Young children as ‘becoming’ writers within the context of a school classroom: Creating alternative approaches to hear children through their writing activity

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This article seeks to counter the predominant understanding of young children's writing activity within a classroom, which has been formed as a response to the structural framework of school literacy. Taking a different approach, I have explored the established relationship between language and writing as a socio-cultural construction transforming human thought (Vygotsky 1986; Wertsch 1998), and plugged aspects of these ideas together with features of Deleuzian thinking. The writing child is conceptualised as a becoming writer (Deleuze & Guattari 2004), and their writing activity considered as a process of ‘relational encounters’. This alternative reading of children's early writing activity is presented through the analysis of a short vignette; a writing encounter between three children where connections between bodies, mediational objects, sensations and emotion are traced to further our understanding of writing as a process of movement and production.

Introduction

As an activity, writing offers young children a way of ‘saying something’ about themselves and their world. In their use of writing tools, children are able to articulate and extend their thinking into meaningful acts of communication with others. How adults hear what children are saying within writing activity, and how they observe and listen to children as they engage in the processes of learning about writing, is dependent on particular frameworks for thinking about childhood and literacy related to the cultural-historical context of learning. Young children's writing activity is therefore understood, or read, in terms of what the literacy structures that surround childhood say young children's writing should and could look like, which, in turn, is connected to the desired image of the writing child (Hermansson, 2011).

This article focuses on a group of young children, aged four and five within an English school classroom where their writing voices are heard by adults largely through the dominant narrative of a fixed curriculum framework. In this context, the documenting and evidencing of a child's writing voice in school, what they say and do as a writer, is directly related to the developmental outcomes contained within the documentation and the pedagogical structures surrounding them.

My argument is that it is possible to listen to what children are thinking and communicating about writing by considering not only a structural ‘reading’ of the writing child related to prescriptive targets and goals, but by attending to the
connections and interactions that they create with each other, and also to the material world. Children's writing goings-on can be considered as a process of creating multiple connections that draw together various productive forces. These events can be captured as significant writing moments or encounters, but should always be understood as part of a continuing creation of multiple relations and associations that often extend beyond and challenge the structural frameworks in which they operate. Exploring writing in this way enables an examination of young children's writing conceptualised as an 'un-fixed' process, which raises manifold questions about what writing may mean, may look like and how it can be construed by both adults and children in educational settings.

To explore these alternative approaches to children's writing activity, I will begin by extrapolating ideas developed within socio-cultural constructivist theories of language and literacy, which allow for an understanding of writing as a social gesture, constructed within specific socio-cultural and material worlds. I will extend these ideas further by presenting an example of a writing encounter between three children for analysis, and examine how this writing activity has been constructed as a meshwork or an assemblage, an entanglement of trails and connections (Ingold, 2007, p. 81). My aim is to trace the movement within young children's writing encounters that are integral to the process of transformational thought and action. My intention is to show how the narrative voices of the children are constructed as relational and reactive, and thereby offer a more complex, and potentially limitless rather than limiting, reading of children's voices as writers.

**Socio-cultural constructivist theories of language and writing**

**Writing as thinking and meaning making**

When Vygotsky wrote that "Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them" (1986, p. 218), he was indicating the integral relationship between shared social language and how our knowledge of the world is constructed. Language as a social force shapes who we are but we also shape it, and children exploring language within social contexts are actively participating in this process.

Vygotsky argued that writing is a complex behavioural function that begins with gesturing. Gestures are initial visual signs by young children, which could be conceived as writing in the air. Before alphabetic signs and symbols are understood, these gestures symbolise and represent whole aspects of thought. These physical motions representing thought take on a secondary form as children begin to use writing and drawing tools. As writing develops into a literate practice, where writing tools are used to represent specific social knowledge about sign/symbol relationships, meanings develop about what writing means. Meanings are consequently created through the appropriation of external signs.

There are two significant aspects of this if we are researching children's writing activity. First, writing activity must be understood as a whole social experience where children's knowledge is formed through participation in social activities that build connections between different aspects of language use and function. As children learn about the semantic parts of their social and cultural writing
system, for example, the shapes of letters and their sound-symbol relationships, this needs to be contextualised within other meaningful communicative activities, rather than experienced as discrete elements that are segmented away from, rather than connected to the whole (Britton, 1987; Goodman, 2005). If we want to know more about how young children are thinking and learning as writers, we need to explore how aspects of writing relate to each other as an entirety, or as a relational network, rather than breaking down this complex interactive process into separate units for examination.

