

From drawing to writing: What happens when you shift teaching priorities in the first six months of school?

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Abstract

Most young children love to draw and they all need to learn to write. However, despite the research over the past 30 years which identifies a strong relationship between emergent writing and drawing, in some classrooms young children are being obliged to see drawing and writing separately rather than as a unified system of meaning making. In this article I highlight one outcome of the fourth phase of an ongoing research project which focuses on writing in the first year of formal schooling. In 2009 I challenged 10 teachers working with children in the first year of school to make drawing central to their writing program, particularly during the first half of the year. I wanted to examine the relationship between children's drawing and learning to write in the first six months of formal schooling in an era where visual literacy and linguistic literacy combine. This required a shift in teachers' priorities. The result of the research is unambiguous: if teachers encourage emergent writers to see drawing and writing as a unified system for making meaning children create texts which are more complex than those they can create with words alone. The findings, if not new, are significant for two reasons. Firstly, in an era where visual literacy is central to new literacies it does not make sense to ignore the research which identifies the important relationship between drawing and emergent writing. Secondly, the findings remind us of the power of building on from the known to the new; *meaning making* through talking and drawing are the known, and writing as script is the new. The approach discussed also leads children to develop a positive attitude towards themselves as writers.

Keywords: emergent literacy, drawing, writing instruction, learner engagement

Introduction

School is an important environment for learning but it is not the only context for children's learning. The more school literacies mirror *real life* or *new* literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and are introduced as a natural extension of what a child has learned within their home and preschool community the more likely a child will be motivated to master school literacies, of which learning to write is one part. In this article I will discuss the outcome of shifting teachers' priorities so that writing is introduced by building on what children already 'know and can do' (draw and talk) when they start school. A child's *drawing* (and talking) can provide a powerful connection between home and school and offer both motivation and scaffolding for early writing. In 2000 Brice Heath argued that future curriculum should "integrate visual, verbal and other representational modes as schools move closer in goals and process to non-school learning communities and organisations" (Brice Heath, 2000, p. 121).

The project informing this article is part of an ongoing study which began in 2007 and aims to investigate writing instruction and learning in the first year of school. The specific project discussed here aimed to investigate what would happen if teachers working with children in the first year of

school made drawing central to their writing program during the first half of the year. I begin the article with a brief review of relevant literature about emergent writing and the impact of teachers' priorities and then follow with an overview of the project. A discussion of the findings and a brief conclusion complete the article. I argue that if teachers encourage emergent writers to see drawing and writing as a unified system for making meaning children create texts which are more complex than those they can create with words alone and are more in tune with contemporary understanding of literacies in an era where visual literacy and linguistic literacy combine (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to create new literacies. This approach also leads children to develop a positive attitude towards themselves as writers.

Learning to write

Writing is a complex interaction of cognitive and physical factors involving the hand, eye, and both sides of the brain (Bromley, 2007). Learning to write is often represented as a linear progression, from scribbles and mock writing to inventing spellings that map sounds onto written letters leading eventually to readable and increasingly complex text (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). However, writing actually develops at many levels simultaneously (Tolchinsky, 2006) as children develop a "symbolic repertoire" of which print is only one element (Genishi and Dyson, 2009, p. 83). While children's experience with print prior to school will be varied, most children come to school with the ability to talk, play, tell stories and draw (Genishi & Dyson, 2009) and in some cases have extensive experience in multimodal text interpretation (Anning, 2002).

The drawing and writing relationship

Drawing and writing involve some of the same psychomotor skills; depend on similar cognitive abilities; are both expressive arts; are both developmental; and are both purposeful (Jalongo, 2007). Research from the 1980s and 1990s reports a strong relationship between emergent writing and drawing (Caldwell & Moore, 1991; Calkins, 1986; DuCharme, 1991; Dyson, 1988, 1990; Norris, Mokhtari, & Carla, 1998; Oken-Wright, 1998). More recent research has come to similar conclusions (Dyson, 2001; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Jalongo, 2007; Mayer, 2007; Ring, 2006; Shagoury, 2009).

While "writing units (e.g., letters) are culturally determined, commonly acknowledged, constrained in number, and constitute a closed system" drawing units are "cognitively determined, debatable in nature, age and task dependent, and unfixed" (Levin & Bus, 2003, p. 891). However, "the act of composing - the deliberate manipulation of meaning - occurs first in more directly representative media, among them gesture, play and drawing" (Dyson (2001), p. 129). For many children drawing is both child's play (Norris, et al., 1998) and a substantive mental activity (Sheridan, 2002); a socially meaningful activity and a constructive process of thinking in action (Cox, 2005) which allows access to real and imaginary worlds (DuCharme, 1991). Drawing is "spontaneous, aesthetic, expressional, and graphic" (Neu & Berglund, 1991) and holds the potential for rich expression and complex learning (Oken-Wright, 1998). Drawing also provides relief and stability which supports the new challenges of writing (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Neu & Berglund, 1991). When children are beginning to write on their own and must "laboriously invent the spellings for many words, their pictures often need to carry a large part of the story; otherwise their energy runs out before the tale is told" (Grinnell & Burris, 1983, p. 28).

