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Writing and writers: the perceptions of young children and their parents

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Over the past three decades early writing research has focused on the processes involved as children learn to write. There is now a powerful evidence base to show that children's earliest discoveries about written language are learned through active engagement with their social and cultural worlds. In addition, the idea of writing development as an emergent process is well established. The study reported in this paper adopted case study methodology combined with an age-appropriate data collection technique in order to explore children's perceptions of themselves as writers. A focused task using a hand puppet called Baby Bear was used to elicit children's perceptions. The children's parents were interviewed to elicit their perceptions of their children as writers. This small-scale exploratory study found that the children had clear perceptions about themselves as writers. There were important links between parents' perceptions of their children as writers and the ethos for writing they created in the home. It was found that, overall, more positive parental perceptions were linked with more attention to the meaning of children's writing. It is concluded that early years settings could usefully identify and compare children's and parents' perceptions of writing in order to enhance children's writing development.

Keywords: emergent literacy; early writing; young children's perceptions

Children begin to explore the features of writing from a very early age. They do so with the intention of creating meaning before understanding of the alphabetic principle has developed, and despite the fact that the writing produced is not conventional (Bradford and Wyse 2010). Over the past three decades early writing research has focused on the processes involved as children commit their thoughts and explorations to paper. Marie Clay (1975, 15) for example, argued that by examining children's earliest attempts at writing we are provided with a 'rich commentary on [children's] ... learning about print', learning which is 'encapsulated in their accumulated attempts to write'. Early experimentation of this kind is known as *emergent literacy* (Teale and Sulzby 1986; Hall 1987). Emergent literacy theories explore the reading and writing behaviours of young children that precede and develop into conventional literacy and are characterised by two key premises: (1) they are a set of practices that young children who have had relatively little experience of writing engage in and (2) they incorporate an element of growing

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metacognitive awareness in young children, perceiving them as active enquirers into the nature and purposes of literacy (Wray 1994; Jacobs 2004). One of the hypotheses that underpinned the research reported in this paper is that if children are indeed emergent writers who are metacognitively active then it is likely that they will have perceptions of themselves as writers.

Rowe's (2003) analysis of children's unconventional texts suggested that young children's authoring processes are not qualitatively different from those used by older writers. Several other studies such as Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) and Wray (1994) make a case for adults and children alike using similar cognitive processes in terms of the decisions they must make when confronted with a writing task. Writing involves choosing from a range of possible actions, which in turn implies a degree of conscious awareness of potential alternatives. Pahl (1999) argued that children will interpret things according to the information and resources to which they have access at the time and according to what is currently salient in their thinking. In other words, children will simply make use of what they know. In this respect it is inexperience that determines their ability to write conventionally, rather than the strategies they use when they approach a written task. Jacobs (2004, 18) describes such strategies as 'temporary scaffolds', which will be gradually refined as children begin to understand more about the writing process.

Home literacy and children's perceptions

There is now a powerful evidence base to show that children's earliest discoveries about written language are learned through active engagement with their social and cultural worlds (Wells 1986; Gee 2001; Barrat-Pugh 2002; Compton-Lilly 2006). Literacy development will occur wherever literacy practices are occurring, thus children are beginning to learn about reading and writing initially in their homes and communities through interacting with others in reading and writing situations. Factors such as environment, interaction with family, education, and children's neural development therefore have an effect on the emergence of representational systems (Clay 1993; Dyson 2001, 2008; Neuman and Dickinson 2003; Nunes and Bryant 2004). Children test their hypotheses about the forms and functions of written language in social contexts from an early age (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Barrat-Pugh 2002; Rowe 2003). Neuman and Roskos (1997) argued that such early participation in writing and reading practices represents an important phase of literacy learning because it is through these experiences that children come to understand that print is meaningful. Participation further enables them to practise or develop their hypotheses about what written language is for and how it works.

