



# Write from the Beginning



**Sinead Harmey (UCL IOE)**  
**Fliss James (East London Research School)**  
**Jennifer Chung (UCL IOE)**  
**Isidora Castillo Rabanal (UCL IOE)**

# Write from the beginning



## **A UCL East Community Engagement funded project**

International Literacy Centre,  
East London Research School  
Sheringham Nursery and Children's Centre

With thanks to the Sheringham Nursery School Community and East London Research School; UCL East Community Engagement for funding this project; and Ondre Roach and Mediorite for photography

Suggested Citation:

Harmey, S., James, F., Chung, J., & Castillo-Rabanal, I. (2024). *Write from the Beginning*. London; UCL Institute of Education.  
August 2024

## Write From the Beginning

---

### Background

Writing an important skill in itself but also contributes to reading development, (Graham & Hebert, 2010). In England, however, at least 26% of children perform below expected standards in writing in the early years (DfE, 2022). The National Literacy Trust (2024) reported that levels of writing enjoyment have decreased by 18.1 percentage points since 2010

The pathway to becoming a skilled writer starts in the early years and we know that home literacy practices have a significant impact on children's emergent literacy skills (Incognito & Pinto, 2021). Children come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and privileging their 'home stories' is essential. It makes sense that providing the best start in writing should involve the entire community, children, parents, and teachers. There is ample research, however, that suggests despite the different strategies to support young children and parents few make it from beyond the 'lab' to the classroom (Harmey, Munoz-Chereau, & Moss, 2020). Adopting a collaborative approach, however, may be one way to bridge the gap between researchers and communities. This, however, requires careful consideration of how researchers and communities can engage. This project, therefore, proposed to trial an approach for two communities that operate as sites of learning for and about children's learning to work with each other to support young children's writing.

*We envisaged that changes that might occur as a result of this project would be*

---

- Heightened awareness and a deeper understanding of the challenges to and opportunities for supporting young children's writing (teachers, researchers, parents and children).
- That there would be an increase in (a) teacher and parent knowledge of 2 specific strategies to support writing and (b) researcher knowledge of strategies to work in collaboration with the wider public
- Participants would develop skills and confidence in supporting aspects of writing: researchers would develop skills in collaborating in the community, parents would develop skills in supporting writing, teachers would develop skills in writing pedagogy and sharing of expertise with researchers, and ultimately children might develop writing skills

---

## **Purpose of the Project**

The purposes of this engagement project 'Write from the Beginning' were to:

- To co-produce an approach to supporting young children's writing.
- To learn from each other about strategies to embed research in practice with a diverse population.

The project was a collaboration between researchers from the International Literacy Centre (IOE UCL), the East London Research School and Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre. It was funded by UCL East Community Engagement. Project activities consisted of 5 workshops for 12 families that ran over the course of summer term 2024

The ethos underpinning the project was to value participant's diverse knowledge, prior experiences, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This was driven by positioning parents as experts and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity – thus writing in any language, in any form, and moving between languages was celebrated and encouraged.

The workshops were held in the morning after adults (parents/ guardians) had dropped their children to nursery. The workshops started with adults only and a very short discussion of the planned session for the day and then involved adults and children.

The initial framework for the workshops had been developed between the project lead in EL research school (James) and UCL (Harmey) with an expectation that there would be flexible adaption along the way in response to teachers, parents and children and feedback and reflection from workshop to workshop.

This was a new method of engagement with a view to finding sustainable and meaningful ways going forward to collaborate with families to support early writing.

---

## **The Write from the Beginning Pedagogical Ethos**

The EYFS (DfE, 2023) goals in writing are that children at the expected level of development will:

- Write recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed
- Spell words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters.
- Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others (p.14).

Harmey (2023), however, outlined that it can be difficult to envisage what the pathway to these goals might look like in nursery classrooms. We focused, therefore, on building the foundation writing by focusing on two strands: the physical act of writing (transcription) and communicating meaning (composing) through this project.

Write from Beginning had two specific goals:

1. To develop strong hands for writing
2. To share and write stories

### **1. Developing Strong Hands for Writing**

This was done by focusing on multiple areas, but we drew primarily on MacKenzie and Scull (2018) by focusing on specific areas in each session. The project lead, also a qualified primary school teacher, undertook the Crossfit Educator's Certification (Crossfit, 2024) to understand more about improve quality of instruction in functional movements. Sessions focused on;

:

#### **Core strength**

Core strength means having a stable base to support fine movements. This is done by building strength in the back, abdomen and pelvic area so the body can be stable while moving hands and arms (MacKenzie & Scull, 2018, p.154)

Activities to support core strength in our sessions included holding our bodies in a plank, all fours, and animal walks and we used Crossfit Education (Crossfit, 2022) daily movement breaks to inform activities.

#### **Shoulder control**

This means stabilising the shoulder so that arms can work freely (MacKenzie & Scull, 2018, p.154-5). This was done with activities like animal walks,

crawling, and writing on vertical surfaces and we used Crossfit Education (Crossfit, 2022) daily movement breaks to inform activities.