Shifting teachers' priorities

"What teachers do matters" (Hattie, 2009, p. 22). Teachers don't just deliver a curriculum, rather they develop, refine, transform, interpret and prioritise (Hargreaves, 1994; Helsby, 1999) with the most effective teachers making decisions based on evidence provided by research (Gambrell, Morrow, &

Pressley, 2007). What teachers prioritise demonstrates to children what they see as important. However, despite the research which supports drawing in its own right and the link between drawing and writing, in the United Kingdom children as young as three attending English nursery and infants schools are experiencing formalised literacy instruction which undervalues drawing (Anning, 2002; Coates & Coates, 2006). Likewise, in the United States of America there has been an institutional and political push for formal literacy instruction and testing that has seen social and symbolic play in preschool and early school classrooms become expendable (Bergen, 2006). This may be a response to the “accountability movement” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 59), a consequence of a “narrow understanding of literacy as reading and writing words” (Ring, 2006, p. 195) or a view of drawing as a time-filler or “activity to encourage realistic representations of objects, people, places or events” (Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009, p. 5). Prioritising *letters and word, print conventions and accuracy* could be making the writing process unnecessarily difficult for some children and ignoring the research which reports strong, reciprocal relationships between drawing and writing particularly during writing acquisition.

The project context and research design

The project focused on the teaching and learning of writing in ten Kindergarten classrooms in New South Wales (NSW), Australia in 2009. Children usually start Kindergarten (the first year of formal schooling) in NSW, between 4 ½ and 5 ½ years of age although they may be a little older. They may or may not have attended pre-school or childcare prior to school. Some children enter school with a background supported by privileged preschool literacy experiences from home and early childhood settings that have prepared them well for school literacy (Hill, 2004) while others do not.

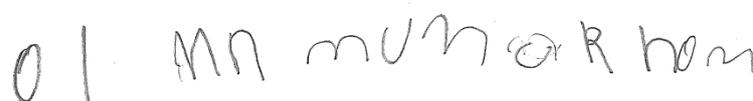
At a meeting held in December 2008 I provided interested teachers with the findings from an earlier stage of the study. Of 337 samples collected in 2007/2008, 273 were accompanied by some form of illustration, although these often appear to be hastily drawn, lacked detail and in some cases did not appear to relate to the writing at all (see for example figures 1-3 below) while others had no drawing.

Figure 1



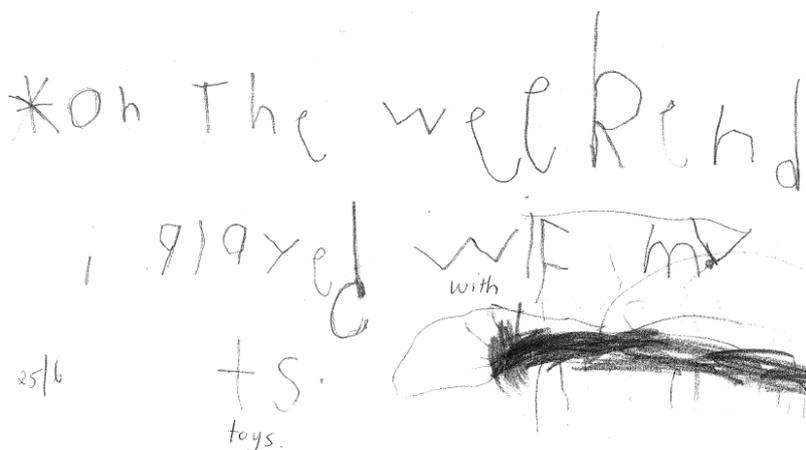
(“I don’t know what I write.”)

Figure 2



(My mum is at home)

Figure 3



(On the weekend I played with my toys.)

Informal discussions with the teachers at this meeting supported my previous findings in regard to the neglected place of drawing in the kindergarten literacy program. Teachers claimed that they had no time for children to draw as they were expected to reach a certain level of proficiency by the end of kindergarten and they felt this required a formal approach to writing instruction which focused on *letters, words and conventions of print* and did not include time for drawing. Teachers discussed how drawing was not a priority rather it was something that the quick writers did when they had finished their writing. The teachers all agreed that slower writers were often not given time for drawing.

