Exploring the early writing experiences of young children within the home through autoethnographic reflections

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The third decade of the 21st century has seen a focus emerge on the agentic practices of writers, focusing on what, how and why people write. While considerable research has been conducted on school-age writing practices, there is still limited insight into the writing practices of children outside of school or formal education settings. This article adopts a collaborative autoethnographic lens to explore a mother's perception of her children's writing practices and their identity formations as developing writers, in discussion with her doctoral supervisors. The article specifically explores the parental, sibling and environmental supports that are made available to four siblings within the home to support early writing, and how their understandings toward writing are developed and practised. Consideration is given to the relationship between informal home writing practices and implications or opportunities for school and early childhood writing practices.

Introduction

Writing has been used as a fundamental mode of communication for centuries, enabling people to communicate with one another and with ourselves (Dyson, 2020b; Olson, 2009). Writing is both relational and culturally bound (Compton-Lilly, 2014; Kress, 2000), with young children actively exploring written language through their social and cultural worlds (Peterson & Friedrich, 2022). This places emphasis on both the physical environment and also the human relationships and interactions within it, to foster the symbolic resources and cognitive capacity associated with early literacy learning (Dyson, 1999; Compton Lilly, 2014).

The research that encompasses early literacy in the preschool years emphasises the value of early writing during this time, both as children become active meaning makers communicating thoughts and messages and as a precursor for later literacy success in school and beyond (Flewitt & Clark, 2020), along with the real-world consequences of unequal literacy achievements of children (Campbell et al., 2018). There is also ample evidence of the growing prominence of writing and the need to develop high-level writing skills as children and adults interact with others across multiple communication platforms (Zhao & Flewitt, 2020) and participate in new work economies (Brandt, 2015); as Kress (2000) pointed out, 'the world of communication is not standing still' (p. 16). Given the importance of early literacy learning and evolving communication environments there is still much to learn about the development of early writing in preschool aged children, particularly in the home, warranting further exploration in this key area of children's literacy learning.

Exploring the literature

Early writing experiences in the home

From a young age, children start to become aware of intentional mark making by others as meaningful, thus prompting the child to make their own marks on paper (Clay, 2001). Often considered by others as scribble, these initial attempts at writing are typically self-initiated, motivated by a sense of belonging and active participation within a literate community and culture (Dyson, 2020a). As such, learning to write evolves over time and is situated within a set of social and contextual relationships related to the home, school and peers (Compton-Lilly, 2014). We understand the processes of learning within the home reflect the wide variation in children's language, both linguistic and cultural, as well as the diversity and multiplicity of languages and literacies available as resources for meaning making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2002; Wohlwend, 2008).

Presently, research indicates that home writing practices including both parent-led and children's independent writing practices, which are supportive of early writing development (Guo et al., 2021). Typically speaking, parents are often responsible for introducing their children to early writing practices through the home learning opportunities and the resources they provide (Malpique et al., 2023). These parent-led home writing practices include but are not limited to parents explicitly teaching children writing related concepts such as letter formation, concepts about print, phonology and morphology. A study by Puranik et al. (2018) examining the relationship between home reading and writing parties among 282 kindergarten children in the United States found that children's engagement in independent home reading and writing practices improved their later letter writing, spelling, and composition. The results from this study also show a positive association between parents explicitly teaching these writing concepts to their preschool children and children's subsequent letter formation, spelling, and child initiated, independent writing (Puranik et al., 2018).

Drawing, writing and play

As young children talk, draw, write and dramatise their way through different play-based scenarios, they are not only making sense of the world through their familial and community-based experiences, but they are also becoming composers of text, ascribing meaning to their drawing and mark making, while grappling with the many layers of symbolism associated with the production of text (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Dyson, 2020b). We see children as experts when it comes to creating authentic opportunities for text production in their play, and it is during such moments, that children can develop and extend their early conceptions of writing (Peterson & Rajendram, 2019), demonstrating a clear awareness of the interconnectedness between the symbolic nature of oral and written language (Scull, Mackenzie & Bowles, 2020). As Leong and Bodrova (2012) asserted, when adults engage with children in make-believe play, the benefits are maximised, with positive effects on students' developing 'social skills, emerging mathematical ability, mastery of early literacy concepts, and self-regulation' (p. 28).

