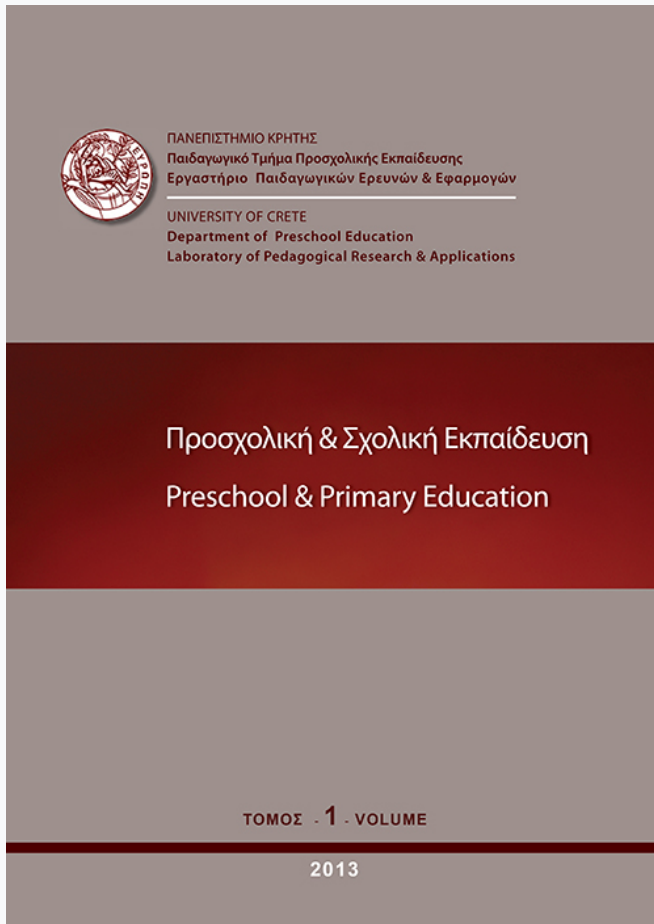


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### What we know about teaching writing

Henrietta Dombey

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# What we know about teaching writing

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**Summary.** The teaching of reading is the subject of much national and international study and the focus of considerable attention from education administrators and politicians, as well as educators. The teaching of writing receives less attention. Yet it is both complex and an essential part of education. This paper presents an overview of research into the teaching of writing in Anglophone countries from the last 40 years or so. Unlike the teaching of reading, there appears to be little controversy over the most effective approaches: researchers in the US, UK, New Zealand and Australia appear to be in broad agreement about the most effective ways of going about this complex task. While those learning to write in English have to struggle with a particularly opaque orthography, the findings from the studies cited below could also apply to teaching in other languages, particularly those with alphabetic orthographies.

**Key words:** Writing, primary, composition.

## Introduction: Why writing matters

Together with learning to read, learning to write is at the core of the education process. But writing is much less widely assessed than reading. Apart from the secretarial aspects – spelling, punctuation and handwriting or keyboard skills – and perhaps the ‘correct’ use of grammatical forms, it seems to be harder for assessors to agree on both a general scheme of evaluation and also on how an individual piece should be graded. Where frameworks for assessing progress in writing are established and where effective systems of evaluating learners’ texts are achieved, they may seem complex and puzzling to all those not immediately involved. So, public concern about literacy levels usually focuses on reading.

But writing is important. Writing is not just about putting spoken language down on the page or screen. It is also about composition – construction of texts that can communicate without their author’s presence. So it is a more complex and demanding process than reading and consequently harder to learn. One researcher claims that engaging in a writing task is as mentally demanding as playing chess (Kellogg, 2008).

But only through the ability to write as well as read can children become full members of a literate society, able to contribute their experiences and ideas to those remote from them in time and place. And only through writing can they learn to work out those ideas and reflect on those experiences in ways that carry their thinking forward.

Some schools teach writing well. There are a number of primary schools in the UK and elsewhere where children enjoy writing, do so with ease and verve, and score well on tests. Yet many other schools have problems: many children are not enthusiastic and writing

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scores on the tests taken by seven- and eleven-year-olds in England have been consistently lower than scores for reading. If we are to improve standards in writing, we need to learn from the success stories. This article aims to help readers to do this.

Some of our knowledge comes from intervention studies, some from surveys and some from observational studies. In recent years, studies of teacher and school effectiveness have made an important contribution, and so a substantial section of this paper is devoted to insights from this work. All these research paradigms have value as sources of information about how children go about the business of writing, how they can best be helped to learn to write – and to become writers, exploiting the rich possibilities that written text has to offer for enlarging their lives.