What children see as most relevant will differ according to the circumstances of their upbringing: 'learning, especially learning an expressive system like written language, is not divorced from one's identity and history but, of necessity, embedded within it' (Dyson 2001, 139). Diversity in literacy practices in homes leads to diversity in the literacy abilities of children as they start school, and whilst there is a regularity which characterises literacy development it is clear that children reach developmental stages through a variety of different routes (Pellegrini 2001). Each child's pathway into literacy is a distinctive journey shaped by personal, social and cultural factors (Martello 2002; Whitehead 2002).

Methodology

A key issue when researching young children's perspectives is the ways in which their responses can be encouraged and the significance that can be attributed to them. Concerns have been raised about children's cognitive abilities to process and respond to structured questions about their perceptions (Qvortrup 2000). There is also evidence to suggest that children sometimes respond to questions even if they do not understand them (for example Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay 2000). However, Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) show that young children's perspectives can be accepted as genuine, valid evidence and that children's responses improve in reliability when they are questioned about matters that are relevant and meaningful to them. Powell and Thomson (2001) argue that the quality and quantity of responses can further be enhanced by developing a supportive environment and Birbeck and Drummond (2007, 21) are explicit in their argument that if one appropriately engages children in the information-gathering process there is no reason why their perceptions and thoughts should not be regarded as competent. Relevant research supporting the authenticity of young children's perspectives as valid includes the C.IND.LE project (Whitebread et al., 2004). The project found that children as young as three were able to express choices and preferences and were aware of their own abilities and even difficulties. Cremin and Slatter (2004) provided a rationale for consulting with very young children to enable their voices to be heard and taken into consideration when planning pre-school provision and argued that their expressed preferences can be taken as an accurate account of their thoughts and feelings. They matched the children's responses against adult responses and found that the children's responses matched adult perceptions most of the time.

The research reported in this paper built on these positive theories of young children's capability to express themselves by using a collective case study approach (Stake 2000) to investigate young children's perceptions of themselves as writers. The research was undertaken in an early years setting in England where all children were treated as writers and where writing opportunities were an intrinsic part of day-to-day provision. Data collection occurred during visits to the setting on average once per week over a period of two half terms (approximately 14 weeks) between October and February of the academic school year which began in September.

The participants were six children aged between three and four years old, and their parent(s). Purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, 103) was adopted to select three girls and three boys whose primary language was English (see Table 1). Although it was not statistically representative of the early years setting's population as a whole, the rationale behind this choice was 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, 104). In discussion with the class teacher, children from a range of ages and abilities were chosen, with reference to the teacher's knowledge of each child's perceived willingness to respond to and work alongside a new adult within the classroom.

Because the main aim of the study was to understand children's perceptions, a method of data collection was designed that would directly acquire data from the children themselves. This was an age-appropriate activity called *Baby Bear* undertaken with each of the six children in order to elicit their perceptions about writing. The children talked to a hand puppet, Baby Bear, who wanted to know how to write. The activity created a climate for focused talk and response. All six children were given a similar prompt at the start of the activity, encouraging them to help

Table 1. The case study children.

Name	Gender	Age at beginning of study	Writing ability (participants assessed using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Assessment Scales for Writing)
Rahid	Male	4 years, 1 month	2. Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning
Lottie	Female	3 years, 9 months	3. Represents some sounds correctly in writing 1. Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks 2. Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning 3. Represents some sounds correctly in writing ('L' for Lottie, 'm' for mummy, milk, 'l' for lemon) 4. Writes own name from memory 5. Holds a pencil and uses it to form recognisable letters 6. Attempts writing for a variety of purposes, using features of different forms (for example letters and lists)
Isla	Female	3 years, 6 months	1. Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks
Tom	Male	3 years, 6 months	1. Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks
Amanda	Female	3 years, 4 months	1. Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks 2. Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning 3. Represents some sounds correctly in writing ('a' for Amanda) 5. Holds a pencil and uses it to form recognisable letters 6. Attempts writing for a variety of purposes, using features of different forms (for example letters)
Simon	Male	3 years, 4 months	1. Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks

Baby Bear to write. This worked for all but one of the children, Rahid, who was not at all interested in talking to a puppet, but who instead talked to the researcher about his perspectives on writing whilst demonstrating what he knew about the writing process on paper. Interaction during the Baby Bear activity was audio-recorded and transcribed. The audio-recorder had been used previously within the setting for the children to experiment with as a speaking and listening activity so that recording the focus activity was not an alien concept to them.

Semi-structured interviews with the children's parents were undertaken to explore parents' perceptions of writing and the children's home literacy experiences. An overall format was devised for the parent interviews which provided some degree of systemisation. Initial questions were the same for each, focused around particular topics, but left relatively open-ended. This approach provided some room for individual exploration (Biddle and Anderson 1986), and allowed for data to be compared across participants. During the interview, parents were asked directly whether they perceived their child to be a writer or not, and then invited to explain their response.

Data analysis involved the development of six individual child case studies and cross-case analysis to examine perceptions. The case study methodology resulted in an orientation to ‘holistically intuited’ (Cho and Trent 2006) findings. Each transcribed Baby Bear activity provided a rich, contextualised account of the children’s perceptions of themselves as a writer. Analysis of transcripts and accompanying field notes focused initially on children’s perceptions of themselves as writers. Children’s perceptions were then compared with responses from the parent interviews. Initially the data sets were read through several times to look for themes and patterns that were either unique to each individual case study or repeated across the studies. Certain repeated words, phrases or patterns of behaviour emerged and became coding categories. Categories of codes were as follows:

- codes under which the most general information on the setting and sample children were sorted, such as age and gender;
- codes that provided information as to how the sample children defined the experience of writing, including defining patterns of belief such as ‘I am a writer/I am not a writer’. This was particularly important in relation to discovering the children’s perspectives of themselves as writers and their understanding of the writing process;
- codes involving recurring phrases the children used, such as the use of the verb ‘to write’;
- codes relating to writing behaviours at home, for example, access to writing materials, or observing a parent or carer writing.

The codes, once applied, enabled not only an analysis of each individual child as a writer, but also cross-case analysis.

The children involved in the study were viewed and treated as literate individuals. The expectation on the part of the researcher was that given the right materials and contexts the children should be perfectly capable of displaying competent literate behaviour. The Baby Bear activity was designed as a focus activity. A focus or adult-led activity occurred on a daily basis at the setting and the children were used to being invited to participate. The Baby Bear activity was therefore carried out as a natural extension of the work of the early years setting. It was not restricted to the six children involved in the study in case they might feel singled out, but was open to any other children showing interest. The questions asked were pertinent and relevant to the children’s experience and knowledge, using child-friendly language. The researcher had extensive experience of teaching this age group and got to know the children well, acting as participant observer within the setting throughout the duration of the data collection visits. Birbeck and Drummond (2007, 21) argue that, ‘the participant adult role for the researcher is entirely congruent with the cognitive and social needs of children to participate meaningfully in research’. Field notes were collected throughout the duration of the study.

The British Educational Research Association’s guidelines on ethics were used as the basis for the study. Sensitivity was shown throughout to those being researched. Specific considerations were made when gaining informed consent from the sample children’s parents. An initial letter was sent, inviting them to take part in the research and offering a brief explanation of the study, followed by a meeting to talk with them and clear up any misconceptions. Two parents mistakenly thought that their children might have been taken out of the classroom, for example, or that

Table 2. Children's perceptions of themselves as writers.