Second, children become literate writers as they derive meaning from print and understand the functions of language as a socially active process (Street, 2013). Within a classroom environment, young children recognise the role and functions that writing has in relation to the values and purposes of schooling; writing is therefore culturally saturated (Mercer, 1994, p. 93). Intertwined with this, children's literacy practices within classrooms are infused with their own social concerns and desires. Young children's writing changes as they "begin to sense new functional possibilities in their activity" evolving "as others respond both playfully and critically, to their efforts" (Dyson, 1989, p. 255-7).

Writing as tool use and transformation

As writing apprentices within school, children appropriate specific tools for thinking (Rogoff, 1990) within their writing encounters. Writing objects and tools, for example pencils, paper, chalks, pens, keyboards etc., are thinking technologies that help children to convey their thoughts. They have specific sign functions that are socially and culturally meaningful in providing communication to and with others. The meaning of a pencil for example, the themes of writing and drawing that it carries, is made clear by the rules of its social and cultural use within a specific context. The meanings carried by the writing tool are created through children's social interactions and as shifting reactions to material changes.

Within this argument, writing tools, as carriers of meaning, can be understood as mediational (Wertsch, 1998). If they had no social use or meanings attached to them, perhaps these objects would have an empty existence. Writing tools are used to adapt and develop social and cultural practices, and, as semiotic tools, they also transform us and our human relationships (Cole, 1996; Scribner, 1997; Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010).

Writing as multiliteracies

John-Steiner (1995) has argued that our understanding of the relationship between language and shared symbolic systems needs to extend into a more diverse semiotic, for example, as map-making, musical notation and visual representations. As a response to increasing technological development, there has been a move to embrace an understanding of writing within a wider understanding of multimodal symbolic systems. New Literacy Studies (NLS) and multiliteracy theories have taken a more expansive approach in viewing young children's writing as a multitude of communication practices within multiple childhood spaces. (Pahl, 1999; Kress, 2000 2003; Levy, Yamada-Rice, & Marsh, 2013).
The multiple opportunities for text writing needs to be understood not only through the context in which texts are practiced, but also in how this activity connects and transforms children's social identities. The idea of writing as a socially situated practice places an emphasis on how people use and modify those practices (Halliday, 1988; Gee, 2004). Children take on multiple literacy identities dependent on context and it is important to recognise how children “infuse their texts with a sense of their identity” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 19).

As modifiers of literacy, children are engaged in a process of design and redesign through their writing activities. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argue that writing, viewed as a process of design, is created through the resources (tools), grammars and semiotic systems (signs and symbols) within children's social spaces (classroom). When a child is writing, they are transforming design conventions by shaping meaning and re-presenting the given design, creating a 'recycled' version. However, they should also have the opportunity to redesign the available designs on offer, and this means challenging the literacy structures around them.

So, within a writing activity, there is the potential to create multiple designs within multiple forms as a process of transformation that is integral to how children express their social identity and knowledge of the world. Writing as creation, as a construction of social and material relationships, is always in response to new functional possibilities within social contexts, sometimes constrained and sometimes liberated. As literacy users, children play and experiment with the structure of writing, its form and content, by exploring the potential possibilities that it has to offer (Cremin & Myhill, 2012).

**Writing as activity and production**

The realisation that literacy processes are layered with social interaction and are contextually bound has meant that writing as an aspect of literacy has been interpreted as a situated or ‘doing’ activity (Gee, 1996), an important way of participating in everyday social life. Writing viewed as action indicates that it is a practical and material process, a bringing into being of ideas or objects. Children's meaning making within their writing work occurs as tools are used, spoken about and altered through practical activity (Wells & Claxton, 2002), and may also be described as a practice of production. These productive writing moments in children's lives are complex interactions involving multiple cognitive, social, material, and sensory exchanges. To understand how and why writing comes about, we need to consider the intricacies of forces within children's writing as productive events. Ingold (2011, p. 6) has argued exactly this, that the "essence of production lies...in the attentional quality of the action — that is, in its attunement and responsiveness to the task as it unfolds — and in its developmental effects on the producer." The child writer(s) and the supporting adult(s) may have particular ideas in mind, through their engagement in writing activity, about what they intend to produce (this is examined in more detail below). However, the production of writing is not confined within the completed writing object, rather, it exists through the practices and activities that are created within the writing encounter.
Narratives of young children’s writing in school

In line with models of socio-cultural pedagogy and language learning, the writing encounters that children have within English classrooms are purposely planned by teachers to encourage collaborative thinking and language construction through talk and play. However, it is the psychological model of writing development as an individually constructed activity, socially separate and contained within the child's mind (Rowe, 2003), that is the most prevalent conceptualisation of young children’s writing held within both the statutory (Department for Education [DFE], 2014) and non-statutory (Early Education, 2012) guidance for teachers.

