



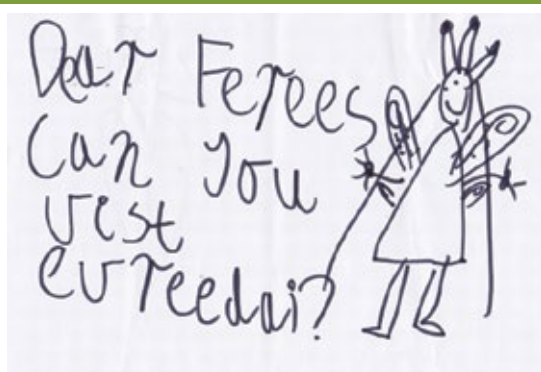
Australian Government
Quality Teacher Programme



Creating Texts with 21st Century Early Learners

A professional learning experience for pre-primary teachers in independent schools in Perth metropolitan and regional areas

REPORT 2013



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Overview

The Project – *Creating Texts with 21st Century Early Learners* – was a collaborative project between the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) and Edith Cowan University (ECU). The project, which was funded by AISWA, provided twenty-four early childhood teachers with an ongoing and multi-layered professional learning experience about the teaching and learning of written communication in early childhood. The project goal was to develop the teacher participants' understanding and knowledge in relation to young children's writing development, and to positively influence the learning of the children in their classes. In realising this goal the project aimed to:

- develop teacher participants' theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and understanding in relation to early writing;
- provide opportunities for teacher participants to reflect on, critique and explore new knowledge in light of their own experience and understanding of the children they teach;
- support teacher participants in carrying out their own action research whereby written communication learning and development needs for individuals and groups of children in their classes are identified and addressed;
- establish a collaborative learning community whereby teacher participants share and reflect together on their thinking and learning, their classroom experiences and their problems, strategies, and solutions; and,
- encourage teacher participants to capture their ongoing learning and development and that of the children's written communication through the use of a professional learning journal.

The main components of the early childhood writing project were four seminar days, a classroom-based inquiry and a professional learning journal. Each component was important to the achievement of teacher learning that carried over to classroom practice and moreover, that had impact on children's development as early writers. The project established a collaborative approach to teacher learning whereby the participants collectively considered, critiqued and evaluated children's writing samples, planning documents, new information and ideas and, shared experiences, issues and needs in relation to the teaching and learning of writing. The collaborative nature of the project meant participants were able to provide each other with the stimulation and support beneficial to their growth as teachers.

Project aims were further supported through the use of relevant articles and accompanying review frameworks. The use of class surveys and questionnaires provided the impetus for reflection and discussion about classroom writing environments, writing experiences, family influences and important areas of learning for beginning and early writers.

The project also involved the collection of data from the teachers to monitor the achievement of project aims. Furthermore, data collection in the form of a 'needs analysis' was carried out at the beginning of the project; the information gathered served to identify the teacher participants' current understanding, beliefs and practices and their areas of interest and self-efficacy in relation to young children becoming authors. The information allowed for the design of seminars to be relevant to the needs, interests and experiences of the teacher participants.

Overall, the project achieved several positive outcomes. The evidence suggests that the teacher participants developed in their knowledge and understanding of early writing and were able to make effective changes to classroom practices so as to progress student understanding, knowledge and skills in written communication. It would seem that most significant development for many teachers was the exploration of the role of motivation in writing and the practices that positively influence children's enthusiasm for, and engagement with the writing experiences of the classroom. Motivation was linked to the concept of 'purpose' and 'audience' and for several teachers achieving a balance between teacher 'controlled' writing tasks and giving children carefully crafted ownership of the writing process and product appeared to be a major achievement. As children began to explore writing through meaningful tasks, several teachers commented on the way in which they began to see writing as a means of authentic communication rather than the teaching of skills. Of note was the evidence that learning and growth occurred in different degrees amongst the teacher participants suggesting further consideration of the internal and external influences on a teacher's orientation to learning and change.

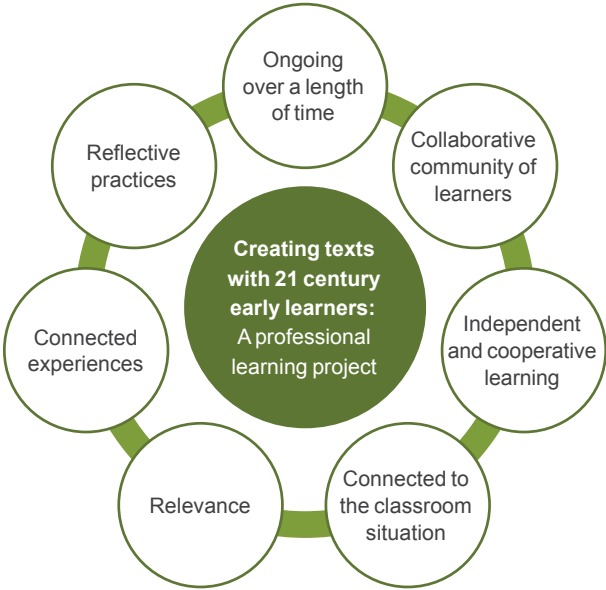
Participants

The project focussed on pre-primary teachers and altogether 24 teachers participated. Teachers were encouraged to join the project with a colleague from the same school. This resulted in four pairs of pre-primary teachers, where there was more than one pre-primary class and four individual pre-primary teachers from a range of pre-primary schools. In addition six pre-primary teachers invited their kindergarten/pre-primary or pre-primary/year one colleague to be involved in the project as part of their Early Learning Team. This enhanced the project as teachers worked together supporting each other and potentially strengthening the impact of the project in their schools. The teachers self nominated and were selected from fourteen different independent schools in Perth metropolitan and regional areas.

The teaching contexts of the participants held many similar features though a few significant differences

prevailed. Over 50% of the teachers taught in medium level socio-economic areas of Perth; in contrast the others were equally representative of low and high socio-economic areas. Class sizes varied significantly; the range was from classes of 11 students to those of 30 students; over one third of the teachers had class sizes of between 15 and 20. There was a somewhat high representation of teachers (70%) who taught students who spoke English as a Second Language (ESL). There was a sizable variation in parent involvement from situations in which parent involvement was high to those for whom parent involvement was minimal. In terms of the classroom space, most teachers reported it to be adequate. The suggestion was that it allowed for implementation of the experiences and activities of an early childhood program but that it provided little scope for extending the teaching and learning spaces beyond what was a basic requirement. Fifteen percent of participants reported that their classroom space was more than adequate.

Figure 1: Components of the Professional Learning Project



Time frame

The project was carried out over nine months which allowed teachers' to engage in a substantial array of activities. Research identifies duration and scope as being significant features of professional learning that positively influence student outcomes (Cameron, Mulholland & Branson, 2013; Mockler, 2013; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The considerable duration of the project acknowledged the time needed for teachers to develop, reflect on, discuss, absorb and practice new knowledge and to continually refine their classroom practice. The activities were integrated into four seminar days held over the course of the project, homework in between seminars and classroom research and practice carried out by teachers in their own teaching and learning contexts.

Significant features

The various features, experiences and activities of the project worked in combination to shape the processes of change necessary for teacher learning and pedagogical innovation and ultimately for student learning. They reflected those that are identified in the research (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) as being important to achieving gains in teacher knowledge and effective change in teaching practice. The key features of the *Creating Texts with 21st Century Early Learners* project are outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Components of the Professional Learning Project

Ongoing over a length of time	The project was sustained over a considerable length of time during which teachers engaged with a range of learning and development activities.
Collaborative community of learners	Teachers had many opportunities to work in collaborative partnership with others to critique ideas, experiences and information and construct their learning.
Independent and cooperative learning	Teacher involvement comprised both independent and collaborative opportunities to construct their learning.
Reflective practices	The activities and experiences of the project facilitated reflection and consideration in terms of each teacher's own teaching situation and group of students.
Connected experiences which deepened learning	The various activities and experiences built on each other to provide continual opportunity for teachers to strengthen understanding and knowledge and to continually progress their practice and their students' engagement and learning.
Relevance	The topics and content of the project remained relevant to the needs of the participants; survey data and other informal feedback from teachers was used to ensure this.
Connected to the realities of the classroom situation	Teachers were supported in considering new Information, ideas and issues in light of the practicalities of their own classroom. Classroom-based inquiry was carried out allowing teachers to use new knowledge to address the specific needs of their students.

Classroom-based inquiry: Teacher action research

Central to the project and important to ensuring its significance was the use of *classroom-based inquiry* which involved teachers investigating their practices in teaching writing and their students' learning. They used observation, interviews, conversations and analysis of samples of writing to ascertain students' learning and development as well as their engagement with and attitude towards writing and the writing experiences of the classroom. They considered their findings in the context of the teaching practices they employed and the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge gained through other experiences of the project. The insights developed became an impetus for change and many teachers began doing things differently.

Figure 2: I-E-P-A-E cycle of classroom-based inquiry and knowledge building



The *classroom-based inquiry* component of the project was based largely on a traditional action research model which called for teachers to:

- (i) Articulate an issue, a problem or a point of conjecture in relation to their classroom situation associated with the teaching and learning of writing;
- (ii) Gather and analyse information in order to better understand the identified issue, problem or point of conjecture;
- (iii) Draw on available resources (seminar knowledge-input sessions, personal reading and discussions with other teachers) to extend understanding about the ways in which an issue, problem or point of conjecture might be addressed and to devise an appropriate course of action;
- (iv) Implement new strategies or practices; and
- (v) Evaluate the consequences of doing things differently and share them with other teachers during seminar sessions; consider the process of change in their personal learning journal.

Figure 3: Adapted teacher inquiry



An important feature of the inquiry was the provision of opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. Small groups were able to meet during seminar sessions to share their inquiry experiences, exchange knowledge with respect to the teaching of writing and student learning in this area. They were able to question each other and help each other to gain deeper insights into their situation and determine how issues might be addressed. They also shared their successes from the introduction of new and adapted strategies and practices.

Classroom-based inquiry provided a very useful means to assist teachers to enhance their teaching effectiveness. In particular, the sharing of ideas and experiences provides a practical path towards improvement. The approach recognises that teachers are involved in their own unique classroom experiences and challenges and that they are therefore in a position to develop appropriate responses to them. In many ways their development may stem from tackling authentic, rather than theoretical, needs. As emphasised by Jaquith, Mindich, Chungwel, & Darling-Hammond (2011), professional learning that makes a difference is embedded within a system of learning and improvement that supports teachers' work—and it must be sustained and involve reflective inquiry.

Seminars

There were four professional learning seminar days which were held at regular intervals over the duration of the project. They brought together the twenty-four participant teachers as well as the AISWA Early Childhood Curriculum Consultant and three literacy specialists from ECU. A principal focus of the seminars was the input of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge about written communication and teaching young children to write. The knowledge was delivered by means of interactive presentations and case studies which teachers explored, challenged and subsequently considered in relation to their current teaching practice and school policy.