Name of child	Child's perception	Reason give to support perception
Rahid	No	'I can't do any writing ... just my brother can write.'
Lottie	Yes	Nodding when asked if she could show Baby Bear what writing is, picking up a pencil and writing her name
Isla	Yes	'I can write ... on my own.'
Tom	Yes	'Like that?' (making marks on paper when invited to tell Baby Bear what writing is)
Amanda	Yes	'I need to use this red pen.' (when asked to do some writing for Baby Bear)
Simon	Yes	'These lines have lots of numbers on it (<i>focusing on the alphabet abacus</i>) and these are all out.'

they might become the subject of planned handwriting instruction or tests which they felt their children clearly were not ready for. Parents were told that the study would be unobtrusive because the research would be undertaken in the everyday context of the nursery setting.

It is common practice to use pseudonyms to conceal the identity of research participants to avoid individuals being identified (Wiles et al. 2006); however, it was anticipated that a specific problem would arise when it came to publication of the results. One of the methods of data collection was the use of writing samples that the children in the sample group produced. Several of the children wrote their name fairly legibly on the samples used to support the findings, which meant that permission was sought to use the children's first names in the writing up of the study. Parents agreed to the use of their children's real name in the reporting of the research where the name was a focus for analysis for the children's writing. The parents also agreed, along with the headteacher, that the researcher should be introduced to their children as another teacher in the setting to support the naturalistic approach of the research. Finally, whilst parents were happy for the Baby Bear activity to be audio-recorded, they elected not to be audio-recorded themselves during their own parent interviews.

Findings

The children had clear perceptions about themselves as writers; all six gave a direct, meaningful response to the prompt given at the beginning of the Baby Bear activity (see Table 2). Either they had something to say about themselves as writers or they indicated that they could demonstrate what writing looked like on paper, or both.

Responses to the Baby Bear activity

Rahid was the only child to say he could not write. He talked about his six-year-old brother, currently being taught handwriting skills in primary school, as someone who he perceived as a writer:

Researcher: Now Baby Bear wants to do some writing.

Rahid: But I can't, my brother, but I can't do any writing.

Researcher: Can you not?

Rahid: No.

Researcher: Could you show Baby Bear what writing is?

Rahid: I can't really, my, just my brother can write.

Lottie, the most advanced writer in the study, gave a non-verbal response to the prompt by nodding her head, picking up a pencil and writing her name. Lottie then went on to write her name for Baby Bear, independently and legibly in upper case letters in the top left-hand corner of her piece of paper.

Isla revealed that she saw herself as someone who could write despite not being able to do so conventionally:

Researcher: Baby Bear's here today for a special reason. He wants some help. He'd like to know how to write, but he's never written anything before.

Isla: I can write.

Researcher: Can you write?

Isla: On my own.

Tom did not give a verbal response to the prompt to help Baby Bear to write, but rather showed him some writing. Even though Tom was a less advanced writer than Lottie he still had clear perceptions. He made small, careful, precise marks to show Baby Bear what writing looks like:

Researcher: He wants to do some writing. Can you tell him what writing is?

Tom: Like that? (*Makes marks on paper*)

Amelia also portrayed herself as someone who could write:

Researcher: Can you do some writing for Baby Bear?

Amelia: I need to use this red pen.

Researcher: Can you show Baby Bear how you write your name, Amelia?

Amelia: Yes.

Even though Amelia said she could write her name for Baby Bear she could in fact only write the first two letters of her name, A and M, independently. She labelled all her work produced in the classroom in the same way.

Simon, who was not writing conventionally, still held a clear perception of what writing involved:

Researcher: Yes, this is Baby Bear and he's come into our classroom today for a special reason. He needs some help, because he wants to know how to write. And he's not really written anything before. Do you think you can help him?

Simon: Um (*nodding yes*).

Researcher: First of all Baby Bear wants to know what writing is. Can you tell him?

