

Writing in Context: Reluctant Writers and Their Writing at Home and at School

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Abstract: This study investigated the engagement with writing of reluctant writers in the contexts of home and school. A structured and semi-structured survey method was used to capture responses from 106 reluctant writers in 9 primary schools (age range 6–9 year olds) in the UK. Findings show that although these students were deemed to be reluctant writers by their teachers, the majority admitted to writing in a range of genres in the home context. It was found that these students had access to adult help with their writing in the home and also had ready-made audiences. A sociocultural perspective is used to explain the discontinuity in the writing behaviours of these students between home and school. The implications of this study are applicable to societies with highly prescriptive writing curricula in which transcriptional writing skills are privileged over creativity and compositional processes. The corollary is that schools need to adopt ethnographic approaches to literacy in order to capture the varied identities of students as writers, and provide the means by which students can freely apply literacy practices developed in the home to writing in school.

Introduction

This study compared the writing practices of 106 pupils aged between six and nine years old, identified by their teachers as reluctant writers. The study emerged out of a larger research project investigating reluctant writers, funded by the Bedford Charity (Harpur Trust). The project involved 19 teachers in nine Lower Schools in one Local Authority in the U.K. All but one of the schools was state maintained. All of the schools followed some form of the National Curriculum's programmes of study for English (DfEE 1999), albeit modified by the National Primary Strategy (DfES 2006). Although two schools were developing a 'creative curriculum' which involved the integration of subjects around themes, all of the schools taught literacy as a separate entity within the curriculum.

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy

The teaching of writing in the project schools was influenced by cognitive process models of writing composition (Hayes & Flower, 1980), which fail to take account of the social contexts in which writing occurs (Prior, 2006, p. 54). In contrast, sociocultural perspectives suggest mental functioning is socially situated and subject to cultural, institutional and historical variation (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 3; Wertsch, 1998, p. 3). Wertsch (1991) develops the idea posited by Vygotsky that mind cannot be seen independently of culture and that mental processes are influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which thinking occurs. Given this perspective, it is possible that the cultural tools available to the learner in different social contexts give rise to differentiated thinking in these contexts. Hence, the way writing lessons are framed in the classroom context may cause the learner to adopt significantly different mental orientations to writing compared to writing events in out of school contexts. The sociocultural perspective therefore is founded upon the 'premise that language is social, cultural and political' and that literacy is 'a complex cultural practice that is part of children's identities and everyday lives both

in and out of school' (Whitmore et al., 2004, p. 312). A sociocultural perspective framed this study which sought to explore, identify and explain discontinuities in the literacy practices that might exist between home and school for these reluctant writers.

Myhill and Fisher also note that writing is socio-culturally complex and that young writers must learn to manage 'differently situated expectations of school literacies and the literacies they encounter in the home and in their out of school worlds' (Myhill & Fisher, 2010, p. 1). Ivanic (2004, p. 223) provides a sociocultural model of literacy in which the production of text is embedded in a nested system consisting of: cognitive processes, the particular social context of language use and wider socially available resources, including multi-modal practices, discourses and genres. The model takes account of how socio-political and socio-cultural discourses impact on language use and textual production for different groups. To explicate this point a little more, what is posited in this study is the view that in complex pluralist societies, individuals have multiple identities that are situated in the different sociocultural contexts that are integral to their lives. In this paper home and school are the sociocultural foci for an investigation of the attitudes and behaviour of reluctant writers in relation to the writing process. The central question concerns how the identities of reluctant writers might be shaped by these different contexts and their consequent behaviours in these settings.

The multiplicity of sociocultural contexts available to the individual is represented in Figure 1 ('An Interactional Multicultural Perspective' Gardner, 2007, p. 21). Hall (1998) suggests that sociocultural contexts are relational, that is, they are differentiated not only in terms of cultural mores but also in terms of differences of social power. Inside each context individual identity is shaped by means of discourses. However, in some instances, due to the permeability of boundaries (Marsh & Millard, 2000), identities, or aspects of identities may overlap across sociocultural contexts. If, as Hall suggests, sociocultural contexts are differentiated in terms of power relations, the discourses within them are likely to position individuals in subordinate/super-ordinate ways. Hence, across contexts individual identities may differ. For example, Heath's (1983) ethnographic study of literacy development in three communities in a town in the USA demonstrated that where the literacy discourses and practices of home and school were broadly similar children had a