Multimodality and digital literacies

The rapid growth of digital communication has reshaped our literacy practices in the home, for both parents and children alike, with young 'children's relationships with digital texts and devices increasingly, a matter of global importance' (Scott, 2022, p. 235). Further, the way in which we communicate through writing and the expansive definition of what constitutes 'text' has changed significantly due to rapid changes in technology over recent years (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Children have embraced these new and evolving technologies as a means to communicate (Neumann, 2003) and as Mills (2011) described, 'children are "shifting meanings" across multiple modes in the digital age, well ahead of mastering formal writing skills' (p. 56). Research suggests, that globally, young children from diverse sociocultural and socio-economic backgrounds are regularly accessing and engaging with digital technologies in the home, with many doing so on a daily basis (Fielding & Murcia, 2022). Moreover, children's digital literacy practices within the home, are bound by parental perspectives on accepted digital home literacy practices for young children, and are therefore mediated accordingly (Soyoof et al., 2023).

Notable work by Kress (1997) described children's home writing practices as being 'multimodal' as they often included a number of communicative elements, referred to as sign-systems or modes, such as writing, drawing and oral language. When we consider digital writing practices, then multimodality (the interrelationship between two or more modes (Mills, 2011) becomes increasingly expansive as compared with print-based forms, as they not only require the interpretation or composition of words and images, but also sound, movement and animation. That being said, the digital home literacy practices of young children are under-represented in the research, and this signals the need for further investigation, to provide the data required in order to inform public policy and education reform (Flewitt & Clark, 2020; Ozturk & Ohi, 2022).

Given the importance of the home as a site for learning (Malpique et al., 2023), this study aims to discern some of the events, practices and home contexts that the four siblings are immersed in, which form and shape these young children's perceptions of themselves as writers and their early dispositions towards writing that ultimately lead to their 'habitus as a writer'. It is these moments in time that our study hopes to capture and better understand in terms of their contribution towards children's early writing development and their 'identity' as writers (Compton-Lilly, 2014), as lived and told by the participants themselves.

Given the importance of the home as a site for learning (Malpique et al., 2023), this study aims to discern some of the events, practices and home contexts that four siblings were immersed in, leading to the formation of their perceptions of themselves as writers and their early dispositions towards writing It is these moments in time that our study sought to capture and better understand in terms of their contribution towards children's early writing development and their 'identity' as writers (Compton-Lilly, 2014), as lived and told by the participants themselves.

Autoethnographic methodology insights and method practices

Autoethnography was very deliberately chosen as the methodological framing for this study. Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection, typically referred to as "reflexivity", in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life' (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). As a qualitative approach to research, autoethnography allowed for the 'personal' and the 'cultural' elements of the experiences to be merged to provide a rich, vivid account of the lived complexities of writing in the home. It enabled us to capture the early writing experiences of four young children in the home, as lived and perceived by their mother, someone with experience as an educator and researcher in the early childhood and primary years and to explore the research questions and themes in this unique context. In addition, this methodological framework supported the researcher to collect data consistently over an extended period of time while regularly engaging in ongoing dialogue with her doctoral supervisors. The reflective actions practised within this study allowed for growth in methodological and topic understandings and practices, alongside key epistemological, ethnographic pillars of critical reflection and connection to social and political contests.

Autoethnography has gained widespread following, in part because it addresses what Lapadat called "significant ethical challenges that face many other ethnographic and more broadly qualitative approaches to inquiry" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 22) - the issue of representing, speaking for, or appropriating the voices of others (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnography is reflexive and positions the researcher within the study, in that the author of an autoethnography is both subject and researcher. However, as Ellis (2007) reminded us, as a qualitative approach, autoethnography can be ethically fraught. This is particularly apparent when we consider the distance that results from the subject and the researcher being the same person, and because it can be challenging to translate personal experiences into the sociocultural and political action (Lapadat, 2017).

Recently, Chang et al. (2013) has promoted the value and validity of collaborative autoethnography as a broad term for autoethnographic research conducted by two or more researchers. Chang and colleagues explained the ethical value of collaborative autoethnography, stating that autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines the autobiographic study of self with ethnographic analysis of the sociocultural milieu within which the researchers are situated, and in which the collaborating researchers interact dialogically to analyse and interpret the collection of autobiographic data (Lapadat, 2017). Collaborative autoethnography methodologically lends itself to greater rigor than autoethnography (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Two or more researchers contribute to data generation, analysis, and writing/performing, so collaborative autoethnography is strengthened by the contribution of multidimensional perspectives on the research (Chang et al., 2013). When several researchers work together, the different disciplinary and experiential perspectives they bring to bear can deepen the analytical and interpretive components (Lapadat, 2017). Using a team approach addresses a weakness of autobiographic data that arises from the researcher being too close to the experience to

see it in a holistic or nuanced way, metaphorically the blind spot in the centre of the eye (Holman Jones et al., 2016; Lapadat et al., 2010). In autobiographic accounts, there is a tendency for the narrator to tell a coherent story that presents the self positively (Malorni et al., 2023). A team that has established interpersonal trust, and a process for examining or interrogating personal narratives rather than taking them at face value, has the potential to create a more rigorous, polyvocal analysis (Geist-Martin et al., 2010).