Simon: (*Points to the alphabet abacus*). These lines have lots of numbers on it and these are all out. (*The alphabet abacus was located in the Writing Area of the classroom where the activity took place. It had letters or numbers on one side of a cube and an illustration of something that began with the initial letter sound on the other*)

Using the alphabet abacus Simon was able to tell Baby Bear that writing involved the letters of the alphabet. He showed Baby Bear ‘numbers’ on the abacus (corroborating his parents’ comment that he called all letters ‘numbers’) turning them all the right way round so that Baby Bear could see them. He knew therefore that writing involved combinations of letters written down. He turned the cubes the right way round so that all the letters of the alphabet were facing the front and were readable.

Parents’ perceptions and children’s writing

Only one of the children’s parents perceived their child to be a writer; the other five sets of parents did not perceive their child to be a writer (see Table 3). The majority of parents felt that their children’s writing should be conventional if they were to describe them as being able to write. Simon and Isla were regularly observed by their parents making marks on paper at home; however, in their parents’ eyes this did not make them writers. Simon and Tom’s parents went further, suggesting that there was no message in the marks their children were currently producing. Rahid’s parents said Rahid did not write at home, he only drew. Rahid had access to a computer and could type his own name and that of his brother using the keyboard. Lottie’s mother, the only parent in the study who described her child as a writer, said that her perception of her daughter as a writer had been formed prior to Lottie beginning to write her name and use conventional letters. She gave the example of when Lottie was younger, making marks on post-it notes and saying, ‘I’m writing’. Her mother always accepted this as valid, meaningful writing.

The study examined links between parental perceptions and children’s perceptions of themselves as writers (Table 4).

Overall perceptions summarised as either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ could have resulted in four possible patterns of response:

- (1) parent(s) and child perceived the child to be a writer (yes/yes);
- (2) parent(s) perceived their child to be a writer but the child did not (yes/no);
- (3) parent(s) and child did not perceive the child to be a writer (no/no);
- (4) parent(s) did not perceive their child to be a writer but child did (no/yes).

Table 3. Parents’ perceptions of their children as writers.

Child	Parents’ overall perception*	Parents’ explanations for perception
Rahid	No	‘He can only type letters on the computer.’
Lottie	Yes	‘Ever since she began to make marks on paper and say to me, “I’m writing”.’
Isla	No	‘Writing is something you can read in the conventional sense and I cannot read anything she puts down on paper. I do however go along with her explanations about what she has done and believes she has written.’
Tom	No	‘He doesn’t really write; he prefers drawing. He scribbles; he’s only three and a half.’
Amanda	No	‘She does not produce any conventional writing as yet.’
Simon	No	‘He cannot write conventionally, it’s just marks. He has shown no interest in writing until now. There’s no message in what he’s written.’

Note: *When asked if they thought their child was a writer.

Table 4. Parents' and children's perceptions.

Child	Parents' overall perception	Child's overall perception
Rahid	No	No
Lottie	Yes	Yes
Isla	No	Yes
Tom	No	Yes
Amanda	No	Yes
Simon	No	Yes

None of the case studies featured pattern two. This is potentially significant because it may indicate that children are unlikely to perceive themselves negatively (i.e. not a writer) if their parents have a positive overall perception. Examples of the other three patterns which featured are explored below.

Pattern 1 (Yes–Yes): Lottie

Lottie lived with her mother, father and younger brother, aged 21 months. Her mother worked four days a week so Lottie and her brother were cared for by a childminder whilst her mother was at work. Lottie's mother and father were both very involved with their daughter's education and interested in supporting her progress. Her mother felt that her own upbringing definitely influenced the way she approached writing with Lottie. She remembered watching her own mother write and wanting to be able to write like she did. Lottie's mother considered learning to write to be important for her daughter, describing it as an essential skill for life. She felt Lottie needed to learn to write to be able to communicate with people, to be able to express herself, and to be ready for school.