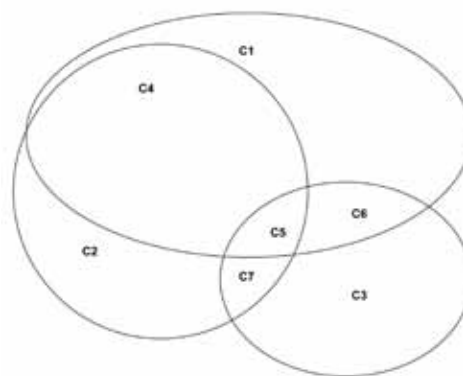


Figure 1: An interactional multicultural perspective.

smooth transition to literacy development in school. Hence there was no significant change to their identity as literacy learners across the two contexts. The permeability referred to by Marsh and Millard above is represented in Figure 1 by the intersections or overlapping ellipses. Each ellipsis represents a sociocultural context in which the child develops. In this model C1 might represent the school and C2 the home with the overlap between the two denoted by C4. Each sociocultural context provides the narratives through which individuals make sense of their lives. Where these narratives differ markedly between sociocultural contexts, allowing little common ground between them, the individual occupies two identities that bear little relation to one another. In this case, C3 in Figure 1 represents the home context of a second child. As can be seen the overlap or common knowledge between home and school denoted by C6 is much smaller than that for the other child.

In Heath's study, the group of children who experienced most difficulty developing literacy in school came from the group where literacy development in the home and community differed significantly from that of the school. The identities of these children as literacy learners then would be further from the intersections in Figure 1 because the sociocultural narratives in which literacy development in the home is embedded positions them in opposition to the sociocultural narrative of the classroom. Put another way, an 'important aspect of power-knowledge relations in schools is the imbalance between teacher and learner in terms of whose knowledge is given legitimation and importance' (Paechter, 2001, p. 167). There are resonances here with the concept of 'cultural capital' as a means of explaining differential levels of educational achievement between social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, in this investigation social class was not under scrutiny.

What is suggested here is a complex relationship that emerges in the interplay of: identity, sociocultural context, power, knowledge, situated narratives and the learner in the contexts of home and school. Under mutually supportive conditions, learner development occurs unimpeded but this paper suggests that where disjunctions occur across the two contexts, learner identity, behaviour and development follow distinctly different trajectories and that the same learner can occupy different identities across sociocultural contexts. In a sociocultural perspective, writing is driven by real purposes in real life social contexts. This approach identifies the 'writing event' as the situated construction of texts inextricably linked to 'complex social interactions' within the event and the 'social purposes for writing' (Ivanic, 2004, p. 234). This paper suggests that the two major sites for such events, which drive children's general literacy development, are the home and the classroom. However, opportunities for experimentation with forms, modes and processes may significantly differ across these two sites. Hence the emerging writing identities of children and their conceptualisation of the social purposes of writing may also differ in these two contexts, where literacy practices between home and school are markedly different. In the UK context, school based literacy has been dominated by *The National Curriculum for English*, and until recently *The National Literacy Strategy* and *National Primary Strategy for Literacy*. Sealey (1997, 1999a, 1999b) suggests these curriculum documents fail to recognise the sociocultural nature of language and may cause teachers and pupils to acquire misunderstandings of the nature and purpose of literacy. Currently, pedagogic discourses on writing are strongly influenced by assessment criteria from which learning objectives for writing are derived (D'Arcy, 1999; Gardner, 2012). Smith (1982) makes the distinction between writing as secretarial skills and writing as compositional ones. D'Arcy (1999) posits that a balance of the two sets of skills is required in order to develop students as effective writers. However, in her critique of standardised testing in the UK, she asserts that textual structure, grammar and punctuation are privileged over the writer's ability to express thought and feeling (D'Arcy, 1999, p. 10). Both teachers and students are positioned by a pedagogy which is situated in a paradigm of writing privileged by curriculum and assessment frameworks and which is in turn framed by political decisions about the nature of education. In his discussion of mind and mental processes, Wertsch

(1991, p. 14) draws attention to the symbiosis of mind, self and emotion. Hence, it can be argued from a sociocultural perspective that the learner's conceptualisation of writing and the self, as a writer, is socially and culturally situated and that pedagogy influences not only mental processes but the affective self of the learner also.

The findings of this investigation are relevant to educational contexts where the literacy curriculum is oriented towards writing as an autonomous, decontextualised skills based paradigm (Street, 1984). The corollary is that such pedagogy devalues and discourages students' engagement in compositional processes and creativity in writing (D'Arcy, 1999; Gardner, 2012). Hence, the identity of the student as a writer in the classroom is bounded by the dominant discourse of writing pedagogy. However, this investigation sought to discover if the identity of 'reluctant writers' ascribed to the students by their teachers was replicated in the context of the home.

