Canterbury Christ Church University

Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities

The Playful Writing Project: Exploring playful writing opportunities with reception class teachers

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The teachers were involved in the initial stages of interpretation and drawing out the key messages from the evidence gathered. One teacher, Kim Jackson, also presented the initial findings at the November 2017 TACTYC conference with me; a particularly valuable activity for the project in providing us with an audience to rehearse the ideas that are now refined within this report.

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Project summary: *Exploring 'playful writing' opportunities with reception teachers: expanding understandings of young children's mark-making, drawing and writing within self-initiated play*

This was a longitudinal study over the period of one year which set out to explore how Froebelian ideas of play, as '*creative self-activity and spontaneous self-instruction'* (Lilley, 1967 p.92), could support children's engagement with mark-making, drawing and writing.

There were two main research questions posed:

1. How do playful pedagogical practices based upon Froebelian principles support children's mark-making, drawing and writing?
2. How are teachers able to listen with care to children's 'playful writing' activities in reception classrooms?

The intention was to provide empirical evidence that showed how the application of Froebelian principles within playful pedagogical practices may help develop opportunities for children's mark-making, drawing and writing in school. The research participants were a group of six reception teachers, who met monthly to develop a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) over the period of a year. The group's activities provided a space for participants to engage in reflective dialogue with each other about their pedagogical practice, and critically explore ways in which they were able to listen to children in co-constructing a deeper understanding of children's multiple meaning-making, creativity, imagination and connection to the world within playful writing activity. This proposed a way of researching with teachers where knowledge was formed from *within*, a fundamental Froebelian principle (Hargreaves et al., 2014), and also recognised the importance of teachers' empowerment through collaboration within professional learning communities (PLCs) which have the potential to influence school cultures and policies (Caena, 2011).

Start date
January 2017

Finish date
December 2017

Research aims

Children's literacy play within reception classrooms is increasingly directed by adults to produce quantifiable outcomes (Roberts-Holmes 2014). The aim of this research was to explore a more expansive understanding of mark-making, drawing and writing within young children's playful activity, by drawing on Froebelian principles of self-direction, self-expression, and creative exploration. It also pursued an examination of the concept of 'playfulness' – a quality that emerges spontaneously without pre-conceived intentions – and how writing can be supported using more playful strategies. By rejecting an instrumentalist view of the curriculum, this research hoped to offer alternative pathways for teachers to explore literacy and play.

The research sought to engage teachers with a broad understanding of young children's multimodal

writing practices within play (Pahl, 2002; Kress, 2010; Mavers, 2011) and highlight the diverse ways in which children communicate by making marks on the world. The purpose was to encourage practitioners to think about literacy and play not as separate, but as entwined, and so limited if narrowed towards adult-led activity with specific curriculum outcomes in mind. If teachers were able to explore these ideas within their practice and know more about how different children with diverse experiences can be shown to be forging unique connections in their learning, this would enhance more inclusive practices within the group and enrich the curriculum offer.

Finally, the intention was to build teacher engagement in research processes, '*so that wherever possible teachers are active agents in research, rather than passive participants'* (BERA 2014 p.8). This project aimed to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their research literacy and investigate their own practice, and in so doing explore the effectiveness of Froebelian practices in their work.

Planned outcomes of the project

- To identify Froebelian principles and key features of 'playful writing' to share with others.
- To examine teachers' personal beliefs, expectations and values around mark-making, drawing and writing, and to consider how their own writing experience and writing identity frame these ideas.
- To create an expansive discussion with practitioners about play, mark-making, drawing and writing beyond curriculum requirements.
- To develop a shared understanding of 'playful writing' activity, co-constructed between children and adults.
- To articulate a professional voice with teachers that advocates the importance of young children's play and mark-making, drawing and writing within school environments.
- To develop a sustainable network of teaching professionals who are able to advocate mark-making, drawing and writing practices within playful pedagogical practices into the future.

Outline of the methodology

Theoretical framework

Socio-cultural theories (Vygotsky, 1986; Smagorinsky, 2011) underpinned the research as these approaches highlight the importance that play activity has in supporting children's language and literacy development. Play is viewed as an essential requirement in young children's lives as it provides opportunities to extend thinking and imagination. Writing, drawing and mark-making within these approaches to play is considered to be a representational tool that provides an extension of the child's thinking. To explore the possibilities offered by play further Froebelian principles of self-direction, self-expression, and creative exploration were adopted. This Froebelian framework also took into consideration that '*all knowledge and comprehension of life are connected with making the internal external, the external internal, and perceiving the harmony and accord of both'* (Froebel, 1987, p.175). A quote that corresponds with Vygotsky's (1986) ideas surrounding a child's development, where the construction of their learning moves from the external social and cultural world, to the internal psychological one.

