing of imaginative prose (stories) and/or factual recall for a purpose, and the mechanics of handwriting as two different entities.

We read,

'Those who study the history of writing are convinced that it is one of the most momentous of all human inventions. It makes possible the use of language beyond speech' (Meek, 1991:23).

For this specific research (accepting that we scribe stories as a norm for our cohort) we concentrated on the emergence of physical mark-making/handwriting.

WHAT WE DID

We chose to undertake research through an ethnographic lens – one where the ethnographers' role is to immerse themselves in the lived experiences of their participants. (Penn, 2016). We learned that qualitative research focuses more on high quality information from more specific individuals, as opposed to quantitative research which provides a large quantity of numerical data (Bryman, 2008). For our purpose we preferred the former.

We carried out more observations, watching children at play in our gardens and further afield, recognising when and how mark-making was involved, and recording in case notes. Some of these case notes were eventually written up as case studies.



Brush and Water on Wall



Chalking



Recycled Cardboard

Our observations evidenced that opportunities existed in many forms to support emergent writing, and a more specific question arose. 'If we could see evidence of mark-making *what* was happening outdoors to help that development?'

'Realising the Ambition: Being Me', Scotland's Early Years guidance document, told us

'Outdoor environments often contain more opportunity and stimulate children's curiosity and wonder for learning than indoor playrooms and classrooms.' (Scottish Government 2020:65).

Incidental conversation with children gave us insight to their idea of 'writing' and evidenced that few made any distinction between their art creations, early scribbles, paintings, or creations in sand, clay or mud – all could tell a story...and stories are written in books and made up of writing. But that did not show how the actual physical

writing was developing.

Transient Art and Clay



We looked again at our findings and began to interpret them through the lens of what we had learned from reading - that certain physical skills were needed to develop writing!

To write requires muscle strength and control - particularly *'in shoulders, arms, hands and fingers'* (Cowley, 2012:40). Play activities were described - the kind that happen at WCNS on a daily basis: *'climbing, hanging, digging'* - all which develop core strength, and gross and fine motor skills. Hanscom described how *'pushing and pulling objects, lifting heavy stones and logs'* all advance a child's sense of proprioception - necessary to understand how much force to give to *'writing with a pen without ripping the paper'* and added that *'children with poor proprioception are generally more susceptible to fractures, falls, dislocations, and injuries'* (Hanscom 2016:46-47).



Climbing, Hanging and Jumping



Swinging and Twirling



Running and Jumping

The importance of the vestibular sense which a child needs to be able to balance, sit in a seat, and co-ordinate was also stressed. This balance is developed by *‘having the opportunity to move...spinning...walking and running on uneven surfaces...jumping from height to different height, and navigating various terrains’* – all of which can be readily achieved outdoors (Hanscom 2016:48-49).

And there we had it – the answer to our question: ‘If we could see evidence of mark-making *what* was happening outdoors to help that development?’

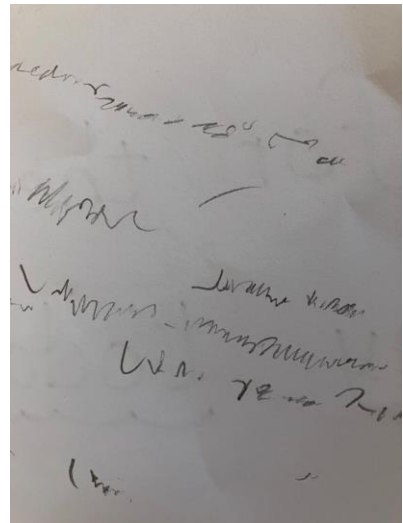
Play.

CONCLUSIONS

- for a child’s emergent writing to occur outdoors, their environment for playing and ‘working’ must be conducive to building prerequisite skills.
- children, when mark-making outdoors, will go from mark-making to legible writing.



- experimenting with mark-making develops the understanding of how symbols represent something and leads to composing texts.



THANKS

On behalf of those involved - 26 children, staff and families - I wish to thank the Froebel Trust for funding which made this research, and learning, possible. To anyone considering applying for a grant to enable practice research I would say 'go for it'. There is plenty support on tap from the Froebel Trust; your setting will move forward in many ways – and you will arrive at conclusions to your research questions less wary, more confident, and as better practitioners than when your research journey began.

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