Based on their meta-analysis of literacy research, Whitmore and her co-authors conclude that children's initial engagement with reading and writing is not dependent upon formal instruction, but that they 'construct and refine their literacy through active interpretation and purposeful sense making' (Whitmore et al., 2004, p. 302–303). That literacy development in literate societies, involving children's interaction with texts to derive and construct meaning, begins before a child starts school is well documented. Shirley Brice-Heath's seminal work (1983) also demonstrated how children are enculturated into literacy in the home and community and that these practices are differentiated along the axis of class and culture. Similarities and disjunctions between literacy practices in the home and school were found in her study to position children differently as learners in formal classroom contexts. The skills and knowledge children acquire from out of school learning is an aspect of their 'cultural capital', which is a key influence on the academic attainment of children from different social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Integral to contemporary children's 'cultural capital' is their knowledge of multi-modal texts, including film, news print, comics, video-games and the World Wide Web, which provide them with semiotic resources, making literacy learning broader than it is defined in current UK curriculum. Paechter (2001, p. 167) refers to the kind of knowledge acquired outside the formal context of the classroom, as 'owned knowledge' and places

significance on the differential of the power-knowledge relationship between teachers and pupils. Children's 'owned knowledge', or 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al 2005), is often excluded in the classroom and is, therefore, implicitly de-valued against 'high' status 'school knowledge' and the learning processes of schooling, deemed worthwhile by the social elite (Paechter, 2001, p. 169). Writing development in the classroom is constrained by hegemonic discourses emanating from powerful elites which filtrate through officially approved educational paradigms to writing pedagogy and assessment criteria (Gardner, 2012). This suggests that the power-knowledge relationship between teachers and pupils is located in discourses outside the teacher's control, particularly in education systems with prescriptive curricula and government initiated inspection regimes. However, the importance of the teacher's ethnographic knowledge of children's learning in the home and community has been shown to be an important factor in inclusive classroom practice; pupil engagement and motivation (Gonzalez et al., 2005). What these studies suggest is that children's learning is initiated in the home and community but the knowledge acquired by some children in this context, may become 'subjugated knowledge' (Foucault, 1980) in the classroom. That is knowledge which, at best, is deemed subordinate to the officially sanctioned knowledge of the curriculum, and at worst, remains invisible and unexplored in school (Paechter, 2001). However children's 'funds of knowledge' or 'owned knowledge', when fully realised in the school context, can become positive resources for further learning. If this knowledge remains subjugated, the full extent of the child's cognitive and cultural resources fails to be recognised by schools, leading to flawed evaluations of the child's ability and achievement.

The consequence of such discontinuity in literacy practices between home and school was evident in Bissex's (1980) early case study of her own son. At school his writing was typified by short monotonous sentences, whereas at home his compositions were inventive, mature and communicative across varied genre and to different audiences. This study suggests that the dominant assessment paradigm in the UK privileges secretarial aspects of writing over compositional ones and that this contributes to a classroom writing culture which constrains the development of some writers. At the time of Bissex's study such assessment paradigms may have been less significant than they are now. However, her observations make it

evident that discontinuities have existed for a long time and have remained unchecked. This suggests research into the writing practices of children at home and at school is long overdue.

The gendered nature of such discontinuity was found in Meriso-Storms' (2006) study which concluded that boys who often dislike writing in school use it for many purposes outside school. Whitehead (2010) suggests that this greater ingenuity for literacy and learning in out of school contexts is stimulated by a greater range of options available to children and freedom to make choices within a varied linguistic landscape. Whitmore et al (2004, p. 306) suggest that when children have the freedom to create they are able to demonstrate complex ways of meaning making, which reveal the social and cultural factors that permeate and influence what is read and written and how their literacy is developed. The reality of children's daily lives is central to the purposes for which they instigate self-sponsored writing. Hudson (1986) also found that children's perceptions of the circumstances surrounding the act of writing influenced compositional processes, as did children's ownership of the processes. Gallas and Smagorinsky (2002) also concluded that the learner's interaction with text is embedded in the cultural context in which literacy activities occur and that the nature of literacy practices in the classroom can hinder the student's ability to demonstrate knowledge of texts acquired in other contexts.