In terms of the study at hand, the research was performed with approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Parental consent was also obtained prior to the children's participation in this research. Artefacts were used to prompt the memories surrounding some of the lived experiences and interpretations of the stories that are shared. Initially, over 150 photos and videos taken by Author O'Grady, combined with original copies of the children's attempts at mark making, drawing and writing, were used to capture the stories that describe their early writing practices over a two-year period. These were complemented by journal entries that were written and reviewed by Author O'Grady to add further depth and another perspective to the stories that were told. After collating, the data were analysed for patterns and themes through a systematic thematic analysis, representing a series of personal stories, while also giving insight to the individual context within which the data were set. Through the analytic process, the data were interpreted, identifying themes present within the individual data, as well as across the dataset, supporting the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Informed by Singh and colleagues (2022), this study drew on personal experiences of Author O'Grady to present the data, and the combined expertise of Author Scull and Author Lyons, in conversation with Author O'Grady, to inform the cultural, political and social underpinnings of the data.

The richness of the texts came about as a consequence of both self and group reflection (Lapadat, 2017; Singh et al., 2022). However, whilst collaborative autoethnography often positions two or more people focused on a phenomenon, we chose to innovate the methodology by layering the data sets. That is, Author O'Grady described a biographical approach, which was followed by Author Scull and Author Lyons engaging in curious excavation of the biographical accounts to explore societal and cultural perspectives of the biographical data. Author Scull's background in researching young children's writing provided an interpretative lens that mapped the experiences of the children to the extant research. Author Lyons' knowledge of early literacy and new literacies theory provided further insights into the contemporary literacy practices of young children learning in home environments.

This less typical use of autoethnography saw a richness in the data emerge, with each researcher identifying often what the other(s) could not see (Singh et al., 2023). This was done in an iterative manner, which is outlined below.

Phase 1: Storytelling of my experiences with my children

This article focuses on the home writing experiences of Author O'Grady's children, Alice (5-6 years), Henry (3-4 years), James and Sarah (twins, 1-2 years). Over an extended period

of time, these siblings were observed by Author O'Grady to examine the influence of both the social and physical environment on how early writing was being practised by these children in the home. From an autoethnographic perspective, Author O'Grady captured and shared her stories of how her children were engaging in writing and her own experiences of this with Author Scull and Author Lyons, her doctoral supervisors. The research team engaged in regular conversations, exploring the perceptions and experiences of Author O'Grady.

Phase 2: Looking back to look forward

As a consequence of storytelling described in Phase 1, we began to focus on how autoethnographic methodologies enable artefacts to inform the story. We described this process as a collaborative reflexive process of shifting back and forth; that is, the artefacts allowed Author O'Grady to reach back into her experiences to share deeper insights, which were woven into narratives of experience (Wall, 2008).

Phase 3: Connecting experiences to political and cultural norms and expectations

As narratives of experiences emerged, Authors Scull and Lyons, in collaboration with Author O'Grady began to systematically analyse the narratives to excavate the political and cultural norms and expectations to engage with professional and academic audiences (Adams et al., 2017).

Presentation of the data

When the data were analysed, four key themes emerged, which evidently assisted in categorising the large data set; *Communal spaces in the home; Private spaces, Exploring the digital;* and *Outdoor drawing and play*. Subsequently, four autoethnographic reflections from Author O'Grady are detailed below, representative of each of these themes which seek to encapsulate the essences of some of the early writing experiences of the participants within the home.

Story 1: Communal spaces in the home, private spaces

> During our children's formative years, our living room coffee table became a central place to engage with early mark making and writing. While our children have always had independent access to writing materials, which they would use in various places and spaces both indoors and out, an assortment of pencils, crayons and art supplies became a permanent fixture on our coffee table, and this is where our children would typically gravitate to when working on either a preschool- or school-related task, or something which they themselves had initiated.
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> Throughout each day, the children would frequently come and go from the coffee table on their own accord, returning to work on something they had

commenced earlier or perhaps to begin something new. That being said, if one child was there, they were often all there! At first the twins observed this daily activity from the comfort of their bouncers as they keenly attended to their older brother and sister, but it wasn't long before they too were seated at the table, fully immersed in what was happening.

