

## **Developing Mark Making and Letter Formation** *Curriculum Development Study Overview*

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### **Introduction**

The low status of handwriting in schools in the UK has been identified by a number of leading academics as a cause for concern. The recent “What’s the Use of Handwriting” White Paper, produced as part of the Write Your Future Campaign, has clearly shown that handwriting is an essential foundation for effective learning. It is concerning, therefore, to learn that a third of primary teachers claim to spend less than 30 minutes teaching handwriting per week (Write your Future, 2016).

Despite the huge media attention given to the impact and affordances of new technologies, for example, tablets and mobile phones, there are important reasons why we need to teach our children handwriting. We have reviewed the research in this area – published in the Write Your Future White Paper, 2017 - and it has emerged clearly that the recording and composing of ideas by hand does seem to promote more effective learning, better recall and more thorough processing of information than typing.

The ability to write without having to spend too much time thinking about the handwriting part of the activity is something all learners aim to achieve. Our own research (Medwell and Wray, 2014) has demonstrated a strong relationship between handwriting automaticity and the quality of composition. This allows writers to devote more attention to ideas and expression of those ideas, thus producing higher quality written texts. Learning such automaticity in handwriting begins at the very earliest stages of schooling, at a time when handwriting may also have a vital part to play in developing how young children understand the sounds of words.

With this in mind, along with the firm belief that handwriting deserves greater attention, we began the project reported here. The aim of this project was to look at the very earliest stages of handwriting and understand how teachers and parents of young children might teach handwriting most effectively at this crucial foundational education stage. The project was undertaken at a time when early years’ teachers were experiencing a downward pressure from an assessment driven curriculum that focuses attention elsewhere, meaning that mark-making and letter formation are often neglected.

### **Research Methods**

This project was undertaken by a team of seven early years’ teachers and two University Lecturers. The teachers involved had a range of experience, from three to 38 years, and they were all working in good or outstanding schools.

Participation in the project involved four afternoon meetings at the University of Nottingham where the actions of the project were planned and reviewed;

- Phase 1: Teachers audited their setting’s mark making and letter formation activities for two weeks and interviewed a sample of parents about home mark making;
- Phase 2: Teachers tried out some new techniques suggested by colleagues for three weeks and evaluated the impact on children and families. University staff visited all the schools to observe mark making activities

## Phase 1: Findings

At Meeting 1, the teachers agreed on five important issues:

- Mark making and early writing (MMEW) had a lower profile than reading and maths in school and with parents.
- All the teachers felt that more was expected of them in preparing children to be confident writers at an ever-earlier age.
- Names (children's own) were the historical and personal starting point for writing.
- The teachers felt that parents lacked confidence when writing with their children and received much more explicit guidance from schools about reading.
- Finally, all the teachers agreed that early years' teachers planned a wide range of mark making and writing activity across the whole curriculum but questioned the effectiveness of some of these activities.

In the observed classes teachers identified:

- Adult supervised MMEW opportunities in all settings; these included a vast range of activities, such as decorating plates, creating rangoli patterns, and writing cards to take home
- MMEW activities as part of a huge range of play, including construction, playing with sand, themed manipulation tasks and outdoor activity. These activities were sometimes opportunities to write or play-write in imaginative play (such as shopping lists in a play-house) or perform mark making experiments like writing in foam on a tray.
- The settings all assumed the use of a wide range of media that make learning to write fun and engaging for kids, including crayons, felt tips (often not allowed in homes) water, paint, salt, sand, cornflower, pens, hair gel, shaving foam and glitter. The teachers said that range and novelty were particularly important for young children, who might well find a medium they liked and revisit it many times.
- Fine motor activity inside and outside buildings such as writing on walls with water or soluble paints, playing with chinks, and sand manipulation. Again, novelty of both medium and setting was important.
- Shared writing opportunities (that is writing involving an adult and a child together) were identified in some settings but surprisingly few.

