Two-Year-Old and-Three-Year-Old Children's Writing: The Contradictions of Children's and Adults' Conceptualisations

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Abstract

The paper reports the findings of an in-depth qualitative research study investigating the writing practices of nine families and their two-year-old and-three-year old children in an early years pre-school setting in the east of England. The aim of the research was to develop a clear understanding of what children of this age already know about the functions and purpose of writing. The research further sought to develop joint understanding amongst parents and the early years setting of how the children might be expressing themselves through writing in both contexts; at home and in the setting. Findings showed that most adults did not perceive that the children could write, a perception that was rooted in the conceptualisation of writing as necessarily formed of conventional text, and a skill to be developed and taught at a later age. In direct contrast to this the participant children were engaging in their own discourse of writing, driven by self-belief in what they were able to achieve through using writing as a medium for recording and sharing information. It is argued that if children as young as two years old perceive themselves to be writing, a responsive writing pedagogy can only be effective following a reframing of how writing is understood in relation to children in early years' settings and homes.

ECEC, early years curriculum, pre-school provision

Literature Review

In England greater prominence has recently been given to two-year-olds as an age group of special interest. Since 2008 England's statutory early years curriculum has specified programmes of study for children from birth to five (DCSF, 2008), but expanding pre-school provision for two-year-olds has been a specific focus since 2012 as part of a government initiative of early education entitlement which has served to highlight the age group as a whole (DfE, 2013). Innovations such as the *Funded Twos* programme has brought the importance of quality education from the age of two years old to the fore. From a pedagogical perspective, if two-year-olds are perceived as a prioritised age group with unique educational needs, then this includes their writing development; indeed, the current statutory early years curriculum covering children from birth to five years includes Writing as one of the *specific areas* of literacy learning (DfE, 2017).

Written notation involves a child's ability to systematically produce, read, and use their writing vis-à-vis their understanding of the functions of print. Although there are very few previously published research studies to date that deal specifically with early writing and use of notation amongst children below the age of three years, there are more studies to be found that report on notating skills in slightly older pre-school children (see Roberts and Lancaster, 2006; Leyva, Reese and Wiser, 2011 for example). Seminal research on young children's writing, has included case studies of individual children undertaken by parent researchers in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, for example Bissex (1980), Baghban (1984), and Payton (1984). These

cases are longitudinal descriptions of the developing writing of children between one and two years old and reveal a trajectory of their developing competence in relation to writing that becomes increasingly 'accurate' or conventional over time.

Different terms have been used to describe young children's writing. Tolchinsky's (2003) path to alphabetic writing is one such example. Clay (1975) referred to children's early attempts to write as beginning writing behaviour, a term which also supports a line of thinking in relation to their ability to utilise existing knowledge about writing in order to communicate. Martello (2001; 2004) used the term precompetence in the same way. Clay (1975)'s description of children's writing as beginning with 'gross approximations' is significant from this decade, as even if they were recognised as such, children's early attempts at writing were typically described as mere 'scribble' by the adult observer; in other words, purposeless, random marks without any real meaning attached to them. This was because they made no sense from a conventional perspective, leading researchers such as Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984, p.178) to famously conclude that "in scribbles is the origin of the written sign". Their use of the term scribble was not however used to dismiss what children were doing; the authors were in fact taking an enlightened approach. Harste et al. (1984) discovered for example that children of this age were already making planned organisational decisions about their writing and that they wrote with an expectation that the marks they made would make sense; in other words, they were writing with intentionality, a characteristic of the writing process. Similarly, Matthews (1999, p.19) argued that children's scribbles were products of their systematic investigation rather than random or meaningless unintentional marks. In this respect intentionality can be described as being synonymous with meaning, which is important as it forces a re-conceptualisation of the term 'scribble' and the need for a better way to describe children's early attempts at communication on paper. Goodman (1986) has argued that children from the even earlier age of two engage in writing tasks for a wide variety of reasons and that most have begun to use symbols to represent real things such as names and objects. In more recent research Lancaster (2007) investigated the use of "intentional signs" (p.126) amongst a group of 10 children aged between 18 to 30 months and found that children under the age of two are able to distinguish between writing, drawing, and number, based on the child's experience and perceptions of how each of these three domains represents meaning. Evidence of intentionality at such young ages is significant because it suggests first that children are engaging with a discourse about writing early on in their lives, but second, if this is in fact what they are doing, it necessitates appropriate intervention by adults built on positive understandings of children's capabilities.