Lottie regularly observed her mother writing at home. They wrote cards together and Lottie would write her own shopping list alongside her mother. She had some English writing scheme books at home but was not pushed to complete them. When Lottie wanted to write at home she had access to the necessary materials to do so, either in the kitchen or in the toy room. Her mother regularly observed her daughter writing independently at home, especially shopping lists and cards. At the time of the interview, Lottie had been writing her name on pictures for about five months. She had been aware that she needed to write her name on pictures having been to a playgroup prior to starting nursery. Before she was able to do this for herself she would ask an adult to do it for her saying, 'I need my name on it'. At home, Lottie would write letters for words beginning with initial letter sounds from familiar names such as 'm' for 'mummy' or 'milk', 'L' for 'Lottie' or 'j' for 'jelly'. She used other letters from familiar names, including her own to create letter strings. One of the strategies Lottie's mother used to support her daughter's writing development was to encourage Lottie to write over her own writing. Writing activities therefore occurred regularly at home and were seen as valid, purposeful and meaningful. Her confidence was evident in her approach to writing activities in the classroom.

Pattern 2 (No–No): Rahid

Rahid lived with his mother, father and older brother, aged six years and one month. Both parents worked full time running their own computer company

and employed a nanny to care for Rahid and his older brother. Rahid's parents considered writing to be important for their son, his mother describing it as 'expression' and 'a life skill'. Rahid's parents were very involved in his education, and had taught him the names and sounds of the letters of the alphabet. Computers were a key feature of their home life, and both Rahid and his brother had regular access to one. His parents did not concentrate on encouraging him to write at home; his father stated that there was no formal teaching but sometimes his nanny drew dots for him to join up to form letters and words. Both parents expressed the opinion that writing was something that would be explicitly taught once Rahid was at school. They were not aware of writing as an emergent process. Rahid observed his parents writing at home, for example cheques, cards and shopping lists. If he wanted to write at home he knew where to access the necessary materials for this; however, these were to be found in a drawer in a desk in the home office and were not easily accessible, particularly if his parents were working. Rahid could write his own name and that of his brother on the computer. His parents said they could not describe their son as a writer because for them writing is something that you must be able to read in the conventional sense. They clearly felt that writing was a skill that needed to be taught and described the input their six-year-old son was receiving at school. He was perceived to be learning to write because he was receiving formal instruction. These perceptions were reflected in Rahid's responses during the Baby Bear activity. He could for example reproduce several letters of the alphabet conventionally. He knew that there were many letters in the alphabet ('there are all sorts of letters') and whilst he recognised most of them he did not feel able to write them all down. He referred to letters as hard or easy. If he felt they were easy, he would attempt to write them:

Rahid: 'e', 'e', 'e' is easy! First you do that.

Researcher: Yes.

Rahid: So I'm looking at 'e'. (*Finishes the letter off*) This is a 'e'!

Researcher: Fantastic!

Rahid: Looks a little bit ... looks like ...

Researcher: Have you got another one?

Rahid: I'm going to do one more.

Researcher: You're going to do one more are you?

Rahid: Yeah.

Researcher: OK.

Rahid: Not that one there, that's too hard. 'ks' – that looks like a 'ks' (*referring to 'x' on abacus*). First you do one – 'ks'!

Researcher: Well done!

Rahid: 'ks'.

Researcher: Well done!

Rahid: Because that's easy. That's easy.

Pattern 3 (No–Yes): Simon

Simon lived with his mother, father and younger brother aged 13 months. Both parents considered learning to write to be important for their son; the reason given was that he would be able to express himself. At the time of the interview he was

