



On Your Marks!! Encouraging mark making- developing writing



Children and
Learning

Reading, writing and children's comics

Some children need more support and encouragement than others to make marks, and some may be particularly worried about activities where marks are to be made on sheets of paper. Generally we would be right in assuming that most of these children are boys, but there will be several girls in any setting who lack confidence with early writing. Often they are lacking in confidence in other areas of development: and particularly with speech and language. Crucially for these children, the process of early writing often has little meaning. Real anxiety can be created if children start formal writing activities too early, and particularly if they have yet to develop the physical dexterity needed. So how can we help them find mark making and writing fun, and to become engaged and involved enough for them to explore and practice?

We know that children learn most from activities that are based on their own interests, and staff at Sacred Heart noticed that children particularly like to talk about TV programmes and films. This inspired teacher Katie Monastero to buy some comics that feature cartoon characters. "We wanted to make sure that we had a range of comics that appealed to both boys and girls, so we chose those that featured 'Ben 10', 'Fifi and the Flowertots' and 'Disney Princess'. We were thrilled by the children's responses. I was amazed at how much chat these comics could generate. The children spontaneously made drawings based on the pictures in the comics, and copied the print. It was exciting to see the boys in particular become very deeply absorbed in drawing and writing, and talking about what they were doing."



Staff in the Foundation Unit at Whitefield Infants were very concerned that some children, including girls, were not becoming involved in mark making activities. Lily, for example, was very quiet, did not settle on any activity for long, and seemed to want to avoid engaging with adults or other children. Sian, on the other hand, was more verbal,

but lacked confidence in her fine motor skills. Our aim was to try and involve them in activities that would improve their confidence.

We put two tables together and asked both girls to help us cover them with white lining paper, and stick it down with masking tape. As can be imagined, several other children were intrigued, and wanted to join in. Once we had finished covering the table, we chose six children (including Lily and Sian), to look at the comics. These included characters from BBC's *CeeBeebies*, *Thomas the Tank Engine*, *Fifi and the Flowertots*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Ben 10*, *Power Rangers*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *In the Night Garden*. As at Sacred Heart, the level of discussion was tremendous, with children talking about their favourite characters, describing episodes of recent programmes, and talking with each other about the contents of the comics.

After a lengthy discussion we introduced felt pens, and children wanted to spontaneously draw pictures of their favourite characters, as well as make their own representations. Soon they were copying script from the comics, and particularly the names of characters. It was exciting to note that Lily became deeply involved in making a detailed drawing of Fifi. Another girl, who is also quite shy, began copying Lily, and between them they worked out how to copy the *Fifi* logo.

Sian meanwhile, was reluctant to start drawing. However when I moved with her across the table to see what Lily and her friend were doing, Sian became more enthusiastic, and wrote 'Fifi', in the same style as Lily. While Sian was less able to be involved unless she had adult support, she was nevertheless very pleased with her achievement. By this time our paper was quickly becoming filled with drawings and marks. These included random marks, experimental squiggles, repeated patterns and children's names. In fact these represented all the stages that children go through on the way to becoming confident writers. What was most noticeable was the children's deep level of involvement.

Foundation Teacher Sue Tomes-Rolt summed up why this activity had been so successful. "This was an activity that naturally fascinated the children. It represented their culture, and for once they knew more about a subject than the adults! The communal nature of sitting round a table and writing on a large sheet of paper is very important. There is no end to it, unlike on a piece of paper that you have been given just for yourself. You can choose to work together, or watch what other children are doing and make marks in your own time."

This activity has had a very big impact on the children and staff. The table is regularly covered with paper, with an adult supporting mark making based on a theme, such as a story, or a topic like 'Easter Rabbits'. Lily and Sian are regular participants at the table, and this has boosted their confidence to interact with adults and other children, and make marks.

Further reading

Mark making matters: young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development. DCSF 2008

Supporting children's writing development in the Early Years. Lawrence Educational Publications 2010

Gateway to Writing <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/254287>

Rolls of lining paper, used for decorating, are available from hardware shops.

For more information about Luton's *On Your Marks!* project visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk or contact Sue Thomas susan.thomas@luton.gov.uk