

Aim and purpose for the action research:

Aim of the study was to investigate how movement, drama and music could help to develop the fine and gross motor skills needed for early handwriting in a creative way and inspiring way. The study was in response to a whole school focus on improving handwriting and on developing strength in fine/gross motor control in the EYFS.

Action research questions

Does developing young children's *movement memory for handwriting* embed the movement/shapes the fine motor movements needed to write legibly and fluently?

If this process is effective; can we also provide experiences (and an environment) to enable children to use movement for self-expression and creative experimentation of their ideas as a motivator to practice mark-making?

Implementation

For twelve weeks all Foundation Stage children, aged three to five years, participated in weekly whole-class, twenty-minute Write Dance sessions. In addition to this some children were identified by class teachers to receive more frequent, focused, small group sessions for more individualised movement and mark making sessions.

Schemes of work

Plans for the weekly lessons combined: themes from 'Write Dance' books; plus specific goals identified by teachers/teaching assistants e.g. the development of anti-clockwise circles and, most importantly, the ideas from the children themselves. The movement and mark-making sessions *had to make sense to the children*. Consequently, incorporating the children's ideas produced some very creative lessons. For example, fireworks developed into planets as they had been looking at this in class and were interested in the topic. During a different session, the children completed movement and musical drawings inspired by the Gingerbread man running away, a topic they had been exploring in English writing lessons.

Progress tracking

A typical session began with a warm up, using big movements, stretches and shaking limbs and so forth. This helped the children to focus and get moving.

Observations and reflections were made during mark making and musical drawing sessions and it was noticeable that the children lacked strength and stamina in their fingers, wrists and lower arms. This weak strength and stamina meant it was particularly difficult to maintain a tripod and pincer grip. Additional ideas were sourced from occupational therapy exercises that were specifically developed for handwriting. These were adapted for the children to complete to music, in a fun way. It was important that the exercises were adapted to capture the children's imagination, for example, one exercise was themed so that the children used their fingers to stretch and cast a spell.

The lessons plans were focused upon Write Dance principles (such as circles) at speed; gradually slowing down. Consolidation for progression was necessary; this was achieved by making big movements, then gradually reducing the size of the circles and practising the circular movements in an anti-clockwise direction. A baseline assessment was completed with a small number of case studies and their progress was observed over a 10-12 week period, the baseline was then repeated and differences observed.



Figure 1: Smoother shapes were harder to control than the up and down shapes; for example rounded shapes and circles.

Children responded very positively to the movement and liked the collaborative nature of working together on large sheets of paper on the floor. I observed boys really liked working together on this and would often collaboratively join their loops and shapes together.

Laban's theory of movement analysis was incorporated because this approach emphasises the different aspects of movement; for example, making the children aware of which parts of the body were moving; in which direction, and **how** is the body moving. Laban principles linked well with the Write Dance principle of changing direction.

Collaboration and language

The children often talked about what they were doing as they were doing it. They also talked about their pictures and used their imaginations to tell me stories inspired by the pictures, for example:

The Bee is getting dizzy. There is the flower he is going to get nectar. The bee got lost in the race!

Consequently, a range of areas of learning began to develop such as vocabulary, imagination and role-play.

Rhythm, music and dynamics

Rhythm was also particularly good for emphasising certain movements. Children practised certain movements in time to music to really *get the feel* of what they were doing. The Write Dance principle of long straight lines was matched to music with a strong 4/4 beat, with a feel of dynamism. The Write Dance principle of flowing rounded shapes was matched to 3/4-time signature with a lighter airy feel and looked at ideas such as water, wind and flying.

Key findings

Over the course of a three-month period there was a marked increase in fine motor control from all case studies as evidenced by the baseline assessment.

- You can accelerate children's progress through strength building exercises. Children need to develop the strength and fine motor control when they are in EYFS so that they are then ready for formal writing.
- Importance of getting the basics. Establish good habits from the start, such as the tripod grip and forming circles anticlockwise.
- Multi-sensory approaches incorporating a combination of physical, sensory and language skills are very effective. This links back and supports existing research and the approach advocated in Mark Making Matters (Department for Children Schools and Families 2008) of doing, feeling and thinking.
- Celebrating and giving children a chance to develop in a playful and imaginative way encourages children to develop their own natural style and 'swing' to writing.
- Movement is a good way of helping children to visualise and develop the language and understanding needed for writing. Movement also releases tension in the body.
- Children need lots of repetition of movement e.g. circles in different sizes and on different surfaces to really feel the movements they are supposed to be making and increase strength.

Biography

Vicki Gentle – I am a drama and dance specialist currently teaching at Berkhamsted School in Hertfordshire. I trained at the Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts and Middlesex University and originally started teaching Drama in Secondary Schools. Over the past few years, I have taught dance and drama to younger primary school age children. I really enjoy working with the creativity and imagination of the primary years and I am interested in how the arts can be developed across the curriculum to enhance children's learning.

Email contact – Vgentle@berkhamstedschool.org