What research such as this shows however is that how children's early writing is conceptualised is to a considerable extent prescribed by our adult knowledge of graphic systems. A term which has emerged in England to describe children's early engagement with the writing process and which appears in the current statutory early years curriculum (DfE, 2017) is mark making. Mark making, whilst somewhat removed from the term 'scribble' is still not perceived as 'real' writing however in that it cannot be read conventionally by an adult. Mark making is an expectancy amongst children aged between 30 to 50 months to which they might sometimes ascribe meaning to the 'marks' produced which are different from drawing. It is also a term created by adults. When terms such as mark making are used to describe children's early writing we would argue that it further polarises adult understanding through not giving sufficient

acknowledgement to what children are achieving in their efforts to communicate via the written word. Significantly, it cannot be used when adults and children talk together about writing because a child would never describe themselves as mark making; nor would they understand what an adult meant if they asked them if this is what they were doing. Mark making is therefore not part of a child's language repertoire, thus alienating them somewhat from a discourse about writing development that they might actually be leading and creating. The term 'writing' is therefore used throughout this paper to describe children's deliberate graphic communication, where children perceive themselves to be writing.

Conceptualising Writing

Children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing include beliefs about learning to write; knowledge and understanding of the purpose and function of writing; approaches to writing; ways of talking about writing; and responses to writing (Ivanic, 2004; Quinn and Bingham, 2018). Research on young children's writing development over the past two to three decades has typically been framed according around one of three orientations; 1. emergent literacy theory, which incorporate stages and phases of writing development (Clay, 1975; 1983); 2. sociocultural emphases, which recognize the impact of the range of writing experiences in children's cultural and social environments on children's understanding and motivation to write (Compton-Lily, 2006). Within this orientation, children shape writing events according to their own personal interests, thus demonstrating a sense of agency in their approach (e.g. Wells Rowe and Neitzel, 2010). This shaping of writing events links with research showing how children's differing participation in literacy events at home and in their communities impacts on and shapes individual text production (Purcell-Gates, 1986; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Compton-Lilly, 2006); and 3. cognitive approaches, where children's developing understanding of the purposes and function or writing are linked to a gradual increasing accuracy in conventional writing output (Wray, 1994; Scheuer *et al*., 2006). All three orientations are built on the assumption that learning to write conventionally occurs over a long period of time, usually years. Another useful theoretical framing is competence theory which recognises children's growing achievement in several competences (with regard to children's writing and competence theory see Pomerantz, Grolnick and Price, 2005). It takes time to become competent in any skill and therefore the notion of writing as a competence to be achieved over time is arguably in line with all three theoretical approaches described above, involving developing knowledge, exposure, adult response, and experience. Pomerantz et al (2005) argue that as children develop in competence, adults' responses play a significant role. For example, parents *scaffold* understanding of writing through the language they use. Parent interventions, throughout the day in the home, such as identifying printed words or talking with a child as they attempt to write words at home may foster children's understanding of the nature and functions of writing, conveying the idea that writing serves a definite purpose (Aram (2007, 2010). Parents and children engage in conversations around letters and numbers at home (Nemann and Neumann, 2009; Leyva, Reese and Wiser, 2012). Development of writing skills is therefore influenced by verbal interactions with adults that support a child's understandings of the power of writing; what it represents. Language ability, as studies of this age group have shown, does not preclude very young children from engaging with early writing. Children's perceptions of themselves as writers and their motivation in relation to writing are important factors in production of text, and how children's early efforts to

write are responded to by others such as key adults in their lives has an impact on how they develop writing as a competence.

Methodology

The research was undertaken within an early years pre-school setting in the UK. The pre-school was part of a larger, established Early Years Centre which included a maintained local authority nursery school capable of accommodating up to 110 children, separate provision for two-and-three-year-olds (the pre-school setting in which the research was undertaken), a joint Children's Centre, a community childcare hub, and a teaching school. Data from the Centre's 2014 Ofsted Report stated that just fewer than 80% of families were of White British heritage, with the remaining groups being from a very wide range of race and cultures. Children in the Centre were known to speak up to 30 different languages.

