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INSPIRING WRITING in PRIMARY SCHOOLS LIZ CHAMBERLAIN



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2 Writing is not a subject

Introduction

This chapter will argue – in what will become a familiar feature of this book – the fact that writing is not a subject. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, a subject is, *A branch of knowledge studied or taught in a school, college, or university* – so writing is definitely not a subject.

However, it is treated as one; it is a lesson to be taught, rather than an activity or skill that is so much more than words on a page. At some point it was decided, and embedded in pedagogical mythology, that writing lessons only take place in the morning because they need to be included in the part of a school day that requires concentration and effort. As teachers, we need to ask what message this gives to children about what writing is – and the role it plays in their lives. As discussed in Chapter 1, children write outside of school and – if the definition of writing is broadened – then they will tell you they enjoy writing. This has implications for you as a teacher. You may be disappointed if, when you ask your children to create a written response to an exciting input, you are expecting to see posters, mind maps, captions, pictures or annotated diagrams, but your class just stare at the blank piece of paper you put in front of them. They may anticipate that the writing outcome you desire has a specific genre and that it needs to fill the entire page because that is what previous teachers have expected of them. This is not the fault of the teachers – this is as a result of policy and the high-stakes testing culture in our schools that has put increasing pressure on written outputs being seen as evidence of learning, rather than as a creative or crafted act. However, you can shift this imbalance by ensuring that in your classroom you have a shared definition of writing with all the writers in the classroom ... and that includes you.

Chapter 4 will introduce an explorative pedagogy of writing and propose an approach to the writing process that is structured, but also a bit messy and can be likened to an artist's palette of colours from which to choose and play around with. The aim will be to support you as a writing teacher to understand all the ingredients within the writing journey that lead to quality writing. However, it is within this current chapter that the discussion focuses on children as writers, their perceptions of writing and, most importantly, what it is that makes the difference to them when it comes to writing lessons in their classrooms. Throughout the chapter, we will return to the idea that writing does not take place within a subject called English; writing is part of reading, of speaking, and of listening, and it is also the vehicle through which learning in other subjects can be communicated. Being a writer runs parallel to being a reader. You learn from other writers by being exposed to quality children's literature, and this means learning *to write like a reader and read like a writer*. As Margaret Meek (1991:48) reminds us,

To read is to think about meaning; to write is to make thinking visible as language. To do both is to become both the teller and the told in the dialogue of the imagination.



Over to you

Lay three sticky notes in front of you. On each one complete the phrase 'Writing is ...'. Write down your first thoughts before moving onto the second, and the third. If you have more ideas then record those as well. Try not to be academic or clever, just write down whatever comes into your mind. When you have finished, have a look at your impressions of writing. You might have written 'Writing is hard', or maybe 'Writing is about spelling or handwriting'; sometimes student teachers put 'Writing is creative' or 'Writing is personal'.

You can understand the aim of the task: reflecting on your own thoughts about writing, and this should lead you to start thinking about what writing will look like in your classroom. Ultimately, you are creating and crafting your own definition of what writing will look like in your classroom – and how you will support children in becoming accomplished writers.

Studies from the US and England would suggest that attitudes towards writing are shifting and with advances in technology there is a need to re-classify what might be included in a category headed *Writing*. In the US-based PEW Internet study (Lenhart *et al.*, 2008), young people reported that they wrote a lot, with 93% saying that they wrote for pleasure but only if 'electronic' texts were included. However, 60% of the same young people did not actually consider electronic texts as writing (2008:2). The following year, a similar study by

the National Literacy Trust (NLT) found that 75% of young people in England say that they write regularly if the definition of writing includes writing text messages, posting on social networking sites or using instant messaging (Clark and Dugdale, 2009).