Ten of the teachers who attended the meeting agreed to work collaboratively with the researcher to examine what would happen if drawing was given priority in their writing program in the first six months of the 2009 school year. These teachers entered the research project voluntarily although a number were initially quite wedded to the programs they had offered students in previous years which had not prioritised drawing.

Children (N=60) were randomly selected from 6 different public schools and 10 Kindergarten classrooms. Five of the schools were situated in a regional city with 100 000 people and one school was from a small village 30km outside the regional centre. Twelve of the 60 children were attending schools that had a Priority Schools classification to reflect the low Socioeconomic Status (SES) of the families at the school. The children ranged in age from 4.07 to 6.02 years in the first week of school. Twenty six (43%) were girls and 34 (56.67%) were boys. All children spoke English as their first language. Parent permission and the children's agreement for participation were provided.

The ten teachers agreed to:

1. support the researcher with organisation of pre and post testing and student interviews;
2. gather samples of writing from their focus children regularly throughout terms one and two (one independent sample in weeks 5 and 9 (term 1) and 5 and 9 (term 2));
3. examine writing in their own classrooms (#see below for process);

4. encourage students to draw and talk about their drawings before writing (##see below for process);
5. meet as a focus group on four occasions between February and July 2009, and again in December, to participate in discussions, reflections, writing sample analysis and to share classroom writing experiences and practices; and
6. be interviewed at the end of July.

The teachers were all female; ranged in teaching experience from 1 year to 32 years (average 17.2 years); and ranged in kindergarten teaching experience from 1 year to 10 years (average 5.9 years). One teacher had a Master's degree, six had Bachelor's degrees and three had a Diploma of Teaching. Two of the teachers had Early Childhood qualifications and six of the remaining eight were teachers with experience teaching in a literacy early intervention program (Reading Recovery).

The project was designed with a belief that learners construct meaning through relevant and authentic learning activities and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to act as a catalyst who facilitates the learning of their students through activities which allow each student to construct meaning in a given event (Reaburn, Muldoon, & Bookallil, 2009). In this instance there were two layers to this process: I was acting as a facilitator and provocateur creating an opportunity for the teachers to make their own discoveries about how children's drawings might support early writing while the teachers in turn provided authentic opportunities for their children to use their drawings as a valued meaning making system and a bridge to learning how to write. The group of teachers formed a *case study* although each teacher had their own *action research project* within their classroom as they made their own decisions about the directions they should take to facilitate student learning. The teachers were asked to prioritise drawing within their existing writing programs. Each teacher received funds to employ a substitute teacher for five days over the duration of the project. All teachers continued to follow the K-6 English Syllabus (Board of Studies, 2007) and to follow the guidelines provided by "A continuum of critical aspects of early literacy development" (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

#Teachers examining writing in their own classrooms

Teachers participating in the study were each given six half days in their classroom with the assistance of an extra teacher to allow time for close observation of identified students as they were writing and for reflection on the process. Teachers were encouraged to note what children did when invited to write and draw. They noted: the order of activity (draw or write or both); collaborations between children; topics for writing/drawing; conversations which took place as children worked; resources used by children (for example, texts, other children or displays); time spent on tasks; strategies for spelling (for example, copying words or using invented spelling strategies); pencil grip; letter formation; body language; behaviour and attitude. They also examined the final products for: *overall meaning, use of space (layout), relationship between any drawing and text, syntax, length of text, vocabulary (balance of tier 1 and tier 2 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)), spelling development (Gentry, 2000), punctuation use, and letter formation/legibility and the relationship between drawing and writing (if both present)*. On two occasions (week 7 term 1, week 5 term 2) teachers recorded their interactions with small groups or individuals during writing time using a small audio recorder. These recordings were transcribed by a confidential transcription service and returned to teachers for reflection. Teachers were asked to identify interactions that they felt had led to an increase in student knowledge, skill or confidence in writing. Transcriptions were not shared with the group although they were returned to me with teacher comments.

Teachers encouraging students to draw and talk about their drawings before writing

It was explained to children at the start of the year that during writing time they could draw a picture and write about their picture, or write a story first and then draw a picture. To scaffold the process at the start of the year teachers modelled drawing and talking about their own drawings before choosing something to write which built on from the drawing and discussion. The teachers talked about how the drawings helped them decide what to write about and to remember their ideas. They also discussed how talking while you write can help you with your thinking.

During independent writing/drawing time the teachers engaged children in conversations, using the drawings as a focus. While some children were quieter than others, teachers found that children seemed comfortable talking about their drawings and would speak quite openly during this process. The key considerations were: to have children understand that there were different ways of making meaning (talking, drawing and writing) and all were valued; for the teachers to get to know their children and their interests; to discover children’s knowledge and competencies in writing in a relaxed way.

