



Teachers as writers

Developing a teacher-writer identity enhances approaches to writing in the classroom.

- Writing is profoundly linked with identity.
- Teachers can have narrow conceptions about what it means to be a teacher-writer.
- Teachers may only see published writing or digital practices as ‘writing’, so do not recognise their own experience and practices as valuable.
- Sustained professional development opportunities for teachers as writers can enhance self-assurance as well as expand pedagogical approaches.
- The role of teachers as writers can have significant impact on student writers' agency, motivation and engagement in writing.

Whilst there have been studies of young writers (Collier, 2017; Ryan, 2017; Kervin, Comber and Woods, 2020), relatively few studies have been made of teachers as writers, yet there are pedagogical consequences when teachers review the writing process from the point of view of an insider (Goouch *et al.*, 2009). The notion that teachers should be writers emerged in the early 1970s (Emig, 1971) in the USA and has been followed by a series of empirical research projects, reviewed by Cremin and Oliver (2016). However, the findings reveal that the evidence base in relation to teachers as writers is not strong, particularly with regard to the impact of teachers' writing on student outcomes. The review indicates that teachers have narrow conceptions of what counts as writing and being a writer and that multiple tensions exist, relating to low self-confidence, negative writing histories, and the challenge of composing and enacting teacher and writer positions in school.

However, conceptions of what counts as writing or what makes a ‘writer’, often centre on print-based text, ‘authorship’ and narrative/expressive genres. Many

teachers appear to discount everyday writing or digital practices, and may not self-identify as writers for this reason. The work of the New Literacy Studies (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Street 1984), which highlights the ordinariness of writing (and reading) practices, does not seem yet to have influenced teachers' conceptions of writing. As Yeo (2007) also observes, teachers' conceptualisations have little to do with current theories or practices in literacy and composition, or with what is formally taught in teacher education programmes; rather they are rooted in teachers' past experiences, historical conceptions of writing and policy codifications.

Street's (1984) 'autonomous' model of school literacy appears to remain highly influential in teachers' thinking about writing. This model, prevalent in accountability cultures that measure progress against sets of normalised sub-skills, fails to take account of difference or of cultural experience. In contrast, Street's (1994) 'ideological' model recognises the diversity and complexity of literacy practices, seeing them as everyday, situated and multiple. Teachers' limited conceptualisations tend to reinforce a dichotomy between school and personal writing, as well as between personal and professional writing, thus neglecting potentially productive connections between personal and school experiences. Arguably, as a consequence, many teachers are unlikely to recognise their students' everyday writing experience and 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al.*, 1992), or capitalise on their own range of textual practice in an inclusive representation of what it means to be a writer.

The review suggested that pre-service and in-service training programmes appear to have important roles to play in developing teachers' conceptions of writing and sense of self as writer. Findings suggest that sustained opportunities to reflect on personal writing histories, engage in writing, discuss textual processes and participate in a community of practice, can influence teachers' self-assurance as writers and their pedagogical approaches (Cremin and Oliver, 2016). Given the societal importance afforded proficiency in writing, and the influence of education on young writers, it is recommended that such opportunities are more widely utilised and in particular that the classroom consequences and influence on student outcomes are more extensively and rigorously researched.

Teachers as Writers research project (1)

The Teachers as Writers (TAW) research project (2016-2018), a collaboration between two universities and Arvon (a national creative writing charity in the UK) included a residential experience, and offered teachers sustained opportunities to write and build relationships with professional writers in order to improve student outcomes. The project findings indicate that teachers' engagement with professional writers can enhance student achievement in writing. With strengthened writer identities, teachers made pedagogic changes which in turn impacted upon students' motivation, confidence, sense of ownership and skills as writers although the statistical data did not reveal enhanced attainment (Cremin, Myhill, Eyres, Wilson, Oliver and Nash, 2020).

Impact on teachers

The teachers involved developed new insights about writing and being a writer which they drew upon in school, including: understanding about freewriting, ownership, the social and emotional demands of being a writer, the iterative nature of writing, and to a lesser extent revision.

Changed pedagogic practices: The impact of writers' engagement with teachers on their pedagogic practices was particularly evident in the teachers' changed practices in relation to freewriting, creating time and space for writing, the sharing of written work, and in how they handled the writing process

Teachers' identities as writers: The residential experience of the project made a substantial difference to the teachers' writer identities with almost all feeling they would describe themselves as writers. These writer identities were sustained after the project, and in some cases strengthened, due in part to the experience of enacting them in the classroom.

Students as writers: Most teachers developed more awareness of their students as writers, and began to acknowledge identity work in writing and the role of autonomy, agency and choice in their participation and learning. However, aligning such recognition with prescribed curriculum requirements is challenging.

Impact on students

Many or all student groups interviewed after the TAW project reported enhanced motivation, enjoyment, engagement and sense of ownership; greater awareness of aspects of the writing process and perceived progress in writing skill.

Motivation, enjoyment, engagement and sense of ownership: Students saw changes to teaching and learning, which they perceived as liberating, welcoming more opportunities to share and discuss ideas. They welcomed the introduction of personal notebooks for writing which were not assessed, opportunities for freewriting and greater choice over topic and form, more time to reflect on writing, consult and receive feedback, all of which gave them a sense of creative freedom. They also commented on increased confidence, largely as a result of more interactive and collaborative approaches to text development and improvement, where ideas and writing were shared and discussed at formative stages.

