

# An Investigation into Parents' and Children's Understandings of Early Writing

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Originally from Co. Donegal, I have been working as a primary school teacher in Dublin for eleven years, most recently as a mainstream teacher in infant classes. My experiences during these years have given me a true passion for early childhood education. I have experience working with children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and working with parents who are involved in their young children's education. Literacy learning, especially oral language, is so important in infant classrooms and there is little support for teachers in emergent writing. This was the focus of my research in my Master of Education dissertation in MIE.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Literacy, Emergent Writing, Early Childhood Education

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main functions of primary schools in Ireland is to support children in the attainment of effective writing skills; so that they can participate in contemporary society, express their voice and communicate with others over space and time (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2013; O'Toole, 2016; Purcell-Gates, as cited in Riley, 2006). However, no child lives in a vacuum (Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny, 2017) and when children begin primary school, they bring with them knowledge and experiences of the written language that they have gained from their family members.

Literature reveals that although there is extensive research into the development of oral language and reading for young children, there is a gap in research on early writing development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; Puranik, Al Otaiba, Sidler, & Grelich, 2014; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Puranik, Philips, Lonigan and Gibson' (2018) call for further study on the relationship between emergent writing and

writing-related practices in the home. Subsequently, this study aimed to illuminate the essential nature of writing, assenting that children's first experiences of the written language are in the home.

This research recognised that parent perceptions on early writing needed to be examined so that future school practices, curricula, interventions and policies can be guided by these understandings. This study was underpinned by Street's theoretical framework of Literacy as a Social Practice (1984, 2003a, 2003b, 2012, 2016) and specifically explored the following research questions:

- Do parents' and children's understandings of early writing, reflect an emergent writing perspective?
- How do family literacy practices influence the development of early writing?

## CONTEXT

Literacy learning in the infant classes, in primary schools are guided by two curricula, the first is *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curricular Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009), and the Primary Language Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills [DES]/NCCA, 2015). Both curricula support an emergent literacy perspective; Aistear (NCCA, 2009) states that emergent literacy is the "foundation for reading and writing" (NCCA, 2009, p. 54). Although, the Primary Language Curriculum doesn't use the term 'emergent literacy', it acknowledges that children "come to school with different language experiences" (2015, p. 12).

The emergent writing approach identifies that children delve into writing before they have any understanding of the alphabetic principle. It is the combination of scribbles, shapes, drawing, talk and gesture, letter-like symbols and invented spelling, used by a young child to express meaning in written form before they can write and spell conventionally (Byington & Kim, 2017; Gentry, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Williams & Hufnagel, 2005; Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 1995). The acquisition of emergent literacy skills is a powerful predictor of later reading and writing achievement (NELP, 2008; Purcell-Gates, as cited in Riley, 2006; Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Supporting curricula in Ireland, a National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy was launched by the DES in 2011. This strategy states that parental support is essential for children's educational success (DES, 2011). It documents that a key strategy for raising the literacy levels of children, is to increase parental involvement in education particularly during

early education. The involvement of parents in education is not a new notion, as the role of the family has been long established in Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Article 42.1). This research re-emphasises the family's role in education and recognises that literacy consists of both traditional technologies (such as the use of pencil and paper) and contemporary technologies (such as emails, text messages etc).

## METHODOLOGY

Underpinned by a qualitative approach, this research gathered data using a combination of complementary methods including; journals, image-based documents, participating in semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see table 1). Six parents and seven children participated in the research. Parents kept journals that recorded details on the literacy events that occurred in the home. Parents then discussed their journals in semi-structured interviews. Children (of the parents interviewed) participated in focus groups which were structured using a study by Bradford and Wyse (2013), in which a puppet called 'Jackson the Frog' was used as a stimulus for discussion. Image-based documents, consisting of examples of the children's writing were examined in the study to support claims made by the participants.

	Journals	Semi- Structured Interviews	Focus Groups	Image-based Documents	Totals
Participant 1	✓	✓			2
Participant 2	✓	✓			2
Participant 3	✓	✓			2
Participant 4	✓	✓			2
Participant 5	✓	✓			2
Participant 6	✓	✓			2
Focus Group A			✓	✓	2
Focus Group B			✓	✓	2
Total	6	6	2	2	16

*Table 1: Description of data*

Participants in this study were accessed through one school using volunteer sampling. To achieve anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout. As with any study, there were specific limitations. Firstly, this was a small-scale study limited to thirteen individuals with experience of a single setting and teachers' perceptions of emergent writing were not examined. This presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of the study (Denscombe 2007), therefore,

findings in this study are not made as general claims. Secondly, the vast majority of the participants in this study had English as their second language. The credibility of this study was enhanced through the use of data triangulation (Yin, 2003). The data was analysed clearly using the six-phase process of thematic analysis, to ensure that logical findings were contrived (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To create confirmability, the researcher made it clear to the participants that a copy of the final work would be made available to them (Basit, 2010).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings presented in the following section represent a snapshot of a larger study on children's emergent writing.