Data collection

Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In this article the data collected through teacher observations and reflections, teacher interviews, student interviews, and writing samples are considered. The findings from the testing data will be reported in a future article which will focus specifically on the quantitative data.

Table 1: Student data collection processes

Timeline	Data collected	Collected by
Term 1 weeks 1-2	The <i>Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III)</i> (Dunn & Dunn, 1997).	Researcher
Term 1 weeks 1-2	The <i>Record of Oral Language</i> (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton & Salmon, 1983).	Researcher
Term 1 weeks 1-2	<i>Who Am I? Developmental test</i> (de Lemos & Doig, 1999). Includes a writing sample and drawing of self.	Researcher
Term 1 week 5	Independent writing sample	Teacher
Term 1 week 9	Independent writing sample	Teacher
Term 2 week 5	Independent writing sample	Teacher
Term 2 week 9	Structured writing sample	Teacher
Term 2 week 10	<i>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (H & R S in W)</i> (Clay, 2002)	Researcher
Term 2 week 10	<i>Writing Vocabulary (WV) task</i> (Clay, 2002).	Researcher
Term 4 week 8	Structured writing sample	Teacher
Term 4 weeks 8- 9	<i>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (H & R S in W)</i> (Clay, 2002) (alternate form)	Researcher
Term 4 weeks 8- 9	<i>Writing Vocabulary (WV) task</i> (Clay, 2002).	Researcher

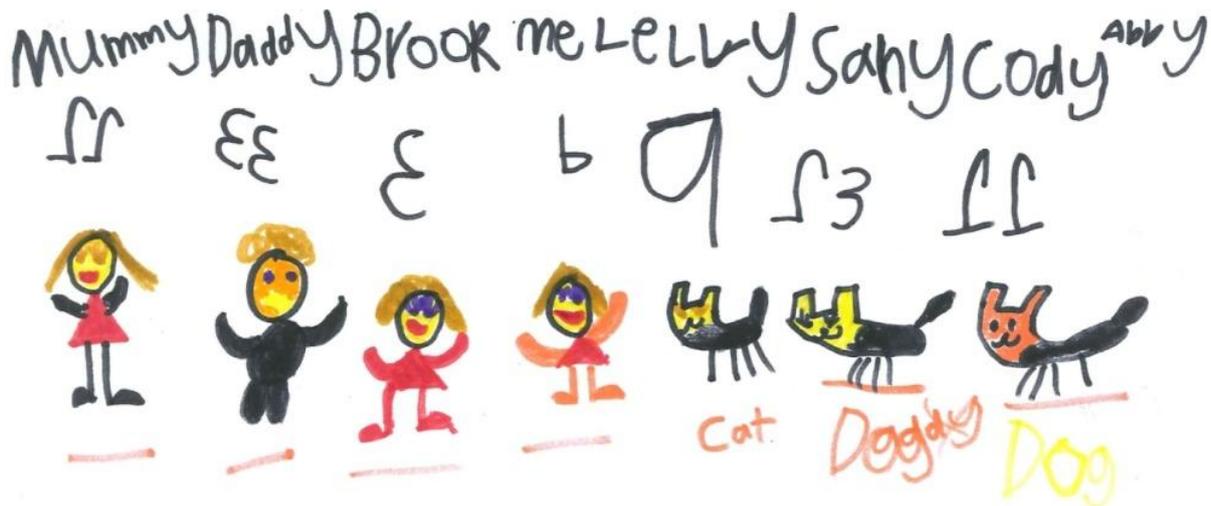
Writing samples

Student writing/drawing samples were collected from the focus students in the first two weeks of the year, weeks 5 and 9 of term 1 and week 5 of term 2 and *structured samples* were collected in the final weeks of term two and four (see figures 4 and 5 below for examples). Directions for the structured sample collected in week 9 of term 2 were provided as follows:

Today I want you to do some drawing and writing about the people who live in your house. You can draw first or write first, it doesn't matter, but I want you to draw and write. If you are not sure how to write a word just have a go and do your best. Start now and remember you are drawing and writing about the people who live in your house.

