

## Observing and Monitoring Emergent Writers in the Classroom: A case study

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The purpose of this action research was to observe and monitor how emergent writers developed creative writing skills using a creative writing tool known as a 'squiggle book'. The study tracked a sample of twenty-four kindergarten students' creative writing progress over the course of an academic year. In doing so the author addressed the need for a more innovative and unrestricted creative writing outlet where students could write freely and fully engage in the imaginative creative processes. Through the study the sample of students also actively engaged their critical thinking, and speaking and listening skills. The sample of students and the author sat together on a one to one basis at the end of each 'squiggle book' entry to assess and discuss the piece of writing completed by the student. The author kept detailed notes around these conversations and the observations made of the 'squiggle book' entries, these field notes formed the basis of the findings of the study. It was found that progress and attainment was not limited to creative writing skills but was shared across many significant developmental areas.

### Introduction

*'Developing the capacity to be creative can enrich lives and help to contribute to a better society...Children need the right conditions for creativity to flourish'. (Fisher & Williams, 2004, p1).*

Writing in the early years takes many abstract and diverse forms including lines, scribbles, pictures, and random letters and numbers to name a few, and as such, we as early years educators must nurture and cater to this diversity to enable our young writers to develop their creative skills to their full potential. For this reason the author believes it is important to give students an outlet in the form of a tool that would enable them to both draw and write creatively, with the freedom to fully express themselves in an independent way without restriction.

This article explores and examines the process of developing emergent writer's skills as a critical component that will invariably lead to the development of creative writing skills in the early year's classroom. To begin with an introduction to the background of the 'squiggle book', the driving force behind this study is articulated. A subsequent review of the current literature surrounding creativity, imagination and emerging writing in the early years will lay the foundations for later discussion in relation to the data gathered and analyzed in this action research through the use of the 'squiggle book'. Following this is a discussion around the definitions of and thoughts about 'emergent writing', 'creativity' and 'creative writing', and how this enables the child to connect to their imagination and creative, critical thinking processes. Further to this, the article will then go on to look at the impact of the introduction of the 'squiggle book', the creative writing tool that was used for the purposes of this study to

promote and encourage the students to engage their imagination through independent creative writing tasks. Not only does the ‘squiggle book’ enable the child to write imaginatively and creatively but it also includes a tool for self-assessment, whereby the student can, with the aid of a pictorial rubric analyze and assess their writing abilities and the progress they have been making from one month or writing task to the next.

Student self-assessment is a fundamental reflective learning skill that a child should be encouraged to acquire, develop and apply from an early age. The study investigates the sequence of events necessary for a child to develop early emergent writing skills including the ability to ‘read’ their pictorial representations, to discuss what they have identified them to be, and to reflect on them, in order to plan and make realistic goals for future creative writing tasks. ‘In communities where creativity and imagination are championed, visual literacy is promoted. Visual literacy is the ability to identify and describe what we see, and evaluate its aesthetic qualities and fitness for purpose’ (Duffy, 2006, p8). Research by Boud (2013) argues that all forms of assessment have two key characteristics, and each would give premise to the need for the use of the pictorial self-assessment rubric used in conjunction with the ‘squiggle book’, in this study. That is to say that, in order to assess a piece of work, the child or adult must first know the success criteria or the expectation of the standard of work to be produced, and secondly, they must be able to make a reflective or critical judgement as necessary on the quality of the work they have produced. Pictorial representations coupled with written words in the Early Years are paramount in facilitating children’s language acquisition and understanding, hence the need for pictorial rubrics, when the student can see the pictorial expectations and explanations and the steps to be taken to meet them, it is easier for them to formulate a plan for how to get there.

Following on from this initial discussion, the article will specifically analyze and discuss the progress of students over the course of a year in a kindergarten classroom on a monthly basis and how links can be drawn, supported by the literature reviewed. The author will conclude the article outlining and discussing the findings drawn from the study and conclude by summarizing what has been discussed.