The research cited here comes from the English-speaking world, primarily from the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand. While successful teaching of writing is a skilled and complex matter, as shown below, the evidence from all these countries suggests that learning to write is most effectively achieved through approaches that balance communicative purpose and technical skills (e.g. Knapp et al, 1995; Louden et al., 2005; Medwell, Wray, Poulson, & Fox, 1998).

## **What writing is and how we go about it**

### *What writing involves*

In almost any piece of writing, from a substantial novel to a note on the kitchen table, a writer has to bring together:

- a sense of what has to be communicated – a purpose for writing;
- a knowledge of who might read the text and how to speak to them without the support of a shared context – a sense of audience;
- a familiarity with the explicit language of written text and its lexical, grammatical and presentational forms;
- an awareness of different types of writing, both paper-based and digital, and which might best fit the purpose and audience;
- a knowledge of punctuation and spelling;
- control of handwriting or digital technology;
- a readiness to review the writing after the first draft, checking for sense, for fitness for purpose and audience, and for technical accuracy.

### *What writing can do*

However, writing is not just one, undifferentiated kind of activity: different purposes require different kinds of writing.

The writer can use writing to:

- record events, through log books, diaries etc.;
- work out ideas and shape emerging thoughts, through jottings, drawings and notes and wikis;
- order and extend thinking, as in planning for action or developing an argument;
- reflect on experiences, ideas or learning, through journals, logs and diaries;
- create aesthetically satisfying works, such as stories, poems and plays;
- communicate with others, both known and unknown, in a range of formal and informal ways, through texting, e-mails, letters, work reports etc.

These purposes are not all mutually exclusive: some writing may be for the writer alone, but most writing has a communicative function, an audience in mind. In addition,

engaging in the act of writing builds a cultural identity for the writer, an authorial persona. To write is to extend one's relationship with the world and one's role in it.

### *The changing nature of text*

Writing these days is not just about words alone: in the world outside school the nature of texts has changed dramatically in the last few decades. Advances in digital technology have opened out possibilities, allowing texts to have a much stronger visual component with the added possibility of sound and video. Electronic texts of all sorts can be copied, modified and forwarded in ways that make them much less static than conventional texts and blur the boundaries between reading and writing. Today, text composition is as much about design as it is about verbal choice (Bearne, 2005; Kress, 2008).

### *Going about a piece of writing*

So how do we go about this complex task? Over 30 years ago, Hayes and Flower (1980) proposed that the experienced writer engages in three different kinds of activity: planning, creating text and reviewing. In their view, this is not a simple three-stage sequence but a process in which the writer weaves back and forth between all three activities in the course of writing a single text.

For children learning to write, any piece of writing involves, of course, a further kind of activity, in that spelling, punctuation and handwriting – skills that experienced writers use almost automatically – require conscious attention, at least in the early years of primary school. So to become independent writers, children have to learn to orchestrate many different kinds of skill, knowledge and understanding, bringing them into harmony to create a satisfying and effective text.

Building on the work of Hayes and Flower cited above, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) see that to become effective writers, children not only have to learn to write for known and unknown readers, they also need to move from 'knowledge-telling' to 'knowledge-transforming' (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982). In short, children need to learn to exploit the opportunity offered by writing to develop their thinking and understanding, through using the act of writing to order, explore, extend, clarify and revise their view of the world and their place in it.

What follows is based on this view of writing as a cognitive, social and cultural act, focused on the making of meaning, much more than the sum of its technical parts.

## **Children becoming writers: what they have to learn in school**

All children arrive in the first class of their formal education (aged about five years, in England) with knowledge and experience that is relevant to learning to write. But this knowledge and experience is likely to differ widely in kind and extent. Many children may have 'had a go' at writing, in play or in cards to family members, or on the computer. Many are familiar with the language of the written word (rather different from conversation) through listening to stories read aloud. Some may have engaged in shared story-telling and some may have memorised songs. Many children with a home language other than the language of school instruction may have 'had a go' at writing in a script based on different principles from those of the orthography taught in school. All these different kinds of learning need to be recognised, valued and continued.

So too do children's out-of-school experiences of digital writing, which are likely to increase as children get older. A 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum needs to reflect the increasingly multimodal forms of writing children engage with (Bearne & Wolstencroft, 2007; Cremin &

Myhill, 2011). If the definition of writing is broadened to reflect such practices as digital games, texts messages and web-design, many children say they write for pleasure (Clark & Dugdale, 2009; Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Rankin Macgill, 2008). There is also some evidence to suggest that young people who have their own social networking page have more positive attitudes towards writing (Clark & Dugdale, 2009).