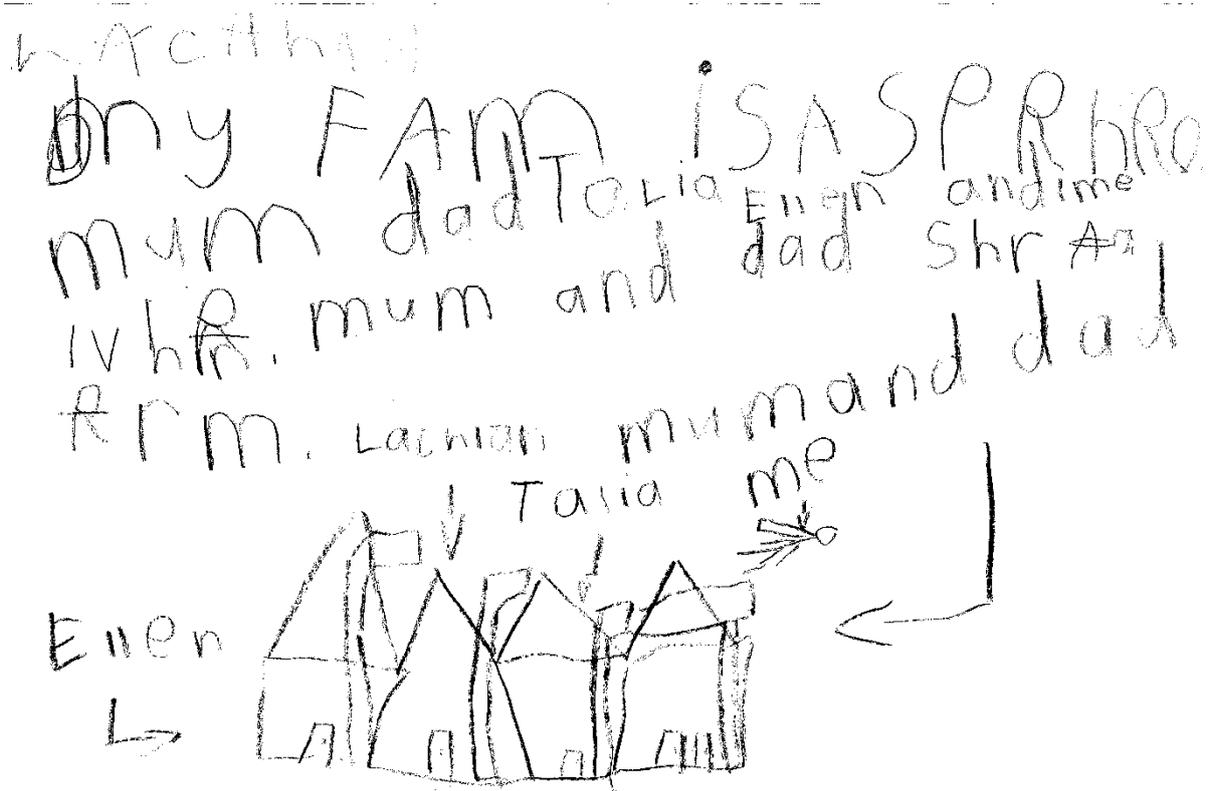
No teacher support was provided. Children worked together in a group setting and could access help from the room (e.g. the word wall) if they wished. If children helped each other spontaneously that was allowed. Teachers took on an observation role, taking detailed notes as they observed. This allowed them to notice whether children drew or wrote first or moved back and forth from one to the other. They also listened to the children's talk and observed the processes applied by them. When I visited the schools to conduct the end of term two post-testing I used the samples as discussion starters when I interviewed each of the focus children. Two hundred and forty independent writing/drawing samples (4 per child) and 120 structured samples (2 per child) were provided in total. Testing data were collected in addition to the writing samples and interviews. Samples were shared at teacher focus group discussions.

Figure 4



("This is who lives at my house." The lines under the figures represent the word *person* that Abby said she did not know how to write. She was able to label her pets as cat or dog. The numbers represent each family members age)

Figure 5



(My family is a super hero. Mum, dad, Tahlia, Ellen and me live here. Mum and dad share a room. In conversation 'L' explained that the other names are labels showing where the family members sleep. 'L' is flying across the sky. The drawing shows the special chimney chutes that the Super Hero family members use when they wish to fly.)

Focus group discussions

The teachers participated in focus group discussions on four occasions throughout the first two terms (Term 1, weeks 5 and 10; Term 2 weeks 3 and 8). A follow up focus group discussion took place at the end of the school year. The group met each time for 3 hours and engaged in sharing, discussion, writing sample analysis and reflections. These discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Reflections were conducted as a group but also as individuals. Reflections were directed by the researcher. For example in Term 1, week 5, teachers were asked to reflect on *what writing instruction felt like, sounded like and looked like, in their classrooms from the point of view of the children and themselves at that point in time*. Teachers could draw, write in prose or bullet points or draw a flow chart.