However, the important consequence of the later 2014 NLT survey (Clark, 2015) is the apparent gender divide across pupils aged 8–16, with 19% of boys consistently saying that they do not enjoy writing compared with only 8% of girls. Of these, 18% of boys reported that they were *not very good* writers, compared to 13% of girls. In a separate much earlier study, children aged 7 were asked to write to a younger child explaining what they needed to know about writing in their class (Wray, 1995). What was striking in the research was that the most frequently mentioned aspects were spelling and neatness, with children also advising others not to make the writing too long in case the teacher got bored. Wray's study is nearly 25 years old, but the NLT survey in 2009 of 3,000 children and young people suggests that children still consider that being a good writer involves primarily having good handwriting and the ability to spell (Clark and Dugdale, 2009). The more recent NLT 2017 survey (Clark and Trevanian, 2016) highlighted a link between writing for pleasure and attainment, with those who said they enjoyed writing outside of school seven times more likely to write above expected levels (23% versus 3%). Figures like these catch headlines but they also lend weight for pushing forward with the argument that, despite what the adults say, children do write and they do enjoy writing. Chapter 4 will discuss in more detail the more recent developments in support of a *writing for pleasure* agenda.

An action research project into raising boys' achievement in writing noted that it was those in middle-primary classrooms who reported as having the most gains having been part of the project. The boys self-reporting to the question, 'Do you enjoy writing?' rose from 75% at the beginning to 100% by the end (UKLA, 2004). This, coupled with an increase in confidence and motivation, led to the boys holding more positive attitudes towards writing, which was then reflected in higher teacher assessments of their written work (UKLA, 2004). However, this contrasts with a study that took place across eight schools with children aged 8 to 10, who shared not only negative attitudes about writing, but also expressed their anxieties about writing (Grainger *et al.*, 2003). And what we know from research by Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) is that those who are anxious about writing say they do not enjoy it and have difficulty generating content. In addition, this research also suggests that a teacher's assessment of a child's attitude towards writing strongly relates to their actual writing attainment.

The seminal National Writing Project in the 1990s suggested that children's perceptions of *writers* is that they are the people who publish books (usually stories) while any act of writing is often thought about in terms of the end product (National Curriculum Council, 1990). So, there is work to be done to convince children that writing is a creative process and full of possibility.

Much writing research comes from the field of cognitive psychology, where the focus is very much on the skill and cognitive demands that writing places on the writer. However, even

psychologists know that ‘writing is a social activity involving a dialogue between the writer(s) and reader(s)’ (Graham *et al.*, 2012:52). Imagine being able to write about dragons, landing on strange planets, or imagining a different ending to a familiar story. Consider the prospect of making any ordinary day suddenly extraordinary and all because you, as the teacher, chose a word or a sentence that turned you into an adventurer and your class into explorers. That’s what writing can do.

Children’s perceptions of themselves as writers

Research about children’s perceptions of writing often relies on a teacher’s knowledge about the kinds of writing children may take part in outside school. One such study of primary children’s creative writing practices reported that 64 out of the 80 teachers interviewed were able to identify children in their classes who wrote regularly at home because of the writing artefacts they brought in from home (Brady, 2009). The responses were based on questionnaires and the teachers’ *perceptions* of the types of writing and writers within their classes. For example, one teacher reported that 40% of her class wrote at home, while another reported that there were no children in his class who wrote at home. Within these classes *writing* was framed as ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’. However, it may be that some of the other types of multimodal writing the children engaged with at home were just not visible to the teachers because the children chose to keep their writing hidden. A small-scale case study of three middle-primary children (Chamberlain, 2018) uncovered the types of private or *sub-rosa* writing children engage with at home and which they choose to keep from adults. The research took place in the children’s homes and in their classrooms, where they were observed engaged in the writing process and where authorial choices were revealed through the children’s ‘kept-writing’ artefacts. At home, the children had ownership over their writing, which was in contrast to the way they presented themselves as writers in school. At school they struggled to complete writing in the time frame and their teachers often described them as ‘finding it difficult to generate ideas for writing’. Therefore, only asking teachers about the writers in their classes – without understanding the children’s *out-of-school* writing – may mean many rich writing practices remain undiscovered and unvalued.

