

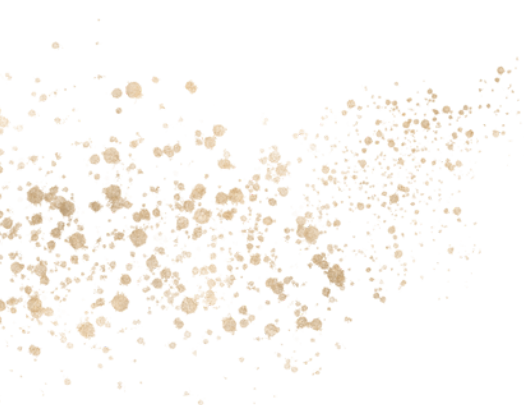
Purposeful Writing in the Early Years - Whose purpose it is anyway?

By Hayley Fuller



A long time ago, when I first started teacher teaching in the Early Years, I was told how a 'print rich environment' would then enable the four-five year olds to start reading. The teacher in the class was printing everything they could from the internet, laminator in hand, and before you knew it, hey-presto! Word cards were everywhere... the role play was as labelled as can be.

A few minutes later, the children had taken these word cards and made them into 'tickets' for a show, or 'fans for a hot day' or 'biscuits on a plate' or 'knives to cut a cake'... and the teacher would say, "No, put that back, that is a label that says 'till' and it belongs by the till, shall we sound it out together? 'T-i-ll' Till.



A long time ago, when I first started teacher training in the Early Years, I was told how formalised handwriting should be encouraged over mark-making. So I observed the teacher with pencils in hand, instructing the four to five year olds to sit, hold the pencil using the correct grip, “Lets form the letter ‘a’ - around the apple, down the leaf”.

A few minutes later, a child has drawn an apple and is explaining how they have an apple tree at home and that it grows from a seed, another child has mark-made their name and is telling me, it has an ‘a’ in it... and the teacher would say, “No, let’s not scribble in your book, we are forming ‘a’ remember? Your book is for writing not for pictures! Lets try again” and the child’s hand would be manipulated so that they would form a perfect ‘a’ on their page.



A long time ago, when I first started teacher training in the Early Years, I was told that the classroom needed to be 'divided' into separate learning zones. So writing was in one area, maths in another, art in a different area and so on. So I observed the teacher putting clip-boards and pencils on a table with a story book on it and labelling it 'Writing Area'.

A few minutes later, a child has taken the pencil pot and placed it into the role-play area "This is the chips for my fish and chip shop" they said proudly! Another child has removed the clip board from the writing area and has moved it onto the carpet "I am taking the register" she says, mark making on the board and encouraging her friends to be the students... and the teacher would say, "The pencils and clipboards belong in the writing area, please move them all back."



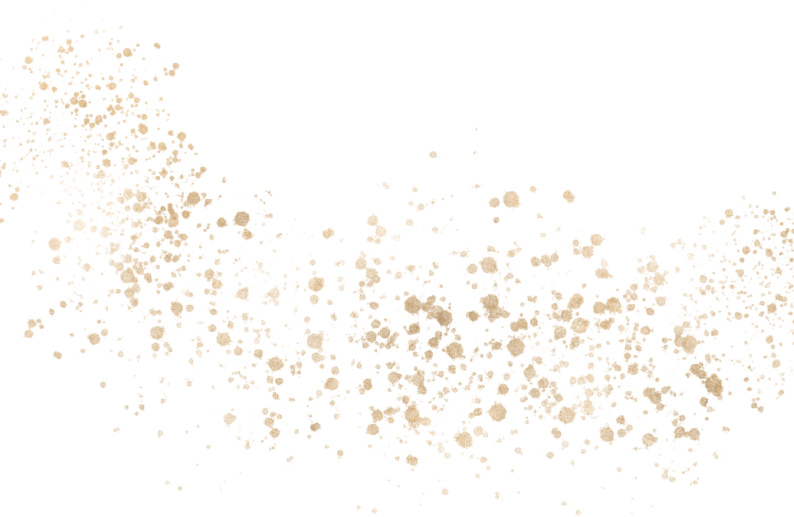
Do you spot the mistakes? As time as progressed, luckily so did my well meaning, but completely inaccurate ‘teacher training’ of how young children truly learn and develop. Anyone who has a passion and interest working within the EYFS (Early years foundation stage) has probably observed at some point or another ‘well meaning’ educators displaying some of the methods above. So let’s pause and reflect... shall we simply teach ‘our’ plans and learning intentions to the children? or can we guide, create and provide ‘opportunities or invitations’ to naturally learn and progress in their own flow?



Let’s look at the first example - a print rich environment. Can the children actually ‘read’ the words around the role-play area? Can they apply meaning to them? For the children to use the word cards for their own ‘purpose’ (by turning them into tickets or biscuits!) is them applying their own meaning, using their natural creativity with the resources available to them. What if, instead of using word cards to simply label, you could observe how the children are interacting and playing and then guide them with their purpose to write? “A ticket for a show! How exciting! Have you ever watched a show before?”
“What else do they have when you go to watch a show?”

Through simple communication and dialogue with the children, they can come up with some brilliant ideas and take some ownership of the learning themselves - making it more purposeful and therefore more meaningful to them.

Maybe they would think of the popcorn or ice-cream you get whilst watching a show - so the purpose to write could be making ice cream/popcorn labels or using their motor skills to craft ice creams or scrunch up bits of small paper to make the popcorn, developing their fine motor muscles which then, in turn, helps to develop writing for the future.



Supporting the child's own intent for writing or mark making makes the attempts more enjoyable, natural and purposeful to them. Let's look at the 'a' for apple handwriting example. The teacher's learning intention was for the child to 'form' the letter 'a' correctly. Let's pause and reflect... shall we simply teach letter formation to 'our' learning outcome? or can we make letter formation more naturally progressive? Allowing the children to have an invitation to develop their fine motor skills thoroughly before teaching actual letter formation. Forcing a child to form letters before their muscles are ready is such as the equivalent as trying to teach a baby to walk before their muscles are developed and ready to stand or crawl. Providing plenty of opportunities and invitations to access fine and gross motor building skills around the classroom will give the children the essential tools and muscles to be able to then write with enjoyment and purpose when they are ready.



Mark making is a child's way of applying meaning to their 'writing' and is a first step into formalised letters. When children are 'inspired' to write, they will firstly mark-make. Mark-making is the child's own learning intention and as an educator we can encourage their communication about the meaning behind their marks. Communication and vocabulary is another skill to help develop within the children, before formalised writing. Modelling the pronunciation of any mispronounced words, or guiding the child to speak in a sentence is essential to develop, before formalised writing takes place.



Providing opportunities for ‘inspiration’ can be a great way to help the children build up their own purpose for writing.

Lets pause and reflect on the ‘learning areas’ example. Having plenty of mark making resources available to the children across the setting (not just in a writing or art area!) will encourage the natural flow and energy of the child’s own learning. Children will naturally move items around the setting, and again, apply their own purpose to the resource. Instead of the educator dismissing it or instructing them to ‘put it back’ observe how the child is interacting with and encourage the children’s own learning intention behind it. It is amazing to observe children when they are in their ‘natural flow’ of learning. Through these observations you can, as the educator, then provide some tools, ideas or resources to enhance the provision.



The next time you are in your setting, pause, reflect and observe - who's writing is it anyway? Who's purpose is the writing for? Magical, naturally progressive writing can happen, if we allow the child to take the lead.



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