The research design used case-study methodology to investigate the writing practices of nine two-and-three-year-old children and their families who were part of one early years pre-school setting. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are children's, parents', and practitioners' conceptualisations of early writing?
    i. How is early writing supported in the pre-school setting and at home?
2. How can practitioners' and parents' understandings of children's early writing practices lead to changes in writing pedagogy in the early years pre-school setting and approaches to writing at home?
    i. What is the rationale for changes in writing pedagogy?

Participants

The research sample included members of staff in the site, parents, and their children. All six members of staff working in the early years setting gave their consent to participate in the research project. All families who had been offered early years provision for their two-and-three-year-old children in the pre-school setting during the academic year 2014-15 were sent a letter introducing the researcher, describing the research project, and inviting them to participate. Of a total of 16 families approached, 10 originally gave consent to participate, however only nine families continued their involvement for the entire duration of the study due to one of the families dropping out as a result of spending three extended periods of time abroad during the data collection period. Table 1 gives an overview of background information on the participant families and their children, where the children are listed in age order from oldest to youngest at the start of the data collection period.

Table 1: Participant Children and their Families involved in the Research

Pseudonym/first name (where consent given)	**Age (at start of data collection)**	**Family Members**	**Languages Spoken at Home**	**Funded Status**
Alyssa	3 years, 4 months	Mother	English, occasional Bangladeshi	Yes
Vivian	3 years, 3 months	Mother, father Older brother, aged 5 years	English	No
Francesca	3 years, 3 months	Mother Younger sister, aged 3 months	English and occasional Spanish	Yes
Myra	3 years, 3 months	Mother, father	English	No
Sofia	3 years, 2 months	Mother Middle child, older sister aged 8 years, younger sister aged 1 year	English and Spanish	Yes
John	2 years, 11 months	Mother, father Older sister aged 8 years, older brother aged 7 years	English	No
Anya	2 years, 10 months	Mother, father Older brother, aged 6 years	Russian (first language), English, and Spanish	No
Amy	2 years, 8 months	Mother	English	Yes
Bryn	2 years, 8 months	Mother, father Older sister, aged 4 years	English	No

Data Sets

Data sets included nine audio-recorded interviews with parents; six audio-recorded interviews with early years educators; 16 classroom observations of one day each, which included interaction with the participant children, recorded as field notes; and a total of 18 writing samples from the participant children. A reflective journal was also kept throughout the data collection period.

Data Analysis

All handwritten and audio recorded data were transcribed into Word files and uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software tool NVivo. This included both interview data sets and individual files of each of the observations (both general observations and any relating to each individual participant child). Another file contained details of observed instances where children had interacted together in writing events. Writing samples were scanned as PDF files and also uploaded to NVivo. Even as data collection was ongoing, some patterns of writing behaviour began to emerge and these were documented in the research journal, alongside reflective comments. These dated notes were also collated together into one file and uploaded to NVivo. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for inductive thematic analysis was used to support a systematic approach to data analysis. An inductive approach through which codes, and ultimately themes, emerged from the data was used. Interrogating the data in this way led to the gradual emergence of a coding framework that was eventually applied consistently across all data sets, the final outcome of which was the presentation of findings in written form.

Ethics

Ethical procedures were followed closely in terms of gaining consent in relation to access to the setting, from the staff members, and gaining written parental consent from the families involved in the study. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry's (2012) concept of consent incorporating the notion of assent and dissent involving a combination of verbal, behavioural and emotional signifiers, additionally provided the foundations for an age-appropriate ethical approach regarding the children involved.

Findings

This findings section presents the discourse about writing that emerged across the three stakeholder groups involved in the research, namely the pre-school setting staff members, the parents, and the children. The writing environment of the children's pre-school setting is first explored and staff conceptualisations of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children are revealed. In the same way, the writing environment at home is then explored and parents' conceptualisations of writing amongst their two-and-three-year-old children are revealed. The children's engagement within both the pre-school setting and home writing environment and their own conceptualisations of writing then follows.

1. The Staff Members

The Writing Environment

The pre-school setting layout included a designated Writing Area, positioned next to the role play area, which consisted of a table at child height with three seats around three of the table sides and an adjacent set of drawers containing sheets of paper. The table provided a focal point for the children to engage in drawing, colouring, and writing events and included a permanent range of felt tipped pens, pencils and colouring crayons in pots which could be accessed at any time throughout the course of a session. The fourth side of the writing table was pushed against a noticeboard. Handwritten laminated words such as "Dear" and "Mummy" and "Daddy" were attached to this using Velcro, along with numbers from 0 to 10.