Of course these out-of-school experiences of writing are not enough: children need to learn to use the written word to create, with increasing independence and technical accuracy, an increasing range of meanings for an increasing range of purposes and audiences as they make their way up the primary school. However, those who say they enjoy writing and those who write outside school are more likely to be writing above the level expected for their age (Clark, 2012).

As to the process of writing, ultimately children need to learn to think up and note down ideas about what they are going to say, turn those ideas into the actuality of words – with images and sounds in many cases – that speak to an unknown reader in a comprehensible and coherent way. They also need to learn to set the words down on the page or screen without conscious attention to how they are spelled or how the letters are formed, review what they have written, refining it to make it communicate more effectively and do all this in a recursive way, moving between amending their plans, forging new text and polishing what they have produced.

I should stress again that what we know of what works best suggests that learning to write in this broad sense is most effectively achieved through approaches that balance communicative purpose and technical skills (Knapp et al., 1995; Louden et al., 2005; Medwell et al., 1998). Certainly sustained, explicit instruction in technical features, removed from the context of purposeful use, does not seem to be the most effective way to teach these lessons.

Instead, we need to encourage and support children's attempts to make personal meaning from school-based writing practices and ensure that they are active participants in their own learning (Cremin & Myhill, 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

## **Lessons from studies of effective schools and effective classrooms**

We have much to learn from research over the last few decades about how children with varying experiences and expectations of written language can best be helped to learn all that it takes to become a writer. Before examining the many classroom practices that have proved productive, I look first at a number of studies of classrooms and schools where the teaching of writing has been seen to be most generally effective. Successful schools and classrooms have much to teach us; we need to see what it is that the most successful teachers do. The features observed are itemised below.

### ***Effective literacy teachers:***

#### ***Balance the technical and compositional aspects of learning to write***

Detailed observational and interview studies of exemplary teachers carried out in the US by Block and Pressley (2000) and by Pressley et al. (2001) show that these highly effective teachers offer children a wide range of reading and writing experiences, including daily writing in journals and writing workshops as well as mini-lessons about the mechanics of writing, based on children's needs. In Kindergarten (ages five to six) this often involves repeating these literacy experiences, using the same text and context until the child makes the connection. At this and the next two grade levels, in any single lesson, the exceptional teachers do not focus on one or two teaching points, but teach up to twenty different skills in

a single hour. The evidence of Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) from four outstanding early years teachers in New Zealand is broadly in line with these findings.

*Integrate these aspects of learning to write*

Balance is important, but balance is far from all in the classrooms of effective teachers. Attention to technical features is contextualized in the process of purposeful writing. In a study of effective teachers of children in the first six grades (aged six to twelve) in New York City, Knapp et al. (1995) observed that they teach skills as tools to be used immediately, not items to be learned for their own sake. This is borne out by the findings about effective teachers of literacy throughout the primary age-range by Medwell et al. (1998) in England, Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) in New Zealand and Loudén et al. (2005) in Australia.

*Emphasise attention, engagement, metalinguistics and challenge*

Effective teachers are distinguished from their less successful colleagues not only by the activities they engage in, nor simply by making clear and obviously relevant to the children the purpose of any technical features under discussion. In their study of early years classes in Australia, Loudén et al. (2005) found that the more effective teachers go about their activities in a particular way: they place greater emphasis on attention and engagement, metalinguage and challenge.

*Give priority to a richly conceived literacy*

In New Zealand, Parr and Limbrick (2010) looked at the teaching of writing throughout the primary years, in schools achieving high results in an area that was normally low-achieving. They found that literacy is a clear priority for teachers in the most effective schools and noted that pupils both read more and write more on topics they care about than their age-mates do in less effective schools. In the US, Knapp et al. (1995) found that effective teachers make creativity and self-expression important in their classrooms. Children in both studies spend more time on task, apparently enjoying what they do. In England, Medwell et al. (1998) found a similar focus.

*Spend more time in small group teaching*

The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), a US government-funded research initiative, has carried out a number of studies including a national study of effective schools in high-poverty inner-city areas (e.g. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). They find that such schools are organized to maximize the possibility of small group work. The composition of these groups is seen to be important, with groups that are based on similar levels of attainment, but are not static, instead changing frequently in the light of continuous assessment and monitoring. Lower-achieving groups are not confined to mundane tasks. Parr and Limbrick (2010), focusing on the teaching of writing, make a similar observation, showing that their effective teachers spend more time in small group teaching than is the norm, again making careful use of assessment and monitoring to adjust the composition of the groups. However, they also note 'Effective practice is not something absolute; it varies with context' (Parr & Limbrick, 2010, p. 586).