beginning to show an interest in letters, which he referred to as numbers; he would ask, 'What does that number say, mummy?' whilst pointing to a letter. He was consistent in his use of this concept in the nursery, describing letters as numbers during the Baby Bear interview. Simon regularly observed his mother writing shopping lists at home and would write his own list on his own piece of paper alongside her. Simon liked to use blue biro pens to write with at home and had always shown an interest in them when he saw his parents using one. He knew where to access the necessary tools for writing at home. He had a drawing table with pencils, crayons and paper, but also referred to the breakfast bar in the kitchen at home as the office. It had a telephone, pad and pen and one stool and was where his parents observed him writing on his own. He wrote lists telling them he was in 'my office'. He copied writing behaviour modelled by his father who sometimes worked from there and Simon clearly associated the breakfast bar with writing. He mainly wrote lists at home; his parents said they did not see him writing anything else. His parents commented that when he wrote he held the pen very carefully and made very deliberate marks on the paper. He was interested in signs when out with his parents and recognised 'S' for Simon and 'R', the initial letter sound in his younger brother's name.

Despite Simon's writing behaviours at home, his parents did not perceive him to be a writer because he could not write conventionally; his mother said, 'He just makes marks'. They felt that there was no message in anything he wrote. He would often say for example, 'Here's a letter' (that he had written) but his parents felt that the focus seemed to be more on delivering it than on what the contents might say. At the same time, they did not discourage him from writing at home and supported his mark making, going along with his explanations of what he was 'writing'.

The different patterns of overall perceptions illuminated links between parental perceptions, home ethos for writing, children's perceptions and their writing. Curiously, for five of the six children, negative overall parental perceptions did not mean that the children had overall negative perceptions. However, the data showed important links between overall parental perception and the ethos for writing they created in the home. In particular positive parental perception seemed to be linked with more emphasis on the meaning of the children's writing. Negative parental perception seemed to be linked with lack of attention to meaning, including the belief that the writing did not have any meaning.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings reported in this small-scale study provide evidence to suggest that young children have clear perceptions of themselves as writers. Even though the children's writing could not be described as conventional (except in the case of one child) the marks they made on the paper were meaningful to them. Most of the children were active participants in the construction of their knowledge about writing, choosing what they wanted to represent and finding the best possible means to do it, in the light of their current literacy knowledge and understanding, in line with emergent literacy theory.

Three patterns of parents' and children's perceptions of writing were identified. There were important links between parents' perceptions of writing and the ethos for writing they created in the home. Overall positive perceptions were linked with more attention to the meaning of the children's writing. Negative perceptions were

linked with the opposite. It is likely that positive parental perceptions about writing could lead to better outcomes for children but this is an area requiring further research.

Despite the small-scale nature of the study and its inherent limitations, particularly in relation to generalisability (Denscombe 2007, 131), some useful suggestions for practice can be made. The findings do show that whilst literacy experiences were occurring at home for all the children, those experiences differed according to parental perceptions of writing. One of the implications arising from this study is that it might be useful if early years educators could identify parents' perceptions of writing. This is an important line of research to pursue as studies have shown that parents' own positive literacy habits in relation to reading, for example, have been related to positive reading outcomes for children (Sonnenschein, Brody and Munsterman 1996). If parents consider emergent writing as 'not writing' then it is likely to benefit children if parents are informed about alternative perceptions. By identifying one of the three patterns identified in this study for each child and their parent(s)/carer(s) educators would be better equipped to support the development of young children's writing.

One possible course of action would be to work towards positive perceptions for both parents and their child as this is likely to lead to a greater focus on meaning, which has been shown to be an important aspect of early writing development. This could be done for example by sharing writing samples from a child's portfolio during a parent consultation and explaining the emergent writing process whilst referring to features of the child's writing; or inviting parents to a session on early literacy development. Weigel, Martin and Bennett (2006, 192) argue that a better understanding of parents' beliefs is particularly important because of the presumption that exposing children to a home environment rich in literacy opportunities is beneficial to young children's literacy and language development. Therefore there is still a need to ensure that parents and early years settings are more closely aligned in their approach to children's writing development; the potential for the early years setting and the home as combined contexts to impact on a child's perception of him/herself as a writer is significant. Identification of patterns of similarity and difference between perceptions of writing in the home and at a setting may be a useful tool for educators and parents, benefiting the development of children's writing.

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