The pre-school setting adopted a child-led approach interpreted as children being able to explore their own trajectories of learning through following their own interests. There were no opportunities for the children to use technological devices within the pre-school setting such as an iPad or computer, however they regularly observed staff members using iPads to take photographs in both the indoor and outdoor environment, or using them to work on. Despite the children not having access to the iPads, they were encased in brightly coloured drop proof, shock proof covers with handles designed for children to hold. There was a pencil attached by string to a painting easel which staff and children could use to write names on completed paintings, however this was not mentioned by any of the staff members during their interview as a possible writing resource for the children. Three staff members mentioned pens and/or pencils and paper as the only specific resources available for children to write with within the pre-school setting, however all six felt that writing resources were available for the children to access independently if indeed this was an activity they wished to pursue. There were some differences in opinion in relation to the writing provision in the pre-school setting on the part of the staff team members, for example Janine said:

> I mean we have like name cards and things where the writing table is, the drawing table, we've got them there for them if they want to have a go at writing. But I think that's all we have really. There's not too much there I don't think.

In contrast Susan, the room leader, stated:

> [There are] lots of opportunities [for writing] … the pens and the pencils are always out, and they [the children] are free to take them to the craft table, which they do…

The overall writing agenda within the pre-school setting was led by Susan. She was the only staff member to talk about the possibilities for children to write other than sitting at the writing table in the Writing Area, for example Susan was the only staff member who referred to opportunities for writing events to take place as part of the role play theme:

> Yeah, we try and incorporate it [writing] into play, you know, for instance sometimes we have the home corner changed into a hospital role play area, and we have clipboards out and they write pretend prescriptions.

One example of writing opportunities available in the role play area was 'Patient Details' forms as part of a vet's surgery (see Figure 1). The possible use of resources such as the patient detail forms was always modelled initially by a staff member through the children's participation in a focus activity before being left for them to access independently.

Figure 1: An example of a patient details form at the vet's surgery

Writing activities were typically developed around significant calendar events that provided meaningful contexts for obvious writing opportunities. The children made Chinese New Year cards on one occasion with Bin (who spoke Mandarin), where children were able to try Chinese writing for themselves. Easter cards were made during the course of the data collection period, however Kyung, the member of staff leading this activity, wrote 'Happy Easter, Love from [child's name]' on behalf of all the children inside the cards, apart from with one child, the oldest child in the setting, who wrote her full name. One reason for this could have been to speed up the process of 'getting through' all the children in a certain period of time; it could however have also been to do with assumptions about the children's writing ability in the pre-school setting. We suggest this because one planned writing activity which was led by Susan involved some of the children writing letters home. Significantly, only the older children in the pre-school setting (those above the age of three years old) were invited to participate. (It should be highlighted at this point that this pedagogical approach should also be considered within the context of a committed staff team dedicated to providing what they understood to be age-appropriate practice). When writing activities such as these took place the children's outcomes were always celebrated through being incorporated into displays in the pre-school setting.

The writing environment included the children observing adults writing both indoors and, on occasion, outdoors. Staff members would regularly undertake hand written observations for evidence or assessment purposes or fill in an official accident form as standard procedure for an injured child, for example. A parent would be asked to sign the accident form to say that their child's accident had been discussed with a member of staff. This type of discussion often took place with the child present. Parents additionally signed their children in and out of the pre-school setting against a register upon arrival and departure. Writing resources did not initially extend to the outdoor area, however part way through the data collection period a large whiteboard was purchased and mounted on a wall at child height outside. The children were able to access this independently when in the outdoor area on days when large whiteboard pens were provided for them to use (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Space to write and draw outdoors

Finally, the writing environment included many opportunities to support children's physical and skills development. The significance of children engaging in such activities was perceived as important by all six staff members to build up gross and fine motor skills as a precursor to holding a writing implement successfully, for example Janine explained the importance of children developing necessary fine motor skills in order to be able to hold any writing implement using "an effective, comfortable grip". Children were welcome to access many skills development resources independently, in line with the pre-school setting's child-led ethos and engagement with these was observed regularly throughout the data collection period. The following examples drawn from field notes give a range of the kind of activities available to the children: using a Sellotape dispenser; decorating a crown with sequins using a pincer grip to select one sequin at a time; pressing keys on a toy piano to make music coordinating both hands; doing (and undoing) jigsaws; filling a bucket with sand using a small spade; and threading beads onto a pipe cleaner.

Conceptualising Writing

Staff members used a range of terms, including mark-making, to describe the children's writing output. They saw mark-making as a developmental stage that was not writing, because it was not conventional written language. This led to resultant tensions in the early years pre-school setting regarding what the practitioner role might be in supporting writing development from the age of two years; indeed, whether there was even a role at all. Additionally, some anxiety was expressed surrounding what was described as children's 'readiness to write' and the notion of not pushing children into writing too soon. Whilst this anxiety impacted on pedagogical approaches within the pre-school setting, it also reinforced how writing was conceptualised as the production of conventional text amongst most of the adults involved in the children's lives, and writing as a skill that must be taught.

The challenges for staff in conceptualising writing were also revealed in a lack of consistency across their interviews in the language used to describe children's early writing behaviour. Table 2 shows examples of a range of language used across the team:

Table 2. Terms used by Staff Members to Describe Children's Early Writing

Staff Member	**Terms used by Staff Members to Describe Children's Early Writing [my emphasis added]**
Carina	In the [pre-school setting], there's lots [of resources for writing], with mark making, we have lots of, you know, colours, crayons, pens available to them [the children] all the time.
Bin	[referring to a specific child] She able do it she just start doing it, yes, in the writing.
Kyung	Uh…I do just naturally reading a book with the children, and mark making, you know, do the writing through the mark making with the two year children, so yeah, I think we do every day with the children normally, but you know, not

	necessarily that this is literacy or something like that, so naturally we do.
Janine	There has been a couple of children, if I write up any observations on the child I look after a couple might come over and ask me what I'm doing, and when I explain to them they just walk away. Or a child that I have looked after will pick up the pen that I'm writing with, and scribble on the pad, which I let them do.
Susan	You know, sort of drawing more than actual writing.
Alice	…quite a lot of it is mark making.

Whilst all six staff members were using language to clearly distinguish between non-conventional and conventional text, the different terms used also revealed a lack of agreement amongst the team in relation to common terminology used to talk about or describe writing in the pre-school setting. This may have been a contributing factor accounting for differing responses and understanding in relation to perceived writing provision and pedagogical approaches therein. Whilst staff members used particular terms to distinguish for themselves between non-conventional and conventional writing, and to describe early writing behaviour, Carina's conceptions were indicative of how multiple terms could often be used within the same interview to describe the same phenomenon, as follows:

> Carina: In the [pre-school setting], there's lots [of resources for writing], with mark making, we have lots of, you know, colours, crayons, pens available to them [the children] all the time. Also when we do mark making that can be, you know, sticking, junk modelling, they always want to go and get a pen, either for, you know, pretend to write, they want us to write the name, so there's a lot of, even with painting, so there's lots of opportunity for them to express, you know, either their creativity, but also, you know, the writing that leads to writing later on, when they write, some children of course are at the stage where they are interested in writing.
>
> Researcher: And do you observe the children writing?
>
> Carina: If you mean scribble, yes.

Although there was evidence of much heterogeneity in relation to conceptualising writing, there were instances of some homogeneity. For example, three members of staff used the term mark making as one way of describing the early writing (emergent) phase. Mark making was not perceived as 'real' writing however, with only one staff member observed responding to children's so-called mark making in the pre-school setting, for example asking them what they had written or what they were writing. To this end, the children's early attempts at writing were not always acknowledged or noticed by staff members.

2. The Parents

The Writing Environment at Home

Writing events were occurring in all the homes of the participant children. Within the home environment all the children had access to resources that could be used for writing, such as paper, pens, pencils, colouring pencils, and felt tipped pens. Six out of nine of the parents spoke of the writing possibilities that certain resources that their children had access to at home might present (Table 3).