Another larger ethnographic study took place over a school year in a middle-primary, multi-ethnic classroom (Bourne, 2002:241). It found that children are often positioned in classrooms according to the relative power they hold as so-called *competent* writers. Those considered good writers had regular conversations with the teacher about the content and detail of their writing, whereas those who were less successful engaged in teacher/pupil talk characterised by questioning that highlighted the children’s mistakes in their writing. This was further borne out in Paul Gardner’s work with primary-aged writers (2013), who declared themselves to be ‘rubbish’ writers because of poor handwriting or frequent mistakes. He found that *once a learner is so negatively self-defined, it takes monumental effort to persuade otherwise* (Gardner, 2018).

However, by asking children about their favourite writing or asking what makes a good writer, teachers can gain valuable insights into what children think writing is for. Two groups of children in Reception and Year 4 were asked to reflect on why it was that their teachers said they were good writers (Bearne *et al.*, 2016). The younger children were very clear about their role as listeners and how moving into good writing was marked by independence, with them showing an awareness of some key ingredients for writing – as in the case of the child who referred to making ‘stories and characters’. The older children had begun to identify the interplay of reading and writing and its impact on their development as writers in terms of being able to widen their vocabulary because of their rich reading experiences.

Reception	Year 4
<i>Why do you think your teacher says you're a good writer?</i>	
We write by ourselves.	I'm going to be an author because I've got a good imagination.
We write so beautifully.	I'm a reader and a writer.
We write our own stories without any adults.	I'm more of a reader than a writer.
We listen to the teacher about what we have to write.	I never talk when I'm writing.
We have good writing.	I use strong adjectives like 'gigantic' instead of 'big'.
We make some stories and characters.	

Table 2.1 *Why do you think your teacher says you're a good writer?*

Another key question asked was, ‘What does your teacher need to know about you and writing?’ One poignant comment was from a Year 4 boy who said, *I like writing, even though I'm not very good at it*. The message to his teacher was clear: *even though I don't think I'm very good (and maybe you don't think I'm very good either), I still enjoy it*. One girl wrote, *I never finish stories*. When probed as to why that might be, it was not because she got bored, or didn't know what to write, it was quite the opposite: she had so many ideas for writing that she moved from one idea to another too quickly. However, to her teacher it looked as if she never completed anything.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that children's definition of writing is often a reflection of their teacher's approach to writing. The classroom where writing is viewed as a dynamic and collaborative endeavour will be mirrored in the accomplished writers who are motivated and enthusiastic about their writing.

Writing conversations

How will you know what children in your classroom think about writing? It's quite simple – you need to ask them. Using either a perceptions survey or asking the same kinds of questions

used by Bearne *et al.* (2016) are good ways of finding out what children think about their writing. However, a simpler way is to start a conversation about writing. There are regular spots on the timetable for you to do this, most notably in guided writing sessions which give you a weekly opportunity to talk to groups of children or ask them about what they think of their writing as they begin to collect ideas or draft their writing. Myhill and Jones (2009) suggest that children should always have the opportunity to reflect on their writing by talking about the decisions made throughout the writing process and ultimately in the evaluation of their final draft.

This ongoing process, underpinned by talk, contributes to children developing as writers through the refinement of their writing. By ensuring that speaking and listening about writing is central in the process, children can begin to articulate all aspects of their writing, whether it is explaining a vocabulary choice or defending a plotline. As James Britton (1970) stresses, *reading and writing float on a sea of talk* and over 40 years later, this principle is reflected in the current National Curriculum for England: *Spoken language underpins the development of reading and writing* (DfE, 2013:3). So maybe your response to whether writing is a product or process (Bearne, 2002) is that it has to be both. The quality of the product is ultimately influenced by the extent to which there has been a shared understanding and communication of the process between you as the teacher and the children as evolving writers.

In addition, Chamberlain (2015:205) proposes that teachers take on the role of ‘souvenir hunters’ by asking children to share favourite pieces of writing, which can often reveal the multiple understandings about the composition and purpose of the writing. This, coupled with asking children to talk through their work, provides a useful framework for understanding more about children’s chosen writing practices, and it may also reveal what writing means to the children in your class.