Recognition of the situated aspect of writing, tied to social and material contexts (Gee, 2004), also underpinned the project as it provided a way to understand how children's playful writing was formed as part of their social experience and their material encounters. New materialist ideas (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010) were integrated as well as a way of exploring children's intra-action with resources and material objects. A co-constructive approach therefore was taken which valued dialogical interactions and material intra-actions between adults and children, and adults and adults. The process of dialogue with others emphasised the diverse and sometimes conflicting views that professionals hold, but also offered the opportunity to create further knowledge about pedagogy as a community of learners (Wenger, 2009).

Ethical procedures

The project plan followed the published CCCU ethical code of conduct and ethical procedures in research practices involving human participants for participant consent and data (CCCU 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Information regarding the project's aims, confidentiality, data protection and storage, and consent procedures were available for the teachers and children at the beginning of the project. In line with EECERA's Ethical Code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al., 2016) the research promoted knowing from multiple perspectives and a duty of care from the lead applicant towards all of the participants.

The child participants in this research were positioned as competent individuals, autonomous, and flexible (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Olsson 2009), and as citizens with rights, as stated in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (1989). The research sought to listen to and form a dialogue with the children (Clark 2005; Eide and Winger 2005) and placed their experience of the world as playful writers as central to the process of knowledge construction. Integral to the project therefore were ways of working with children that encouraged ethical research practices based on respectful relationships. Recognising the importance of listening to children in diverse ways to understand early years practice (Clark, 2011; Davies, 2011), and the ethics of care that is implied within this approach (Dalhberg and Moss, 2005), acknowledged and supported sensitive teacher engagements.

Selection of participants

A request was made via the senior management teams of an already formed alliance of rural village schools in the Weald of Kent for expressions of interest in being part of the research project. The initial plan was to have ten to twelve teachers who worked with reception or year one children and the project plan was presented to the head teacher during a leadership meeting. An initial gathering with 10 teachers from across the primary age phase was held, where the aims and outcomes of the project were outlined and initial discussions were had about the importance of play as a vehicle for writing. Following that meeting one school with four teachers unfortunately withdrew, the deputy head teacher sent an email which explained that the school did not have the capacity to focus on this project as they had other on-going commitments to areas of development linked to their school improvement plan. Six reception teachers from four schools continued with the project.

Spaces and places
Ten meetings lasting 90 minutes were carried out across the academic year (one a month) in different school venues. A private Facebook group was also set up to provide a virtual discussion forum which the lead researcher monitored and populated with information and updates. The group's participants were encouraged to keep a reflective diary of writing events in their classrooms which they brought to each session and provided an on-going record of the children's participation.

Methods
Methods that ensured the voice of the child was heard both as participants in the processes of data construction and as learners in the classroom were utilised. The teacher and child participants engaged in producing videos, taking photographs, collecting artefacts and having conversations which were annotated to document their playful writing. The teachers discussed these and their other classroom activities during the meetings which were audio recorded. Researcher field notes were also taken during the sessions.

Analysis
Initial thematic analysis of data took place with the teachers during the final few meetings. Froebelian principles were used as a framework for analysis and levels of patterned response or meanings were extracted from the data related to the research questions. This process continued after the meetings finished but in dialogue with the teachers. The project was presented at the 2017 BECERA conference, which was focussed on play, and tentative findings were presented at the TACTYC conference in November 2017.

Main findings

The research findings are organised into sections that link directly to the intended project outcomes for ease of reference. It is important to keep in mind however that each of these areas of discussion overlap and traces of each outcome can be found within each section. There are important connections that have been recognised between each of project outcomes and these will be drawn together in the conclusion and recommendations for future practice. In addition, the initial outcome, which was '*to identify Froebelian principles and key features of 'playful writing' to share with others'*, threads through all aspects of the discussion below.

To examine teachers' personal beliefs, expectations and values around mark-making, drawing and writing, and to consider how their own writing experience and writing identity frame these ideas.