Determining priorities

The topics and content of the professional learning seminars were determined by what is currently understood to be important teacher knowledge about writing and effective pedagogical practice. However, content was modified as the teachers' experiences, interests, concerns, needs and current knowledge became apparent; for this purpose a needs analysis was carried out on the first day. The information from the needs analysis was used

to reconstruct content priorities and to ensure the project remained relevant to the teachers and their students' learning. Additionally, it was important to make sure that the professional learning was conducted so as to be representative of the needs of all participants. In order to determine what the teachers considered to be important, we began by asking what their students needed to know in order to create texts. This was followed by asking what they needed to know in order to support early writers. Their responses are reported in the following two figures.

Figure 4: What does a young writer need to know in order to create texts?

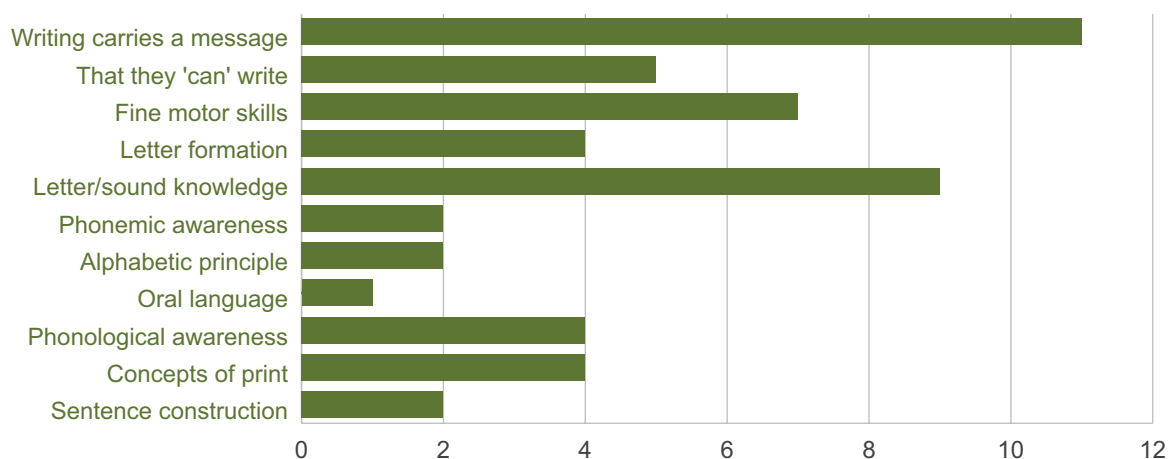
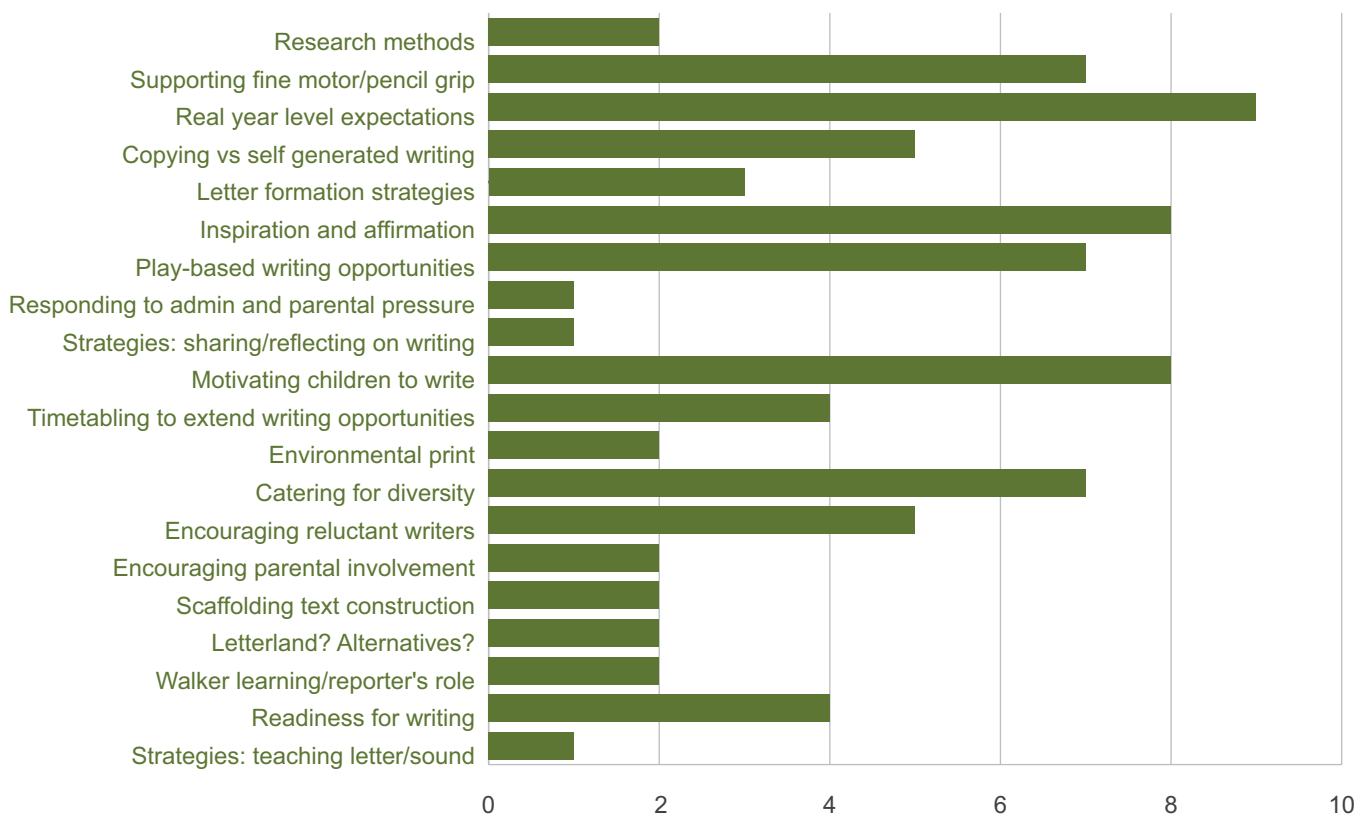


Figure 5: What do I need to know to support the development of early writers?

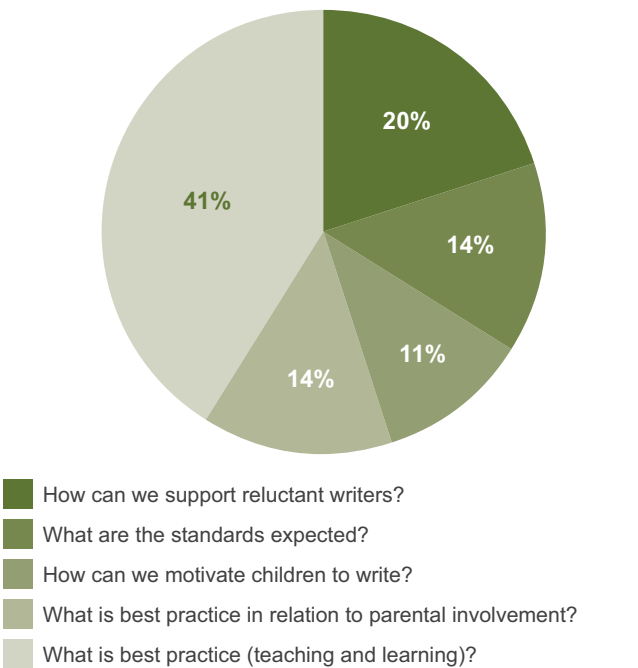


The teachers were then asked to work in groups to identify key questions, based on the previous individual brainstorm while referring to writing samples from four or five students in their class.

During the discussion that informed the needs analysis and the construction of key questions it became apparent that the majority of teachers implemented a very well panned writing program, which included the explicit teaching of the conventions of writing. For many teachers the explicit teaching of hand writing, punctuation, left to right orientation, spaces between words and sound letter correspondence was the focus of their program. Others talked about the importance of the explicit teaching of structure and composition of writing alongside the conventions of writing. It was clear that the teachers felt confident about this aspect of their teaching, seeing explicit and intentional teaching as central to learning and an integral part of their literacy program. Their key questions reflected a concern about how to motivate early writers and involve reluctant writers in creating texts, balancing explicit teaching with child initiated learning. Thus it was agreed that the seminars would focus on ways of encouraging children to initiate and develop writing as authors, taking some control and responsibility for their writing, while recognising the importance of explicit teaching as part of that process.

The following diagram documents an amalgamation of the key questions that emerged from all 24 teachers.

Figure 6: Key questions identified by participating teachers



These five questions formed the basis of the next three seminars and were addressed as shown in the following table.

Table 2: Professional learning provided in response to key questions

Reluctant writers; motivation	The issue of reluctant writers and motivating children to write was addressed for teachers as they began to understand important features of writing experiences for young children. For instance, the teachers understood and applied the concept of purpose and audience as well as play and writing and the use of positive feedback and acknowledgement of communicative content of children’s writing.
Achievement standards	The issue of standards was addressed specifically through activities around curriculum documents but resolution came in unforeseen ways. It would seem that, as teachers became inspired with teaching writing and their classroom practices – and indeed they did – and as they saw their students’ writing progress, standards of achievement became less of an issue for them as they recognised that they were inadvertently meeting the standards.
Parental involvement	The extent to which the teacher participants developed their knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning writing, meant they were in a better position to work in partnership with parents in the goal of helping students to write and develop as authors. They could more knowledgeably discuss those areas of learning and writing experiences that support authentic and balanced writing development.
Best practice teaching (writing)	Teachers learnt about evidence-based strategies and practices for teaching writing through the knowledge input sessions and their classroom-based inquiry. They were also provided with research articles and book chapters for this purpose. Importantly, theoretical understanding was developed alongside pedagogical knowledge. The concept of ‘best’ practice was also challenged and the notion of ‘effective’ practice was introduced, on the basis of the importance of context in the decision making process.



As each key question was explored, the teachers were encouraged to continue to raise issues (rather than seek 'easy' answers) this was achieved through the detailed analysis and discussion of their students' writing samples which evolved from their classroom-based inquiry.

The following were the most prevalent of their concerns:

- How do I simultaneously support young writers moving into more conventional writing while maintaining a play-based curriculum in a way that ensure equity to all children?
- How do I ensure all children are being taught in their zone of proximal development?
- Should small group Shared Writing experiences involve grouping children based on their interests or their abilities?
- Is explicit systematic phonics teaching appropriate in kindergarten?
- How relevant are phonological disorders to emergent writing? When is it appropriate for these children to write?
- When teaching explicitly, is it modelling or co-construction?
- How do I provide space for children to learn and practise in explicit teaching situations?
- Is the time 'left over' adequate for children to attain mastery and fluency?
- Will incorporation of the 'error' strategy and increased use of shared and modelled writing reinforce full stops and capitals?
- How do I plan for authentic child initiated writing experiences?
- Will strategies suggested by the occupational therapist really motivate my reluctant writers?
- How do I integrate writing into play so that 'reluctant' writers are intrinsically motivated to write?
- How can I move the children's focus away from handwriting and toward writing a more meaningful text? Is it about providing more interesting and 'special' writing implements or providing audiences for children's writing?

These issues were typically resolved through the course of the project. It was mostly the case that answers to particular questions were uncovered as classroom practices were considered, adapted and evaluated in light of new information and understanding.

Knowledge input topics and reflective discussions

The knowledge input component of the seminars was carried out by way of oral/visual presentations, case studies and case video clips which were presented by literacy specialists from ECU. The presentations incorporated discussion time so as to afford teachers the chance to think about and consider the information in light of the practicalities of their own classrooms. The topics that comprised the input of new knowledge are grouped under the following ten headings:

- The knowledge, skills and understandings involved in learning to write.
- Writing in early childhood classrooms: guidelines for effective practice.
- In the beginning, young writers develop independence.
- Pedagogy and motivation - theoretical frameworks.
- Writing through structured play, socio-dramatic play and inquiry based learning.
- Understanding and addressing the Early Years Learning Framework and Australian Curriculum in relation to early writers.
- A balanced approach to the teaching of writing - strategies and activities, learning focus areas.
- Using ICT to support young children's writing learning and development.
- Changing perceptions of early writers – the value of classroom-based inquiry.
- Current research (writing pedagogy): Writing workshops in preschool (King, 2012); Drawing to support writing (MacKenzie, 2011); Environmental print and print motivation (Neumann, Hood & Ford, 2012) and; Oral rehearsals for scaffolding writing (Myhill & Jones, 2009).

Knowledge input sessions were always followed by partner or small group discussions that involved teachers reflecting on the information presented. Focus-questions were provided for these discussions. The aim was to support teachers to move beyond a surface level understanding of topics and to cultivate understanding in relation to their own practices and their students' learning. Topics of discussion were supported by the questions and areas for consideration. Table 3 (overleaf) shows the relationship between the topics of the knowledge input sessions and the discussion focus topics.

I wonder who made the
moon...



Josefeen climbed a
long ladder and put
a shiny rock in
the sky Emma

"Josefine climbed a long ladder and put a shiny rock in the sky."

Table 3: Connecting knowledge input sessions and discussion topics

Knowledge Input Topic	Reflective Discussion Focus
The foundational knowledge, skills and understandings involved in learning to write	Consider how you provide understanding and use of three of the knowledge skills and understanding components of foundation literacy/writing in relation to your context. Explore the role of the indoor and outdoor environment, learning experiences, resources and interactions in promoting these aspects of early writing.
12 effective practices for integrating writing in children's daily schedules	Consider, review and evaluate your classroom writing context in terms of the twelve effective practices outlined in the presentation.
In the beginning: early writers develop independence	Determine the skills and understandings about writing that the teacher in the video aimed to develop and identify the different experiences provided to teach children about being writers. Describe how you introduce your students to writing, while fostering independence.
Pedagogy and motivation – theoretical frameworks	Explore your personal philosophy and theoretical foundations of your pedagogy – how does this relate to motivation through authentic purposes for writing? How do you use writing to purposefully communicate with others and help your students to learn to view themselves as 'real' writers/authors.
Writing through play, socio-dramatic play and inquiry based learning	Define, share and evaluate these three aspects of learning to facilitate authentic and independent writing in your classroom. How do these influence motivation and independence?
The Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum	Analyse the demands of these two frameworks in relation to the content and outcomes of the planning and implementation of your literacy learning program, with a specific focus on writing.
Balance of strategies and experiences for teaching writing	Discuss how the teacher in the video uses the strategy of Shared Writing to teach her students specific understandings and skills of writing – consider specific techniques used and the role of the students. Share examples of how you intentionally use literacy scaffolds for your emergent writers. How and to what extent do you use talk to scaffold children's writing? In light of the information presented, how might you extend this?
Using ICT to support early writers	Explore three ICT applications and map how these could be effectively used with your students.
Changing perceptions of early writers	Describe what you have changed or adapted and the impact of these changes on early writing development. Reflect on the value of classroom-based inquiry.
Current research (pedagogy) based on research articles	Reflect on the content, ideas and relevance of each research article; consider in relation to own classroom context.

Other seminar activities

Other seminar activities were derived from teachers' immediate work with students and their classroom-based inquiry data. The activities involved teachers partnering with each other to collaboratively consider their own teaching situations and practices and their students' learning and development.

Examining students' writing

Teachers worked together to examine samples of their students' writing and together, sought to identify how these revealed the efficacy of their teaching methods. They exchanged points of view, information and ideas and they highlighted strengths and problem-solved around issues uncovered. These sessions served to enrich each other's thinking and learning about writing pedagogy and their students' writing development.

Working with a critical friend

Teachers were given the opportunity to work on their classroom-based inquiry in pairs/groups with a shared issue. Such discussion involved the notion of a critical friend in that as they 'un-packed' their concern, they listened to each other, asked questions, made statements and worked to help each other shape deeper understanding. In taking on the role of critical friend teachers were able to support each other in gaining depth of understanding and clarity of their issue and in transferring understanding into practice. The role was supported through the provision of questions that were asked by the critical friend to ascertain the essence of the issue, before moving to the next stage of possible actions.

Questions included:

- *What do you mean?*
- *Can you give me a little more detail?*
- *Can you give me an example?*
- *Can you tell me a little bit more?*
- *Why do you think that?*
- *Why does that excite/worry/ intrigue you?*
- *Can you interpret that in another way?*
- *Is there another possible explanation?*

The significance of these sharing sessions was that teachers with different levels of understanding and varied experiences could learn from each other. Throughout the process teachers articulated their growing knowledge both for themselves and others in their group. The value of this type of experience for teachers' professional learning is highlighted by Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley (2003) who state, "Knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience" (cited in Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2006, p.81).

It was noted that these types of discussions had a positive impact on the cohesiveness of the participants. A genuine culture of learning, risk taking and collaborative inquiry ensued and a sense of trust and confidence resulted from teachers realising that their issues and concerns were often common to the group.

Teachers' feedback about students' writing

Feedback about students' writing helped to connect the five key questions, as it is central to the teaching and learning process. We looked at the potency of comments teachers might provide their students in response to the written texts they create. Examples of different feedback comments on samples of students' writing were provided; typically comments were about the surface features of the student's writing (for example, the spelling, punctuation, sentence structures and word spacing) but they also included comments made in response to the message or the communicative intent of the written text. The different feedback comments were analysed by the teachers and a discussion around the implications of each type of comment ensued. Two specific questions directed the discussion:

- *What message does each type of teacher response (feedback) provide the children about written communication?*
- *What theory of teaching/learning is indicative of each type of feedback?*

The teachers then considered how they respond to their own students' written texts and whether or not they provide a certain types of feedback more than other types.

They considered the implications of their own feedback comments and the implicit message they were giving their students about what is important to the act of writing. Discussion extended to deciding how feedback might address a broad range of important perspectives about writing. This reflective process was carried out in groups.

Classroom writing experiences

The teachers carried out a writing audit for which they kept an ongoing record of the writing experiences that their students engaged in over a period of time. This comprised noting information about the nature of each writing experience; for instance, the initiator (the teacher, a child), the links between the writing and other learning experiences or topics and the purpose and audience for the writing task. The information that emerged from the audit became the basis of a group activity where teachers discussed their findings relative to their understanding about the teaching and learning of writing and considered other possibilities for children's writing experiences.

On another occasion group discussion addressed the communicative nature of classroom writing experiences. The information that surfaced indicated that a significant number of teachers provided their students with writing experiences that had purposes other than that of genuine communication, often related to:

- writing skills practice e.g. the use of correct punctuation;
- the acquisition of assessment data; and,
- accountability e.g. indicating to the principal, parents, specialist teachers and other visitors to the classroom that children were learning to write.

Although it was acknowledged that these aspects are important, it became clear that for some teachers these formed the focus of their writing program. However, there were some teachers who afforded their students purposeful communicative writing experiences; for these teachers the concentration was on a number of purposes – letters, messages, signs, reports and explanations.

Teachers discussed how they might establish purposeful classroom writing experiences where their students wrote with communicative intent and for genuine audiences. Links were made to previous case videos that presented young children writing with purpose and audience in mind. Additionally teachers were asked to consider how purposeful writing experiences might positively influence students' motivation to write. This topic extended into another seminar session where writing as a part of play, particularly socio-dramatic play was the central topic. Within this context teachers were able to reflect on the value of self-initiated purposeful writing and re-evaluate the significance and teaching of the surface features of writing.

Children's thoughts about writing

Teachers also conducted an interview with the children in their class. The interview was adapted with permission from part of an unpublished interview schedule from Byrnes and Brown (2007). It comprised the following questions:

- *Do you like writing or having a go at writing things?*
- *Do you like doing this by yourself or with someone else? If someone else, who?*
- *Is there somewhere special you like to go to write e.g. in the writing corner/at home in the kitchen?*
- *What kinds of things do you particularly like to write there?*
- *Do you like to choose the things you write e.g. write your name?*
- *Do you think it is a good idea to learn to write? If yes, why? What's good about learning to write?*
- *Are you looking forward to learning to write lots of different words?*
- *Who is teaching you to write? What do they do? How do they teach you?*
- *Did (will) you have to do anything special to help yourself learn to write?*
- *If yes, what did (will) you do?*
- *Was (Is) it going to be easy for you to learn to write?*
- *Why do you think that?*
- *What if it is hard? What will adults do?*
- *What will you do?*
- *Now (When) you have learnt to write, what kinds of things will (do) you be able to write?*
- *Do you think you are (will be) good at writing?*
- *Is there something you always like to write e.g. your name on birthday cards? If yes, what?*

The information that surfaced from the surveys became the topic of a seminar. Together teachers reflected on their survey revelations; that is, the students' understanding and thoughts about writing and learning to write. They identified commonly held attitudes, celebrated the positives and sought to determine the implications and possible ways to respond. The survey results revealed a number of positives areas of students' understanding about and attitude towards writing.

Writing and curriculum expectations

The Australian Curriculum – Foundation level English (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011) and the Early Years Learning Framework – Outcome 5 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009), were the focus of one seminar, the aim of which was to ensure understanding in relation to the knowledge, skills and understanding important to learning to write. Additionally, it was anticipated that teachers would recognise the value of authentic, child-centred writing experiences for achieving curriculum requirements. As teachers examined the foundation level English content of the curriculum and considered Outcome 5 of the Early Years Learning Framework, they were assisted to associate the learning espoused with that being achieved as a consequence of their involvement in the project.

Looking back and looking forward

A focus group discussion was held on the final seminar day, for teachers to review their learning and development in relation to writing and young children. Teachers shared their personal experiences of learning and growth and the ways in which they have changed or adapted classroom practices and understanding. They also revealed what they observed in terms of their students' growth as writers and their attitude to and engagement with writing. The discussions were carried out in small groups each with one project leader and five or six teachers. Three questions were used to guide teachers' thinking and provide the starting points for the sharing of experience and learning. The three questions were:

- *What have you noticed about how your thinking has changed or developed in relation to the teaching and learning of written communication in your classroom?*
- *In what ways have you changed, adapted or added to your practices for the teaching and learning of written communication?*
- *What have you noticed about your students' learning and development in the area of written communication? Are there particular areas of learning and development that you would attribute to your participation in the writing project?*

The focus group discussions also provided important information that would allow for determining the effectiveness of the project in relation to its goals.

Professional reading

The development of teachers' theoretical and pedagogical knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing was further supported through personal reading and, for this purpose teachers were assigned research articles and text book chapters chosen for their relevance to their interests and needs. The readings that were provided dealt with the following range of topics:

- Writing in early childhood classrooms: Guidance for best practices (Bingham & Wasik, 2012).
- Mark making matters: Young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development (UK Department for children, schools and families, 2008).

- Multiple ways of making meaning: Children as writers (Barratt-Pugh, 2007).
- Developing Motivation to Write (Bruning & Horn, 2000).
- Play and literacy learning (Barratt-Pugh, 2000).
- Learning to write at the level of letters (Temple, Nathan & Temple, 2013).

The readings were sometimes accompanied by supplementary reflection activities which directed teachers to relevant information and helped to make connections between the information presented and their teaching contexts. An example of a reflection activity is shown below. This activity was used in conjunction with the research article about writing and motivation.

Figure 7: Example of reflective activity provided for personal reading task about motivation and writing.

Motivation to write: Examining classroom practices?

The article, *Developing Motivation to Write* (Bruning & Horn, 2010), provides an examination of some issues relevant to children's motivation for written communication. The authors outline some points of assumption (pp 26 – 27) about writing development and learning; these explore the teacher's beliefs about writing, the need for children to experience writing as purposeful and to see it as an authentic form of communication and that knowledge about how children learn oral language is significant to their learning to communicate in writing. Furthermore, a framework is described whereby four factors important to the development and maintenance of motivation to write are explained. The focus is not specifically early childhood; nevertheless, the four factors remain relevant to working with early writers.

Read the article with a specific focus on how the information presented relates to the written communication teaching and learning practices of your classroom. Note the key points of each of the four factors explained, how your teaching/classroom practices are supported by the information in the article and any changes you might make to your practices.

Factors	Key points and important practices	Application to your classroom practices
Nurturing Functional Beliefs About Writing [pp. 28 – 29]		
Fostering Student Engagement Through Authentic Writing Goals and Contexts [pp. 30 – 31]		
Providing a Supportive Context for Writing [pp. 31 – 33]		
Creating a Positive Emotional Environment [pp. 33 – 34]		

The professional learning journal

For the teachers who participated in the project, learning was an individual endeavour; teachers had their own expectations, learning requirements and unique class of students with their own needs. From this point of view the professional learning experience could be described as a personal journey for each teacher, in conjunction with a colleague in the same school for some teachers. Fundamental to their depth of learning and growth as teachers was the opportunity to think about and critically reflect on the experiences with which they engaged and practices implemented. This important aspect of learning was fostered through the collaborative discussions which

were integral to project experiences. It was further promoted through the use of a professional learning journal which teachers completed over the course of the project.

Professional Learning Journals were distributed to teachers at the beginning of the project. They were specially designed notebooks in which teachers could document the experiences and events of their professional learning journey. They were used by teachers to record the teaching and learning issues they identified, their analysis and thinking and the awareness that ensued. The professional learning journals were a record of the teachers' learning journeys but importantly, they provided teachers with a means by which to learn about the process of reflective practice. As Samoa (2011) explains, "*keeping a journal encourages deeper*



levels of thought, change and improvement in [teachers'] practices... [it] shows that the learner has been thinking about the process of his or her learning and [developing] understanding" (p.72). In essence, the professional learning journals were to be records of what teachers did, what they learnt and what they understood in relation to themselves as teachers of written communication and their students as early writers.

Teachers were provided with information about the potential sources of information for their writing and reflection; for example, seminar experiences, personal readings, discussions with other teachers, significant classroom writing experiences, observations of students writing and the writing (texts) they produced, conversations with students, classroom-based inquiry, their assumptions, beliefs, and values about teaching and learning writing and the results of change or addition to their classroom environments or teaching practices. Additionally, they were offered suggestions for ways in which information might be represented in their journals – descriptive and reflective writing, mind-maps, annotated photographs and examples of children's writing, transcripts of conversations with children. However, the emphasis was placed on the individual and flexible nature of learning journals.

Questioning frameworks that facilitate their reflective thinking were provided to support the process; for example, self-questioning in relation to a particular experience

or finding – *How do I feel about this? What do I think about this? What have I learned from this? What action will I take as a result of what I have learned?*

The professional learning journals were discussed with the teachers on each of the seminar days. Through these discussions teachers were supported in understanding the nature and purpose of the journals; any questions they had were addressed.

On the final seminar day, teachers displayed their journals for others to view and they shared information about the processes and information reflected in the journals and of their learning journey overall.

Project outcomes

The effectiveness of the Creating Texts with 21st Century Early Learners project was determined through data collection at each seminar, classroom visits and focus group discussions in which teachers shared about their participation in the project and how it had shaped their understanding, thinking and classroom practice. They described the transfer of their learning to the classroom situation and how it had influenced their students' writing motivation as well as their development as writers. As teachers talked about the different strategies and practices they were implementing in the classroom, it became apparent that they had gained from the professional learning experiences of the project.

Teachers' comments during focus group discussions typically included phrases that indicated growth and change in terms of their understanding and thinking about teaching and learning writing. They typically included such expressions as:

- *I've changed...*
- *I think one of my biggest changes has been that...*
- *My whole mindset has changed as well...*
- *I think that's been huge to really solidify my understanding of...*

Reflection

How do I feel about this?

What do I think about this?

What have I learned from this?

What action will I take as a result of what I have learned?

- *I've diversified my thinking about ...*
- *Because I have a deeper understanding I know ...*
- *My thinking has become much clearer about it [teaching writing]*
- *I found it made me question why I'm doing things a bit more...*
- *I think by us, as teachers, being conscious about why we're doing what we're doing...*

It was clear that for some teachers a new enthusiasm for the teaching of writing ensued from the experiences and activities of the project. As one teacher put it, *"I think I'm more energised and more excited about it all"*, and another, *"I'm more interested in it [teaching writing] and I'm more enthusiastic about it and I think that's having a really positive effect..."* Other teachers talked about being inspired by their students' flourishing writing skills and increased interest in writing.

Teachers' learning occurred across a broad range of topics relevant to young children becoming writers. Focus group discussions confirmed teachers' new knowledge and understanding and its unmistakable transfer to the practicalities of their classroom situations. It was evident that most teachers made genuine changes to their practices or improvements to what they were already doing, through the development of new knowledge and understanding. Several areas of learning were identifiable from the data, and although all of these are interconnected, they are presented separately to enable detailed evidence and discussion.

Purposeful writing experiences

Many teachers shared experiences of new classroom practices that reflected a contemporary understanding of the importance of providing their students with meaningful writing experiences where the focus was on communicating with others for real purposes. Teachers spoke enthusiastically about their shifts in practice and shared their appreciation of writing experiences that provided children with a sense of purpose and audience. There were many comments made that revealed this area of their learning and the subsequent change to classroom practice.

I have consciously thought about why they're writing it and who's going to be reading it. So a lot of the things that they have been doing I've consciously thought of the audience more than I used to. So my writing has become a lot more purposeful. Displaying the writing rather than just sticking it into a book. Sending postcards home, writing emails to each other, whether it's written or whether it's typed; the children send me emails and I return their email.

My main aim was to make writing purposeful so that they would want to write and really have a communication aspect to the writing.

The teachers' stories about creating more authentically communicative writing experiences were embedded with enthusiasm about the way it influenced their students. Many teachers linked these types of writing experiences to their students being more engaged and more motivated to write. For some, the enthusiasm was about being able to harness the interest of those students who were previously unwilling to write.

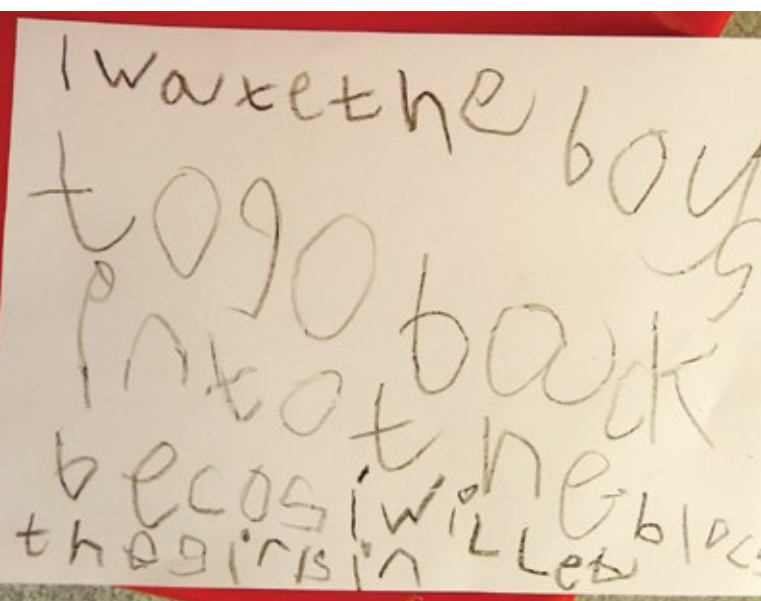
That was very motivating for them. Making an actual book, they're, "This is my first book! I'm an author! I've published my first book!" They put in so much effort with the illustrations. When the ... more reluctant ones saw the other children putting in all this effort and how special the book was when it was put there (on display), they all just ... it was a chain reaction! You can see the pride and effort. So this is my most reluctant writer in my class...well, this is how it became, and she just took so much pride in this.

These books that I've created have been about having authentic reasons for writing, and I think it's been... it's been fantastic for me too... it's been empowering for them because they've actually sent messages home where they've got a response... they've talked about it at home, so that's instantly told them how useful writing can be. Children who normally wouldn't write are writing.

...and I found that it has made a huge difference with them wanting to write and how much they will write and the motivation to write.

It has made writing exciting. The kids are excited about the process, engaged in the process, but it also honours the fact that authors take time to create good stories.





Play and writing

Many teachers talked about the idea of providing opportunities for children to write during play. They told stories about their experience of integrating writing into socio-dramatic play, learning centres and outdoor play. For some teachers the notion of writing during play was new while for others it was about being more conscious of opportunities to extend this practice.

I put paper and pens into the block corner and very much allowed the children, any opportunity that there was, got them to create the labels, got them to do the writing. So it went very much from teacher-directed writing opportunities to child-initiated writing opportunities.

I put stuff in the construction area, I'd never done that before, with pens and clipboards and they made little notes about the Lego things that they'd made...

I've got a post box in my class now where they can write letters to each other, write to me, and then we have a postman who gives out the mail at the end of the day.

When we did the space centre, when we do the supermarket, or when we did a hairdresser, instead of printing out a ... big banner that's bright and colourful and sticking it up, the children [create] it. So they have to write that it's a space centre and what they'll see in the space centre. They need to create the computer... In the supermarket they need to write where the dairy is going to stay, where the vegies are staying. They need to label everything.

We now have writing more in the home corner, it's in the block corner, it's at the science table; there are always pens and pencils around; paper for writing on, for them to just go ahead and do it.

There's just writing all over the pavement, everywhere, but they love it. It's giving them the opportunity to... and knowing that it doesn't have to be on a piece of paper, there are other ways to write.

And so it was very much changing it and making it far more child-initiated, far more child-centred, including lots of writing in their play, in a block corner, and just making it fun, making them excited about writing.

Teachers demonstrated awareness of the benefits to their students' writing development of integrating writing into play. They spoke of increased opportunities for their students to write and the naturally supportive environment that play provides for their students developing writing skills and understandings. They highlighted children's willingness to write when it is a natural part of their play and of the sense of empowerment provided from the self-initiated writing that play encourages. Finally, they spoke of the fun and excitement generated from writing as a part of play.



Self-initiated writing

Closely linked to the idea of writing and play is the notion of children's self-initiated writing. When teachers were asked about their learning and the classroom practices that have arisen from their involvement in the project, many comments related to the idea of relinquishing control of students' experiences of writing. Ideas of being more flexible, providing more choice and freedom and setting up a range of writing opportunities were championed as teachers shared their learning on the topic of self-initiated writing. Additionally, teachers talked of seeing the benefits to their children's enjoyment of writing and confidence as writers.

I'm a lot more flexible in the way that I think about their writing... I just say, "Well, what do you want to write about? What can you tell me? Is there something else that you'd like to tell me?"

Freedom of what they want to write, and they don't only have to write what we're prescribing them to write... Having more confidence in what they can do... Have more ownership over their work...

Creating more opportunities for them to write rather than just the writing lessons.



We are celebrating any form of writing and allowing any opportunity for them to do (rather than dictating particular text types).

If you've got something that's deeply important to you let's write about that.

Allowing more empowerment with their own peers and in their own community, rather than me directing it all the time.

Daily opportunities to write

A number of teachers told how the project had influenced their belief in the importance of providing daily opportunities for their students to write. For one teacher, conviction grew from an article that formed the basis of a seminar and a home reading reflection. She states, *"we had that article with the 12 things to [use to] audit your own teaching of writing, and the one that really hit me was write every day"*. For another teacher, learning involved her 'letting go' of a particularly structured program and more spontaneously responding to the opportunities that present themselves for children to write. A different perspective was provided from a teacher who felt her thinking hadn't changed but that the project had simply allowed her to be more aware – more cognisant of what she was doing and of what the children were doing and more conscious of providing the children with more opportunities to write. Others also talked of being more aware of seeing the opportunities for children to write.



Teacher feedback about children's writing

Another widespread area of learning was in relation to the significance of the type of feedback teachers provide their students about their writing. It became evident during the course of the project that many teachers were primarily focusing on their students' application of writing conventions; that is, their students' use of such things as full stops, capital letters, spelling and spacing. Discussions suggested that the nature of their feedback was influenced by an often self-imposed pressure to meet curriculum requirements and standards and perhaps also misconstruing the ways in which this might be done. However, when sharing insights and experiences of change during focus group discussions, it would seem that for many teachers, feedback practices had changed and an understanding of the value of the message provided in teachers' feedback had been acknowledged. The following comments highlight teachers' shift in perspectives.

I started off by focusing on capital letters, full stops, sounding out words and looking at the techniques of writing and in no time at all the children were feeling bad about themselves. "I can't do it." And they'd come to me straight away for, "How do I spell this?" "How do I spell that?" because they knew that there was one way to spell it and so actually my scaffolding was hindering them... So I thought, right. I'm going to focus on their ideas, praise and encourage and look at their strengths, and I went on from that and they have just blossomed.



And I stopped correcting their work. I started having conversations with them rather than say, "Oh, you should have had finger spaces" ... and even the spelling and everything. I just stopped being sort of "you must do this and you must do that." And what actually happened was the children realised that I respected their work ... they started writing more, and they started writing all over the classroom.

And so [in six weeks] this has changed from nearly every child doing about one sentence to writing a story ... I think it's saying, "You can do it", "Oh brilliant. Well done", "Oh I loved the way that you used your sight words," and little things like that and, "What a great idea..." and in that positive way these kids have just grabbed it... believing they are writers. Believing in themselves because they didn't believe they were writers before....

I would always change their writing and it didn't matter what it was, even if it was one little spelling mistake, I would still write down the correct, and now I've started to realise well, why am I actually doing that? If I can read their writing why am I adjusting their spelling; they don't care. So I think it's been good in that sense, because I think some children are

kind of brought down a little bit by saying, "Why isn't that spelt correctly?" So now I'm focusing more on the content rather than the spelling.

Rather than worrying so much about whether they're forming the letters just so, and the technique aspect of it, and become much more focused on looking for meaning and looking for that, that pure motivation which is where the writing is really coming from something that they want to tell me or tell each other, or sort of a genuine communication rather fussing over so much of the detail.

The message of the following teacher story highlights the fact that other methods such as modelled writing might serve children's learning about conventions while enabling the teacher to focus on the meaning in children's writing.

I totally overwhelmed one poor child with correcting every mistake he'd made in his writing, and I could just see his face just dropping and, totally losing it, and I really had to pull myself up and say, "No, don't correct him at all, respond to the message."

There were several teachers who noted that despite using less feedback that focuses on spelling, punctuation, spacing and handwriting, their students learning in these areas had continued to progress. As one teacher noted, "...you can just see they've got all the conventions and they know how to do it". This point of view was reiterated by another teacher who observed, "...you can see the progress...some of the children I have are at the random letter stage, but as you go through, yes, you're still writing random letters but now I've got capital letters, now I've got spaces, within a week and a half".

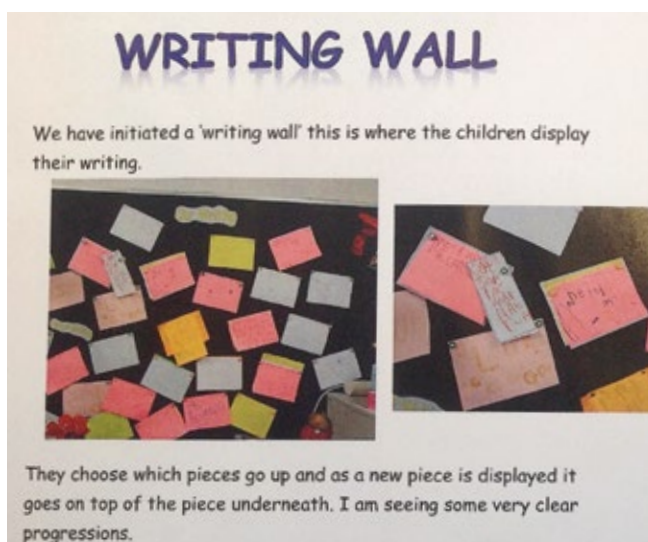
Connected to the topic of feedback is that of *valuing children's writing*. It is often through feedback that teachers can show, not just that they value their students' writing efforts and written texts, but that they attach importance to ownership of the texts their students write. Many teachers shared the ways in which they strived to indicate to their students that their writing was valued and that its ownership was respected as evidenced by the following comments.

Really, we should be asking permission before we display work, or we change work, or correct work, because it is their work. The fact that it is their work that they produced.

It's their journal. I don't write in it, I don't write underneath it, I don't correct it. I stamp it with a little stamp that says "independent" work on it and then I date it underneath. So they bring it to me, they read to me and I'll say, "Fantastic. Great.". And then they close it off and put it away. It's theirs.

And what actually happened was the children realised that I respect their work, and because they realise I respect their work they started writing more.

I think I take the time more when they come to me with a piece of writing that they've written.



Scaffolds for writing

The importance of scaffolding young children's writing was mentioned as an area of learning by some teachers. One teacher drew on the learning she derived from a seminar session which focused on the cognitive effort of written language production for young children. The teacher's comments demonstrate the application of theoretical learning to the classroom teaching situation.

... about that cognitive load, because that really struck me and I've been thinking a lot about that, particularly for my beginner writers and how to lessen that cognitive load. And I do use lots of writing supports but I have been more explicit in making sure that those supports are available for children... introducing the oral rehearsal [for] their writing... they tell me what they're going to write. They tell their friend what they're going to write. Making sure... lots of things that we've suggested here ... having their high frequency words on the little wing things and having those things with us all the time, so that we can lessen that cognitive load in as much as possible; always starting by drawing, those sorts of things. So that's been an interesting reflection.

For another teacher the learning she derived from the project resulted in her adopting a variety of scaffolding techniques to support students' writing. The project, she explains, resulted in a new mindfulness about teaching writing.

I think there's been a fair shift in where I actually consciously teach writing, whereas before I let it happen but it wasn't my focus... And through that I've done the purposeful scaffolding ... whereas I never did that before, I just helped children as they asked me but I didn't set out with the task of, as a teacher in my mind, saying "I'm going to scaffold these children to improve their writing".

A similar experience was put forward by another teacher who stated, "I found through ... doing the [professional learning project] that if I'm going to give them a writing task, don't just give it to them cold, prepare them for it and how can I do a series of events that's going to actually prepare them for what I want".

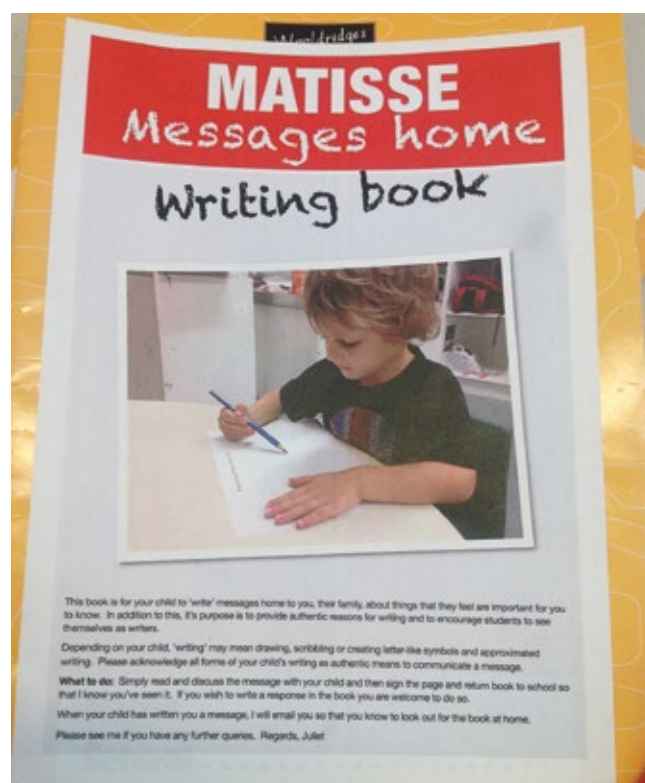
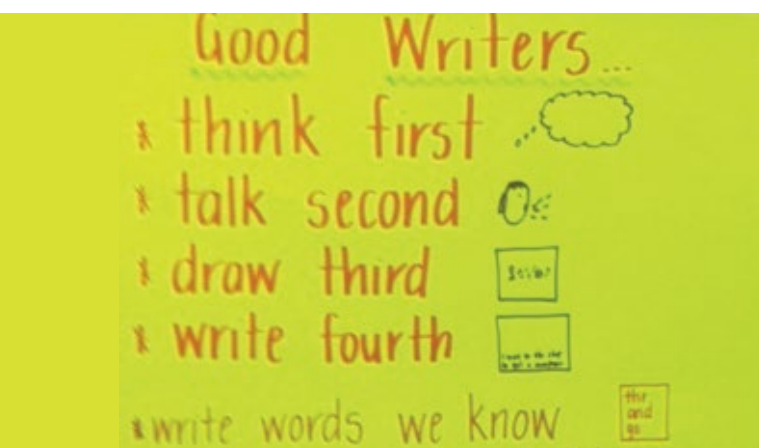
A few teachers reflected on their use of the strategy of modelled writing (teacher writes while the students observe) to scaffold their students' writing. They shared their observations of how use of the strategy developed their students' ability as writers. This is exemplified by the comments of one teacher who stated, "I think I've just been much more aware of doing modelling of writing in the pre-primary class. And I just found they've learnt so much just from that modelling more than anything else, because they take what they can at that time and apply it."

The scaffolding technique of having children draw before writing was mentioned during focus group discussions as being effectively implemented as a support for early writers.

If they [students] had the opportunity to draw first or draw with it, it sort of seemed to help their thinking and to put in their mind what they wanted to say and what they wanted to communicate, and then to translate that into written words was a lot easier for them. Also, that provided different levels of writing opportunities. There are some children [who] only labelled things, or only wrote their own name and then worked their way up to actually writing phrases or sentences about what they'd drawn.

Writing and involvement of the home/parents

There was some mention from teachers of working in partnership with parents to foster students' writing development. In one seminar where the results of a student survey were discussed some concerns were raised about



parents “taking on the job” of teaching their children to write. The concern was that these parents were impeding their children’s developing confidence as writers because in teaching them to write they were placing too robust an emphasis on spelling and little emphasis on other important components of learning to write.

This concern was further elucidated by teachers’ comments during the focus group discussions at the end of the project.

I think parents are trying to get children to do things too quickly, and are skipping a lot of steps to get there. A two-year-old scribbles and they do the circles and the lines and read a beautiful story back to you, parents are not seeing that as part of the education or foundation, and are skipping that.

However, comments were also made about changes to parents understanding about the development of writing and important areas of focus for children learning to write. As stated by one teacher, “*I think we’re starting to make parents more aware of that as well. That what they’re writing does not necessarily have to be correct, it needs to be their writing.*”

On a different note, one teacher spoke of how her classroom practices as influenced by the project have resulted in children wanting to write more and that this has trickled into the home situation.

The parents have certainly noticed. They have been coming in and saying, “Oh, goodness; they go through so much paper at home now. It’s writing, writing, writing all the time.”

Several teachers also reflected on the impact of taking an animal, object or stuffed toy home as a stimulus for writing and connecting with families. They commented that this had created authentic purposes for writing, giving children ownership of their writing while involving families in the process at the same time. They found this was a positive means of talking to families about early writing, sharing their goals and supporting parent involvement.

Curriculum, standards and expectations

At the beginning of the project, a number of teachers had expressed concern about satisfying the Australian Curriculum requirements of the English learning area and of fulfilling school leadership expectations. For many, their concerns gave rise to a sense of urgency about their students’ writing skills development, which for some occasioned a more direct approach to teaching writing. Such concerns are articulated in the following teacher comment.

I was getting quite stressed with the pressures from the school about meeting the Australian Curriculum and how that was looking, and these were their expectations, and was I doing justice to the children? Personally, I felt that I was pushing them because there was a big reluctance

to write. There was apprehension, because I was feeling uncomfortable. It’s amazing how that transfers even though you think you’re being confident, how that transfers to your children.

This same teacher, when later pondering the project’s influence, voiced a confident and more relaxed attitude about meeting curriculum requirements in relation to her students’ written communication.

From coming to this workshop and with networking, and with the research that I’ve read from it, and the information that’s been given, I’ve really reflected on my own teaching philosophy and what I think is appropriate for these children at this age. And they will get there and meet the achievements standards of the curriculum. It’s about me now changing my thinking and providing more motivation and wanting them to write.

Similar shifts in concerns about addressing curriculum requirements were expressed by other teachers. By the end of the project there was a general sense from the teachers, of being able to achieve (if not extend beyond) the learning that the curriculum advocated. And that this could be done while also honouring how young children learn.

You’re so focused on what the curriculum wants and you forget about what the children need. And for me it’s taken me back to that: what do the children need to learn to read and write?

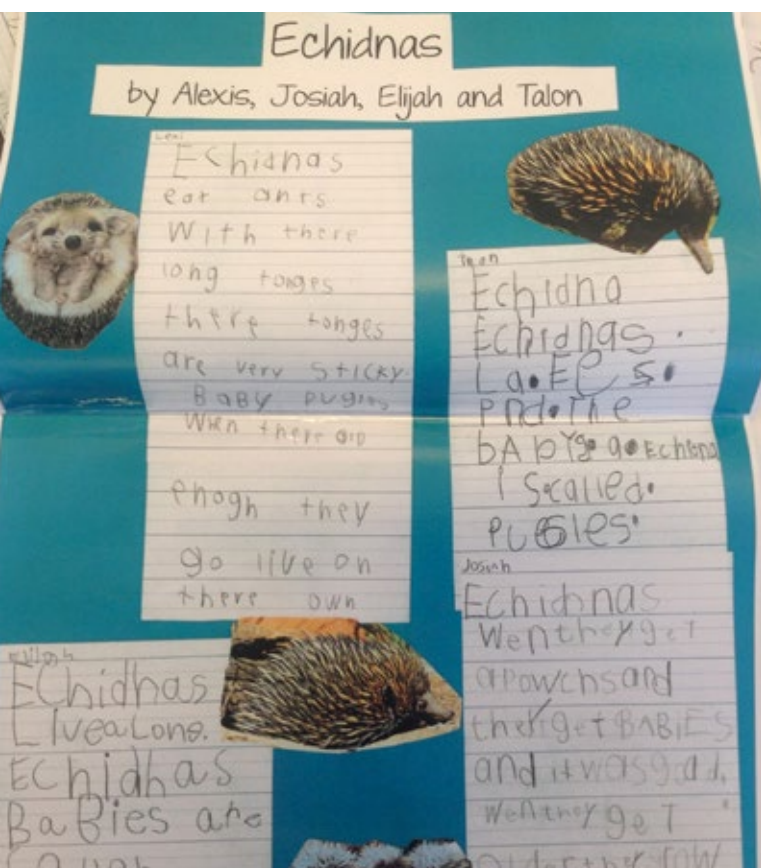
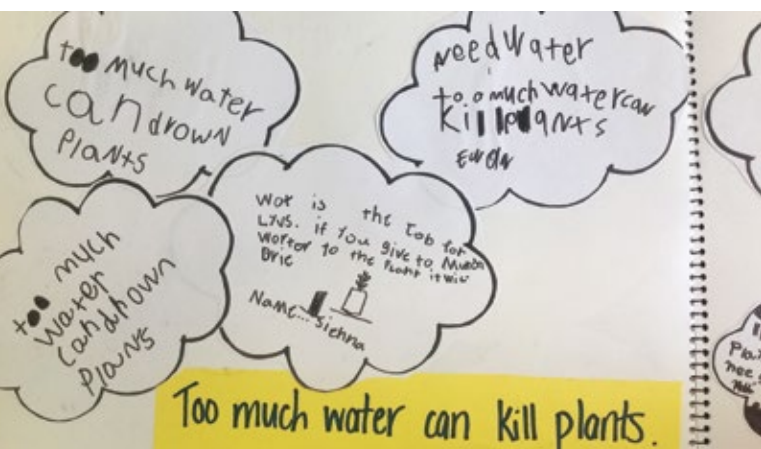
We’ve shown that those achievement standards can be achieved through fun, exciting, child-initiated activities.

I know that I’m well and truly into the curriculum, [and so] we won’t get into trouble ... as you said of the pressures of where they need to be at the end of the year, but now that we’ve got all these amazing tools and we’ve got the research to back it up as well, I think we can allow... give us, as teachers, time and give the children time to get there.

My thinking has also gone from taking what’s in the curriculum and translating it in to a different way of approaching writing...that there are other ways of doing it without ticking off your tick boxes all the time. Reading the curriculum in a different way.

Yeah, I think my thinking has become much clearer about it. I think, similarly, I was stressed about how you fit such a volume of knowledge and understanding and activity into a year group of children that are not always at the same level as each other, and aren’t always willing. I think, for me, it sort of simplified... it’s been simplified.

During focus group discussions teachers talked about how their participation in the project had positively influenced the learning of the children in their classes. They presented samples of their students’ writing and they shared



observations and stories that exemplified their students' writing learning and development.

...my children are definitely well above where they need to be...and it's been done in a fun, motivating way.

I feel now, at this point in time, that the children are probably starting to or demonstrating achievement standards.