Interviews with teachers

Interviews were conducted with each of the ten teachers at the end of term two and again at the end of the year. Interviews took approximately 30 minutes per teacher. These were recorded, transcribed and returned to the teachers for comment prior to analysis. Questions were open ended, and designed to have teachers reflect on how writing is taught and learnt in their classroom and the experience of being part of the research focus group (e.g. *What do you believe are the key factors for literacy teaching in Kindergarten? Where does writing fit? What about children's drawings? What have been*

the most successful elements of your writing program in terms 1 and 2 this year? What advice would you give to other kindergarten teachers in regard to teaching writing?).

Interviews with children

Brief interviews were conducted with each of the children at the time of post-testing in July. Children were asked to talk about their structured writing/drawing task (*You did this fabulous work in class the other day – can you tell me about it?*) and they were asked the following questions: *Do you like to draw? Do you like to write? Do you like to draw and write at home? What sorts of things do you have to draw and write with? What sorts of things do you like to draw? What sorts of things do you like to write about? Does anyone help you? Which do you like to do best – drawing or writing? Why?* The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

A content analysis approach (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; O'Leary, 2004) was applied to the qualitative data in order to interpret meaning in speech and text (focus group discussions, reflections and interviews). Themes, patterns and recurring issues were identified from within the data. Interviews were returned to teachers for comment and clarification once they had been transcribed. Themes and issues were fed back into the later teacher focus group discussions.

Teachers were involved in informal analysis of the student samples during focus group discussions while a more formal analysis was conducted by the researcher and a research assistant. The informal analysis was conducted by teachers in pairs as they used their professional judgements to discuss writing samples in terms of *overall meaning, use of space (layout), relationship between any drawing and text, syntax, length of text, vocabulary (balance of tier 1 and tier 2 words (Beck, et al., 2002)), spelling development (Gentry, 2000), punctuation use, and letter formation/legibility*. The researcher analysed the samples with the assistance of a research assistant using the seven dimensions (*meaning, genre, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and handwriting*) described by Fox (2000). The writing samples provided evidence of the impact of prioritising the drawing on student learning while the focus groups, reflections and interviews provided evidence of changing teaching attitudes and student engagement in class.

What impact did prioritising drawing have on the teachers and their students?

According to the teachers, 'writing' time was a popular segment of the day. Teachers reported positive interaction and conversation between children leading to collaboration and peer support. Several teachers said that this was different to previous years.

... in other years sometimes children said 'I don't know what to write' - but with starting with the drawings they always have something to write about, they always have something to say and they are probably talking more, they're talking about their drawings.

Teachers talked about how children were motivated to *draw and write* when they had free time. They described their children as *risk takers* who were *flexible* in their approach to writing and not dependent on the teacher to provide a topic or story stem as children had been in previous years.

... they want to go and draw and write ... we have free play once a week in the afternoons many of the children go and do free writing in free play, and that's where I'm like, you've got to be joking ... So – writing and drawing – they love it. They love writing because they love drawing

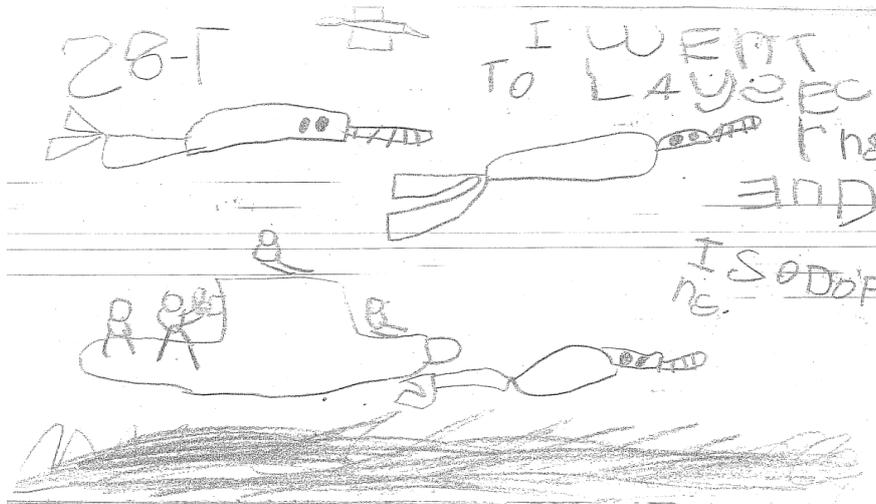
Positive impact on student behaviour was also discussed by a number of teachers who felt that the emphasis on drawing had made writing accessible to all children and therefore all were engaged in the task. Other teachers discussed the detail in children's drawings and how some children seemed to

have increased concentration and improved fine motor skills as a result of the increased emphasis on the quality of their drawings.

their enjoyment of writing is actually just amazing – and behaviour in the classroom is so positive . . . they want (speaker's emphasis) to draw and write . . .