Looking back to look forward

Through my observations of our children's social interactions centred around early writing in communal spaces within the home, it became very apparent that a little 'learning collective' had formed, quite naturally. Within this learning collective, the children would avidly explore new skills and concepts in relation to early writing, sharing their thoughts and ideas, materials and concepts as they keenly observed one another, to further develop their own skills and abilities in this area. For example, Alice might ask, 'How do you spell "birthday"?' or 'What letter makes the "c" sound in "can" is it a "k" or a "c"?'. It was in these moments that I would pause to assist Alice with her writing, and we would discuss some of her ideas and questions pertinent to the task at hand. During such times it became very clear that Henry, albeit two years younger and yet to begin his schooling, would carefully listen to the dialogue between Alice and I, scrutinising the subsequent mark making on her page. He would regularly glance over to analyse Alice's pencil grip, to examine the way in which she was forming marks on her page, how she folded her piece of paper to make a card or how she would point to each word as she reread her writing to herself or others, so that he too could imitate some of these early writing skills and behaviours, which he did!

From an early age, our children have been naturally working towards oral language competency and efficiency, simply through their day-to-day interactions in life. However, it is not until much later that children develop the same level of competency with text production. Documenting children's thoughts and ideas through written text has been extremely effective in helping them to communicate the depth and breadth of their thinking, which they may likely be unable to share if constrained by their own writing abilities. I have often transcribed for Henry and Alice, helping to bridge the gap between oral language and printed text and build their authorial skills, while also fostering a positive attitude towards writing. Moreover, I have frequently added annotations to their drawings, supporting their artistic representations to have a corresponding dialogue that has been crafted by the child and recorded by the adult.

Connection: Text co-construction

From a sociocultural perspective, writing is a meaning-making system that is learnt as children co-construct texts with others in their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The successful acquisition of writing is firmly predicated on the mediation or scaffolding that takes place between a child and another child, or teacher or parent and child, and it is in these moments that children begin to explore early concepts and develop the skills pertinent to writing (Malpique et al., 2023). More specifically, it is through these shared

experiences that children begin to develop an awareness of the sources of knowledge available in written language and the strategies used to combine and check information to construct messages in print (Clay, 2001).

The dialogue in these interactions, involving both young children and those guiding the task, 'present rhetorical possibilities and provide feedback to each other on how these possibilities might be interpreted or appreciated by readers' (Peterson & Rajendram, 2019, p. 29). Similarly, as adults write for children, they model the discourse patterns and complexity of written texts, with the challenge of writing often resting in the fact that while the meanings in oral language can be negotiated between conversational partners, written texts must be structured in ways that can be understood without the need for clarification from an absent author (Mackenzie, 2020). By drawing children's attention to specific features of texts, including but not limited to, register and content, vocabulary, spelling, grammatical features, letter formation and concepts about print, they learn to control the linguistic complexity required in writing (Halliday, 2016; Purcell-Gates, 1994).

Story 2: Private spaces

Until recently, our children have typically explored writing in communal places within the home; however, after the recent addition of a small desk in Alice's room, Alice has delighted in having a private, creative space to explore text construction in its various forms. Alice's desk contains a drawer that is filled with an assortment of craft and writing materials, which she would often use to write notes to her friends or to draw and write in her journal. This has evidently become a pastime that she finds both relaxing and rewarding. Alice is very content doing this on her own and it is something that Henry is beginning to participate in also. Although Henry, James and Sarah tend to explore text construction in communal spaces, which is likely due to their age and developmental stage, the availability of resources and the appeal of writing alongside others, Henry will occasionally take a notebook and pencil into his bedroom to draw or write either something creative for himself or with some degree of communicative intent to share with others. It has been interesting to note that while Henry likes to share the majority of the texts that he creates, Alice seems to be more selective with those that she chooses to share, and those that she chooses to put on display in her room and other places around the home. That being said, both Alice and Henry enjoy seeking feedback and affirmation for their early writing attempts. This can at times cause frustration for them when there is a degree of ambiguity around the intended message; for example, when Henry records a series of letters such as 'pfhrekshfyrtn' and asks another family member to read his writing, expecting a coherent and literate response.