Table 3 Writing Resources available in the Children's Homes

Name of Child	**Writing Resources available at Home**
Alyssa	She's got a special table in her room, in her bedroom that's got just for sitting and doing drawing and painting, and she's got her pencil case on the table, it's always out, ready, and paper, so yeah, she's got it all there ready to go.
Vivian	There are always paper and pens around, they do have specific, you know, they've got a box of pens, and there's paper everywhere. So yes, I'm pretty sure she could always find it…
Francesca	She's got pens under our coffee table, which are always, always there, pens and paper.
Myra	She's got pens, and paper… she knows where it is and she'll quite often do that [writing] herself.
Sofia	She's got like the colours always on the table, and there's always material around, she's got her own book as well, yes, so...There's material all around the house.
John	Pencils, pens and paper are at his level.
Anya	We have a table, a little table down in the kitchen with pencils and paper there, so she can access them easily.
Amy	Yeah, I've got, you know, pens, colouring pens… and I've got a box in her bedroom because obviously I like to, and I separate each so she knows which thing is, or I'll keep them in the cupboard for her, and she'll come up to me and say, "Mummy, paper and pens."
Bryn	Actually they have a basket each, because [participant child's elder sister] doesn't like to share her special crayons with Bryn because he'll tend to break them, so they have a basket each with their colouring and drawing things in, and paper and notebooks and things, so they are in, they've got a playroom, so they are on the side, and yes, they just help themselves to their stickers and colouring things.

All nine children observed their parents, and where they had them, sometimes their siblings, writing. They were also involved in collaborative writing events at home such as writing shopping lists and birthday cards. Amy's mother wrote on a calendar, explaining what she was writing in front of her daughter, and Sofia regularly observed her mother typing on the iPad. Bryn's mother regularly wrote letters:

> I write letters, I like writing letters to friends, so I sit down and do that sometimes, when they are doing something crafty-wise, I'll sit down and write a letter or card or things like that.

Anya and her mother wrote letters to her grandmother who lived in Russia. This meant that Anya was beginning to approach writing using her knowledge of both English and Russian scripts concurrently. Different patterns of interaction in relation to shopping lists emerged. Alyssa wrote her own alongside her mother, asking for help with spellings and writing items using a conventional script. Anya wrote her own alongside her mother using her emergent English script; and Francesca took it in turns to write items on a list with her mother, she using her emergent script alongside her mother's conventional writing. Additionally two of the two-year-old children, John and Bryn, regularly observed older siblings writing which led to unprompted written responses on their part. Bryn's mother stated: "He's definitely interested in it [writing] and I think because X's [Bryn's older sister] doing it it means he'll sit down to do it as well". John observed his two older siblings doing homework and his father recounted an example of his son spontaneously creating his own writing event alongside them:

> Yesterday the other two were doing their homework, and he was, "I'm going to do my homework", which involved a piece of paper and Sellotape and folding the paper and then a bit of scribbling.

Evidence from the parent interviews suggested that at least two of the children, Alyssa and Anya, wrote independently on a daily basis at home. The difficulty in being precise with this figure was due to the fact that writing independently was a phenomenon that could only be quantified based on the perception the parents had of their child and also how they conceptualised writing.

Conceptualising Writing

Most parents perceived writing as a skill that incorporated being able to accurately reproduce all the letters of the alphabet to create text in the conventional way. Five of the nine participant children observed older siblings writing at home when they did homework which had an additional impact on their parents' conceptualisations of writing. Older siblings (who ranged in age between 5 and 8 years' old) were still described by their parents as learning to write. Table 4 summarises terms used by parents to describe their children's writing.

Table 4. Terms used by Parents to Describe their Children's Early Writing

Name of Child	Terms used by Parents to Describe their Children's Early Writing
Alyssa	If we've got a birthday card to write out, or if I'm doing the shopping, I say to her, "You write it."
Vivian	I have to say I have assumed that even to her there's not a pattern there, so she isn't, it's, she's sort of almost playing at writing. I don't think what she's putting on the paper necessarily means anything to her. I think you probably disagree, I don't know, but I mean definitely the letters, and maybe recently she has been, but it was more before she was sort of playing at writing and telling me that she was writing, and being proud of writing, but I don't really believe that what she scribbled she thought meant anything.
Francesca	I write shopping lists and she pretends to write a shopping list.
Myra	She wants to pretend that she is writing.
Sofia	She does love scribbling.
John	I'd say he forms shapes with a pencil or pen but I wouldn't call that writing.
Anya	(Pause)…she can hold the pen very well; she can write very well without knowing the letters. It's the very early stage where she has started to write, and to write nearly. My belief is Anya will be, I think by four, four and a half, she might know some letters and start joining letters.
Amy	I'll write "To Nanny", and then I'll say, "Would you like to do something on there?" And then she'll just do her little squiggles.
Bryn	He scribbles but I usually get him to do something in the card, so that kind of thing. He's taken to sitting down and trying to write stuff, and he doesn't really write but he's trying. He makes marks and he thinks he's writing.