In her study of 3,001 pupils in the UK aged between 8 and 16 years, Clarke (2009) found that more students preferred writing for fun, family and friends (38.5%) than writing in school (17.4%). The meta-analysis of ethnographic studies; case study and clinical studies, conducted by Whitmore and her co-authors (2004) drew three conclusions; firstly that children find individual paths to literacy as they invent language in social settings; secondly, that individuals are located in sociocultural identities, political status and linguistic heritage; and thirdly that, literacy events are influenced by issues of power and access. The situated nature of textual construction is further explicated by Activity Theory. Bazerman and Russell (2003, p. 1) posit that writers give meaning to texts in the contexts of the activities within which textual construction occurs. Prior and Skipka (2003, p. 180) refer to environment selecting structuring practices (ESSPs), which are activities that appear to be supplementary to the compositional process but which contribute to it by allowing the writer time and space away from the text. They cite

the example of an academic breaking from the revision of an article to tend to her washing. These breaks gave her time to reflect on the text and re-fresh her thinking. The home context provides child writers with a matrix of ESSPs that are absent from the classroom. Furthermore, in the classroom children are often expected to sit in place, not move and apply themselves to textual construction as a continuous process. Whilst this may suit some writers, classroom based research suggests considerable variation in children's compositional processes (Myhill 2009).

Research methods and design

During individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 19 teachers in the project they were asked to draw on their professional experience to identify typical behaviours of reluctant writers. These responses were collated to devise a checklist of characteristic behaviours, which was then used by each teacher to identify a sample of reluctant writers in their school. Purposeful sampling, therefore, was used to select students. In order to comply with ethical procedures, parental/carer permission was sought before the commencement of the research. As an aside, this approach to eliciting teachers' knowledge in order to construct a research tool was one means by which participating teachers developed a sense of ownership of the research process. This has implications for future research which attempts to integrate practitioners and academics in collaborative investigations.

The project was divided into two phases with phase one being of two years duration and the second phase being a single year. Different cohorts of teachers and pupils participated in the two phases. Phase one comprised 66 students in the age range 5–9 years old, whereas the second cohort of 40 pupils was slightly older with ages ranging between 7–9 years. The method of purposeful sampling resulted in a gender difference in which boys outnumbered girls by a ratio of 2:1 in both phases. The proportion of ESL students in the second phase (35%) was higher than in the first phase (18%).

Six months into the first phase, a structured, child-friendly questionnaire was given to each student. The same questionnaire was completed at the beginning of the second phase. Students were asked to respond to four key questions/statements:

How do you feel when you are asked to write by yourself?

How do you feel if an adult works with you on your writing?

Circle the three things you think make a good story.

Do you ever write at home?

The first two questions, intended to capture students' affective responses to writing when working with or without adult support, were accompanied by a variety of options in the form of words and corresponding emoticons, which the student was asked to circle. The options were: happy, cry, angry, sick, confused, embarrassed, I don't know and other. A supplementary question asked students to try to explain the reason for their choice. The third question also included multiple choices and was designed to elicit students' perceptions of writing along the transcriptional-compositional skills divide. The choices available to students were: ideas, description of characters, neat handwriting, interesting events, correct spelling, description of setting and capital letter and full stops.

The final question gave students lines of choice in the form of a flow diagram, which has been replicated in Figure 2 below. Students had an amanuensis in cases where the questionnaire proved challenging.

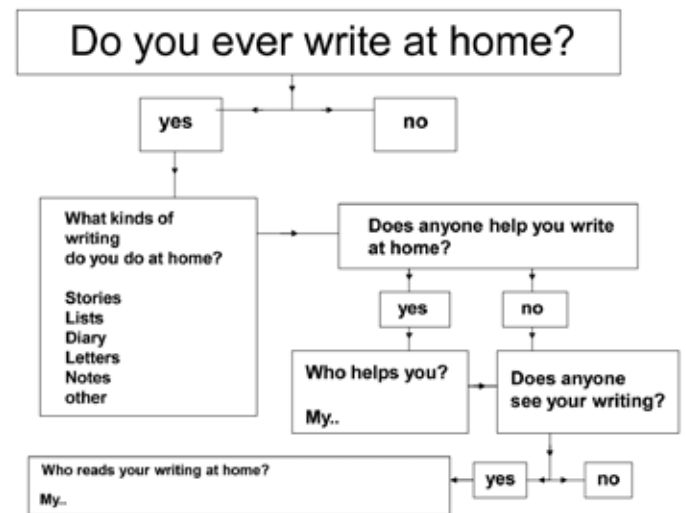


Figure 2. Flow diagram

As Figure 2 shows, the flow diagram allowed supplementary data to be elicited, including: the types of writing pupils engaged with at home; whether they received support in the home with their writing and by whom and the nature of their audience, if they had one.