Looking back to look forward

It is interesting to think about the factors that lead to children deciding to write and draw in private spaces as opposed to communal spaces. The ability to engage with text construction independently and having the agency to do so for

> a range of purposes does seem to play a significant part. That being said, regardless of where an artefact has been created within the home, and no matter how young or old our children have been, they have frequently sought positive affirmation for their efforts. The satisfaction gained through the acknowledgement of one's work often resulted in a mutual exchange of smiles and a clear sense of accomplishment. This was coupled by a strong sense of agency and purpose, and you could see this driving their intent as they persisted with an artefact that involved early mark making or writing such as a 'thank you' card or signage for a cake stall.

Connection: Appropriation, agency and affirmation

The text construction, particularly the focus on the private and personal described here, demonstrates the children's ownership and mastery of the writing process as they appropriate skills and understandings developed in social interactions (Rogoff, 1995). Importantly in the observation reported, we see the children at home initiating writing tasks of their own volition. As Parr (2022) stated, having agency around a task or a purpose for writing is critical as children begin to see themselves as writers. When young children make conscious decisions to apply a previously learned writing skill or approximate skills learned to new situations, writing becomes a catalyst for additional growth and enhances the motivation to write (Graham, 2019).

However, while children may write with intention and independence, they often expect adults will be able to read what they write, requiring the adult to interact with the child to gain some clues about the intended meaning and the experiences that prompted the text creation (Clay, 1975; Wohlwend, 2008). As young children grapple with the complexity of the written code, they need to attend not only to how to write, but also what and why. As Dyson stated, perhaps one of the most sophisticated questions a young child can ask is 'What did I write?' as 'the meanings of our texts are revealed only in the meeting of authors and others in particular moments' (Dyson, 1999, p. 130). Drawing attention to concepts of communication with an audience in children's early writing and affirming their efforts contributes to children's positive identity as writers, increasing the possibilities that they will continue to write and enjoy writing, and see the value of the texts produced (Wohlwend, 2008).

Story 3: Exploring the digital

> Our children have all enjoyed being granted the freedom to explore aspects of early writing through the use of various digital mediums, including computers, *iPads* and smart phones to name but a few. These devices have been extremely effective in capturing their attention, enabling the children to play, explore and engage with text production through a different medium or modality, either independently or alongside another family member. Using their fingers in place of a stylus to draw and explore elements of early mark making appears to be a very different sensory experience as compared with the use of more traditional mediums. Alice and Henry have both enjoyed engaging with several different apps that predominately focus on drawing, letter formation, phonological and

> phonemic awareness, which have served to reinforce the learning that has taken place at home or in a more formalised educational setting. However, when they have engaged with text construction through technology for 'real-world' purposes, such as sending a text or voice message to a friend or creating a birthday invitation, the learning, creativity and engagement has been far deeper.
>
> *Looking back to look forward*
> When exploring early writing using digital devices and apps, our children have been enthralled with the highly dynamic and interactive capabilities made available using technology. They have embraced any opportunity to engage with a touchscreen interface and marvelled at their capacity to dictate texts to send messages to people or 'google' something. What is also interesting to note is that our children like many others, are unafraid of 'unknowns' when it comes to digital technologies. They simply enter a process of 'trial and error' and rely heavily on their intuition. Moreover, they will often narrate their actions, push buttons or click icons at random in order to achieve their desired outcome or simply see what might occur when exploring the different ways texts can be produced through digital technology.

Connection: New technologies, new texts
Neuman et al. (2007) suggested that providing children with a variety of interesting writing materials throughout the child's home affords the opportunity to embed meaningful writing experiences into all activities within their immediate context. Clearly, the tools of new media have become a part of childhood's everyday objects and materials of play (Laidlow & Wong, 2016; Ozturk & Ohi, 2022).

Trends in text production, occurring in the contemporary world require the incorporation of digital skills involving engagement with technologies and multimodal texts (Lyons, 2017; Scott, 2022). Educational systems are still grappling with the challenge of how to respond to these new technologies and the new kinds of texts such technologies enable, despite decades of research evidence (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 2009; Gee, 2002, 2009; Kress, 2000). The term 'old wine in new bottles' to convey the idea that education systems in large part are using current modes or tools ('new bottles') through which to teach very traditional literacy skills ('old wine'), is well established in the literature (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Lyons, 2015; Rowan & Bigum, 2012). What the data in this study illuminates for us, is how young children in particular use tools to construct meaning. It is precisely the ubiquitous use of varying tools to construct texts using new technologies that is significant, and points to the need for greater consideration to be afforded to understand the social practices children engage in to produce texts, particularly digital texts (Ozturk & Ohi, 2022).