### **Bilateral coordination**

Using both hands at the same time to complete a task MacKenzie and Scull, 2018, p.155). This was done by writing on vertical surfaces and playing with playdough.

### **Fine motor control and hand strength**

This doesn't necessarily mean using a pencil. In fact, children should be developing hand strength in a variety of ways with different positions to develop hand and wrist strength.

We did this this by focusing on 2 sets of activities in each session:

- Warm up activities (for core strength, shoulder control and bilateral coordination)
- Drawing on Myers (2006) 'Fine motor programmes for preschoolers we focused on different areas like:
  - Waking Up Hands (to provide sensory stimulation and warm up)
  - Strong Hands (focusing on grasp and building strength)
  - Smart Hands (focusing on using multiple skills at once to manipulate objects)

## **2. Sharing and writing stories**

Another core area in writing is telling stories and understanding that writing is language written down. For preschoolers even their earliest marks can have meaning. We can tell a lot by what they understand about writing by the marks they make also can help them to develop language as we talk with them as they write.

We focused on one key strategy throughout the sessions by acting as co-authors with them. There is a strong focus in Sheringham Nursery and Children's Centre on the ShREC [Share attention – Respond – Expand – Conversation] (James, 2020) approach. Shared writing was a perfect context for having high quality interactions to support language development.

Having a shared focus for getting a message on paper and using these opportunities to develop talk, to help the child to write what they can, and by writing their message for them provided an opportunity for parents, other adults and children to work on something together, to talk, and for children not see themselves as writers – and have a model of their adult as writers.



---

## Session Elements

In this section we describe the flow of our sessions that were developed and refined over the course of the workshop by all participants.

### 1. Adult Focus

Sessions always started with a social element. A time to chat and share feedback from previous sessions and set the intention for the session.



### 2. Children arrive

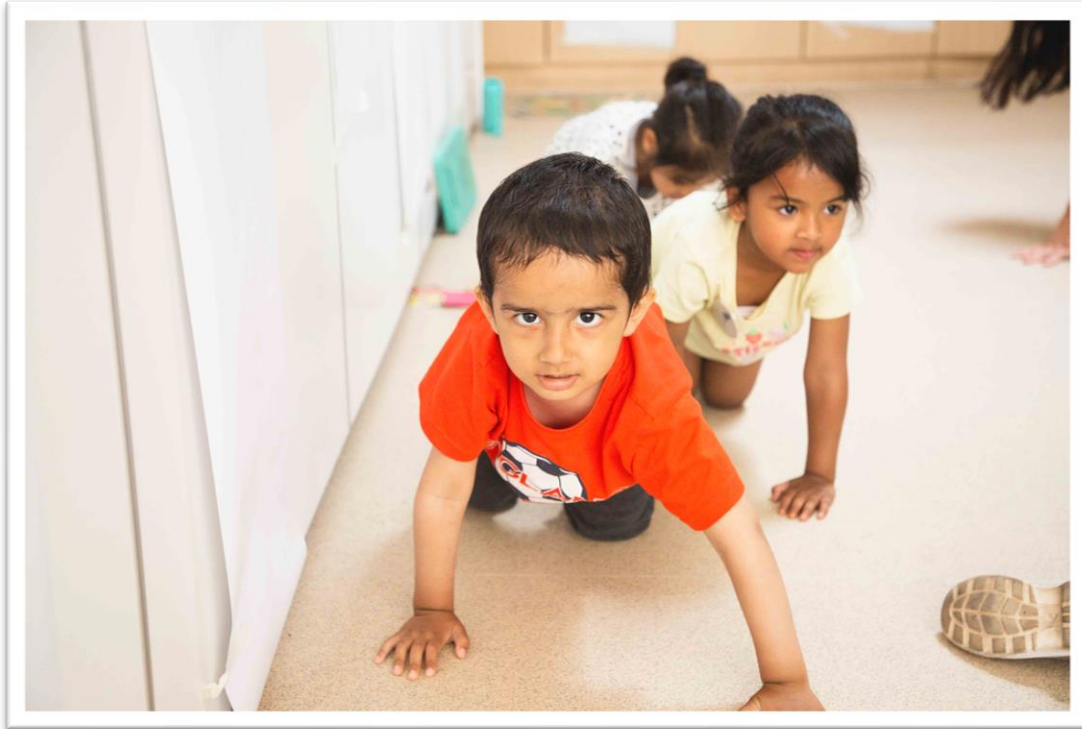
The children then joined the session and settled with their parents/ caregivers



### 3. Developing Strong Hands for Writing

#### Warm Up

Our sessions always started with warm up movements and opportunities to develop core strength and shoulder control by playful movements like animal walks.