### **The Emergence of the ‘Squiggle Book’ Study**

The idea of the squiggle book arose from an early years professional development workshop attended by the author some time ago. Over the course of the two day workshop, much was explored around how young children learn and inquire to stimulate all areas of their development. Towards the end of the workshop, many children’s picture books were shared with the participants, one of which was ‘The Squiggle’, written by Carole Lexa Schaefer. A rich discussion was held after this story was shared both about how we as adults may not always see how exciting and exhilarating the simple things can be in the eyes of a child, and also around how it can be used to further develop and enhance the imaginative and creative skills of the child. As a result of this the belief that something of great educational substance and value could be developed from this emerged, and thus the ‘squiggle book’ was born. In examining ways in which one could use and adapt the simple ideas presented in the story of The Squiggle to enrich the learning of the students, particularly in the area of students emergent writing and long term tracking of this writing was the next step. Whilst journal writing was engaged in daily by students, whether it be for a prescribed writing task or a free inquiry task, it was felt that it lacked an element of being able to moderate or benchmark progress on a

month by month basis. What was needed was a tool that could embed the important element of student reflection or self-assessment, and the squiggle book seemed like the perfect solution to both of these concerns. Over a short few weeks the squiggle book was developed using a half-lined page with a simple 'line' or 'squiggle' at the top of each page. These 'lines' or 'squiggles' would serve as the provocation for the students to engage their imagination and release their creativity, in that the student would be encouraged to look at the line or squiggle and using their imagination make it anything that they wanted it to be. Students were then encouraged to extend the drawing to reflect this and to write about what their squiggle had evolved to be. The last element of each month's squiggle book entries involved the student and teacher sitting together with a pictorial rubric, whereby the student self-assessed their work and discussed their rationale for their decisions with the teacher and then the teacher also assessed that same piece of work and explained their decision to the student. These conversations provided a wealth of information to both the student and the teacher in terms of short-term goals or target setting, and the students' ability to self-reflect and critically analyze their own work, which promoted and developed their higher order thinking skills. In terms of this study, the squiggle book was introduced to a sample of twenty-four Kindergarten students. It was felt that the squiggle book presented as age and developmentally appropriate for the sample and monitored and tracked the progress over the course of one academic year. This will be further discuss later in the article.

### **Emergent Writing, Creativity and Creative Writing**

*'Embrace the scribbles, scribble writing, and letter-like shapes as children begin to write and move from name writing to other forms of writing (e.g., letter/word writing, story writing). It is more important for young children's writing development for them to engage in writing activities than it is to focus on correct letter formation', (Gerde et. al. 2012, p353).*

This captures both the early years child at the emergent writing stage and also the essence of what the squiggle book has to offer the child and overall what it hopes to achieve, which is a shift in the tunnel vision that looks only for correct letter and word formation and grammatical correctness rather than the invaluable meaning-making process that is happening for the child through the inquiry process itself. Each scribble means something, and it is in the dialogue surrounding these 'scribbles' and the true teachable moments occur and learning takes place. The non-prescriptive nature of the squiggle book writing, affords students the opportunity to be confident in expressing their thoughts in a creative and imaginative way and in writing and words that they can understand and relate to. The focus of the teacher in this way is as a facilitator, a support when called upon or requested to be and as a non-judgmental observer to share in the child's imaginative and creative journey. It is not to place focus on correct letter formation but rather on the 'story' the child has to tell, and the way they depict or write about this on paper also gives great insight into the child regarding their letter sense, phonological awareness, and general imaginative processes. As affirmed by Barbot et. Al. (2012, p209), 'Teaching creative writing- that is, encouraging students to write by drawing upon their imagination and other creative processes- may support writing development in all its components'.

Furthermore, this review of the current literature, examined and explored the process of developing both creativity and creative writing in early year's emergent writers and draw on any relevant or substantial links between the two. Fisher & Williams (2004, p11) contend that,