Here, 9-year-old Milly’s map is an example of a kept and favourite piece of writing that reveals how she perceives writing. You may argue that what you are looking at is a drawing and not a piece of writing, but for Milly, maps are writing. They communicate ideas, and there is text in



Figure 2.1 Milly’s map

the form of labels and captions. Rather than a finished product, the map is the basis of a game: a spy game that Milly plays with her friend that involves two characters making their way around the island to find a hidden 'base'.

As you review this piece of writing, consider the additional information that Milly shares in a later writing conversation. Milly has kept this artefact since she made it some years ago when she lived in Berlin. The fact that she chose to bring the map back with her to England reflects the important symbol the map has perhaps become. It represents a different time and place and reminds her of her early friendships which she wishes to retain and recall. All of this information could easily have remained hidden, so the importance of the map as a symbol of friendship would have been lost. The message is clear – talk to children about their writing and understand what motivates this type of personal response. For Milly as a writer, this kept artefact reveals her captured childhood memories of playing with old friends. Writing is so much more than just marks on the page defined by a teacher's learning objective.



Jottings

Create your own writing conversation framework by gathering questions you might ask children about their writing. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Are you a good writer?
- Do you enjoy writing? Why?/Why not?
- Can you remember a piece of writing you did when you were younger that you were particularly proud of? Why was that?
- What's the best piece of writing you've done recently? What was good about it?
- Do you ever write/draw at home? What kind of things?
- Does anyone else write/draw at home?
- What advice would you give someone younger than you to help them get better at writing?

A text-rich environment

If we want children to enjoy learning, then reading and writing needs to be everywhere. It needs to be obvious to every child what topic they are learning, through the wall and practical displays. Showcasing the importance of writing can be achieved through the displays and

learning can be scaffolded with word walls that the children can refer to when writing by displaying ‘tricky’ words as a reminder when spelling. Or choose a poem, write it out, put it up and let children respond (Rosen, undated). Let children be explorers in their classroom and see it as a place where there is always something new to discover. Who wouldn’t want to be a writer in this classroom where ‘Exciting Writers’ are at work?

Have a ‘book of the week’; nominate a child to bring in a favourite book from home and display it in a prominent place. Let the child explain why the book is important to them and allow other children to respond – before you know it, there will be a unique library of favourites.



Figure 2.2 Exciting writer at work

The National Curriculum highlights that, *Reading also feeds pupils’ imagination and opens up a treasure-house of wonder and joy for curious young minds* (DfE, 2013:4). Put reading for pleasure at the heart of your teaching by reading daily to your class (regardless of the year group), and this will ensure that the children in your class have access to quality children’s literature to share and enjoy together. There is also another more immediate impact on children’s writing ability: those who are good comprehenders use their story knowledge to tell structurally coherent stories (Cain, 2003:348). The suggestion here is that by reading aloud to your class, there is an additional benefit to children who find reading for meaning difficult to grasp when they read independently because of their over-focus on word reading. By listening to stories read aloud by a more experienced reader – you – they have the chance to improve their reading and language comprehension skills, which in turn supports them in getting better at telling stories and then helps them become better comprehenders. In short, it is a virtuous circle. However, what is crucial is that the reading aloud of texts is not used as a tool for analysis, but

instead the focus is simply to enjoy being read to and having the time and space to take on board the structural content of different genres.

In interacting with and reading quality texts, both fiction and non-fiction, children learn that the texts act as good teachers or models and can be used to support their own writing (as discussed in Chapter 5). Barrs and Cork (2001) refer to this as *the reader in the writer*, while others maintain that children who know how texts work are more likely to be successful writers (Flynn and Stainthorp, 2006:61).