*Know what their pupils can do and what they need*

Medwell et al. (1998) note that effective teachers are also marked out by their use of focused observation, systematic record-keeping and skillful use of more and different support for struggling writers. Such features also mark the classrooms of the effective schools in the CIERA studies (e.g. Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000).

*Create more discursive, conversational and dialogic classrooms*

Classrooms where children achieve greater success in their literacy learning are certainly orderly places, where teaching is explicit and expectations are clearly transmitted to children. But the order is democratic rather than autocratic: the shaping of written text takes place within a general atmosphere of tentativeness, negotiation and dialogue (Knapp et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000).

*Build explicitly on children's personal and cultural backgrounds*

The teachers in Parr and Limbrick's (2010) study demonstrate knowledge of the children's out-of-school lives, and reflect this knowledge in the print environment of the classroom and in the kinds of writing the children are asked to engage in. The work of the classroom is not culturally separated from the children's homes, but recognises, values and builds on their home experiences.

*Share the purposes for writing and the criteria of success with learners.*

Studies show not only that effective teachers are marked by the clarity of their explanations, but also that they offer timely and focused feedback and that all this is within the context of a sense of purpose shared with the children (Knapp et al., 1995; Louden et al., 2010; Parr & Limbrick, 2010; Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000).

*The actions of effective literacy teachers are founded on beliefs – about literacy, teaching and children – that set them apart from their less successful colleagues.*

The practice of the most effective teachers is supported by their philosophies (Medwell et al., 1998; Parr & Limbrick, 2010). These teachers have a stronger focus on meaning and place more importance on children's recognition of the purpose and function of particular literacy activities; they also see all pupils as capable of becoming effective writers (Au, 2005; Block & Pressley, 2000; Block, Oakar, & Hurt, 2002; Parr & Limbrick, 2010; Taylor et al., 2000; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). The most effective teachers see their pupils as active, thinking, feeling sense-makers and apply their theoretical understanding not just to the class in general, but to particular children.

Such approaches, dispositions and beliefs appear to be more important than curricular content.

**Key classroom practices that promote development in writing**

One message that comes through very many of the research studies cited above is that if children are to be fully engaged in their learning they need to experience learning to write as interesting, meaningful and purposeful from the start, which means that they should not be confined to exercises in letter formation in the early stages, but involved in purposeful activities such as shared story-writing and the exchange of written messages. We need to ensure that classrooms are responsive to the knowledge, skills and concerns that children bring to school and supportive to the generation of ideas that take the children into new territory. What follows is a list of practices aimed to do just this that have been shown to be effective.

*Children tend to make a good start in learning to write where their teachers:**Model and share the process of writing*

But how can children start to produce meaningful texts while also getting to grips with the technical aspects of writing? Children need to learn to combine a complex array of skilled activities into one coherent (if not always smooth) operation. Re-enthusing teachers in the writing process can be an excellent starting point. Visiting children's authors who talk

about how they go about writing can provide a way in (Cremin, Reedy, Sprackland, & Starling, 2010).

Modelling writing involves the teacher in constructing a composition in front of the class, on a large surface, 'thinking out loud' as she goes, thus demonstrating the many kinds of choices involved in composition. The topic is chosen to engage the children's interest. Through this activity, the teacher can draw attention to writing as a process of orchestrating knowledge and skills, and show how to maintain a focus on the subject matter, and a sense of the purpose and audience for the text, while also dealing with necessary technical matters. This is often achieved through a sequence of some or all of the processes of informal and formal planning, drafting, revising, proof-reading and preparing the text for publication (Fisher, 2002).

Even more effective is the practice of Shared Writing, where the children are actively involved in both choosing the words and setting them down on the paper. This has been shown to be highly effective (Laycock, 2011) particularly where the writing is directed at meeting a purpose recognized by the children as important. The teacher's management of the processes of composition, transcription and revision provides a framework in which many different aspects of the process can be experienced and brought together, leading to a recognisably accomplished outcome. Perhaps the most important feature is the discussion through which the text is composed and revised. This offers the possibility of developing metalinguistic awareness, of exploring how different words arrangements and punctuation marks construct different meanings.

This approach can be particularly constructive for children in Reception and Year 1, learning to set words down on paper for the first time, as Geekie, Cambourne, & Fitzsimmons (1999) show most powerfully in their study of a highly effective teacher of children starting school at the age of five in Australia. The children start each day by helping their teacher scribe a one-sentence 'story' about a shared experience. At other points in the day the children show, in their attempts to record their own stories, how much they have learned from this shared experience. In both contexts, as she listens and talks to the children, the teacher's aim is to help them achieve what they cannot yet do on their own.

#### *Invite the exchange of written messages*

The postbox in the corner of the classroom of the youngest children is one way to make writing a matter of real communication for them. So too can be the teacher's response to a child's story or account of an experience. There is the world of difference between "good try" and "I got lost too, when I was your age". The danger that writing becomes an empty exercise to please the teacher is always present: exchanging purposeful messages can re-engage children in the process (Block & Pressley, 2000).

Electronic communication can make the act of writing particularly engaging. Six- and seven-year-olds can be enthusiastically and productively involved in texting, message boards, Twitter and sites such as Club Penguin (Marsh, 2012; Waller, 2010). In these contexts writing becomes fun for many more young learners, who come to see the point of careful composition and transcription.

#### *Encourage the use of talk in the writing process*

Latham (2002) has shown that talk can extend the capacity of working memory for writing - a particularly important consideration where young novices are concerned. In a Scottish study, children just starting school at five wrote significantly better when they talked through the writing process with a twelve-year-old who had struggled in the early years of learning to write (Nixon & Topping, 2001). Talk between children seems to facilitate the internalisation of processes demonstrated by the teacher and can assist children in deciding what to say and how to spell (Davidson, 2007).



### *Support invented spelling*

English orthography is notoriously complex. We should not expect children to get it right from the start. Research shows that children learning to write in English use a variety of useful spelling strategies from the early stages – phonetic, visual and known words.

The most productive approaches to helping children make progress in these early phases appear to be support, encouragement and purposeful writing (Bissex, 1980). Children learn to spell through trying to do so as they write and should be encouraged to monitor their own spellings from early on, with support from teacher and peers;

Encouraging invented spellings in these early stages helps children get their own words down on the page. But to make further progress, visual approaches – ‘remembering how words look’ – are necessary as well as ‘sounding words out’. Explicit teaching makes the biggest difference in moving children towards conventional spelling (Peters, 1970).

More recent work has not challenged these findings. Instead it has reinforced the idea that to learn to spell effectively in English, children need to be trained to attend to both the sounds of words, their visual configurations and, as spelling develops, the structure of words (suffixes, prefixes, word roots etc.) (O’Sullivan & Thomas, 2007).

### *Encourage play with rhyme and alliteration*

Young children enter enthusiastically into play with the sound of language. The academic pay-off is that they become more aware of speech as sequences of phonemes and so better prepared to learn phonics. Sharing nursery rhymes and tongue twisters brings the added benefit of showing the enjoyable nonsense that can be created through language. The research studies of Bryant, Maclean, Bradley, and Crossland (1989), of Coyne, Farrington-Flint, Underwood, and Stiller (2012) and of Goswami (1999) have shown a clear connection between experience and knowledge of rhyme and alliteration and later progress in reading and spelling.

### ***In their later primary years, children continue to make progress where their teachers:***

#### *Engage in writing themselves, sharing experience and expertise with their classes*

McKinney and Georgis (2009) and Yeo (2007) have shown that teachers’ childhood experiences of writing in school have an impact on their identities as writers and teachers of writing. Not all those experiences were positive or transfer well into today’s classrooms. Gannon and Davies (2007) show that many teachers are drawn to teach English by a love of reading but are less enthusiastic about writing and often lack assurance as writers. When teachers develop such an assurance however, this can, scholars argue, have a positive effect on their teaching (Andrews, 2008; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2009). Studies by Cremin (2006), Cremin and Baker (2010) and Pritchard (1987) suggest that when teachers readily engage in writing themselves, they come to reconsider and transform their pedagogic practice and may show increased empathy for younger writers.

#### *Work with children, demonstrating the process of writing, acting as scribes, response partners, editors and advisors*

Vygotsky’s (1930/1978) conception of effective learning, produced as a novice shares a task with a more experienced practitioner and Bruner’s notion of scaffolding are often loosely invoked to justify a variety of teaching approaches (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). By contrast, the work of Cremin and Baker (2010) identifies a series of contexts in which teachers share the writing task with their students productively to scaffold their learning. They show the effectiveness of teachers taking a range of supporting roles, helping children develop confidence and competence as young writers (Cremin, 2006; Cremin & Baker, 2010). The teachers may be involved as:

- authentic demonstrators in front of the whole class, showing how they go about such varied task elements as choosing a topic, selecting the right words, revising the word order and remembering spellings;
- scribes for whole class joint compositions, where children have the support of both the teacher and each other as they jointly construct a shared text;
- writers alongside the children in small group contexts, where they can create a genuine 'workshop' atmosphere as both teacher and children wrestle with the choice of words and the task of setting them down;
- response partners, helping children to become aware of how others see their writing;
- editors and advisers, perhaps closer to the more traditional teacher role, but here aimed towards offering authorial advice and helping children make wise choices as writers, rather than correcting their writing;
- publishers, enabling children to present their writing to a wider audience.

#### *Encourage and support wide and copious reading*

When published authors give advice about becoming writers they invariably tell their audience to read as much as possible. The survey by England's inspection service, Ofsted, of 12 outstanding schools revealed that visits to libraries, plentiful reading aloud by teachers and the provision of good-quality up-to-date texts stimulated pupils to read more and inspired them with ideas for their own writing (Ofsted, 2011). Children who read more write more and write better. Arguably the most pervasive effect appears to be on the texture of the young writers' written language: on the vocabulary, sentence structure and cohesive patterning through which they create complex webs of meaning (Cairney, 1990; Frater, 2001; Pantaleo, 2007a; Sipe, 1993).

#### *Regularly read substantial texts aloud*

Studies carried out in the 1960s showed that listening to stories read aloud in engaging ways at school has a significant effect on children's vocabulary (Cohen, 1968; Fodor, 1966). Elley (1989) also shows that reading aloud to 7- and 8-year-olds in school provides them with a significant source of vocabulary expansion. But the effect goes wider than vocabulary. In an experimental study of reading aloud to kindergarten and first grade children, Vivas (1996) shows as well as improved vocabulary and story comprehension, increases in the range of syntactic structures and the width of linguistic activity in the classroom.

This is richly demonstrated in the report of a research project carried out by staff at the Centre for Language in Primary Education with teachers of nine- and ten-year-olds in schools in South and East London (Barrs & Cork, 2001). Working with rhythmic and resonant texts, some of them common to all five classes, the six teachers strove to engage children through animated reading aloud, dramatisation and related activities, including discussion of key features of the texts.

Over the year of the project, dramatic changes in the children's writing became evident. In all classrooms the literary text had become a source and an inspiration for writing. But how the text was used varied across the classrooms. The teacher's activities most positively associated with improved scores and to writing of high quality were reading and re-reading aloud, intervening and responding to children's texts during the process of writing, and reading their work aloud to them.

#### *Make extensive use of drama, involving children in writing arising out of this*

Children are particularly responsive to drama – to the idea of taking on other roles, imaginatively living others' lives, investigating fictional scenarios and exploring the implications of their actions through their multimodal engagement. Such engagement

invites children to 'inhabit' a text, giving it a new urgency, and prompting an exploratory yet focused use of language. Drama has an important role to play in literacy education. Primary phase research indicates that it has a positive effect on learners' achievements in writing, producing more depth and detail (Barrs & Cork, 2001; Cremin, Gooch, Blakemore, Goff, & Macdonald, 2006; Crumpler & Schneider, 2002; Fleming, Merrell, & Tymms, 2004). In particular, when teachers 'seize the moment' for children to write *during* drama, the tense scenarios of the imagined experience offer a supportive scaffold that fosters thoughtful, imaginative and effective writing (Cremin et al., 2006).

#### *Encourage language play*

Research into children's language play indicates that children's delight in playing with rhyme, rhythm and tune contributes to their learning of the sounds, structures and meanings of language and to its symbolic use (Grugeon, 1999; Opie, 1993). Drawing on children's enthusiasm for playing with language, their spontaneous use of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and assonance enriches their writing of poetry (Cummings, 2007). Their poetical experiences may best be nurtured by building bridges between their existing knowledge of language play and the new knowledge of poetry encountered in the classroom.

#### *Foster choice and independence in writing*

Schools that are hospitable to their students' out-of-school lives, including the writing practices of their homes and communities, evoke a greater commitment to learning to write and a greater sense of the importance of writing (Nixon & Comber, 2006). Other research into connections between home and school indicates that fostering choice and enabling connections to be made between writing at home and at school can increase motivation, commitment and quality (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Close studies of what children actually write have shown that the topics and the materials they choose to engage with emerge from their social and cultural experiences and the practices in their homes and communities (Walsh, 2007).

#### *Provide authentic purposes for writing and allow children to choose their own topics*

Unsurprisingly, children appear to write best when writing on topics that matter to them. Some know what they want to write about, whether this is about an area of expertise or an adventure story. Others may be at a loss and need a context and a purpose to commit themselves to. The teacher may create the context, perhaps a drama involving many different roles and perspectives on events, but if the students are given choices about the forms, perspectives, audiences and purposes of their writing, they are more likely to be engaged and committed (Bearne, Chamberlain, Cremin, & Mottram, 2011; Cremin et al., 2006; Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Walsh, 2007).