In addition to findings from the questionnaire, data trends were corroborated by means of two further research methods: firstly, through regular symposia with teachers in the project. These symposia were discussions in which data trends were discussed and issues were raised. They provided a recursive loop in

the research process, enabling data to be interrogated by the lead researcher, which was then verified by means of dialogue with teachers. The second method involved documentary analysis of journals kept by each of the teachers.

Findings and discussion

The pupil questionnaire was positively received by teachers in both phases of the project. They commented on how it allowed them to elicit information about pupils they would otherwise not have acquired. It was their view that the questionnaire had a universal appeal and could be adopted by schools as a way of giving teachers useful insights into pupils' engagement with writing.

Attitudes to writing

It is perhaps surprising that 50% of students in phase one and 49% in phase two reported their enjoyment of writing. This is a slightly higher figure than that of Clarke's (2009) study in which 45.6% of students either enjoyed writing quite a lot or very much. However, Clarke's study was for a general population and was not restricted to reluctant writers. The sample was much larger ($N=3,001$) and covered a wider age range than this study. The students in this study were much younger than the majority in Clarke's sample and it is possible that attitudes to writing change with age. In view of the fact that the sample in this study was purposely selected around the characteristics of reluctant writers, fewer pupils might have been expected to report an enjoyment of writing. However, when the reasons underpinning students' enjoyment of writing were explored, it was revealed that causes were more to do with social-environmental factors than the process of writing itself. Half of those who said they enjoyed writing gave responses which either showed appreciation of the peacefulness of the experience or its social compatibility, such as everyone doing the same thing or proximity to friends. Being allowed to write independently without adult help was another reason given, although this was more applicable to pupils in the second phase of the project. Younger pupils in the first phase of the project reported that without adult support they were either confused about the writing task or else did not know what to write.

The majority of students who expressed their dislike of writing in class gave a sense of confusion, caused by not knowing what to write, as the main reason. As can be seen in Figure 3, the response rate for this reason

was greater in phase two of the project. Also significant amongst students in the second phase is the proportion for whom writing caused anxiety, which is approximately 20%. This response did not appear in phase 1, which may suggest the feeling is age related. The older the reluctant writer the more intense is likely to be their negativity to writing in the context of the classroom. However, entries in teachers' journals revealed the younger age group had 'hidden' anxieties around their perceived poor orthographic skills or poor legibility. The spelling issue was referred to by one teacher who observed how orthographic 'blocks' seriously affected two boys, impeding the flow of their writing: *'He seemed to come to a complete standstill when he came to a word he could not spell.'*

And of another pupils she added,

'He becomes quite troubled when he can't spell a word.'

However, neither inability to spell nor poor handwriting were mentioned as reasons by pupils in the second phase of the project. Several pupils in the first phase expressed feeling scared of being 'told-off' for not writing enough or for not making their work 'neat'. These deep rooted feelings often go unnoticed by teachers who are often driven by external demands to cover a broad curriculum, at a fast pace.

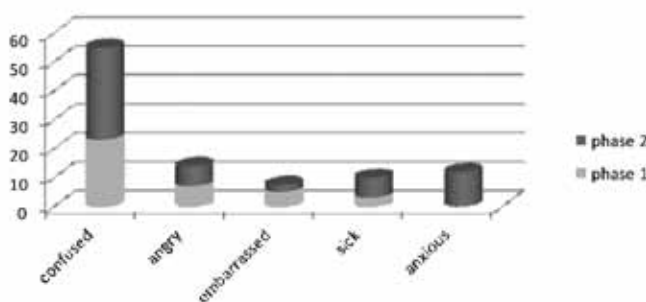


Figure 3. Negative responses to writing in class

The majority of pupils welcomed adult support for their writing. Amongst the 70% of pupils who gave positive responses, the predominant single reason was because of the help they were given with the spelling of words of which they were unsure. This was also given as the major reason by the 67% of pupils in the second phase who generally felt happy to receive adult support. However, pupils in this cohort seemed more inclined to feel happy when they had requested support themselves, rather than being given it automatically. A small number of pupils said it made them feel less anxious about writing. Across both phases of the project, only one child said it made them feel special because (s)

he received more attention. Amongst less positive responses were feelings of embarrassment, largely because the pupils did not like an adult looking at their writing. Around eleven per cent of pupils in each phase admitted to feeling this way. Other responses included: anger, confusion and nausea which together accounted for around 7% of pupils in the first phase but rose to 18% in the second phase. This increase may again be due to pupils' desires to be self reliant or feeling that receiving adult support dented their self esteem. The remainder either did not respond to the question or could not give a definitive answer.

Forty per cent of pupils in the first cohort were positive about writing. Many said they liked writing for a range of reasons including it being fun, they liked describing things or they enjoyed writing stories. An equal number of pupils made no comment about writing. Of the remainder, a minority said they wanted to improve their writing skills. Ten per cent of pupils perceived themselves to be good writers and only two pupils remarked they were poor at writing. Fifty per cent of pupils made no comment about their self image as writers. Responses given by the second cohort were more mixed: fewer pupils responded as positively as their younger counterparts in the first phase. Only 20% said they liked writing or felt happy doing it. An equal number (20%) identified themselves as poor writers. The journal entries of three teachers confirmed that for a significant minority of these students deeply negative self perceptions of themselves as writers had become entrenched.

His finished letter was super and he had lots of imaginative ideas. However, he seems to lack confidence in his own ability and at the end of the session said, 'I'm just no good at writing.'

'I am a rubbish writer.'

'I don't like writing and I don't want to be a better writer.'

These are gendered responses and it is concerning that these boys, who were no older than nine years of age, had acquired such poor identities as writers so early in their learning trajectories. These findings are also indicative of standardised assessment trends in the UK, which show a persistently lower rate of boys' achievement in writing compared to that of girls. It is responses such as these that are the antecedents of Alvermann's (2001) observation that adolescents who struggle with literacy have a long history of frustration and failure with texts. In their later years, pupils who continue to be dis-engaged from literacy may become

troublesome, leading to the widening of the achievement gap (Casey, 2009; Fisher & Frey, 2007). If the affective responses of these writers are to be improved, teachers firstly need to identify the causes of such negative self-views. Clarke (2009) comments on the lack of existing research on children's enjoyment of writing and it may be that simple methods along the lines used in this project could prove useful to classroom practitioners keen to capture such ethnographic data. Assessments of pupils' attitudes to writing in their early schooling and throughout schooling would reveal when, how and why frustration and poor self image occurs, making possible ameliorative action.

Researchers and teachers working in the sociocultural paradigm offer a variety of strategies to re-engage reluctant writers. Such strategies include: collaborative writing (Casey, 2008; Lowe & Boorman, 2012; Scott et al., 2008), working as a community of writers, including the teacher as writer (Atwell, 1998; Casey 2008; Lowe & Boorman, 2012; Street, 2005), real-life contexts for writing, giving a clear sense of purpose (Buis, 2007) and the use of personal experience as the stimulus for writing (Street, 2005). It is certainly the case that teachers in this project found the information illuminating and that it caused them to alter their perceptions of certain students. The data also enabled them to modify teaching plans and student groupings.

What makes a good piece of writing?

This part of the survey asked pupils to circle three items they thought made a good piece of writing. The items listed included secretarial aspects such as handwriting, spelling and capitalisation; as well as compositional narrative features, including ideas, description, setting and characterisation. As can be seen in Figure 4, there was a fairly even spread of responses across these seven categories amongst pupils in Phase One, although a bias towards ideas and characterisation is discernible with 55% and 53% of pupils, respectively, identifying these features as the most important aspects of writing. This is closely followed by 45% identifying punctuation and 43% selecting descriptions of events as key aspects. Handwriting (38%) and spelling (37%) came fifth and sixth in their preferences followed by descriptions of setting, which was selected by 23% of pupils. So, three of the four most frequently identified characteristics of good writing for this group of pupils were compositional elements of narrative. However, the findings of the second phase of the project reverse what was discovered in the first phase. Results from the

second cohort show opinions to have swung strongly towards secretarial skills being the most important features of writing. Capital letters and punctuation were identified as the most important aspect by 88% of pupils, followed by neat handwriting, which was identified by 83% of pupils and correct spelling cited by 76%. In contrast to the first cohort, the importance of compositional skills attracted relatively little regard by the second cohort of older pupils. Characterisation was deemed important by only 17% of pupils and description and interesting events were cited by 12% and 7% respectively. Although the importance of 'ideas' in writing was referred to by 32% of pupils, this is significantly lower than the first cohort.