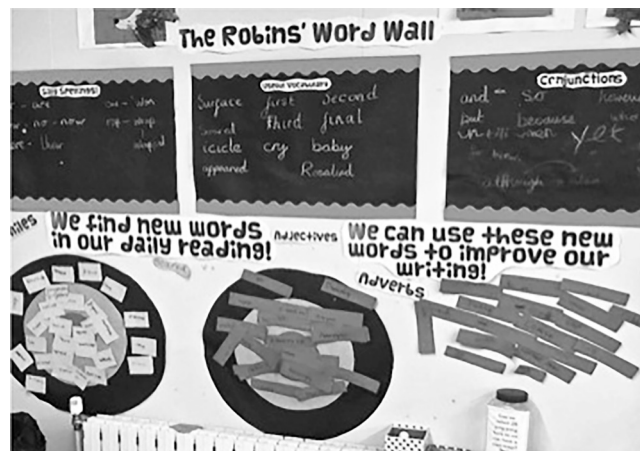


Figure 2.3 The Robins' word wall

In this classroom, the teacher has made the reading and writing links explicit for the children by challenging them to find new vocabulary in their reading and to find ways of using it in their writing. The children are being encouraged to play with words and meanings in a way that Grainger *et al.* (2005) propose makes confident and aspiring young writers.

A report by the National Literacy Trust (Clark and Teravanien, 2017) suggests that children who have books of their own enjoy reading more than those who have limited access to books; in fact they are 15 times more likely to read above the expected level for their age than their peers who do not own books. Therefore, ensure your book corner is well-stocked so that children have access to a range of reading material: quality literature, poetry, non-fiction, magazines, annuals or comics. This might encourage them to go home and share reading with their parents, or they might visit the local library, which will in turn further support them as readers (Goodwin, 2010). In a study of four schools in England, Hempel-Jorgenson *et al.* (2018) found that book corners were used very differently in the different schools, resulting in very different impressions as to the value of the book corner in supporting reading. In three out of the four schools, the area was either not used, or designated a work space or time out area for bad behaviour. In the school where the book corner was a positive

feature of class-based reading practice, it was a space that supported children's engagement with reading for pleasure. What does your book corner say about reading and the readers in your classroom? You could ask the children to help plan the book corner, and let them decide on the theme and what to include: they might choose cushions, chairs, a listening station, boxes of books or a special entrance. You may wonder why you should spend time making your classroom comfortable for reading, but studies have shown that changing the physical environment of your classroom can promote the time that children spend with books (Morrow and Weinstein, 1986).



No excuses

There is no excuse for your classroom to be bereft of purposeful text and quality literature.

Audit your current classroom provision and consider what messages it gives the children about the value you place on reading and writing. Decide on one change you can make to improve it, and then act on it. Create an author exhibit, shadow a book award, create a classroom book, or celebrate different kinds of writing (yours included).

Writing which reflects real life

Daniel Pennac (2006) talks about the *The Rights of the Reader* and his freely available poster outlining all ten rights should have a celebrated spot in your reading or book corner. One of his suggested rights is *the right to mistake a book for real life*. Many of us will relate to this by recalling past reading experiences which may have surprised us with the uncanny ability to reflect our own experiences; almost as if the book must have been written for just us. Writing, too, can provide similar opportunities. The power of writing has already been discussed in terms of a child's ability to decide on any turn of events simply at the turn of a vocabulary or plotline decision. Research also suggests that children write about or engage with writing practices which reflect the significant events of their lives – or they write with or for people who are important to them (Chamberlain, 2018; Earl and Grainger, 2007). A research project into the reading and writing lives of 71 5-year-olds determined that the children wrote at home with a range of family members, as well as writing by themselves (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). Both these factors have implications for writing in your classroom: children like to write about events which they have direct experience of, and are knowledgeable about (Graham *et al.*, 2012).