Writing journals, which usually take the form of books in which children are free to write (and also draw) on topics of their own choosing, provide a valuable context in which children from four to twelve are free to explore their own particular concerns. Used carefully, as described by Graham and Johnson (2012), they can have a markedly positive effect on children's attitudes and attainment in this area. It is important that the teacher treats the journal as the child's property and an indicator of his or her interests and thinking. So the teacher's role is not to correct transcription errors, but, where invited to do so, to respond to the substance of what the child has written.

#### *Find time for children to write every day and also to engage in sustained periods of writing*

Like all complex skills, writing is not easily or quickly mastered. It needs practice. Of course this does not mean mechanical drills and empty exercises. It means daily and sustained engagement with writing that is playful, purposeful, fed by rich experiences of drama, poetry and story as well as explanatory and descriptive texts. But the time devoted to writing is crucial. Evidence from successful classrooms in the US and England

demonstrates the need both for daily writing and for sustained periods of writing (longer as the children get older) in which children produce substantial texts (Berninger et al, 2006; Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Ofsted, 2011).

#### *Encourage the use of talk as an aid to writing*

The work of Mercer and Littleton (2007) has demonstrated conclusively the power of disciplined, purposeful small group talk to promote children's learning across the curriculum. Drawing on Vygotsky's conception of learning as most powerful when it is collaborative (Vygotsky, 1930/1978), they have shown, in primary phase classrooms, that focused talk can enable children to use language to think and learn together, to organize ideas and to solve problems. This has huge implications for the teaching of writing.

Corden (2000) demonstrates the enhanced writing that follows from the careful fostering of talk in both group and whole class contexts. Building on Corden's work, Fisher, Myhill, Jones, & Larkin (2010) have focused on the use of talk in response pairs to generate idea, as oral rehearsal (or 'writing aloud') and as reflection about the process of writing. Others have also seen the value of such reflective talk, both on the process of writing and on children's sense of what it is to be a writer (Cremin, 2006; Feigenbaum, 2010). In particular, working with response partners appears to prompt young writers to become readers of their own texts and thus helps develop the inner voice of a critically reflective writer (Feigenbaum, 2010).

The creative experience of oral storytelling of old and new tales has also been shown to make a rich contribution to children's narrative writing and to their creative capacity to transform texts (Grainger, 2001).

#### *Establish writing workshops*

Donald Graves (1983), who initiated the shift in focus from writing as product to writing as process, maintained that there are four essential elements to a successful writing-process program: the adequate provision of time (sessions on at least 4 days per week), child choice of writing topic, response to child meaning, and the establishment of a community of learners - a community that has learned to help itself. The *Writing Workshop* approach aims to treat children as writers who have areas of expertise and interesting ideas to communicate.

The approach involves interaction between children and with the teacher at various stages of the process: brainstorming, topic selection, drafting, revision, editing and publication. While there appears to be limited research on the quantifiable effects of introducing this approach, it is likely to be productive, since it embodies very many of the features that, as shown above, have proved successful in raising the quality of writing in the primary years. In addition, the Ofsted report *Excellence in English* (Ofsted, 2011), which presents the practice of twelve exemplary schools, includes a focus on the writing workshop approach adopted by one primary school, with dramatically positive effect.

### ***Children make progress where their teachers also teach those crucial technical lessons ...***

#### *Spelling*

Encouraging invented spellings in the early stages helps children get their own words down on the page (Read, 1971; Treiman, 1994). But to progress, a wider range of strategies including visual approaches is necessary, as well as 'sounding words out' (Snowling, 1994). In particular, work on misspellings (Dix, 2006) and the collection of similarly spelled words have been shown to be productive, as has attention to word meanings (Hilte & Reitsma, 2011).

Effective teaching has been shown to operate through such activities as: 'mini lessons', classroom word collections, displays and print hunts focused on different aspects of spelling, grouping of content or 'topic words', words with common meanings, similar letter strings and patterns, words with the same prefix, or suffix etc. (O'Sullivan & Thomas, 2007).

### *Handwriting and keyboard skills*

Word processing offers unparalleled opportunities for the revision, exchange and presentation of text. It should not be reserved for the publication of children's texts, but should also be used for their composition. However, if these opportunities are to be fully exploited, children need to be at ease with the keyboard, not tapping out their texts laboriously, one letter at a time. Explicit keyboarding instruction (touch-typing) is necessary if the full potential of the word processor is to be unlocked for children's writing (Connelly, Gee, & Walsh, 2010).

Yet a fluent handwriting style is still important. Recent studies have shown that children who write more easily tend to write better texts (Berninger & Amtmann, 2004; Medwell & Wray, 2007). This is not simply a matter of training the fine muscles of the hand: handwriting is not a simply motor act, but can more usefully be thought of as "language by hand" in which orthographic and memory processes make a bigger contribution than motor skills (Berninger & Graham, 1998). As with other technical aspects of the writing process, handwriting and keyboard skills are best learned in the context of producing meaningful text.