Story 4: Outdoor drawing and play

> From a very early age, our children would delight in any opportunity to explore early mark making outdoors in their natural surrounds. One example of this was during a recent trip to the beach, where we as parents observed Alice writing her

name in the sand alongside other words such as 'crabs' and 'jellyfish', with corresponding arrows and diagrams. Here she was avidly working to create a beach signage system to assist others to navigate their path along the shore, and naturally it was not long before Henry became invested in this project. and it morphed into a collaborative effort and negotiation between the two older children. It was at this time that I was able to reminisce about previous years when Alice would use sticks, shells, seaweed and her hands to create elaborate pictures in the sand, exploring early mark making as a part of this process, and this now represents the stage that James and Sarah are moving into. Henry is somewhere in between as he mixes some conventional and nonconventional formed letters in the sand, adding symbols and written text to his creations in the sand, seeking guidance and modelling from his older sister.

Looking back to look forward

Our children have loved playing in nature and drawing in sand or dirt was simply an extension of this and an inherent part of their outdoor play. Whether they were using some form of natural prop or their hands, the children relished making squiggles, shapes and letters in nature, and this is something that we have actively encouraged as parents. What I have found interesting to observe is that the early mark making that happens in a park, at the beach or simply in our backyard, has no obvious physical parameters. The children can nominate the space they use, as well as the materials they choose, and love the freedom of being outdoors. The sensory and tactile nature of their play, the ability to be creative, adding their chosen aesthetics and often working alongside or even collaboratively with others, discussing their explorations and creations along the way, is nothing but a joy!

Connection: Play, drawing and writing

The scenarios above illustrate the affordances of children's rich imaginative outdoor play as creative contexts for learning about drawing and writing. Children's curiosity to interact with their natural environments, as harmonious with the qualities and characteristics of children's play and processes of investigation, help in the development of children's communicative skills through their engagement in meaningful learning (Portier, 2022). It is in the context of creative play that children engage in levels of symbolic representation, using props for symbols of real objects and events (Scull & O'Grady, 2022). Similarly, children unable to convey meaning through writing spontaneously use drawing-like devices as a representational-communicative system (Raban, 2018). The multimodality of the texts created in outdoor play settings, illustrative of the resourcefulness of young children's play and the props used to create texts, highlights the importance of sensory rich environments to support children's early text creation.

Reflective insight

Given that memory and hindsight were used to formulate the personal narratives that accompany the data, it must be acknowledged that it was not possible to recall events

exactly as they took place, and that this very notion is indeed clearly recognised in autoethnographic research (Holman Jones, 2005; Wall, 2008). Further, we acknowledge the singularity and particularity of the data with this idiosyncratic methodology. Autoethnography exemplifies the potential for individual, personal narratives to give understanding to precise phenomenon that is contextualised from a particular point of view (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Implications and conclusion

Across a range of contexts and discourses, early writing practices in the home came to the fore, when children were given the agency to freely explore their communicative intentions, drawing from a range of mediums and modalities that were made available to them. The findings provide a strong case for children's autonomy and voice, as fundamental to home literacy practices, in order to create opportunities for children to meaningfully explore written text construction in myriad ways.

Moreover, when the children were afforded time and space to build on their early writing interests and skills without constraint through play, they were able to form a positive association with writing as the premise for future learning and development to follow. This emphasises the link between active participation in play-based literacy learning and the development of early writing, stemming from the child's situational interest through play and learning, to promote authentic opportunities for written language construction.

Finally, the 'positive affirmation' effect on early attempts at mark marking and writing was noteworthy, encouraging the children to persevere and identify themselves as capable and confident authors of text. This is particularly vital when we consider the transition into educational settings such as the preschool and school, where children will expand upon these home literacy practices, and experience a range of more formalised literacy experiences. According to Norton (1997) identity refers to "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p.410). For children to be motivated to write, and to feel as though they are accomplished authors of text, it is imperative that they develop a positive writing identity, mediated through the social processes centred around learning and teaching both in the home, preschool and school.

Our article has provided a close analysis of the early writing experiences of four children in the home, observed by their mother as researcher, and explicated in conversations with her doctoral supervisors. By focusing attention on the home, we have reviewed a set of practices, within a specific social and cultural context, that created opportunities for children's early mark making, drawing and writing, that might at best shape and modify practices toward improved opportunities for learning.

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