### Wake up hands/ strong hands/ smart hands

This element of the session focused on develop hand strength and we did this through finger play to music and by using our hands to work with playdough



### Rolling



Patting and flattening



Squashing





Creating animals like snakes



Talking about what we made

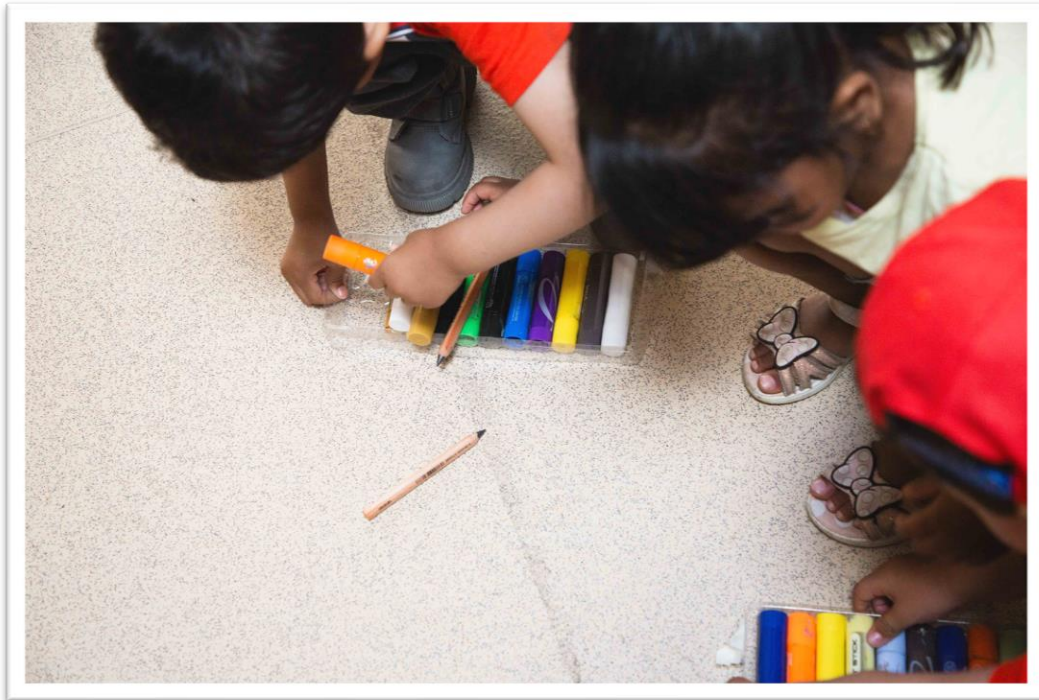


#### 4. Sharing and Writing Stories

The next part of the session focused on telling and writing stories. Often the drawings/ writings stemmed from our play in movement (animal walks) or with playdough. We used 2 simple materials to support the children to write.

##### **Tempura paint sticks**

By experimenting and over the course of the workshops we found these very effective. These materials produced bright vibrant colours and were chunky enough to grasp easily and offered opportunities to open and close lids.





## Rolls of paper on walls

We used rolls of paper stuck up on walls with masking tape at child height. Writing on a vertical surface encourages appropriate hand and wrist position (Myers, 2006, p.268) and opportunities to have work at children's eye level



## Supporting Writing and Story Telling

Talking about what we are writing



Adults and children talking, drawing and writing



Sharing the pen



Sharing and expanding talk through conversation





Modelling writing and acting as a scribe for children





Providing space to draw and create



## REFERENCES

- CrossFit (2022). *Daily movement breaks*. CrossFit Education.
- CrossFit (2024). *CrossFit educators' course (ages 3 – 11)*. Retrieved online at <https://www.crossfit.com/online-courses/educators>
- Department for Education (2023). *Early years foundation stage statutory framework*. Retrieved online at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65aa5e42ed27ca001327b2c7/EYFS\\_statutory\\_framework\\_for\\_group\\_and\\_school\\_based\\_providers.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65aa5e42ed27ca001327b2c7/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_based_providers.pdf)
- Harmey, S. (2023). *Literacy*. In Grenier, J. & Vollans, C. (Eds.), *Putting the EYFS curriculum into practice*. London; Sage Publications.
- Harmey, S; Munoz Chereau, B; Moss, G; (2020) *Translational Research in Early Childhood Education: A Systematic Review and Framework for Researchers*. UCL Institute of Education: London, UK.
- Incognito, O., Pinto, G. (2023) Longitudinal effects of family and school context on the development on emergent literacy skills in preschoolers. *Current Psychology*, 42, 9819–9829.
- James, F. (2022). *The ShREC approach – four evidence informed strategies to promote high quality interactions with young children*. Education Endowment Foundation. Retrieved online at <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/the-shrec-approach-four-evidence-informed-strategies-to-promote-high-quality-interactions-with-young-children>
- MacKenzie, N. and Scull, J. (2018). *Understanding and supporting young writers from birth to 8*. London; Routledge.
- Myers (2006). *A fine motor programme for preschoolers*. In Henderson, A. & Pehoski, C. (Eds.). *Hand function in the child: foundations for remediation*. Elsevier Mosby.
- National Literacy Trust (2024). *Writing*. Retrieved online at <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-themes/writing/>

Image Credits: Ondre Roach/ Mediorite



<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre>