

# Play and Writing in Year 1

Sand and water are resources that are evocative both for teachers and for children. They remind us of days at the beach, the sea, ponds, pools, puddles and even bath time. They offer a context in which we can all share memories of experiences, and in which children can explore and experiment with newly forming ideas and concepts. They are also cheap and easily available and, at one time, would have frequently been found in the KS1 classroom as part of continuous provision. Regrettably, in recent years, they have become almost extinct after the Foundation Stage, despite their tremendous potential for stimulating both spoken and written language in young children.

There is currently (quite rightly) much debate about the Y1 classroom, and about how to provide an appropriate learning environment for children who have experienced the kinds of play-rich activities that the Foundation Stage Document has legally entitled them to. Such activities need to make a comeback on the Y1 agenda if children are to continue to think that learning is an exciting prospect. One of the Early Learning Goals requires that children should 'continue to be motivated, excited and interested to learn'. This is an entitlement for all children, not just those under five, and is only truly achievable if children are offered motivating, exciting and interesting things to do.

This article describes one way in which sand and water can be used in a Y1 classroom in order to inspire children to write a variety of texts.

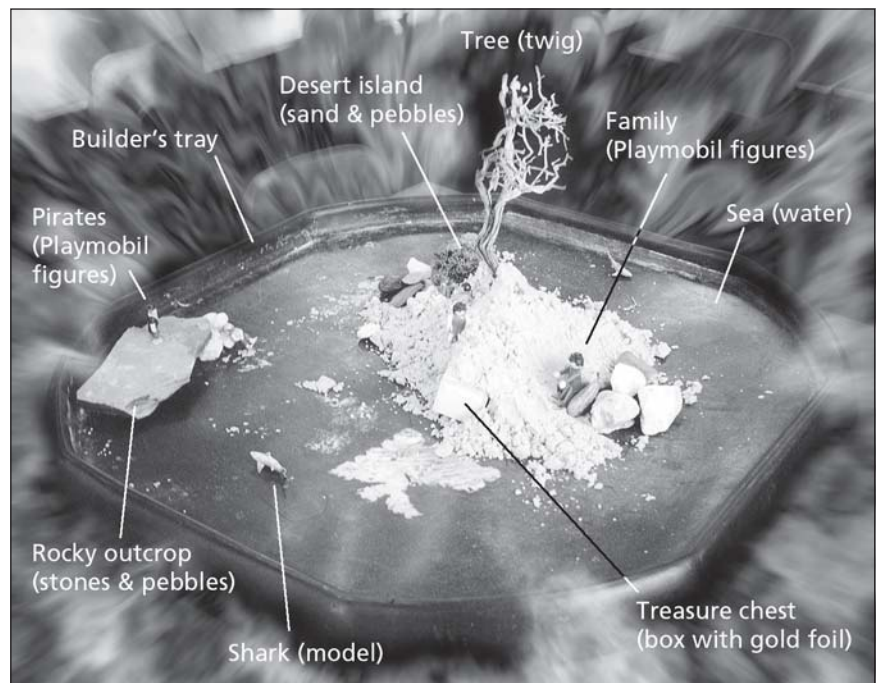
## Setting the activity up

A 'desert island' was set up in the classroom. This consisted of a large heap of damp sand and pebbles positioned in the middle of a builder's

tray. On the island was a small family of Playmobil people, some shells, and a large, gnarled twig which represented a tree at the heart of the island. At the foot of the tree was a small wooden treasure chest containing gold nuggets made from gold foil. A miniature offshore rocky outcrop was also created using stones and pebbles. Perching menacingly on the rocky outcrop was a group of toy pirates. In addition, in the water surrounding the island, one or two toy sharks were circling, for added drama!

Ideally this activity would have been available to the children for a few days at least prior to me asking them to use it as a stimulus for writing. During this time they would have had the opportunity to use it for exploratory play, and developing skills in speaking and listening. As I was only visiting the school for a day, and this particular classroom for just over an hour, this was not possible. Instead, I had to be content with ensuring that all the children had an opportunity to have a

**Helen Bromley feels strongly that the best writing children do in Year 1 is based on ideas explored through play — the same sort of play they enjoyed at Foundation Stage. Here, she describes a lesson that powerfully demonstrates this.**



The classroom 'desert island'

good look at the island before we started to discuss it and draw on it for inspiration.

## Possibilities for writing

I gathered the children together on the carpet for a whole-class session, and we talked about what they had seen. We discussed what it might be like to be on the island, and how the family represented by the Playmobil figures had come to be stranded there. We then began to discuss the possibilities for writing.

It would be an exciting prospect to use such a resource for narrative writing, possibly composing the opening of a story with a class as a whole and working with different groups of children to complete it. However, on this occasion I wanted to use the island to stimulate non-narrative.

I asked the children to talk with a partner about the kinds of writing that might be necessary in a situation such as the toy family found themselves in. I

The children were then allowed to choose whether they wanted to work with a friend or on their own. They could also choose the resources they wanted to use to make their texts. Coloured pens, pencils, and a variety of paper and card were all made available.

There is clearly not room here to discuss all the children's work, so I intend to look in detail at just some of the pieces produced.

## Making a treasure map

My first example is a treasure map, inspired by the tiny gold nuggets inside the small wooden chest. This map, drawn on carefully chosen pink sugar paper, uses a combination of codes — words and symbols — to convey meaning. It reads 'Four steps along Secret Island', and it is interesting to see the way that the girl who made it has used a numeral, followed by symbols (for steps) and then words. Her illustrations at the foot of the map

created a code of her own that has to be cracked by the reader before the adventure can begin. I think it is also worth noting the way that she has chosen to cut the map into a ragged shape, adding a dimension that leaving it as an A4 piece of paper would never have done.

Jenny Daniels has pointed out that 'children go to extraordinary lengths to make sense of their world'; and I would add 'not only to make sense of it but, in the case of an imaginary world, to inhabit it'. This treasure map is typical of the way the children involved in this session used all the knowledge and experience at their disposal to inform the creation of their spoken and written texts.



**'Four steps along Secret Island' — The Treasure Map**

then collected their suggestions on the flip chart, so that they could choose a piece to bring to life from the collaboratively created list. The inventory included maps, messages in bottles and signs, amongst other things. Many children suggested that the family could write 'Help!' messages in the damp sand, or make banners or flags to fly from the tree.

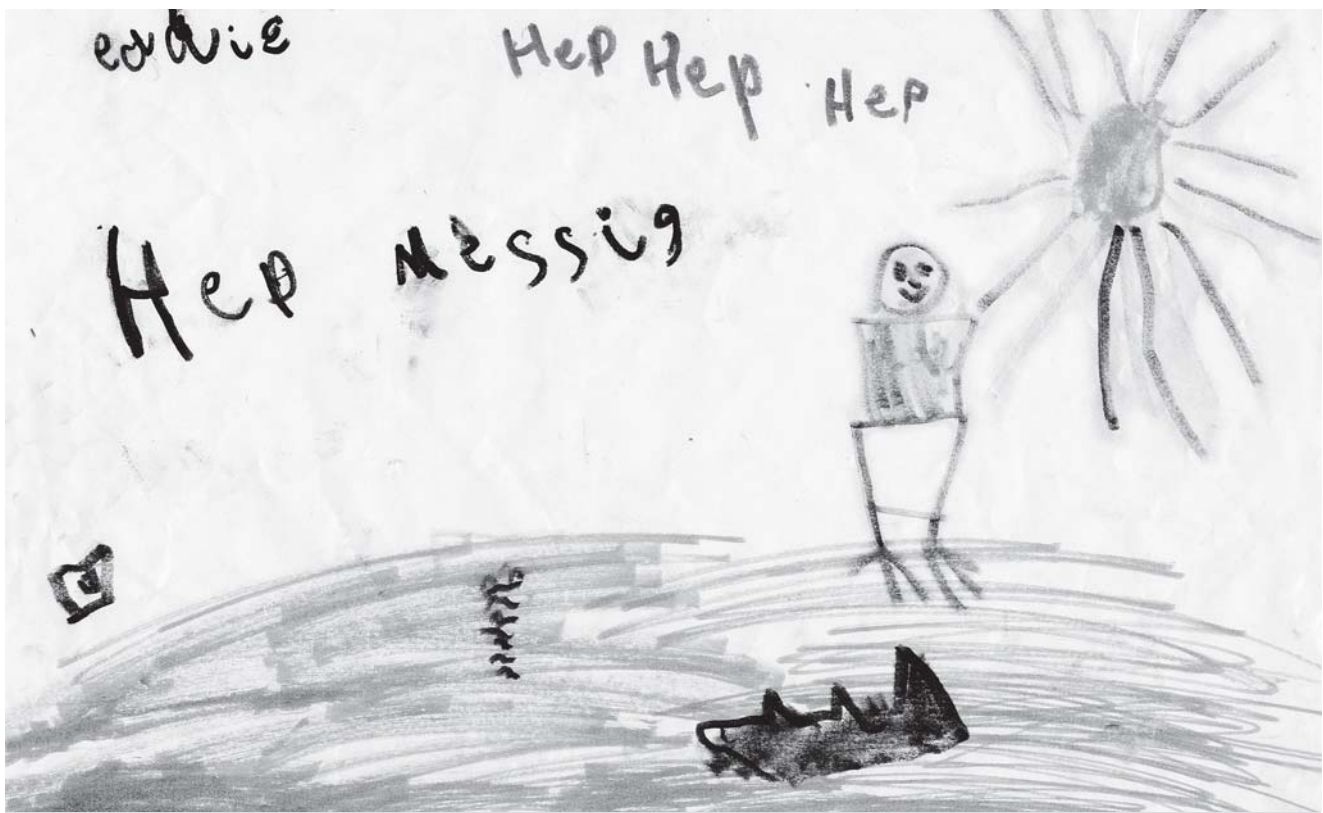
also go some way towards warning of the possible dangers that can be met by those setting off in search of the treasure, (which lies at the spot marked 'x'). The intrepid treasure seeker shown seems to have lost his arm!

This child's way of constructing directions also conveys a sense of mystery which is just right for the genre of the writing. It is as if she has



## A message and a sign

Help messages featured heavily on the list of suggestions for writing offered by the children, and several were produced. I felt that the one shown here was particularly powerful, using the word 'Hep' three times, to emphasise the dire straits that the family found themselves in, surrounded as they were by shark infested water. The words are written above the drawing of the character, as if to suggest that he is yelling for all he is worth, as he watches the shark draw nearer. The addition of the words 'Hep Messig' (see next page) emphasise the genre and draws the reader's attention to its



The 'Help message'

purpose. The treasure box can be seen in the bottom left-hand corner of the page, showing what else was held to be important by the children. Other children who created messages asked if it would be possible to have them placed in a bottle, so that someone could find them.

The third written text that I want to highlight is a sign. Making a sign was a particularly popular choice with the children when they came to write, and I felt that this was partly because, in our initial whole-class discussion, one or two of them had asked whether, if they made a sign, it could be placed on the island. The affirmative answer given was extra motivation for some children to make a text that could actually be used in their play.

The 'No swimming' sign shown here — the words backed up by a circle with a rather worried swimmer surrounded by sharks and a red bar across it — is an extremely effective piece of work. The combination of pictorial and written communication is very powerful. It has been carefully constructed to convey a particular meaning, to great effect. The waving arms and the flecks indicating the splashing waves all combine to give drama to the warning, whilst the use

of the diagonal red stripe is entirely appropriate, its meaning being known to drivers everywhere!

I asked the boy who made this sign to try and explain how he knew what to do. He replied 'I thought about what I knew from real life, and then I made it fit this'. An answer that any teacher ought to be pleased with, illuminating as it does the activation of prior knowledge and a capacity for using the imagination to solve problems.

When the sign was finished, the boy cut it out and went and placed it on the island, on the beach, near the water, which of course, is just the right



place for it. This way of 'publishing' children's work is powerful, not least because it is instant, and they can see immediately that their work is valued and that it can become part of the play-based activity offered initially. Motivated by this example, other children came and added their signs, including one that stated 'No Playing in the Water' (see the photograph)

### 'Evidence' of work

It is worth noting the contribution of one particular child who didn't commit anything to paper, but 'worked' extremely hard for the whole time that the activity was in progress. As the children left the whole-class session on the carpet, this boy came and asked if he could play with the island. When told that he could, he spent the next hour re-arranging the components, and creating a story setting that was far more interesting than the one that I had set up.

This boy was actively engaged and deeply involved in his play for the whole of the length of time that I was in the classroom, helping himself to additional props from the collection that I had taken in. During this period of dramatic small-world play, he was able to construct a story of some

complexity, trying out ideas and literally building the story as he played. I want to emphasise the importance of his contribution most particularly because although there was no written outcome, observation of his play by an interested adult provided the evidence required. On another occasion, maybe he could have been asked to tape record his story and have it transcribed by an adult on a computer for him to illustrate and have displayed alongside the contributions of the other children.

We need to contemplate how to free children from always having to commit themselves to paper for no reason other than the fact that an adult requires 'evidence'. Frank Smith wrote *It must be extremely difficult for children to practice the underlying conventions of composition while the underlying demands of transcription are so disproportionately great and when the physical act of writing is still slow and laborious. You do not learn to dance wearing heavy boots.*<sup>2</sup>

Metaphorically speaking, if we want all children to be enthusiastic, committed writers, they need to take off their heavy boots and put on their dancing shoes. Providing play-based opportunities to write does just that. But sometimes the dancing may take place without any shoes — writing — at all.

## Representative work

If the opportunities offered to a child for writing are not motivating, then the evidence to be gathered from his or her writing will not be truly representative of the range of that child's achievements, and will not therefore be valid for assessment purposes.

The National Curriculum for Speaking and Listening at Key Stage 1 requires that children should tell imaginary stories and be encouraged to participate in drama activities. The child who did no writing in the lesson described here was doing a powerful combination of both, producing storylines from the drama he was creating in the sand and water.

The National Curriculum for Writing at Key Stage 1 states that 'pupils should be helped to understand the value of writing as . . . a source of enjoyment' as well as having the opportunity to 'write in response to a

variety of stimuli'. The sand play provided for the children in this lesson was one way of addressing these objectives.

The National Literacy Strategy at Year 1 talks about signs, labels, captions, lists and instructions. The children who participated in the lesson produced all of these at a level of originality which they would not have displayed had I planned for them to make only a map, or a help message, or whatever. The



diversity of texts produced was amazing and 'No Swimming' would never have been produced had I been relying on a publisher's list of suggestions, with accompanying photocopyable materials, for Year 1. Nor would I ever have contemplated offering it as an adult-initiated model in a shared writing session!

An objective from the National Literacy Strategy requires that children 'use a variety of methods to plan stories'. That is exactly what the child who did no writing did. His 'way' was to engage in deep, high quality, imaginative play with the sand and water. Not all children can plan a story by setting it out in six boxes on a page, or by producing a mind map. Helpful as these methods might be for some, at this level they are arid in comparison to the multi sensory experience that play provides; and they offer no link to the experiences that children have had in the Foundation Stage.

We need to transform the barren learning landscape that currently seems to exist in Year 1, in order to create classrooms in which children find

learning opportunities irresistible and engage in writing because they are highly motivated to do so. As Myra Barrs wrote,

*The work of such thinkers as Gardner and Vygotsky suggests it would be valuable to adopt a broader perspective in relation to early literacy than is generally taken and to look at literacy development in relation to symbolic development in other areas, for instance in dramatic play and drawing.*<sup>3</sup>

The work of the children described

here reinforces this view with great power. If we want children to write imaginatively, then we must create circumstances where they can play imaginatively, so that they can create playful texts from playful situations and truly begin to see writing as a source of enjoyment.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniels, J 'Language, Narrative and Imaginative Play' in *Teaching and Learning in the Early Years* Whitebread, D (Ed) 1996 RoutledgeFalmer

<sup>2</sup> Smith Frank, *Writing and the Writer*, 1982 Heinemann.

<sup>3</sup> Barrs, Myra, 'Maps of Play' in *Language and Literacy in The Primary School*, Meek, M and Mills, C (Eds) 1988 Falmer Press