The writing process and skill development: Students felt they were also better able to articulate the processes involved in constructing text, including initial idea generation, the building of drafts over time, and the purpose of editing. Some said they now revised their writing more extensively and in more depth than they had done previously, although spelling, punctuation and grammar remained the predominant concern of many. Almost all the student respondents felt they had improved in skill and understanding over the project, mentioning improvements in fluency and quality of ideas; descriptive writing; vocabulary range; and understanding success criteria.

Recommendations

In the light of this research, UKLA supports following the recommendations of the TAWS project, which are to:

- Follow-up research to look at how teacher-writer engagement impacts student attainment, paying attention to practice implications.
- Making the implicit craft knowledge of professional writers explicit as a framework to develop teachers' subject knowledge and support their teaching.
- Teacher-writer engagements foreground co-mentoring in order to maximise the educational potential of professional writers' work.
- Teacher-writer engagements encompass more of the writing process, attending to editing and revision as well as generating writing.
- Teacher-writer engagements include close attention to pedagogical follow-through and sustained professional support.

To enhance teaching writing, the project recommended that teachers:

- re-examine the writing process and professional writers' descriptions of this, to consider whether their handling of the writing process constrains students' writing experiences
- offer time and space in the writing process for freewriting sessions and sharing
- write alongside students, acting as role models, sharing struggles
- pay increased attention to students' writer identities and to fostering their autonomy and agency as writers
- make richer use of feedback and peer-editing to support revision
- explore the personal dimension of writing, alongside the social and emotional demands involved.

The roles of teacher as writer

Teachers modelling themselves as authentically engaged writers can adopt a range of roles in order to help children develop confidence and competence as young writers. These might include the roles of:

- engaged and reflective reader
- authentic demonstrator of writing in front of the whole class
- scribe for class compositions
- fellow writer, writing alongside students in small group contexts
- response partner
- editor, co-editor and adviser
- publisher of their own and their students' work
- writer in their everyday lives.

Note

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Sources

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Classroom example

This draws on evidence from the classroom of one of the teachers involved in the Teachers as Writers project. It could apply to teachers and students in any age range.

Tina, a teacher of 7-8-year olds had commented at Arvon that she ‘was hyperventilating at the thought of sharing’ and was ‘afraid of being exposed’ as a less than proficient writer. Gradually, though, she had come to share her writing and back in school she sought to voice her work and invited the children to read aloud their writing to one another, in pairs, small groups and the whole class. Over time, a new rhythm of voicing writing was established in this class. No pressure was applied, but Tina, attuned to the potential for exposure, sensitively invited children to offer extracts of their emerging compositions: a verse, phrase, image or closing line and voiced her own. Some examples of the children’s story openings heard in one observation include: *“Promise me” he said sternly, “you will never tell...”; ‘The night was cold and dark and the mouse knew that if she...’; ‘I remember when I was no bigger than our family dog...’; ‘My mother is a dreamer...’; ‘Once there lived an old man who...’; and ‘Snow fell and Tanja hid, afraid that...’.* These opening extracts were uttered expressively into the classroom sharing space, often with a strong sense of the ellipsis inviting the audience to wonder and imagine. By reading aloud their writing and by listening to each other’s, their teacher’s and the professional writer’s extracts, the emerging authorial voices of this community were heard. By sharing their writing in this public forum (rather than just in the school exercise book for their teacher), children were enacting subtly different identities as authors.

Tina, who commented that she planned to borrow some of their extracts for freewriting prompts, commented, ‘We’ve never heard so much of their work in class’, and acknowledged that previously, ‘We’ve marked it and displayed it, but not really focused on sharing it like this, it’s different and they’re surprisingly interested and really listen’. The children responded enthusiastically, sometimes voting on a favourite line or explaining why they liked it. One noted, ‘We get to hear everyone’s stories and you can magpie loads’, and another that ‘You get to know what people are good at, there’s some great writers in our class’. Pride and a sense of positive writer identities appeared to be developing for some children. On one occasion a child from another class, sent to work in Tina’s room, was told by a peer, ‘If you’re stuck with your story go and talk to Damon, he’s good at hooking the reader in’. Damon, recognised as a writer with particular skills, was asked for his advice, perhaps prompting him to re-negotiate his own and others’ views of him as writer. Another child, responding to a friend’s poem conveyed his respect by observing ‘It’s kinda like music, how do you do that? It’s brilliant’, affirming his sense of the boy’s discursive voice. Following an emotional reading of her own story (begun at Arvon) to the class, Tina and her Teaching Assistant tried to write alongside the children during freewriting - she perceived this reduced the traditionally hierarchical teacher-pupil relationships. As one child noted ‘I like it when we all write, it’s like we’re in it together’.

The observational evidence from this classroom reveals considerable reading aloud, attentive listening, emotional engagement with their own and each other's writing, calm quietness during freewriting and energised conversation at other times as ideas were discussed. Through offering their writing to each other and through reading aloud each other's writing during feedback sessions, Tina and the children were co-constructing their identities as writers.

Teresa Cremin and Debra Myhill on behalf of UKLA

See also

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Children's Writing Journals by Lynda Graham and Annette Johnson

Active Encounters: Inspiring young readers and writers of non-fiction
by Margaret Mallett

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Writing 3-7 by John Richmond

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Writing 7-16 by John Richmond

Teaching Writing Effectively: Reviewing practice
by Eve Bearne, Liz Chamberlain, Teresa Cremin and Marilyn Mottram

Making an Impact 1: Raising Standards in Writing
by Rebecca Kennedy and Eve Bearne: professional development materials
accompanying *Teaching Writing Effectively*

Teaching Writing: What the Evidence Says
by Henrietta Dombey and colleagues

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

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