All nine parents were using language to clearly distinguish between non-conventional and conventional text. There was no common term used amongst the parents for writing, reflecting perhaps different understandings or interpretations of the emergent writing phase in particular. Parents had however individually adopted specific language personal to them to describe their children's early writing behaviour. Only two of the parents, Alyssa and Anya's, acknowledged or described their children's written output as writing. Five parents, Vivian, Francesca, Myra, Amy and Bryn's, acknowledged that their children understood the concept of writing, commonly using terms such as 'pretending' or 'playing' at writing. Two parents, Sofia and John's, felt their child was not writing at all, describing them as scribbling and forming shapes that were not writing respectively. 'Squiggling' and 'scribbling' further emerged as common

descriptive terms across this data set. Squiggling or squiggles were specific terms used by parents to describe attempted written output, whereas scribbling was used as a term to describe output that parents perceived as meaningless but which was nevertheless different from drawing, as in Sofia's case for example. To this end, some of the children's early writing behaviour was not always acknowledged or picked up on as a genuine attempt to communicate meaningfully.

3. The Children's Conceptualisations of Writing

All nine participant children, whether aged two years or three years, understood the difference between drawing and writing. Understanding the difference between drawing and writing was a consistent finding amongst the children whether they were writing for themselves or asking an adult to write on their behalf. They always conjugated the verb "to write" whenever talking about writing, whether their own or others'. When they did write, whether in the conventional sense or not, they described both the writing process (for example, saying, "I'll write it") and their writing output (what they produced on the page) as writing, thus despite being at varying stages in terms of how much they used writing in their everyday lives, they clearly showed some understanding of the purpose, form, and function of writing. One two-year-old child, Bryn, who was not writing for himself, would ask an adult to do so for him, usually his name, indicating an understanding of how writing can be used purposefully in everyday contexts. Evidence such as this suggested clear understandings on the part of the children of writing as a distinct representational mode for creating meaningful communication. Additionally, it was a tool that the children could access, manage, and use themselves; the fact that the writing produced was sometimes not conventional did not prove problematic for them. In their minds, the writing the children produced was always writing, despite the fact that none of the participant children were writing their full name conventionally yet. Table 5 shows the children's understanding of themselves as someone who can write.

Table 5. Children's Understanding of Themselves as Someone who can Write

Name of Child	**Understanding of someone who can write**	**Example of Reason for Perception (drawn from field notes)**
Alyssa	Yes	"Mummy's showing me how to do my A's."
Vivian	Yes	Vivian wrote Amy's name for her in the bottom left-hand corner of her painting using a zig-zag emergent script.
Francesca	No	Francesca was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. She would ask for her name to be added to her creative output and could spell it out.
Myra	Yes	Myra was in the writing area making a card alongside John. I said to her, "What have you written Myra?" "Swirly, swirly. I'm going to write mummy's name," she replied.

ofia	No	Sofia was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. She did however consistently engage in skills development activities. NB. Findings for Sofia are tentative in terms of how she was defining and conceptualising writing. Sofia's first language was Spanish and the pre-school setting focus was on developing her ability to communicate in English, for example devising specific one-to-one and small group activities to model and develop vocabulary.
John	Yes	"And who is this for?" I asked John, indicating the envelope full of cards. "My mummy." "Can you write mummy's name on here?" I pointed to the sealed envelope and John wrote on the front of it using an emergent script.
Anya	Yes	Later on in the morning Anya was in the role play area with a mini clipboard, paper and pencil. She told me she was writing a shopping list. Her emergent script showed a list-like form. The creation of the shopping list was in line with the pretence play she was engaged in. Her baby was in the pram, and she had a bag with a purse and money ready to go to the shops."
Amy	Yes	"Amy went to paint. When she finished, she took my pencil from me and wrote her name using an emergent script. "There, done," she said."
Bryn	No	Bryn was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. He did however engage in Skills development activities and would ask for his name to be added to his creative output: "Bryn did a painting using a foam roller and then asked me to write his name. Without any prompting he went over to the writing table to find me a pen with which to do this."