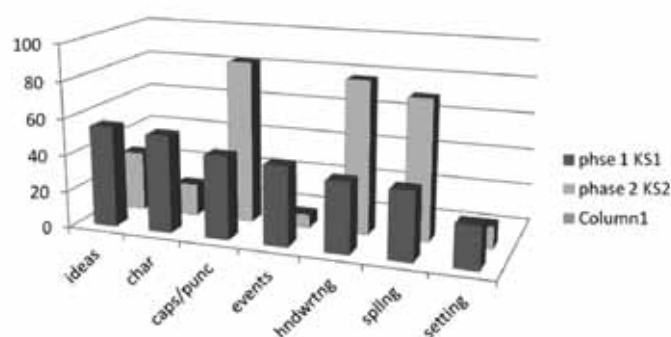


Figure 4. What makes a good piece of narrative writing?

The findings from the two cohorts in this study suggest a dramatic shift occurs in terms of pupils' conceptualisation of what constitutes good writing as they progress through school. It would appear that as they get older, students learn to regard writing in terms of the dichotomised skills identified by Smith (1982), with compositional skills becoming subordinated to secretarial ones. One explanation for this, as D'Arcy (1999) and Gardner (2012) suggest, is the importance attached to secretarial skills in standardised assessment criteria used in the UK, which inform pedagogy and thereby position the identities of children as writers in relation to the dominant paradigm of writing.

Reluctant writers and writing at home

Given that pupils in this study had been selected based on characteristics of their reluctance to write in school, it might be assumed this reluctance would also be exhibited at home. However, the vast majority of students in both phases reported that they wrote at home: (92% in Phase One and 93% in Phase Two). The kinds of texts that pupils engaged with at home included; story writing (phase 1 – 56%; phase 2 – 43%); letters (phase 1 – 51%; phase 2 – 27%); diaries

(phase 1 – 49%; phase 2 – 27%); lists (phase 1 – 40%; phase 2 – 27%); notes (phase 1 – 33%; phase 2 – 24%); miscellaneous texts (phase 1 – 29%; phase 2 – 24%).

Whereas 80% of students in the first phase of the project engaged with more than one text type, with simple texts such as lists and notes often complemented by more complex texts such as stories, diaries and letters, pupils in the second phase of the project were more inclined to engage with a narrower range of texts with only 24% writing more than one genre. It is noticeable that the older group of pupils were less likely than their younger counterparts to write a range of text types, including stories, letters and diaries at home and were more inclined to focus on a single text type. Many of these pupils received some assistance with their writing at home although the form this took was not a matter that was captured by the survey. Of the 60 pupils in the first phase of the project, 52% received some form of help from at least one of their parents. Both fathers and mothers helped their children in equal measure. A second significant difference between the two cohorts is the amount of support parents and other members of the family gave to children at home. Although the percentage of pupils writing at home remained constant across both phases, more pupils wrote independently in the second phase. In fact, the majority (57%) received no support, which suggests that as children get older they either choose to be more independent writers or parents tend to become less concerned about their children's literacy development. A smaller number of children received help from siblings and there was an even split between brother and sisters giving assistance. One or two children were helped by a member of the extended family, such as a grandparent or an aunt.

Audience

In the first phase, most pupils had a ready-made audience for their writing in parents, grandparents, siblings and friends. This was the case even amongst a proportion of those pupils who did not receive help with their writing. Slightly more parents read their children's writing than helped them write. Whereas 47% of mothers helped their children write, 67% read their writing and 45% of fathers were either the sole audience or one of several family members to read children's writing. This compares to 30% of fathers who assisted the writing process. A small number of pupils (5%) had no audience at home for their writing. In the second phase of the project the percentage of pupils who had

no audience for their writing increased to 34%, which represents another significant difference between the two cohorts. As with the first phase, mothers (56%) were the family member most likely to read children's writing, followed by fathers (40%). Twenty-two per cent of readers were siblings. Interestingly, twice as many brothers as sisters provided their sibling with an audience. A smaller number of grandparents and friends were mentioned as readers of their work.

Based on this cohort, the finding suggests that as students mature an increasing number of them either no longer seek parental help with writing or else an increasing number of parents withdraw help. It is also the case that as students get older an increasing number have no audience for their writing in the home setting. However, these changes, for whatever reason, appear not to diminish their motivation to write.

Issues

How do we explain the discontinuity in the writing behaviours of reluctant writers between the contexts of home and school? One inference we may make from the findings is that students in this study found literacy events in the home engaging and possibly more fulfilling than literacy in the classroom. It may be the case that as Whitehead (2010) suggests, the former affords students the freedom to explore writing on their own terms. The social contexts in which writing events occur then are of significant influence on the writer's motivation to construct meanings and it may be the case that these writers deemed to be reluctant in the classroom are, as Bissex (1980) found in her case study, far more expressive at home than at school. Hence, the home may provide students with a context in which they 'own a knowledge' of literacy, that is distinct from the sanctioned knowledge of school (Paechter, 2001). Furthermore, it may be the case that family members provide the child with a more sympathetic ear than the teacher who is bound by a prescriptive discourse of writing and its assessment (Gardner, 2012).