Some of the teachers discussed how they modelled drawing in much the same way that they would model writing, demonstrated how to 'edit' and return to previous drawings to add details, how to prepare drawings for publication and conducted artist's circles where children shared and talked about their drawings. Writing became a natural addition to the drawings (see figures 6 and 7 below which show how complex messages may become when drawing and writing work side by side).

Figure 6



(I went to Lakes Entrance, I saw dolphins.)

Figure 7



(I go to the shops with my mum and Jessie. Mum got trousers. The labels were written by the teacher at the child's request)

Teachers discussed how children were highly motivated by this approach and some suggested that their children had made more rapid progress with writing than children in previous years.

Last year was lots of cut up sentences, sentence starters you know . . . but I think what we're doing now sort of has happened a lot faster than it did last year . . . some of them really want to write lots and lots, keep writing . . . last year that didn't seem to happen, only a very few at the very end of the year did that. There were more risk takers this year.

Six of the teachers mentioned that they were able to get around the children to assist them more easily because of children's engagement with the drawings. There were no children staring at blank pages while they waited for the teacher. This allowed for effective small group and individual instruction at the point of need.

Writing time just seemed so much less stressful than last year. I could get to all the kids and had more time to talk to them and to teach because they all seemed to be so engaged.

In the interviews held in June all ten teachers discussed the positive impact that the emphasis on drawing had made on their student's attitude towards and development in writing.

It's ridiculous how simple a concept it is and yet I'd never done it before . . . it was always the picture afterwards . . . it not only allows the kids that are scared of a blank page not to have that blank page - it works for the kids that need cueing into what they need to write about . . . and if they forget? . . . oh what was the picture about again? . . . Oh that's right . . . that's what I'm writing about.

Teachers seemed surprised by the impact that the shift in priorities had made on children's attitude to writing and their engagement in the process. While initially some were nervous that any move away from the structured approach they had applied in previous years would impact on children's standards of achievement in conventions of print they were pleasantly surprised to see that this was not the case.

I've learned that writing's more fun. Well I have. I used to be scared of teaching writing, because even though I had the Reading Recovery experience, I was just never really sure how they actually got it, you know. But now I can see, with the drawing and the focus on drawing, and just the writing emerging from it, I can see how they build and how they learn— and so, I'm enjoying it more, and I think the kids – there's no moans and groans when it's time for writing, they say oh great, give me the book, you know, like let's get stuck into it. And they are doing so well with learning their spelling strategies and conventions of print.

By the end of the year most children were usually choosing to write first and their drawings had moved to a less central, more illustrative role. While children were actively encouraged to draw first at the start of the year teachers allowed children to make the shift to writing first in their own time. At the start of the year, 41 of the 60 students said they did not know how to write anything other than their name; one provided a linear scribble; two provided non-linear scribbles; nine provided random strings of letters; two provided symbols that were not letters and five drew pictures. Eighteen of the children had problems writing their name at this point. At the mid-year testing, 59/60 of the students were administered the *Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words* Task and *Writing Vocabulary* tasks as described by Clay (2002) in *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. These tasks were repeated in December and stanines used as a way to show growth in children's ability to hear

and record sounds in words and their developing writing vocabulary (see Table 2 below). Stanines are normalised standard scores which redistribute raw scores according to a normal curve in nine groups from one (a low score) to nine (a high score) (Clay, 2002) taking children's age into account. By June, all 59 students provided a drawing/writing sample which included both graphics and text.

Table 2 Mid-year and end of year data collection

Timeline	Data collected	Below chronological age	At chronological age	Above chronological age
Term 1 weeks 1-2	The <i>Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test</i> (PPVT-III) (Dunn & Dunn, 1997).	21 (35%)	2 (3.3%)	35 (58.3%)
Timeline	Data collected	Below average	Average	Above Average
Term 1 weeks 1-2	<i>Who Am I? Developmental test</i> (de Lemos & Doig, 1999). Includes a writing sample and drawing of self.	31 (51.6%)	22 (38.3%)	7 (11.6%)
Timeline	Data collected	Stanines 1-3	Stanines 4-6	Stanines 7-9
Term 2 week 10*	<i>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (H & R S in W)</i> (Clay, 2002)	19/59 (31.6%)	31/59 (52.5%)	9/59 (15%)
Term 2 week 10*	<i>Writing Vocabulary (WV) task</i> (Clay, 2002).	26/59 (45%)	30/59 (50%)	3/59 (5%)
Term 4 weeks 8- 9**	<i>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (H & R S in W)</i> (Clay, 2002) (alternate form)	10/57 (17.5%)	26/57 (46%)	21/57 (37%)
Term 4 weeks 8- 9**	<i>Writing Vocabulary (WV) task</i> (Clay, 2002).	20/57 (35%)	25/57 (44%)	12/57 (21%)