Initial discussions provided opportunities for teachers to make links within their own writing practices and the research project, and to explore what motivated them to write – when, where, and with whom. This initial session led to some very animated discussions between teachers about writing as both a tool for thinking their ideas through, a way of making and organising ideas, but also as a pleasurable activity. The teachers who kept journals and wrote diaries felt that this was an important part of their writing identity. However, one teacher stated that they '*had never written for enjoyment'*, although '*cathartic emails can be a release'*.

The teachers talked of the importance of identifying shared professional values from which to begin to define playful writing. They hadn't considered how play and writing came together in any great

depth before being involved in the project, but the opportunity for reflection within the group allowed them a chance to recongise their shared values.

They were able to relate their personal beliefs about the purposes of writing to the mark-making and writing that children did, and they valued the role that they had in observing, assessing and supporting children as young social writers. They identified the need for '*long observations'*, indicating that time to assess naturalistically was necessary, but also that *'snap shots'*, as a way of capturing children's diverse writing experiences in the classroom, were also important. A challenge was identified in the notion of assessing what they referred to as '*the wow moments'* in young children's writing; of how to identify them as unique and special events. There appeared to be a shared understanding that these moments had significant value.

By exploring the question of 'What is Writing?' as they considered their own and each other's practices, the teachers identified writing as the recording of signs and symbols which were used by children as a tool for communication. There was a general consensus within the group that writing had an important social function. It was an essential means to participate as a social player in the world, and that the meanings assigned to writing are derived from its function as a socially literate practice (Street, 2013). This suggests that the teachers valued writing, not as a technical skill, but as a device through which children are able to announce their presence and be part of wider society.

These ideas were evident in how the teachers assigned values to writing by distinguishing between composition and transcription. They agreed that it was children's composition – their organisation of ideas – that were of most importance for young writers, rather than elements of transcription, or writing correctly. Subsequently, they felt that children's composition led the writing experience and their role was to follow this by supporting the transcription of it through verbal scaffolding and modelling. One teacher spoke of the support she gave,

> '*I would say 'now you have written down your thoughts let's make sure someone can read them', 'then work on finger spaces', 'where does that word end?', and everything, if you throw those things in first then they spend so much time thinking about finger spaces then they have lost the thought of what they want to write. In the early years it should be about what they want to write*.'

There was an appreciation that writing was essentially a desirous activity for young children. A perspective which privileged the children's individual motivation, and resembles the Froebelian principle that recognises '*the uniqueness of every child's capacity and potential'*. In valuing children's self-directed writing, and the child's unique voice as a catalyst for this, the question was then raised about what the teacher's role was in supporting writing in play-based environments. There was a concern about tampering with the child's written expression and how they may have a negative affect on the child's autonomy and self-sufficiency. In earlier discussions they agreed that their role as early years' teachers was to observe and encourage, rather than to intervene, and there was discomfort in having to do both.

Tension was also evident in how, by holding values that appreciated young children's playful writing as an expression of their unique identity, they could be in conflict with a different idea of writing based on an expected developmental trajectory as outlined in the EYFS (DfE, 2017). One teacher stated that,

'*there are targets to aim for, but they are four, and it is easier in reception to say hang on, you might want that, but they are four. Where they come from, what progress they make is important, but not the end goal'.*

To create an expansive discussion with practitioners about play, mark-making, drawing and writing beyond curriculum requirements.

During the meetings Froebel's principles were explored, theories of writing and play were introduced, and recent research in the field was shared. A Facebook group was set up to continue the conversation, share practices and resources, and to provide further links and information. This virtual group was not used by the teachers, despite encouragement to engage. The reasons cited were due to not having enough time outside of the classroom, and although they recognised that extra information was useful, they felt that they already had an abundance of advisory and recommended reading to support their role. There was a lack of interactivity, and immediacy in using the Facebook group as a communication tool, compared to the co-constructive dialogically based meetings which were well attended and positively evaluated.

Through all of the meetings the importance of the role of the adult was a recurring theme. One teacher 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 spoke of the sensitivity she needed to '*know when to skip in or out'* of children's play. Surprisingly, the Froebel principle of, '*the right of children to protection from harm or abuse and to the promotion of their overall well-being*' was selected by one teacher 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 motivation to write.