In these national curriculum documents, the child's development is structured through individual assessment and levels of progress against universal norms described as "best fit judgements", or "typical development" (Early Education, 2012). Consequently, what a teacher notes as they assess children's writing activity is allied to a particular teleological structure where there are end point(s) or specific levels of development expected from the outset (Standards and Testing Agency, 2013). The observation, assessment and planning cycle used to monitor and organise children's writing activity are conducted as a movement towards the completion of stages as progression towards a final outcome. Within the curriculum framework, the Early Years Foundation Stage (DFE, 2014), which outlines practice with children from birth to five, the Early Learning Goal (ELG) for children at the end of their first year of school (when they have completed this stage) is that they are able to

use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They also write some irregular common words. They write simple sentences that can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible. (p. 31)

An aspect of this perceived process of writing development is that children experience writing, not within language activities that promote the connective whole of literacy learning, but through separated and stratified stages, related to the components of writing. For example, through time bound activities in line with phased synthetic phonics programs, such as Letters and Sounds (Department for Education and Skills [DFES], 2007).

Viewed through this prism, children's writing becomes a collection of cultural objects with certain values attached to them, having both an ideal (expected and hoped for) and material (real) state (Cole, 1996). Writing as school literacy is therefore imbued with ideology and employed to particular ends (Smargorinsky, 2011). It has become a future orientated, striated procession of writing events, which are anticipated by and pinned down to a predictable conclusion.
Applying Deleuzian thinking to researching young children's writing activity

A listening methodology

Listening to children as participants in research holds many challenges related to generational roles and power (Christensen, 2004; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Bakhtin’s writing (1986) illustrates for us that, as part of a chain of communication, the voice of the speaker (child) can never be separated from the voices of others. As research participants, children are always anticipating the social reactions of others to guide their responses. Finding ways to identify, listen to, and provide truthful reflections of young children's lives will always be problematic whatever the context.

However, what is possible is to explore children’s voices within a dialogical process of meaning-making or as a socially constructed and shared narrative, and employ sensitive and responsive listening approaches that tune into the interplay between the voices on offer. Back (2007) describes sociological research as a "listener's art" (p. 21), where openness to others needs to be crafted through a "democracy of the senses" (p. 8). In conversing with others, careful attention can be given to the differences that are articulated where discoveries can be made. The approach I have taken seeks to tune in to the turning point of thought, or swerve within conversations between each other, so that we can hear alternative voices and multiple expressions (Hodgson & Standish, 2007).

The vignette as assemblage or ‘meshwork’

The vignette presented below for discussion is taken from my ongoing PhD research. It is of a writing encounter that I noted as part of an ethnographic study based in one classroom, focussing on a small group of children (aged four to five years old) and their writing activity in their first year at school. The vignette has been created from an extract of field notes written within a twenty-minute period, and is considered to be a fleeting moment within a classroom full of activity and production. In a similar vein to Masny (2013), I have used ‘vignettes’ of empirical data to form an assemblage of research. These vignettes are selected because they are intensive ‘texts’ read by the researcher as ‘disruptive’, useful in creating new connections within thinking. For Masny (p. 344), this kind of analysis is a process of interpretation, of asking, what does something mean? The vignette presented here includes a narrative observation followed by my own reflective comments that, as a tentative step towards initial analysis, has transformed and extended the linear account to create a different story. The narrative observation and reflective comments have been taken from my notes written in the field during and soon after the children's activity, and contain grammatical inconsistencies and abbreviation.

The vignette below has been understood and analysed rhizomatically. The metaphor of a rhizome as a device for analysis provides an alternative way of considering knowledge construction and production. Unlike hierarchical tree-like structures, where knowledge about the world is predestined through the identification of arborescent, pre-established connections, the rhizome offers no central structure and appears as a series of lateral developments, shooting out new roots as part of an unending dynamic process. In constructing knowledge of
the children's writing activity within the vignette by thinking rhizomatically, I have explored what it is to be a writer from and through multiple directions, and mapped the dimensional qualities of expansion and variation, avoiding a process of reproduction, where existing knowledge related to the curriculum and expected outcomes remains unquestioned.

Focussing on the movement integral to writing activity, and how the relationships between different associations are constructed, implies that we must look at the processes of arrangement, organisation and fitting together, or how things are assembled. Livesey (2005, p.18-19) has suggested that

"[t]he result of a productive assemblage is a new means of expression, a new territorial/spatial organisation, a new institution, a new behaviour, or a new realisation. The assemblage is destined to produce a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected, connections."