‘Creative minds exercise freedom of thought, they are able to think beyond the given, beyond the world of necessity, and to engage in thought-experiments, thereby to imaginatively create possible worlds out of the raw materials of this world’. This captures the core principles of what the squiggle book is and what it enables the child to do. The simple cue of the ‘line’, or ‘shape’ produced on each page outlined in greater detail earlier in the article serves as a provocation to ignite the child’s imagination enabling the child to create whatever they desire and to write about it freely and unrestrained. This differs to conventional writing tasks, where students are often prescribed a task to speak creating a barrier to individuality and potentially restricting creativity. The normative writing conventions will come into place when the child is developmentally and academically ready. Each child will develop these at a different rate as each student is individual in their needs and abilities. Phonemic awareness, letter formation, segmenting and blending are all taught to students out with their engagement with their ‘squiggle book’ writing and therefore this will inevitably become more and more evident in their emergent writing and indeed their squiggle book entries as they progress throughout the year. ‘The rapid and correct mastery of phoneme grapheme correspondences is a necessary condition for the beginner writer’, Pinto et.al. (2012, p330). As previously referred to in the introduction, students need to be able to read and discuss openly what they imagine their squiggle to be in order to write about it as many early years children will write phonetically about what they have produced. They must first be able to say it in order to ‘sound it out’ so to speak. This part of the process becomes more difficult where the adult ‘prescribes’ the task as the child may write what they think the adult is expecting with little true understanding of the task at hand, or without having the same level of confidence in their work that a free writing task would bring, and furthermore the adult may be likely to read the composition with bias, as they have pre-set expectations of what they would like the child to produce. Gerde et. al. (2012) would support the belief that students should be encouraged to read what they have written to reinforce and maintain the students understanding of the connection between what we read and write. Gerde et. al (2012) also highlights that ‘This helps children to celebrate the writing process’, and ‘to encourage children to discover the letter-sound relationship and how it is related to writing words’, (Gerde et. al, 2012, p354). The dialogue surrounding the self-assessment process that was mentioned earlier, gives opportunity for both celebration of the creativity in the work undertaken and also to make connections between what they are reading and what they have written. As Havigerova, et. al. (2016) states; ‘Creativity is thus a specific ability developed through experience, reflected in specific characteristics of an individual’s verbal, figural, and other products’ (Havigerova, et. al. 2016, p80).

### **Research Methods Findings and Analysis**

As briefly referred to earlier in the article, this action research was carried out over the course of nine months, involving a class of twenty-four kindergarten students aged five and six years. For many of these students it is their second year at school having completed one year at kindergarten one or pre-kindergarten level. The sample was chosen as a sample of convenience, as it was the class of students which the author was teaching. Cohen et. al (2011, p155) describes convenience sampling to ‘involve choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available or accessible at the time’. The data was largely gathered and analyzed using qualitative methods including using and decoding the author’s anecdotal notes on observations, assessing student work samples, tracking the progression of work over time and field notes of conversations with students. The purpose for analysing the notes was to find

if common themes or practices were emerging from this data. Overall the majority of the data gathered saw significant progress in the way students were developing their abilities as emergent writers to deeply imaginative and creative writer's over the course of the year using the squiggle book. It was observed and noted that the discussions with individual students around many of their first squiggle book entries were limited to one word responses to teacher questions or teacher led conversation and some only responded with further adult prompting. Further to that many of the early writing samples were heavily pictorial, with little presence of 'writing' per se.

Students found it very difficult to assess their own work and this was also a predominantly teacher led or teacher guided process in the beginning. However, as the year progressed and students acquired greater conversational skills, their descriptions of their writing along with their ability to reflect on and self-assess their work demonstrated significant improvement. So to say that the use of the squiggle book and the teaching methodologies used in conjunction with it resulted in progress in students writing would be a significant understatement, as substantial development in the areas of students social skills, speaking and listening skills, phonemic awareness, critical thinking skills, cognitive development and writing skills have been made. Students were confident in taking on the creative writing tasks, thinking critically about what they imagined their 'squiggle' to be and writing about it. Furthermore, students were then able to clearly and independently articulate what they had drawn and wrote about to both their peers and to the author. The details used by the students including the colors they used the size something was, feelings and emotions expressed far exceeded those descriptions given at the very beginning of the study and even what could have been predicted would be the result at the end. As the study progressed the students portrayed a coherent understanding of the process of self-assessing their work and became more and more logical in their rationale for their decisions. Students also showed sound understanding of the assessment of their work, and were able to discuss these with their teacher. Some students were even confident enough to question the feedback if they disagreed!

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the study indicated that the squiggle book has had a remarkable impact on student progress and attainment in most developmental areas. Whilst at the outset of the study it was expected or hoped to observe progress in student's emergent writing skills, and furthermore in the development of the students creative writing skills, the overall progress observed upon the conclusion of the study went far beyond these expectations. Evidence presented shows that the 'squiggle book' is not only a tool that could show great progress in students development and attainment at kindergarten level but also a great vessel for creativity into the early elementary years. Such intervention leads students to develop a more vested interest in a personal goal or target setting for their progress and have a concise understanding of the steps to be taken to make that targeted progress.



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