On a number of occasions the teachers described the sadness and even guilt that they felt when they are put in the position of overseer of the curriculum, rather than co-player, or when they are focussed on overall class management rather than engaged in individual children's play and learning. They talked of a sense of '*wonder'* in what children were doing, and the discussion group developed as a forum to reflect on these moments of wonder. The teachers shared photographs, videos and children's writing artifacts and told the story of how they came to be. This hinted at a recognition of what Johan Huizinga (1955) describes as the subjective experience of play, something premised upon an intense relationship with others (cited in Singer, 2013). The teachers recognised that what children were writing and drawing in their play was not only socially and developmentally functional, but also had meanings that were emotionally positive for both adults and children.

To articulate a professional voice with teachers which advocates the importance of young children's play and mark-making, drawing and writing within school environments.

The language of play in classrooms was a particularly interesting element of debate within the group. There was a recognition that the discourses of play – who articulates these, and how these change over time – framed the language used to describe play in the classroom. They accepted that the

distinction between play and learning was entrenched in the primary school system, for example the division between time for play or 'playtime', usually outside, and work and learning, usually inside. Remarkably, even though the teachers placed a high value on play in the work they did with children, they all agreed that they avoided using the actual word play in their day-to-day interactions in school. Instead they used the terms '*learning*', '*discovery learning'* or '*exploring*', as this was an acknowledgement of a more structured and purposeful description of play as an educational activity in line with work and learning,

> '*If I am honest if I say 'go and play', the boys will probably run around or go on the bikes or fight, but if I say go and explore they think, 'right I am going to find something out', or do something exciting. So discovery and exploration gives a bit more structure to children then going hell for leather'.*

However, one teacher did acknowledge that she does ask the children '*what are you going to play with?'* – the word play is used here specifically in relation to resources, a tying down of the concept of play to focused material activity.

Although the teachers recognised that the children would not necessarily see their play as learning in the same way that teachers did, they were aware that the children in their classes may be asked to describe what they are doing to other adults, so they also needed to be selecting appropriate language to justify their activities to others,

> *'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.'*

This type of surveillance had also been extended into clear directives about play from leaders within the school,

> '*The actual language for play was given to us by senior management, it was originally called 'child initiated play' … I think 'child initiated' is a misunderstanding of play and its purpose – play doesn't sound purposeful for outsiders, I mean the people who don't know the benefits of play*'

Even though the concept of play underpins the statutory framework for working with reception children and clearly had great value for this group of teachers in the work they did with children, the word play was avoided as it risked being judged negatively by others who had particular policy-setting powers and therefore influence over practice (Ball, 2013). The teachers did acknowledge their role in articulating the significance of play to people who may have little understanding of the complex meanings of it and/or its pedagogical worth, and felt that this was possible by providing detailed explanations of practice. However, as they were often the only early years teacher in the school, they were in a minority and, unless they are part of the senior management team, their powers of influence were limited.

To develop a shared understanding of 'playful writing' activity, co-constructed between children and adults.

The teachers were able to agree that young children's playful writing activity could be identified as having distinct features. These features were able to be shaped into three characteristics: social function, spontaneity and movement; and being *with* materials. These characteristics provide an insight into the qualities of playful writing as a feature of early childhood education. The teachers were also able to pinpoint two aspects of their role in supporting these characteristics. First by developing sensitivities to children's play, and second by creating environments that encouraged and facilitated, or nurtured, playful writing opportunities.

The social function of playful writing

A good example of playful writing having social function was demonstrated by one of the teachers in her presentation of photographs and annotated observations of children playing a game of jumping over large blocks. This game, initially started by a few children, spiralled into a complex social event. At the beginning of the game, one child decided that it would be a good idea to keep a score of the players' jumps on the whiteboard 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 representative action one step further by writing down the names of who was in or out.

The teacher reflected on this playful mark-making and writing as having an important social function for the playing children: it extended the opportunities to play together. The children who participated were aware of what the writing was for and why it was important that they carried it out. The seriousness of the children's endeavour was also significant. The writing had to be accurate, checked and accountable to the experience of the group; the mark-making here had rules related to its social function, as all writing does, but also the writing was used to extend the play and increase the players' participation, and the play grew in complexity and challenge both for the 'jumpers' and the 'scribers' as it continued. The integration of writing as social representation, as a functional tool, helped to develop the play, and the play helped to develop the writing: a symbiotic relationship.