And they will get there and meet the achievement standards of the curriculum.

...we've shown that those achievement standards can be achieved.

I compare this cohort of children to last year's children or the children before, they are definitely far more advanced than my previous groups, and I think that that's definitely because I've done this writing project, and I've learnt so much from it.

I'm getting fantastic outcomes... it's getting the balance... I have got rid of what doesn't work and I've pulled what I think works from each of those methodologies and I'm finding something that's now working really well and I think if people stop going in one direction only and take what they can from every area, they're going to get far better results... And no one-size-fits-all either.

They're [students] really excited about it [writing], so they're learning and developing as well.

So it's been really exciting for me because I can see a massive improvement.

Students writing motivation and engagement

Teachers shared how their engagement in the project had a positive influence on their children's motivation towards writing. This is persistently reflected in their comments - "I found that it has made a huge difference with them wanting to write and how much they will write and the motivation to write", "You can see the pride and effort", "It's been empowering for them". "They really want to write" and "The children are more engaged, they're excited about what they're doing". Additional comments elaborate on the correlation between student motivation and new or adapted classroom practices.

My book corner had never been more popular. The whole class was in that book corner when everybody's books were in there and they were reading each other's writing. They just loved it. When there are just other books in there maybe one or two kids will go in the book corner.

And then when I go into class on the Thursday, I bring the letter with me and I say, "Well, I couldn't write back to this person because they didn't give me their address," and we have all these conversations about the real purpose of writing. And I found that has really motivated



them to write, and I haven't had to give them so many formal lessons.

...taking the interest and ideas and forming the program around that, it naturally sparks engagement, excitement and motivation within them to learn. ...it's been done in a fun, motivating way.

And I think from doing this course I've seen a huge change in how they respond when I say we're going to be doing some form of writing task. You can see that excitement now because it's not viewed now as a chore; it's something that they're really excited about doing. And it's been amazing to watch them and their enthusiasm grow with it, and seeing them take what they are learning and put it into different areas of the classroom.

For some teachers their observations of increased motivation to write were more precisely made in relation to those students they previously observed as being "reluctant writers". For these teachers, harnessing the interest and engagement of these students had been an important objective and they were excited about what they had observed.

...In the past I had so many reluctant readers and writers, they did it because I asked them to do it, whereas now they do it because they want to do it and they're excited

about doing it, and they want me to see what they can do, and appreciate what they're doing on their own has been a real bonus, and a huge learning curve for me as well.

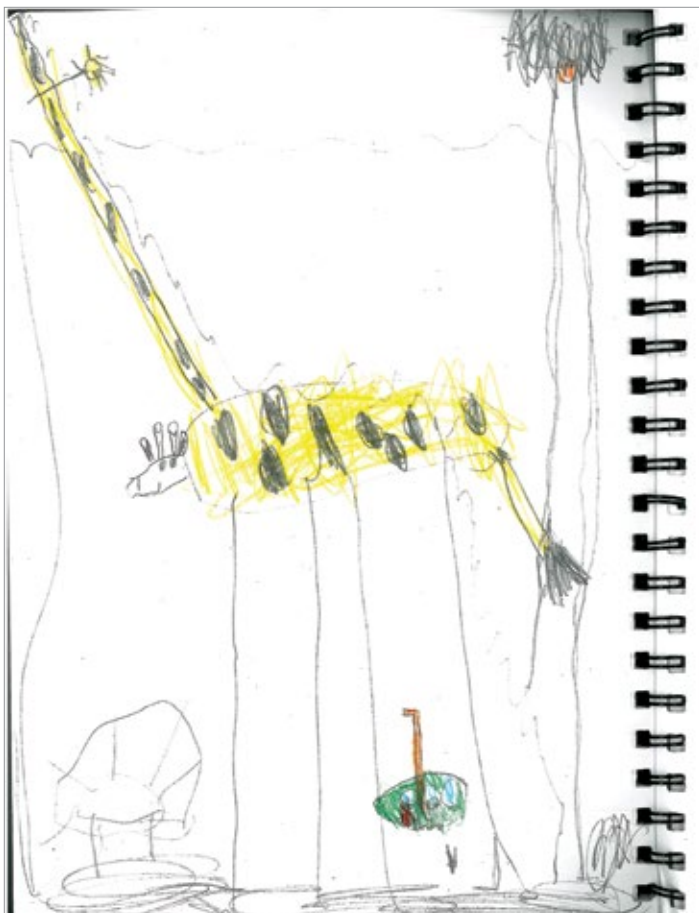
My 'reluctant writers' are feeling a lot more confident in writing just because (we are) celebrating any form of writing and allowing any opportunity for them to do.

You don't often get writing samples from reluctant writers in kindergarten but I do get them, I have a lot from everyone now so that's been really valuable.

From what I can remember from last year, I think a culture of more reluctance to write developed, whereas I can genuinely say this year, even with some of my children who have perhaps special needs, there is not that reluctance...I feel that I have less reluctant... I just feel that reluctance is not a part of the classroom culture anymore.

The stories below provide examples of where teachers have especially noticed the writing engagement shown by boys in their class. For these teachers, until recently, many boys in their classes had shown little interest in writing.

So I've just seen this year the boys and their faces light up and they just... they're into it.



11 Nov
 WE ALL MEAD
 THE DUFF AND
 PANTED SPOTS ON IT. I HELPED
 PANTEN HIM YELLOW. ON
 MONDAY WE WILL STAND
 HIM UP AND HAV A
 FUTE TO SELEBRAT.



"You can write about what you want to write about. Okay, we might be doing pirates or something for other things in crafts or whatever but I don't mind if you want to write about pirates or not..." I think I've changed that in lots and lots of things.

This week I've put stuff outside ... I made a new area where we could have some writing tables and put some umbrellas up and things, and ... even the boys who play footy were over there all morning writing ... it was owned by the boys, they sat there all day. When they weren't doing something else they went straight back to it ... there was about five boys and they were writing all sorts of things ... [next day] the girls, they went and drew a little flower a little bird and then they were gone, ... but the boys did this whole planning thing together Maybe one had the idea and the others all collaborated.

I found at the beginning of the year my boys were very reluctant to write... I've got one little boy... he likes to make little books on super heroes, but he's writing his books now. So instead of just drawing the pictures, he's actually... He sort of went through the process: he drew the pictures, then he started labelling the pictures of who they were... And now he's actually writing a little story to go with each picture. So he's progressed, on his own.

It's not something that I've taught him to do. He's just seen it modelled through me, through the other children, and he's just taken it on board in his own process.

Connected to the idea of motivation and engagement is that of confidence in being able to do something. Teachers reported on what they were doing as a result of the project that led to their students being more confident as writers. Statements typically were of the following type:

- [students] having more confidence in what they can do
- Not one of them [student] now says, "I can't write." ... They're confident in their own skills. They know they can.

Teachers reflected on and made connections between the changes and additions made to classroom practices and their students' increased enthusiasm for and engagement with writing.

In so doing they derived an understanding of factors important to student motivation and the relationship between motivation and learning. Their insights regularly corresponded to those reflected in academic research on the topic. Like many of the teachers' reflections, research delivers an understanding of motivation for writing being positively influenced by writing tasks that involve:

- genuine communication and real life significance for children;
- real audiences and authentic purposes;
- positioning writing as a tool for expression and communication;
- giving students a significant measure of control and choice;
- enjoyment/without stress;
- scaffolds;
- students' belief in own ability; and,
- the use of feedback that emphasises effort and content rather than just mastery.

Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers & Lawrence, 2012; Nolen, 2007; Brunning and Horn, 2000

The last word about this project must go to one of the teachers who declared with great enthusiasm that *"this has changed my understanding and practice in ways that will be with me well into the future, I'm already planning for next year!"*



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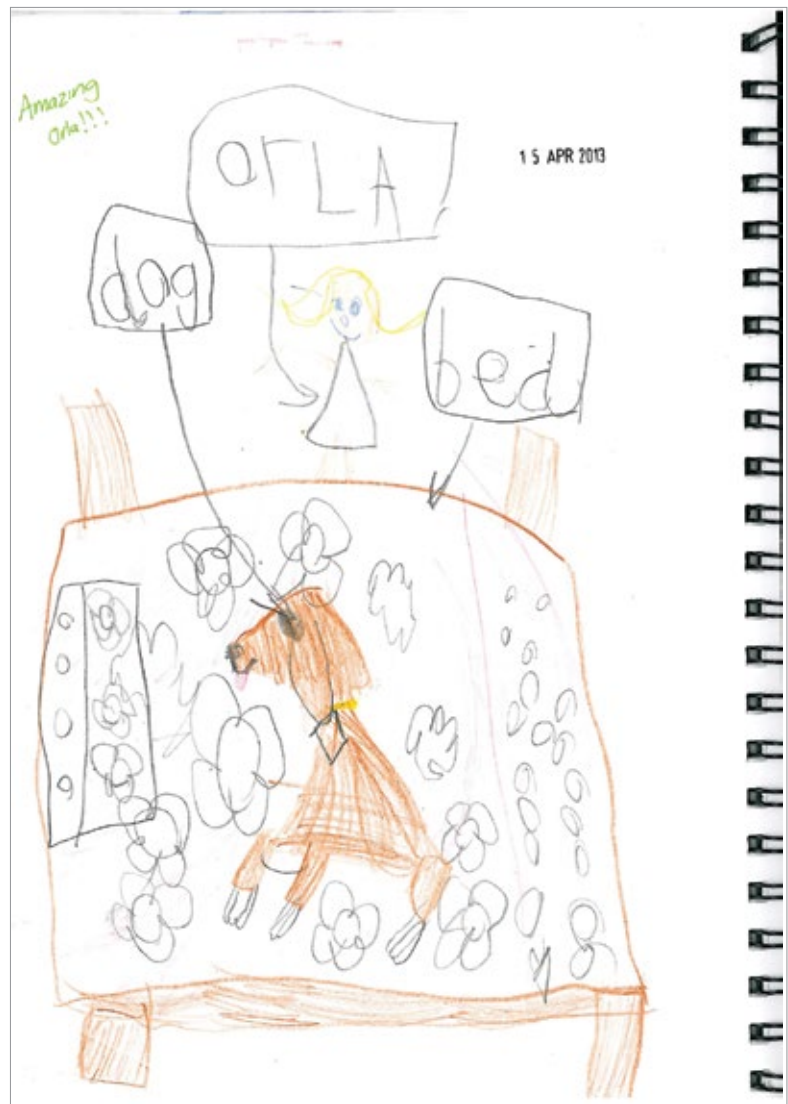
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Appendix 1: Summaries of the four research articles presented in a seminar workshop session

Oral rehearsal for writing

Myhill, D. & Jones, S. (2009) How talk becomes text: Investigating the concept of oral rehearsal in early years' classrooms. *British journal of educational studies*, 57:3, 265–284.