Daniel Pennac (2006) further suggests such radical moves as *the right not to read* and *the right to read out loud*, which no teacher can argue with. However, where would *the right not*

to finish a book or the right to be quiet fit in with the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) requirements of reading? In 2011, a group of Buckinghamshire teachers working as part of a pilot project called 'Teachers as Writers' within the National Writing Project (NWP), discussed the notion of ten *Rights of the Writer*, which were then written and illustrated by Simon Wrigley. This mirrors Daniel Pennac's ten *Rights of the Reader* illustrated by Quentin Blake. According to the projects' founders and co-authors Wrigley and Smith (2010), the *Rights* were, in part, *an expression of the project's classroom approach, which gave young writers greater ownership of the writing process.*

- 1 The right not to share.
- 2 The right to change things and cross things out.
- 3 The right to write anywhere.
- 4 The right to a trusted audience.
- 5 The right to get lost in your writing and not know where you're going.
- 6 The right to throw things away.
- 7 The right to take time to think.
- 8 The right to borrow from other writers.
- 9 The right to experiment and break rules.
- 10 The right to work electronically, draw or use a pen and paper.

Again, some of the rights immediately feel like common sense, but what about those that raise more practical questions for you? For example, what about #6 *The right to throw things away*? What happens if that was the only piece of writing completed in the lesson and that writing was your only opportunity to assess that child's writing, or to demonstrate learning took place? It is worth taking a few moments to read those which feel comfortable, those which raise questions and those which you feel would be impossible in your classroom, or appear to challenge your pedagogy. Cremin and Myhill (2015) have further argued for a modification of Pennac's rights to parallel a set of rights for children as writers. What you realise when you ask children to do this is just how complicated the writing process is – and what children in your class have absorbed having been a writer in your class.

Year 6 children Emily and Sid have created their own ten *Rights of the Writer*. On first reading it is interesting to consider what they think is important, and on second reading it is interesting to consider the order of their ideas.

For Sid, writing is about others' ideas with built-in breaks, with writing only happening when the moment 'hits' you. For Emily, spelling and punctuation are important. And, playing with

the rules and taught grammar of writing are obvious targets for her rights. What is unclear from both children is how competent they are at writing and this is what is so powerful about asking children to create their rights. We are unsure whether Emily's insistence that the transcriptional elements of writing are prioritised above *the right to write about whatever she wants* is because spelling and punctuation are more difficult for her, or in fact that she is a capable and playful writer who wants to bend the conventional rules. Sid, too, reveals what is important for him: writing is personal and sometimes solitary and it needs the thoughtful editor rather than the perceived potential of what author Jeanne Willis refers to as the *harsh critic* in the form of other adults. What of Emily's right to write lies, or to write an unrealistic story? For teachers, there are two ways of viewing these ideas: either you see the possibility of creating problems in the primary classroom as the diversity of the young writers is revealed, or you relish the opportunity to find out more about the young writers and what might just make the difference to them when faced with a writing activity.

	Sid	Emily
1	<i>The right to magpie from others.</i>	<i>I have the right to deliberately misspell words.</i>
2	<i>The right to have breaks.</i>	<i>I have the right to deliberately use punctuation incorrectly.</i>
3	<i>The right to write when the moment hits you.</i>	<i>I have the right to use 'and' at the start of a sentence.</i>
4	<i>The right for it to sit in your room.</i>	<i>I have the right to write wherever I am.</i>
5	<i>The right to not let your parents see.</i>	<i>I have the right to write with a leaf.</i>
6	<i>The right to not be criticised.</i>	<i>I have the right to write whatever I want.</i>
7	<i>The right to not have your parents make suggestions.</i>	<i>I have the right to write an unrealistic story.</i>
8	<i>The right to have time to write.</i>	<i>I have the right to write about someone else's life.</i>
9	<i>The right to use whatever you want to write or type with.</i>	<i>I have the right to publish anything I want.</i>
10	<i>The right to write whatever you want.</i>	<i>I have the right to write lies.</i>

Table 2.2 Ten Rights of the Writer (by Sid and Emily)



TA DAH!

Create ten *Rights of a Writer* for you as an adult. Consider how these might be different from how you are expecting children in your class to view writing. Ask the children to write their own, then display them and use them. Look for different ways of incorporating some of



the children's ideas into your pedagogy for writing, establish shared definitions of writing and create a community of writers (Cremin and Myhill, 2012) where writing motivates developing writers through a collaborative process that is both authentic and meaningful to their lives.

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