There were many other examples of playful practices which exploited the social functions of writing, both within parallel and collaborative play. Co-playing offered children meaningful and rich opportunities for co-construction in writing activity. Children responding to each other by using communicative marks (signs, symbols, letters and numbers) was a common event in the classrooms. As an example, a group of children using chalks outside to draw lines on the playground to represent roads decided that they also needed signs to tell others in the class how to navigate the road, when to stop, and how to stay safe as road users. Writing, and drawing alongside it, symbolised important communicative aspects of the play which encouraged children to engage with it as a collaborative event.

By adopting writing within their play, the children's encounters became more socially adaptive to the needs of the group, more responsive to each other as players, more creative in finding ways to expand the play for everyone, and as a result continued 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 *'spurned on by each other in playful writing'*.

Spontaniety and movement in playful writing

Not all playful writing identified could be described purely through its social function, however. Another characteristic was rooted in the pleasure of actually doing it, and there was a recognition by the teachers that playful writing also had value in how the children were affected, in their feelings of excitement as well as togetherness when, for example, they wrote cards for each other. 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 the children but also to the adults working with them. This is a very different understanding of play than having worth in terms of education or development, but it does correspond to the underpinning values the teachers had described.

Playful writing as impulsive and spontaneous relates well to Liebermann's (1977) description of play as unstructured or without form, carrying with it a 'playfulness', or an ability to move beyond the expected. Children engaged in playful writing quickly, they would suddenly change the meanings contained in their writing by altering its function, for example from a secret message to a sticker, and they would revisit their writing and redesign it, perhaps to make it more useful for another play experience – a process of semiotic redesign (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). This 'recycling' of writing often involved movement – a repositioning in different spaces with different materials – and corresponds with Karen Wohlwend's research from which she has summised 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'*. (2008, p. 133).

Playful writing activity therefore allows children to make connections, not only with other children, but with their environment and importantly with materials.

Playful writing as being *with* materials

In considering the notion of discovery as a way of describing play the teachers were able to reflect on how the children played with writing within and alongside the environment. There was recognition that children actively sought out different resources and different spaces, 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 bounded 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.

As a way of exploring the extent of this, all the teachers decided to engage in a 'folded paper' activity over a period of a few days. Rectangular folded pieces of paper of different sizes and colours were left in different parts the classroom and outdoor spaces. There was no instruction given to the children in using them, or even direct encouragement from adults. The activity was designed to be open ended, and the teachers' role was to observe what children could do with very simple materials. There was some success from this. One child remarked '*it could be a card, I could write a little message to mummy or my daddy*' and then collected up the different coloured paper and put them in a suitcase for a journey to Mars. The child's intention was not only to go to a different planet but also to draw

and write when they got there. Yet, apart from some sporadic inventive uses from a few children the activity was disappointing, and did not provide a catalyst for boundless play or abundant writing.

Reflections were then made on the properties of materials, as it appeared that having freedom to adapt a simple material, and being unrestrained in how it was used, was not enough. Materials needed to also provide something for the children, the items they used needed to 'say' something to them in the moment of their play; the children could be limited by the material make-up of the resources they were using. A smooth, blank folded rectangle could be afforded certain attributes, but its constituent elements also narrowed the play and writing activity, and other materials were selected by children as more useful in supporting play possibilities. The teachers recognised the dependence the children had as players on their material environment (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) and that children's practices of play were '*complex entanglements of congregational, socio-material activity, rather than only individual and interactional'* (Rautio and Winston's 2015, p. 22).

The teachers were able to identify activities where materials acted upon children's thinking as writers, for example, as part of a space station role-play area the pencils were covered in silver foil and this encouraged the children to write as the pencils had acquired a different meaning through their material changes – they had become space pens, to write about space adventures. It is possible to infer that playful writing is materially inspired and that what is commonly referred to as 'the non-human' (Barad, 2007) is an essential element that gives rise to other aspects of playful writing. Children's material intra-actions are an essential part of this type of play. For playful writing to be able to have social function and be spontaneous it needs to have a multitude of materials.

Learning relationships and environments to enable playful writing

The teachers described the importance of creating learning relationships with children that were based on respect for each child's unique voice. They recognised that the child's choice and autonomy needed to be encouraged in their playful writing as this provided ownership and authorship within the play. The children needed '*time to get on and formulate ideas, to be left to it'*. However, the teachers also recognised that they had an important role in spotting children's personal interests, and supporting them in moving from individual playful activity to more collective play. They spoke of the ways in which they modelled different kinds of writing with children, and demonstrated their writing knowledge with children.