### **PARENTS DON'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMERGENT WRITING**

All the participants in this study agreed that writing was a crucial, lifelong skill. They determined that it was important for education, for creativity, for communication and for reflecting upon, organising and expressing one's own thoughts. However, the findings suggested that parents may not fully understand the emergent approach to writing. Only two of the six parents, acknowledged that scribbles, mark-making, drawing and invented spellings were their children's "*own way of writing*". On the contrary, two parents had a traditional understanding of writing, perceiving that young children are unable to write independently and that their children could not yet be identified as writers. In their opinions, in order to create a piece of writing, correct spelling and punctuation is required.

Participant 4 stated that "*the news is all about reading to kids. So we knew, but writing, it is less*" This suggests that the lack of public discourse on the importance of early writing development contributed to her traditional view of writing. This participant added that the first information she received on early writing development was when her child attended primary school. Participant 4 felt that her initial understandings towards early writing, which was that writing must be conventional, may have contributed to her son's lack of confidence and lack of interest in writing. "*I didn't know that such small kids should write... I didn't know I have to allow him for many mistakes... I wanted him to write correctly... and then it was hard for him to suddenly, write with mistakes (Participant 4).*"

## UNDERSTANDINGS OF EARLY WRITING IN THE HOME LANGUAGE.

In this study, five of the parent participants spoke a language other than English as their home language. Parent's understandings of early writing development in the home language heavily reflected a traditional approach. Surprisingly, the parents' whose attitudes reflected an emergent literacy perspective with regards to early writing in English, did not have the same attitude to early writing in the home language. Parents stated that learning to write in the home language was a formal activity, which had to be learnt in a strict environment. In addition, they suggested that children would be better equipped to learn how to write in the home language, after they had mastered how to read and write in the English language. *"I want him to focus on English and once he will be very good in English then I want to... you have to master one and then you go for something else (Participant 5)*. In contrast, all of the children's understandings of writing coincided with an emergent literacy perspective. Three children perceived that they could already write in their home languages. It is noteworthy that these children had never received any formal instruction in writing, in their home languages.

## INFORMAL LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE HOME MAY BE UNDERVALUED

As explained by Bradford and Wyse (2013), parent's perceptions of writing are likely to affect the writing activities that they provide for their children. This concurs with the findings in this study which suggest that natural, informal literacy events occurring in the home may be underappreciated and underutilised as opportunities for learning. Parents felt that writing is a formal activity, and thus, ascertained that it is more difficult to support their children with writing, than with reading. Participant 2 described that *"writing is much less these days... reading is more handy, you can just read anywhere, in any room. For writing, you especially have to sit down and have things to write. You have to make a proper environment."* This concurs with the findings from the child participants, who articulated that writing is a skill-based and schooled artefact.

One parent explained that events such as reading recipes, writing emails and filling in forms occur *"on a daily basis"* in the home, but she had *"never realised that this could be counted as a literacy event"* (Participant 2). Another parent stated that writing only occurred at homework time and that they didn't *"do anything else"* (Participant 5), in terms of writing in the home. However, it was later established, that the family engaged in a wide range of writing events such as emails, messages, word games, shopping lists, drawings, personal lists, cards, invites, completion of forms, study and the use of search engines. It is essential that informal

literacy events occurring daily in homes should be valued and appreciated by parents as important learning opportunities, as children will only become empowered to write when they observe purposeful and functional writing (NAEYC, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Writing development begins from birth (Hall, White, Guo & Emerson, 2017), therefore it is crucial that parents have access to information on writing development in the early years long before their children reach school age. Those involved in writing policies need to promote the concept of emergent writing so that it becomes foregrounded in the discourse on early years literacy.

It is recommended that an alternative intervention approach based on alliances between teachers and parents, is promoted in schools. This approach was developed by Jackson and Doell (2017), wherein the role of the school is to inform parents of specific approaches to literacy. In turn, the parents' role is to inform the teacher of family literacy practices. Together, they identify and implement targeted support, relating to natural practices within the home for the young children.

Similar to Hall et al. (2017), this study, found that the perceptions of adults do not have a significant impact on children's own perceptions of themselves as writers. As stipulated by Hall et al. (2017), it would be interesting to investigate whether this changes as children develop into conventional writers, and if so, the factors involved in this change. It is recommended that a longitudinal, larger scale study be conducted to investigate children, parents and teachers' perspectives on emergent writing in early years.

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