Young children's writing activity as an assemblage has allowed me to follow a wide range of movements within writing encounters, where objects, bodies and expressions have come together to construct and produce new ways of functioning through language. The notion of producing knowledge of children's writing activity in this way is confirmed within Ingold's discussion of lines and movement within a human wayfaring existence (2007, 2011). Ingold stresses the importance of tracing how lines are generated between people, and exploring the world as a connective 'meshwork' of activity and production. If we consider children's writing encounters as a weaving of ideas, people and objects, we can examine it by tracing the threads within the weaving.

**The vignette**

**Narrative observation**

Rita, Eli and Charlie are standing in a line by the cupboard housing the individual trays for their work all holding wipe clean white boards for drawing. I notice them because of their engagement and laughter, and their talk; they are chattering away. They move to sit down where I had been previously with Molly on the comfy chair. I follow them and try to sit out of their eye sight. Eli leans over to me 'we are drawing monsters' he says. Charlie turns to me, and repeats Eli's words and says 'look' as he shows me his drawing. They are laughing and laughing, sometimes hysterically, almost falling off the chair. Rita and Eli are sharing a board, although they both have their own pen. Eli is drawing and says 'this is my sword', then Rita rubs it out, 'you're rubbish at it' she says. Eli laughs and says 'Rita get your own, do it yourself'. Charlie sitting next to them draws some stars and lines. 'This is my name' he says as he waves his board in front of their faces. They all laugh. Rita is scribbling fast. She shouts 'get working' to Eli and nudges him. Charlie hides his board. He doesn't seem to be quite 'in the game' as the others are. He shows his board to Eli again trying to get his attention, and then starts to rub out his own work telling them it's tidy up time. Eli responds by saying 'look at mine'. Both he and Rita wiggle on the chair, rising slightly up and down with excitement, they lean forward and back laughing. Rita is making letter shapes quickly, she is nodding her head as she writes as if she
is saying the words and catching Eli’s eye at the same time, occasionally elbowing him to keep up with her and grabbing his arm.

When the boys are gone, I ask Rita if I can take a photo of her board and ask her what the marks are. She says ‘I can’t read’. I say ‘What’s it about’. She says ‘it’s about the monsters, the monster was a dragon’. ‘So is that the dragon?’ I ask, and she looks confused.

Reflection on events

The writing seemed to be an extension of the game of monsters and dragons that they were playing before they picked up the whiteboards, the dragon wasn’t being represented through the marks, but the marks were in some way transforming and telling the story. The marks were symbolic of their ideas, thoughts, and emotions, the pens and boards were important to how this was expressed. It was action led and frantic at times, involving movements in their social relationships, and between the real or material world and their imagination. They were writing quickly as if to get their ideas down and concentrating hard on the task as if the game depended on the marks they were making. They needed to make the marks for the game to continue. Although it wasn’t my intention, I was included here, as a point of sharing or justification for their play. I wonder whether that was why they found it so funny - they were pretending to write, and they knew it wasn’t correct. I was part of the whole writing performance.

Discussion

Writing as sensation

Deleuze and Guattari have proposed that we "paint, sculpt, compose, and write with sensations" (1994, p. 166). For Deleuze, the notion of sensation is inextricably linked to biology and occurs prior to discovering the true meaning of something through reasoned cognition (Conley, 2005). Although sensation is felt in response to events moments before rational thought, it is also a continual presence in how events themselves are created. The children's sensations within this writing encounter can be attributed to the writing event itself, seen through their continually moving bodies, speech, and playful repositioning in relation to each other and the materials at their disposal. The abstract squiggles and motioning marks of the pen on the board are related to bodily sensation; it is this sensing that links the body to language. In their game, the children are reactive to the flow of events, appreciating and feeling as an effect of their play together, and in how they have arranged the use of their writing tools. The fast scribbling of Rita, her eye contact with Eli, their laughter and physical approximation to each other, were all intertwined as sensational forces within their writing play. So, the essential nature of the writing encounter for the children is primarily that of a bodily sensation (Deleuze, 2003).

Studying writing events as lines of sensation helps us to trace both how children’s writing has been created, and how they have come into being as an entanglement between language and the body (MacLure, 2011). The children were engaged in writing play that was not concerned with representing and signifying the symbols of written language; this was clear from Rita's response to
my question about whether the writing was representative of a dragon. They did not appear to be practicing and imitated adult writing behaviour as an emergent process, or developmental stage of prewriting, which is often how children's early mark-making in play is interpreted. Their writing in this encounter involved more complex and overlapping forces that brought together the sensations of imaginative game creation with the marks on the board. The writing had import within their play because it was specifically abstract rather than symbolic, and therefore transcends meaning making as purely representational of something else. The nonsense writing that is being created is not the opposite of writing for sense. The writing within this encounter produced sense, the sense that the children have to each other, to their imagination, to their bodies, to their material world. As a result, the children produced sense of things using the new machinery that they encountered (Deleuze, 2003).