They recognised playful writing as a multimodal form of communication that adopted other modes in the process of its composition. There was evidence of how talking and drawing were integral features of how writing in play occurred, with many of the children's writing artefacts being made up of a mixture of mark-making, drawing and symbols and signs, and were shaped through playful conversations between the children. Drawing was particularly viewed by the teachers as a crucial way in which children could '*share their worlds'* with others in the learning environment both inside the classroom and in the outside space. As Kress (2010), Pahl (2002) and Mavers (2011) have also found, the overlapping production of these modes supported the function and purpose of writing for children. The teachers did not seek to separate these modes but instead described play activity as a way of opening up, rather than closing down, children's multimodal expressions, and therefore enriching their writing play.

The teachers demonstrated a remarkable tenderness toward the children's writing process, emanating from the values they assigned to it as discussed earlier. They described the compassion

and sympathy they felt in relating to the children's challenges and difficulties as writers. This sensitivity leant towards dialogue and thinking: a way in which the children and the adults were able to exchange positions rather than taking prescribed views of each other's needs (Martin Buber, 1965 cited in Noddings, 2012). The teachers 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,

> *'It's all about the process, not the outcome, it's about finding the meanings for the child that are there'.*

This search for meanings was used to frame sustained shared conversations with children, to scaffold and extend their interest 'I wonder if…' as well as 'I wonder what…' were questions that the teachers described in their interactions with children.

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'*. They noted how playing with the children provided a 'togetherness', or a reciprocity between them providing them with delight and satisfaction in their professional role and highlighting the subjective dimensions of play that Huizinga (cited in Singer, 2013) has described.

To develop a sustainable network of teaching professionals who are able to advocate mark-making, drawing and writing practices within playful pedagogical practices into the future.

On completion of the project the teachers were still communicating and getting together regularly to share practices. It is not clear, however, if this was as a result of their work on the project, or as an extension of their working practices within the rural alliance of schools that they are part of. The evaluations that they gave of the project have provided some evidence of the usefulness to them of it. For example, one teacher said,

> *'I've enjoyed sitting down, taking myself out of the daily… it really helps to reflect…to have informed conversations'*

And by the end of the project the group advocated the need to work with Key Stage One teachers to develop a shared definition of playful writing and advance the importance of 'tuning into' children through careful observation.

> *'I am much more aware of looking more closely at what children are doing, now I want to share this with Key Stage One'*

The teachers in the group talked about the role they had in sharing their practices with others, not only within school but with the wider community, including parents and other early years settings. They had begun to view themselves as advocates of writing within playful pedagogy, and began to ask more specific questions about this approach, for example whether there was such a thing as 'guided' playful writing? And if so, what would it look like? A paper was presented at the 2017 TACTYC

conference about the project. As part of this, one of the participant teachers provided examples of her practice to other professionals. The teachers have also been invited to write an article for Early Years Educator magazine based on their reflections.

Nevertheless, it was not possible to develop a significant sustainable and active network of teaching professionals who would be able to advocate the pedagogical practices explored in this report. Creating leverage in the profession would need time and resources particularly when the discourse that surrounds play in schools, how it is interpreted and understood, is currently problematic (see earlier discussion on the language of play in primary schools). The fact that one of the schools withdrew early from the project may indicate the challenge that exists in creating a playful writing approach within the current educational landscape, where there is increased pressure on schools to secure measurable results. Commercial products (e.g. Read, Write, Inc.) are now increasingly sold to schools as a package of 'tested' knowledge that guarantees literacy improvement. Bringing together groups of children and teachers to co-construct knowledge at a deeper and more complex level, appears to be sadly out of kilter with a system where defined outcomes are now shaping play pedagogy.

Conclusions and recommendations

In an education climate where externally created models of literacy teaching are becoming increasingly normalized, the professional autonomy of teachers appears to be decreasing. At the same time, play pedagogy within reception classes has become a contested area. Ofsted's latest report *Bold Beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools* (2017) has caused a justified amount of concern within the early years sector. Its seeming failure to recognise the value of play and playfulness as a means to support confidence and dispositions to learn, and a focus on the transcription skills of writing, rather than children's foundational language and composition, suggest a willful ignorance towards developmental understandings of childhood and appropriate pedagogical approaches (TACTYC, 2017).