The children's understanding of themselves as someone who could write did not necessarily equate with adult perceptions of the same. Both Amy and Myra felt they could write, but staff members and their mothers did not. Similarly, John was engaging in writing events across the pre-school setting and home, but this engagement was not taken seriously in either context as early writing. Sometimes staff and parent

perceptions of individual children were not always the same. For example, Anya engaged in very different writing activity at home and in the pre-school setting. Described as a writer by her mother, she engaged in writing on a daily basis at home by choice. She was observed by her mother consistently writing stories using a mix of conventional and non- conventional text, speaking as she wrote for example, writing down the narrative one word at a time. She was additionally observed incorporating writing as part of her play. Her writing remained invisible to the adults in the pre-school setting however in that it was assumed that writing would not be an aspect of her learning that she would be displaying at the age of two years old.

The discourse about writing that emerged for the children was not dependent upon age and conventional writing ability. Overall, findings revealed that all nine participant children had an understanding of how writing could be used in their everyday lives and indeed were using writing as a means to genuinely communicate. The children used what they knew and understood about writing to create such written meaning, for example using an emergent script (as distinct from drawing). Three out of four of the participant children believed that they could write by and for themselves. Their writing demonstrated the communication of meaningful ideas and was beginning to be defined by several characteristics. The children were particularly keen to claim possession of their output in the pre-school setting in the form of drawings, paintings, and models, showing their understanding of the importance of using their name to signify ownership. This was consistent across the participant children whether they were writing their name for themselves (not necessarily conventionally), or asked an adult to write it for them. The following example reveals how Amy's writing exemplified this understanding:

> Amy walked over to the painting area of her classroom. The researcher said to her, 'Are you going to write your name?' 'No', she replied, because she had not finished her painting. When she had finished painting she took the pencil from the researcher and wrote her name. "There, done," she said.

Figure 3. An example of Amy's consistent use of her signature.

Evidence of Amy's conceptualisation of writing can be seen in the bottom left corner of her painting where Amy's signature can be seen (Figure 3). The observation of Amy, and the interaction with her, revealed that Amy knew how her name should look when written down. Repeated observations revealed that at the age of two years Amy had developed a signature, similar every time she wrote her signature, and always appearing in the bottom left hand corner of her paintings. It further reflected an understanding of the approximate length of her name, which she could also read on name cards prepared by the setting. In the extract, Amy also revealed her understanding of a pencil as an appropriate tool to write with, distinguishing it from her paintbrush which had served a different purpose.

Discussion

Discontinuity between the children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing impacted on pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting and parents' responses at home. The adults' and children's discourse about writing existed independently of each other until these discourses were exposed as a result of the research. However it was also clear that despite their conceptualisations, the adults involved in the children's lives were driven by a fundamental desire to support the children's writing development (indeed all aspects of the children's development) appropriately. This has implications in relation to developing effective writing pedagogy for children as young as two years' old.

If children as young as two years old perceive themselves to be writing, effective writing teaching in the early years can only be achieved through a reframing of how writing is conceptualised by adults, which has implications for early years writing environments within settings and homes. One small but emblematic aspect of this reframing would be the replacement of the term 'mark-making' with the term 'writing' in all relevant discourse including curricula and policy documentation, because, in the light of the findings from this research, mark-making represents a deficit-view of children's capabilities. Using the term mark-making can prevent more meaningful discussion between adults and children about writing, and hence represent a missed opportunity for learning. Instead, a more profound understanding of what writing is for two-and-three-year-old children needs to be part of the professional development for early years practitioners, and represented as part of the support, guidance and advice for parents. Discovering and responding to the writing discourse for children of this age is therefore a vital step towards co-constructing appropriate writing pedagogy, a necessary conception to improve the discourse and pedagogy of writing.

If, as this study showed, children are engaged in a discourse about early writing from a young age, a key line of thinking offered by researchers such as Makin (2006) is helpful in reframing how this discourse might be understood and reframed. Makin (2006, p.267) argues that viewing literacy from a social practice perspective enables the focus to shift from writing as conventional text to one that responds to how children create and use literacy in their everyday lives. Whilst previous studies of spontaneous writing have primarily focused on children functioning within the framing of conventional writing, taking a child-focused approach is important in understanding the important steps that children take to becoming conventional writers. Both perceiving and responding to children as the writers they perceive themselves to be, and to understand their approaches in the context of literacy experience, is crucial in the development of writing as a competence and motivation to write.

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