### *Punctuation*

Calkins (1980) found that in classrooms where writing was purposeful and attention was focused on the effect on the reader, eight- to nine-year-olds used a wider variety of marks and did so more effectively than their age mates in classrooms where writing was more regulated and punctuation learned by rules. Hall's research (2001) with five- and six-year-olds tells a similar story. He found that meaningful understanding of punctuation results from a combination of the following: meaningful reading and writing activities, talk about punctuation, emphasising the effect it produces, encouragement of an experimental approach, a well punctuated classroom environment. An important contribution was also made by the teacher's self-discipline in limiting herself to one type of explanation for punctuation - either elocutionary (how the text should be read aloud), grammatical (how punctuation indicates syntactic divisions and relationships) or semantic (how it shows meaning). Skill in using punctuation is also supported by children's experience of a range of text forms, and a classroom ethos in which talk about learning is ongoing and interest in punctuation marks is encouraged.

However, the children Hall observed to make most progress in their use of punctuation were given very little explanation by the teacher. The principal criterion they used in deciding on whether to use a particular mark was semantic - what the mark would make the words mean.

### *Grammar teaching*

Robust research evidence about the direct relationship between teaching primary children knowledge about language or grammar and any beneficial impact on their writing remains very limited. Two significant large-scale meta-analyses (Andrews et al., 2006; Hillocks, 1986) found no evidence of a relationship. It should be noted that these studies concern the teaching of grammar separated from the teaching of writing.

However, more recent projects have involved teaching grammar in the context of writing. Working with children aged six to ten in Scotland, Hunt (2001) has shown that introducing key terms such as 'synonym', 'verb', 'noun', 'sentence' and 'noun phrase' in the

context of shared writing can clarify the options and so help children consider alternative wordings and make appropriate choices.

Recently in England, a study by Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson (2012) involving a large-scale randomised trial in secondary schools found positive effects for teaching that included explicit attention to relevant grammatical constructions within the context of writing particular kinds of texts. But the authors note that not all pupils benefited equally, finding “a more marked positive effect on able writers” (Myhill et al. 2012 p. 151).

This study was carried out in secondary schools, where a sustained metalinguistic focus might be considered more developmentally appropriate, than in primary school, not least because many of the technical processes of writing have already been mastered by most children before entry to secondary education. But, as indicated above, the teaching of writing inevitably involves the use of some metalinguistic terms. We do not yet know which of these terms are likely to be most productive in the primary years, at which stage, or how they might best be introduced.

## Assessment

To have value in informing decisions about the paths to be taken by students or teachers, any system of assessment needs take account of the more important aspects of writing outlined above. As the evidence cited makes clear, learning to write involves learning to compose written language, suitable to the purpose served by the writing and the audience at which it is directed. It is much more than spelling, punctuation, handwriting and the appropriate use of grammatical structures.

It is essential that any assessment of writing reflect this fact. Assessment for the purposes of monitoring, for audiences within the school or beyond it, must also recognise the complex nature of learning to write. Selecting aspects of transcription to stand proxy for the whole complex process will not yield useful results. Especially where such information is used to judge schools and teachers, it will instead lead to an over-emphasis on one part of learning to write at the expense of other vital aspects.

## Conclusion

As this survey of a wide range of research findings has repeatedly shown, it is not useful to divorce technical matters, whether grammatical or secretarial, from the business of learning to compose written text for a range of audiences and purposes. Starting off with activities as modest as a message to a friend popped into the classroom postbox, children need to know that writing is about communication and ideas.

In classrooms where young children learn to write effectively, attention is given to both the learning of the codes of written language and also to the uses and purposes of writing, in ways that are meaningful to the learner. Teachers provide extensive opportunities for their pupils to read and respond to children’s literature and to write for a variety of authentic purposes while also attending to the codes of written language – to grammar, sound-symbol correspondence, spelling patterns, punctuation, and text structure. Ironically, while they need explicit teaching, these more mechanical skills appear to be best learned in the context of engagement with powerful literature and writing a range of texts for purposes and audiences that matter to the writer.

In these successful twenty-first century classrooms there is no longer a sharp divide between the written word and other modes of communication. Today children come to school with experiences and expectations of multimodal text. When they leave school it is to

make their way in a world dominated by proliferating digital forms of communication. We owe it to our children not to try to recreate the classrooms of sixty years ago, but to allow them to benefit from the rich lessons research has given us over the intervening decades about how children learn to write and what the new technologies have to offer. In this way we can help them take possession of the written word and use it to make sense of their lives, and the world around them.

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