### Parent interviews – key take outs

In the two-week period teachers collected 69 parent interview notes and consent forms. Talking to parents about writing (instead of more usual topics such as literacy or maths) was deemed to be a useful activity in itself. The teachers felt it had improved relationships, raised interest among the parents and opened up the whole topic. Interestingly, six of the seven teachers had experienced follow up interest from parents.

The overall impression from parents was that there was no consistent approach when it came to doing MMEW activities at home. Additionally, it was clear that whether or not parents actively promoted writing was not obviously linked to social status, parental working status, parental age or where parents lived.

Reading with their children was a much more comfortable topic of discussion for almost all the parents than writing. Most parents had attended the school reading workshops and said that books sent home from school were comforting. Presumably, the books gave a focus, structure and familiarity to the activity. Parents also mentioned the "home school" books gave them a feeling of accountability, so they set the time aside. This raises the issue that writing and mark making lack such a predictable structure. Writing can be about anything and use a vast range of media. As such, it lacks a "format" parents can easily follow.

Some parents had a large range of writing tools in the home, but other parents were unwilling for children to be given access to “messy” tools or scissors. Parents were concerned about safety, damage to property and supervision. For some parents involved in the study, not being able to control the use of certain writing implements was identified as an issue. A few parents had simply not considered having this sort of provision in their homes, and a few found the idea of providing a range of media daunting in terms of time and organisation.

Devices also presented a control issue and were a source of tension for many parents. Parents were keen to discuss educational use of devices such as phonics apps but also to emphasize control over device time. The teachers believed that parents felt that the ease, accessibility and educational games on tablets and phones were useful but they also felt guilty about the amounts of screen time these took up. Many of the parents spontaneously described how they limited screen time, but none said they replaced it with writing.

Perhaps the most interesting issue that emerged from the interviews was that parents did not know what their children “should” be able to do, or what they should have the opportunity to do. Some parents simply said they did not know what to do with their children and others said they did not want to “push too hard” because their children might not be ready for writing. A few parents did not want to “get it wrong” or “get in the way of school”. These were supportive parents who were keen to work with their children’s schools. The teachers felt that those parents who were least concerned with what children “should” do were actually the ones who gave children the opportunity to do more MMEW. In effect, a concern that MMEW learning should be very structured was excluding some parents.

### **Focused class observations**

Some children were habitual in their choices of activity and “always” chose MMEW activities. Other children were “repeat visitors” who would try a different activity and then return later to re-do an activity they liked. Some children avoided “messy” activities. The teachers did not find a strong pattern that differentiated between boys and girls. They all appeared to enjoy their MMEW activities.

The biggest difference between observations of the F1 (Nursery) and F2 (Reception) children was the way the children engaged with MMEW activities. The teachers found F1 children would engage with a MMEW activity if there was an adult modelling or supporting engagement - but not otherwise. The teachers agreed that more adult intervention was required to engage Nursery children with MMEW activities than was necessary for F2 (Reception) children. In contrast, the F2 (Reception) children were more likely to engage with very similar or the same activities even where no adult model was available. The teachers speculated on whether this reflected the greater experience of F2 children or greater ability to sustain individual interest without an adult directing their attention.

### **Strategies**

The final phase of the project involved teachers building on the results above by piloting strategies to enhance their provision. These include both a range of additional class activities and a range of activities to raise parent awareness of MMEW, as this emerged as a key issue.

Below are some of the strategies that were implemented, with a summary of results/observations:

1. **Taking it Home** – This involved children taking home messy play media in the form of cornflour (to be mixed with water) and syrup. Parents were asked to experiment

with their children, including drawing patterns and discussing the way the substances felt. This allowed teachers to share information with parents about activities carried out in school and provided parents with an opportunity to explore and discuss play activities with their kids.

2. **Mark-making challenge morning** – Children were given a challenge card and had to complete eight mark-making challenges (e.g. writing letters in sand, writing a thank you note, creating a postage stamp and using a post box ). The key outcomes were that children took pride in their work and there was a sustained and shared focus on completing the activities.
3. **Draw to the music** - The teacher collected a range of music, big sheets of paper and a range of chalk, crayons and paint. The children were offered the opportunity to “Write to the Music” by making marks in response to music. All children enjoyed this activity and the range of responses was exciting.
4. **Learn to write morning with parents** – This was designed to better educate parents on what early ‘writing’ involved (based on interview feedback). The focus of the morning was for parents to see the activities that counted as mark making, with the follow up including all children taking home small pots of treacle or cornflour for messy play at home. Parents took a lot from this, and activities were replicated at home in a controlled environment.
5. **Stay and play writing activities for 3 days** - This strategy involved addressing the issue, identified by the teachers, that “writing” sessions for parents were poorly attended compared to reading or maths sessions. It drew in hard-to-reach parents, encouraged a lot more talk between parents and staff about what children had been doing in cutting, drawing and writing, and resulted in more children bringing in writing from home. Children responded very positively to shared guidance, and the activities increased letter focus amongst both age groups.
6. **Talk for handwriting** - This strategy was based on the parent interviews, where parents said they did not want to “do it wrong” when writing with their children. It aimed to share common language for letter formation in school and with parents. The teacher started with a staff meeting to identify and discuss the instructions for letter formation which would be used, consistently, throughout the school. Letter rhymes were rejected and consistent forms of words adopted. Activities included: use of these forms of words in all class activities (i.e. phonics, writing, and play) and leaflets for parents to ensure they knew the letter formations and language that were being embedded across the school.
  - **What’s in a name?** - This strategy aimed to raise the profile of children’s written names in their school and home lives – and also to use letter names, not just letter sounds, with the children. The school produced and sent out a leaflet about letter formation (based on the strategy outlined above) and the importance of letter names (as well as phonics). Parents showed much greater understanding of both letter names and sounds, and children showed an increased interest in mark making both inside and outside the classroom.
7. **The development of early writing (or, what they “should” do)** - A big book containing photos of participating parent’s children engaged with MMEW activities was prepared. The start of the book showed the development of writing using examples from the earliest scribbles to correctly spelt examples of well-formed text. Parents came for story time and took a copy of the book home with them. Teachers explained the importance of the activities to do at home and left parents with an ideas sheet.

## Conclusions

In the UK, teachers and parents are under increasing pressure to ensure that children do more, earlier, and this also applies to Mark Making and Early Writing (MMEW).

The adult role in inducting children to MMEW is crucial, with the need for parental input as well as teaching in school. The teachers in this study believe it is important and possible to engage parents more in mark making and early writing, and thus, sharing understandings of school practices and expectations is a priority in helping to achieve this.

However, there was an acceptance that writing was less likely to result in parental engagement than reading or maths. This was because parental attention to literacy has tended to focus on reading and, latterly, maths. Therefore, home communications and activities for those subjects are well adapted to engaging parents.

In order to encourage parents to help children with writing activities at home, more attention needs to be given to what a good start to writing looks like, as well as what developmental expectations and opportunities lie at home. Reassurances should also be provided so that young children learn from using a wide range of implements at home and at school.

This project had a significant impact in increasing awareness and building experience of MMEW in early years' classes and at home. Crucially, the project acted as a catalyst for increased and enhanced parental involvement in MMEW and generated some key principles:

- MMEW is for all children and all parents;
- MMEW demands awareness of and attention to literacy in schools and homes;
- The earliest steps in MMEW must not be overlooked or avoided;
- Individual trajectories for MMEW for all children involve undertaking sensory, motor and literacy writing activities
- Teachers have a key role to play in keeping MMEW at the front of parents' and children's minds.

Armed with the findings of this study, **the Write Your Future campaign** aims to equip teachers and parents with new insights and resources to enable and encourage children to enjoy the learning benefits of handwriting.