Early Writing Development

Throughout the 1980s more attention began to be paid to young children’s writing. The traditional belief that they could not and should not write until they went to school was gradually eroded as more and more was understood about emergent or developmental writing and as researchers and teachers watched the writing efforts of the children they worked with. Some of the research that lead to the view that young children could and should begin to write before school is summarised here.

Ferrerio and Teberosky (1989) undertook important research on children’s self-generated hypotheses about writing rules. They found that many children expected written string of letters for people’s names to be proportional to the size (or age) of the person rather than the actual length of their name.

... David thinks that the written representation ‘papa’ is longer than the one for DavidBernardo Mendez (his own complete name) ... a girl who has just turned five ... says ‘Write my name. But you have to make it longer because yesterday was my birthday.’

(Ferrerio and Teberosky, 1989, p.180-184)

Gregg’s writing below was done when he was four years and one month old – it illustrates Ferrerio and Teberosky’s research into this hypothesis. Whilst the strings for ‘my dad’ and ‘my mum’ both contain nine characters, Gregg has made the first look bigger.
Ferrerio and Teberosky (1989) summarise children’s writing activity in relation to the hypothesis that a bigger object must have a bigger word:

They do use a greater number of graphic characters, larger characters, or longer graphic strings if the object is bigger, longer, older, or if a greater number of objects are referred to.

(Ferrerio and Teberosky, 1989, p.184)

Ferrerio and Teberosky also argue from their data that writing is not copying an external model. The children they studied explored various ideas and hypotheses about writing – writing they argue, doesn’t depend on graphic skill (their ability to make letters look conventional) but on the level of conceptualisation about writing – that is the set of hypotheses they have explored for the purpose of understanding writing.
To be effective in supporting young children’s literacy development teachers and parents need to understand what helps children to write, what forms their early writing might take and how writing develops. The illustration below (Weinberger et al., 1990) shows the development of writing from early marks to a more conventional and understandable message. Equipped with this knowledge, adults can tailor their interventions and support in ways which support literacy development rather than battle against it.

Ross and Brondy (1987) suggested that young children must come to understand that speech can be written down in order to progress successfully in reading. Goodman (1980) discussed children’s approaches to the development of a concept of directionality, approaches to latter formation and spelling strategies. She suggested that, early on, children who understand that there are ‘correct’ ways to spell words will ask adults for spelling. Some children, says Goodman, when they have sufficient confidence and knowledge of letter sounds and blends, generate their own spelling rules.

Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) considered children’s readiness to take risks with literacy. They see ‘risk taking’ as a central process of written language suggesting that three and four year olds who take risks with writing and spelling make better language learners.
We could think of young children making sense of writing by three processes:

**Observation**  they see people writing

**Interaction**  they are involved in writing interchanges with adults who write alongside them – birthday cards, letters, order forms – and who sometimes ‘tutor’ them directly

**Representation**  they make their own marks which look more and more like conventional writing as they develop and as they represent the actions and products of writers and learn more about writing that enables them to develop the skills they need

Some studies of individual children’s early literacy achievements in the 1980s have been carried out by researchers interested in the topic. In the main they have studied their own children over a number of years. This has resulted in a small bank of case studies (including Payton, 1984; Baghdan, 1984; Schickedanz, 1990) which can be a useful source of material to examine in some detail, children’s early literacy achievements.

Some children develop their sense of purpose through their early years, by writing and being part of writing experiences, in everyday activities, with their family. Such opportunities should support later progress through the early years of schooling. For many children home and school literacy can be different. Writing at home may be purposeful and less so at school, or there may be little writing at home and much more at school.

Wray et al (1989) state that:

> Everyday in every school, teachers who have mastered the conventions of writing exhort their pupils who haven’t, to write and to write for no apparent reason. All they know is, the more they write, the better they become at it, so eventually the practice becomes an end in itself.

(Wray et. Al., 1989)

This suggests that writing in the classroom is often done ‘because it is’ whereas writing in real life occurs when there is a need to communicate, remember and create.

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