However, the findings from this research demonstrate that a group of teachers who have been given time to reflect and question practices have created a very different account of teaching and learning in a reception class. Unlike *Bold Beginnings*, their version of writing pedagogy demonstrates a sophisticated and values-based approach to the teaching of young children. They were able to conceptualise playful writing and identify its characteristics that could then be communicated with others to support children's interests. It should be recognised that these findings are based on a small sample of teachers, who appeared confident in their play practices with children and demonstrated a firm grasp of play pedagogy from the get go. If the sample had included less experienced, less confident teachers then the findings may have been different. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that any teacher who dedicates themselves daily to building relationships, observing, conversing with, and playing alongside young children will have a rich knowledge of the pedagogical practices that support the potential of each child in their care. This expertise needs to be recognised by policy makers and regulatory bodies.

Emerging implications for policy/practice

If the practices of play in schools are contested then teachers of young children, as specialists in play pedagogy, need time and space to come together and develop shared working definitions to settle these disputes. Senior leadership teams need to recognise the expertise that these teachers hold and should encourage them to communicate the effectiveness of play, particularly in supporting early literacy and writing, within the school community. Without this clarification, play in reception classes runs the risk of being downgraded, and increasingly misunderstood.

Planning for playful writing needs to adopt the characteristics identified in this report: social function, spontaneity and movement, and materiality. Teachers should consider how they encourage and support these elements through their organisation of spaces and resourcing of materials. Having shown that playfulness provides the intensity and purpose to write, teachers need to embrace elements of playfulness themselves by being creative, making decisions in the spur-of-the-moment, embracing intuition and impulsiveness, and recognising the joy that it can bring to the classroom.

The characteristics of playful writing have developed as teachers listened with care to young children. They were able to identify values that were closely aligned to Froebelian principles: *the integrity of childhood in its own right; the uniqueness of every child's capacity and potential; the role of play and creativity as central integrating elements in development and learning; and the right of children to protection from harm or abuse and to the promotion of their overall well-being*. These principles are a good starting point to explore a values-based approach in working to support young children's writing and the connected aspects of learning which has the potential to ingrain a positive life-long love of writing.

Recommendations for further research

Froebel wrote in *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*,

> '*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.*' (1987, p.193)

Play as a mirror to reflect how children develop in response to external events demands a close interrogation of the environment of the child; the choices of materials and spaces, as well as the type of relationships that support learning. But it also demands that we investigate the wider political and educational landscape that is currently shaping these responses. The language of play – how it is exchanged and given meaning – is particularly noteworthy today. The conceptualisation of play within primary schools, and how reception teachers navigate play pedagogy by working with these increasingly politicised concepts, needs further investigation. The teachers in this project were aware that they held complex and competing ideas about play. They demonstrated both 'laissez-faire', or open-ended practices, as well as utilising play as an educational tool to meet curriculum aims, demonstrating conflicting conceptual understandings of the purpose of play (Wood and Hedges, 2016). To unpack some of the strains that exist in pedagogical practices with young children, research needs to be undertaken to further identify the tensions that may exist in reception teachers beliefs about play, how these are shaped as a result of political discourse.

Froebel in the quote above writes '*this little play*'. Here he is saying something significant about play: that although it can appear small and fleeting, it still has value. Elements of play may seems inconsequential to an untrained eye, yet the teachers in this research valued the fine details of play, and how they come together to form the '*bridge*' towards learning. As Tina Bruce (1995) encouraged more than twenty years ago, we need to focus on the minutiae of child's self-activity. It is by looking closely at the details of children's play that we will be able to unravel the importance of the symbolic behaviour of young children necessary for writing, as well as to understand more about how adult relationships support that process. Vygotsky's (1986) emphasis on the centrality of social relationships as the first steps of learning, lends further weight for future research about how teacher-child relationships in schools function as a foundation for literacy learning.

Finally, Froebel highlights the strengths of the '*thoughtful*' adult in steering good practice. The teachers in this study were able to recognise the competences of children as a basis for enquiry, and also had the capacity to be closely attentive to the specifics of their work. They demonstrated the '*thoughtfulness*' needed to enhance ethically driven research opportunities with young children. We need further practitioner research that embraces this approach – one which values the 'wonder' of young children's playful writing experiences.

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