*1 child unavailable for mid-year testing; **3 (5%) children unavailable for follow-up testing

In regard to *Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words*, 13 (23%) of the children remained in the same stanine bracket from June to December, 14(25%) improved stanines by one level, 26 (46%) improved stanines by 2 or more levels and 4 (7%) showed a drop of one level. When it came to the development of a writing vocabulary 19 (33%) stayed at the same stanine level from June to December, 14 (25%) improved stanines by one level, 20 (35%) improved by two or more stanines and 4 (7%) showed a drop of one level. It is beyond the scope of the study to claim that progress is due to the approach applied in the study. The results are shared to show growth and for the reader to interpret in relation to their own experience of early writing development.

What did the students say about drawing and writing?

At the start of the year 41/60 students did not respond or said “I can’t” to a prompt to write although all happily responded to a prompt to draw. When invited to discuss drawing and writing in June they were all enthusiastic about the samples they had produced in class before I arrived. When invited to tell me which they preferred, drawing or writing, 36 of the children said they preferred drawing, 17 preferred to write and four children said they loved to do both. Reasons for responses were generally related to the children seeing themselves as good at drawing or good at writing although some responses were more specific as can be seen by the responses below. The first responses are from children who, at the time of the interview, preferred to write. They were responding to the question: Why do you like writing best?

- Child 1 *Because I can mostly write all on my own . . . without making mistakes.*
Child 2 *I like doing the writing the best because then I know how to learn new words.*
Child 3 *Writing’s best because my dad teaches me. He teaches me how to write words.*

The following responses are from children who, at the time of the interview, preferred to draw. They were responding to the question: Why do you like drawing best?

- Child 4 *Because you can do monsters and planes, even the whole world and some grass and a pond and some ducklings and some ...*
Child 5 *Because you can draw anything . . . drawing is the bestest [sic] thing.*
Child 6 *Because it makes people happy.*
Child 7 *Because I am good at drawing. My Mum thinks I’m an artist. She puts my pictures on the fridge.*

Fifty-one of the sixty children interviewed had access to drawing and writing materials at home and fourteen indicated that drawing and/or writing were encouraged by someone at home (See Child 3 and Child 7 above). Interestingly, some of the children who said they preferred drawing were well underway with the conventions of print and had developed some spelling strategies (for example, phonetic spelling, known words) they could use to write simple messages while some who suggested they preferred writing were in the very early stages of engagement with writing. Their attitude towards writing did not always match with their level of control of the conventions of print (directionality, letter formation, spelling, use of space). This suggests that the need to be accurate was not seen by the children as a necessary requirement of being a successful message maker and fits with the teachers’ comments about how encouraging children to draw had positively supported children’s risk taking with writing.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm earlier research which reports a strong relationship between emergent writing and drawing and the notion that the most effective school learning environment will be one which allows children to build on what they already *know and can do*. In many of the samples analysed the children’s drawings showed form and content which was as powerful as composing and writing and where the drawings and writing were combined the complexity of text was vastly increased. For the novice writers in this study, drawing appeared to provide an external representation of ideas which supported their early attempts to write. The change in teachers’ priorities led to outcomes which related not just to skill development but in student attitude towards writing and behaviour during writing lessons. While the most effective teachers are understood to make decisions based upon research (Gambrell, et al., 2007) it

would seem that in some contemporary schools research has been replaced by accountability measures and the pressure to turn out children who can produce letters, words, print conventions and accuracy rather than meaning makers. When research was reintroduced to the teachers and they were given the opportunity to make some changes to their programs they were quick to see the positive outcomes for children. In some instances the research which linked drawing and writing was something teachers had been aware of but moved away from for a range of reasons and in other cases teachers had been previously unaware of the research. This suggests a need for providing quality research to practicing teachers in a way that is accessible to them.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that the size of the sample (teachers: n=10 and children: n=60) means that the findings can only offer insights into the teaching of writing in the first six months of school and cannot be generalised. Classroom programs varied with the one common element being the emphasis on drawing as part of the writing program. However, the findings confirm that drawing is an important personal means of expression which “when used with confidence, ease and enjoyment, allows for a confident and prolific flow of ideas” (Caldwell & Moore, 1991, p. 209) and that what the teacher prioritises does make a difference to student learning opportunities. If teachers encourage and value drawing they can build a bridge between children’s prior-to-school experiences, a current system of meaning making and the new system of writing. In this way writing becomes a parallel means of meaning making rather than a replacement for the drawing and talking they already do so well when they arrive at school. Contemporary students deserve and respond to an approach to teaching which values contemporary literacies and students’ existing ways of knowing. Teacher priorities and expectations do make a difference and they can be changed.

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