Olsson (2009) has written that "sense is on the border or language" (p. 53), indicating that it is possible to consider sensation as another dimension of language, vital to its process of production. Vygotsky (1999) recognised this sensory or emotional dimension of language within his work on perezhivanie. This term refers to the lived experience of the child or the individual prism through which meaning making occurs (Connery et al., 2010). It incorporates both the child's emotional response and their immediate interpretation of what is happening around them within the writing experience. So, perezhivanie, as reflection and feeling, helps to explain the process in which children are able to respond to each other, within the immediacy of the event. The qualities of the encounter demonstrate that language, as a communicative process, created within writing relationships is continually forming through shared and often unruly emotional and affective sensations (Leander & Boldt, 2013).

Writing as relational

As writing encounters are a process of production linking tools, texts, bodies, feelings, and senses, the connectivity that exists between them can be understood as relational. Children are not relating to each other and their environment within a writing encounter through a predetermined script, instead they are exploring multiple dimensions and pathways within their experiences together. Their continual, changing relationship to each other, as friends within this encounter, was evident in how they moved away and towards each other through physical acts and speech, as a response to the new connections that were being formed with the materials within the game. Their social relationships provided continuous movements that intersected in complex, non-linear ways (Masny & Cole, 2009). The children's communicative gestures, linked to their social relationships, created both disruptive breaks within the activity, for example, when Charlie rubs out his board, and continued growth, as when Rita physically grabs at Eli to re-engage his focus.

The forces unfolding as connections created within the writing experience are movable, mutating and non-static. Actualising these connections, or responding to them, is described by Deleuze and Guattari (2004) as creating 'lines of flight', or 'thought-movements'. Connections that are created may traverse across recognisable ways of being and bring about new thinking. This is evident in how my presence intersected with the children's writing activity as an observer. I was incorporated by the children into their writing play as an audience member, able to view their play from 'outside'. My presence as spectator at the beginning of
the action provided the children an opportunity to perform subversive talk around what their writing should and did say. They defied known adult expectations of what their writing was for, testing and challenging my position through their actions.

Viewing writing encounters solely in relation to external structures, such as the curriculum, limits our understanding of the relational forces at work in writing activity and production. Writing comes into being as an extensive process of network creation existing both externally and internally to the event. The challenge for those who work to support young children's language and writing is to find ways of locating and following the growth and transformation that exists within these relational networks.

Writing as becoming (devenir)

As an alternative to rigid descriptions of young children's writing activity related to an expected completion, writing encounters can be explored as a process of becoming; a constantly changing process, which cannot be reduced to being something else (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 263). Becoming is not a state that exists between the beginning and the end of an activity. That would imply that we eventually develop into a fixed and motionless state of having become. Rather than being understood as a becoming adult writer, children can be understood as becoming different through a continual production of difference, not in the process of representing existing ideas but instead re-presenting as transformational change. "To become is not to progress or regress along a series...what is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which becomes passes" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 262).

The unique, playful dimensions that the children created in their writing encounter contained traces of other events, other places and imaginings related to the story that they were inventing. Their writing was part of a continually changing, adapting process of construction, and invention. As pure movement, their becoming can be understood not in the events themselves, but in the changes between the events (Stagoll, 2005, p. 26). This is where the exceptional moments of production can be explored.

Conclusion

By adopting the notion of becoming to conceptualise children as writers, it is possible to explore aspects of social-constructivist theories of language more closely and extend our understanding of young children's writing as a process of activity, which takes on a multitude of fluid and constantly shifting incarnations. Although the social and cultural structures of schooling help us to understand how young children's writing experience is framed by adult agendas, these frameworks should not be the starting point of enquiry into the multiple dimensions of children's writing experience. Critical examination of children's writing means avoiding simplified and predetermined description, and acknowledging the actualities of the writing process itself: an activity of relational production within the material and social world. We need to find new ways to map these moments as situated body/object assemblages (Coleman & Ringrose, 2014), and provide alternative means for children's writing voices to
be understood. If we consider young children's encounters with writing as a process of transformation and difference, it is possible to show that what is often perceived as unremarkable activity is, in fact, remarkable (Mavers, 2011, p. 1).

References