The findings of this study make it 'threshold research', igniting a series of questions that require further investigation. For example: what affective function does writing in the home have for these students? To what extent do reluctant writers use writing events in the home to rehearse school based literacy practices or are these events, as Whitehead (2010) suggests, occasions when students feel free to experiment with form and meaning? To what extent do these writing events allow students feelings of empowerment to construct

and seize control of their own identities as writers and is this a conscious or unwitting attempt to obviate negative perceptions of themselves as failing writers in the classroom? There appears to be a dichotomy of freedom and constraint in the developing literacy practices for these students with the 'fold' occurring at the threshold of the classroom.

What this research does not reveal is the exact nature of the texts reluctant writers produce in home settings, nor does it inform us of the quality of their meaning making. We may speculate that freed of the writing pedagogy characterised by prescriptive skills based curricula, these students see the home environment as a site in which they are able to experiment with multi-modal forms (Bearne & Wolstencroft 2007; Kress, 2003). If so, are they emulating the cultural modes of meaning making evident in their sociocultural environment or using non-verbal multi-modal forms to express meanings they are, as yet, unable to express through writing (Graves, 1983; Kress, 1997; Medd & Whitmore, 2001, p. 49)? To what extent do children subvert 'school knowledge' by re-possessing it in their own forms of literacy, thereby converting it to 'owned Knowledge' (Paechter, 2001). We have seen from studies of playground behaviour how children do not simply reproduce cultural-linguistic forms but re-frame songs and chants derived from popular culture, making them 'their own' (Grugeon, 2005). To what extent are children doing the same with their writing at home? These are the kinds of questions that need to inform the ethnographic knowledge teachers have about their students in order to fully equip them with critical awareness of students' writing behaviours and identities across multiple settings. According to Dyson (1993), when composing texts children are composing their existence in multiple social worlds. This implies that writing is a means by which children explore sociocultural meanings as well as their own relationship to the social world and, therefore, their identities. Without a broad knowledge of the purposes for which children write outside school, teachers are liable to unwittingly impose on students erroneous identities as writers. The findings of this study then suggest that teacher's perceptions of children as writers within the classroom may be at variance with their self-identities as writers in the home. The corollary is that a pedagogy of writing needs to take account of the social contexts in which writing occurs and the situated nature of textual construction. By adopting a sociocultural view of writing, classroom practitioners could

liberate children's 'subjugated knowledge' (Foucault 1980) as writers and draw upon the 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al., 2005) they acquire in contexts outside school, as a positive resource for classroom literacy practices. This necessitates an ethnography of each child as a writer.

Given that so many children engage with writing in the home context, this study suggests that the identity of the reluctant writer is a socially situated construct located in classroom based literacy behaviour and may be a consequence of the skills based paradigm currently underpinning much writing pedagogy in the UK. As Clarke (2009) states, there is insufficient research on children's enjoyment of writing. This study raises a number of research questions based on the substantive finding that the majority of reluctant writers aged between 6–9 years of age readily write in the home context. Clearly this finding requires further qualitative research in order to explore the writing identities of these writers in the home context.

Conclusion

This study investigated 106 student writers between the ages of 5–9 years in 19 UK schools. Although identified as reluctant writers by their teachers, paradoxically around 50% of the students reported a liking for writing. However, 20% of the older pupils expressed negative attitudes to writing with some students, exclusively boys, revealing extremely poor identities as writers. It was found that older students were more likely to identify secretarial skills as the features signifying good writing, whereas younger students tended to have a more balanced view with a slight bias towards compositional elements. One explanation given is that as students progress through the school system they internalise the dominant writing paradigm framed by a skills-based literacy curriculum that filtrates pedagogy and assessment criteria and thereby constructs the student writer's identity around secretarial competencies. The central paradox in this study is the vast majority of students, deemed to be reluctant writers in the classroom, who actively engage with writing at home. Although the reasons for this were not explained by data emerging from this investigation, a socio-cultural theoretical perspective was used to attempt to explain this phenomenon, suggesting that the home provided students with the space, cultural resources and supportive familial relationships to self-initiate and experiment with writing. The findings of this study support the view that teachers would benefit from

having important ethnographic information about students' language and literacy development in out of school contexts, in order to fully evaluate students' attitudes to, and abilities with, writing.

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