In this paper the author presents support for the notion that emergent writing is supported by talk, and that opportunities for talk before and during writing should be planned. The author describes the process by which talk becomes text as being one of 'oral rehearsal' and illustrates the ways in which young writers can use and benefit from oral rehearsal before and during writing. The combined processes of text generation and text transcription are described as placing high cognitive demands on the beginning writers who generally have less linguistic experience and automaticity with the mechanics of writing. The author suggests that having young writers' mentally plan and orally rehearse sentences before writing them will free their working memories for attention to the transcription process.

Environmental print and emergent literacy

Neumann, M., M., Hood, M. & Ford, R.M. (2012) Using environmental print to enhance emergent literacy and print motivation. *Reading and Writing*, 26: 5, 771–793.

In this paper an environmental print program is described and the outcomes of a research project which involved examining the effect it has on enhancing emergent literacy and print motivation in pre-schoolers is presented. The environmental print program which was implemented once a week for eight weeks involved the use of grocery packaging, multisensory activities, modelling of letter formations, songs and hand/eye coordination practice activities. The results suggest that the sessions involving environmental print helped to foster and sustain emergent literacy growth. The children who were instructed with environmental print showed higher print motivation and performed better on letter writing and standard print reading (than those for whom standard plain letter and word cards were used). This was significant for children from low SES schools. Additionally, training with environmental print appeared to be beneficial in fostering conceptual understanding of what words and letters are, along with other print concepts relevant to this age group. One premise is that the colours and logos in environmental print may have helped children attend to the print thus more readily providing opportunities for the development of print concepts.

From drawing to writing

MacKenzie, N. (2011) From drawing to writing: What happens when you shift teaching priorities in the first six months of school? *Australian journal of language and literacy*, 34: 3, 332–340.

This paper focuses on a research project that looked at the effects of making drawing a central part of writing in a

kindergarten class. In the various classes in which the research took place the children always drew before they wrote; the rationale being that drawing and writing are both a purposeful means of expression, about the act of composing, representing a child's ideas and allowing for the deliberate manipulation of meaning, and that drawing before writing builds on what children already know and can do. The drawing to writing program involved:

Teacher modelling: *Drawing, talking about own drawing and choosing something to write.*

Writing strategies: *Using drawing to decide what to write about, to remember ideas when writing and to talk while writing to help with thinking.*

Conversations: *Teacher with children about their writing.*

The outcomes of the study suggest that when teachers prioritise drawing for writing the benefits to children's writing are numerous. In the classes where the study took place the benefits included that the children:

- Enjoyed writing time and were more likely to maintain engagement
- Developed a positive view of themselves as writers
- Took risks and experimented with writing
- Often chose to draw and write during free play
- Showed increased concentration and *improved fine motor skills*
- Developed greater writing skill
- Created more complex texts over time

Writing workshops in pre-school

King, K.A. (2012) Writing workshop in preschool: Acknowledging children as writers. *The Reading Teacher* 65: 6, 392–401.

The author is a teacher who describes how she went about implementing writing workshops with her kindergarten class (4 year olds). Additionally, she describes her action research which allowed her to assess the efficacy of the writing workshops, to identify and resolve issues and to refine the workshop components. The article describes the four components of the writing workshops which were: (1) Mini-lessons about writing; (2) Writing Time (child-centred and open ended); (3) Author Share time and: (4) Teacher-Student Conference Time. She describes her process of inquiry and how her observations and the cues from the children lead to refinement of the components. The data demonstrated that the writing workshops resulted in many positive outcomes which included development in the children's understanding about writing, their perception of themselves as writers, their willingness to experiment with writing, their positive attitude towards writing time and the time spent voluntarily writing. Additionally, growth in writing skill was clearly evident.

Appendix 2: The writing audit

AlSWA writing audit

Record the different writing activities your students carry out over a period of time. For each writing activity, identify the context (features of the situation) and the nature of the text (purpose and audience) written.

Appendix 3: Survey – What do children think about writing? *(Byrnes and Brown, 2007)*

What do children think about writing?			
(Adapted from "Four-year-old children's views, attitudes & practices towards literacy: Melbourne Graduate School of Education" with permission from Byrnes and Brown)			
Writing ...			
Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1. Do you like writing or having a go at writing things?			
2. Do you like doing this by <i>yourself</i> or with <i>someone else</i> ? <i>If someone else, who?</i>			
3. Is there somewhere special you like to go to write e.g. in the writing corner / at home in the kitchen? What kinds of things do you particularly like to write there?			
4. Do you like to choose the things you write? E.g. <i>write your name</i>			
5. Do you think it is a good idea to learn to write?			
<i>If yes, why? What's good about learning to write?</i>			
6. Are you looking forward to learning to write lots of different words?			
7. Who is teaching you to write? <i>What do they do? How do they teach you?</i>			
8. Did (will) you have to do anything special to help yourself learn to write?			
<i>If yes, what did (will) you do?</i>			
9. Was (Is) it going to be easy for you to learn to write?			
Why do you think that?			
What if it is hard? What will adults do?			
What will you do?			
10. Now (When) you have learnt to write, what kinds of things will (do) you be able to write?			
11. Do you think you are (will be) good at writing?			
12. Is there something you always like to write e.g. your name on birthday cards? <i>If yes, what?</i>			

Appendix 4: Reflective activity to accompany article about best practice and writing

Reference: Gerde, H.K., Bingham, G.E. & Wasik, B.A. (2012). Writing in early childhood classrooms: Guidance for best practice Early Childhood Education Journal

Reflection and change process

- i. **Read** the article to develop a good understanding of the 12 effective practices.
- ii. **Review and evaluate** your classroom learning environment and your teaching and learning practices in terms of the 12 effective practices for supporting children's learning and development as writers. **Determine** where you fall short in relation to each of the suggested practices and record this on the chart.
- iii. In light of your evaluation, **establish** the changes you will make to the learning environment and the practices you will implement.
- iv. Implement the changes that you have identified – these will likely be in terms of the learning environment, your teaching program, the class timetable and family engagement practices. They will also involve more subtle forms such as the way you interact with the children about written communication.
- v. Over time, **appraise** each of the changes you have made in terms of your observations about how each has affected children's engagement in writing and their learning; note your observations. Additionally, you might like to record/transcribe conversations with children, take photos and make copies of children's writing that demonstrate your observations. It is sometimes helpful and a little less overwhelming to focus some specific observations on two or three sample children.

Effective practice (as outlined in article)	Review and evaluation (in regards your classroom)	Changes and additions (in regards your classroom)
Build writing into your daily schedule		
Accept all forms of writing		
Explicitly model writing		
Scaffold children's writing		
Encourage children to read what they write		
Encourage invented spelling		
Make writing opportunities meaningful		
Have writing materials in all centres		
Display topic-related words in the writing centre		
Engage in group writing experiences		
Family Involvement		
Use technology to support writing		
Observation and Appraisal in terms of children's interest in written communication, their engagement in writing experiences and the development of writing knowledge, skills and understandings		
Children's interest in and engagement with written communication	Children's engagement in writing experiences (free play/choice and teacher-led)	Children's writing knowledge, skills and understandings

Appendix 5: Reflective activity to accompany article about writing and motivation

Reference: Bruning, R. & Horn, C. (2000) Developing Motivation to Write, *Educational Psychologist*, 35 (1) pp. 25–37.

Motivation to Write: Examining Classroom Practices?

The article, Developing Motivation to Write (Bruning & Horn, 2010), provides an examination of some issues relevant to children’s motivation for written communication. The authors outline some points of assumption (pp 26–27) about writing development and learning; these are to do with the teacher’s beliefs about writing, the need for children to experience writing as purposeful and to see it as an authentic form of communication and that knowledge about how children learn oral language is significant to their learning to communicate in writing. Furthermore, a framework is described whereby four factors important to the development and maintenance of motivation to write are explained. The focus is not specifically early childhood; nevertheless the four factors remain relevant to working with young beginner writers.

Read the article with a specific focus on how the information presented relates to the written communication teaching and learning practices of your classroom. Note the key points of each of the four factors explained and how you own teaching / classroom practices are supported by the information in the article and to any changes you might make to your practices.

Factors	Key points and important practices	Application to your classroom practices
Nurturing Functional Beliefs About Writing [pp. 28 – 29]		
Fostering Student Engagement Through Authentic Writing Goals and Contexts [pp. 30 – 31]		
Providing a Supportive Context for Writing [pp. 31 – 33]		
Creating a Positive Emotional Environment [pp. 33 – 34]		



Appendix 6: Information sheet about professional learning journals

AISWA and Edith Cowan University Early Childhood Writing Project

Teacher participants' purpose and use of professional learning journals

Your participation in the writing project involves **two levels of learning**; that is:

- your general development as a teacher of written communication in early childhood
- the written communication learning and development needs of the children in your class and your capacity to cater for each child's needs

As a result of **participating in the project** you should better understand:

- the knowledge, skills and understandings that comprise writing and becoming a writer
- how young children learn to write (beginner / emergent literacy)
- best practices for supporting young novice writers in their learning and development in relation to written communication
- ways in which to address your specific needs as a teacher of beginning and emergent writing and to the writing development of the children in your class
- the individual learning pathways for a select few children in your class (progress as writers and how progress was supported); specific needs, the means by which needs are addressed and successful (or otherwise) outcomes
- your own learning pathway as a teacher of written communication with young novice writers (personal insights, growth in areas of need, knowledge, skills and understandings developed)

Achieving the outcomes of the project is an individual endeavour; each teacher has their own learning and development requirements, their own unique class of children with different learning to write needs and their own issues. From that point of view it is a **personal journey**.

Your personal journey is about your movement towards achieving project outcomes as regards to how they specifically relate to you and the children in your class. It is a **progressive journey** towards outcomes and would likely involve some of the following:

- *Assimilating new knowledge and understanding in relation to written communication and teaching young children to write*
- *Identifying specific needs, issues or areas of development for you as a teacher and for the children in your class (in general or in relation to specific children)*
- *Comparing, contrasting, questioning, confirming and enhancing personal understanding and/or experience through conversations with colleagues and others*
- *Reflecting on the specific needs or any specific issues in relation to the children in your class and your classroom writing practices*
- *Reading, reflection and action in relation to (but not limited to) the articles provided about written communication and the teaching and learning of writing*
- *Observation, reflection, learning about, addressing and monitoring to address the issues in relation to your children's development as writers (general or specific children) and your own understanding and practices*
- *Identifying, sharing and celebrating classroom successes*

The Writing Journal is significant; it is **the documentation of your personal learning journey** as a teacher of written communication in early childhood and of a teacher of written communication to a particular early childhood class of children. It is about what you learn, do and understand in relation to yourself as a teacher of written communication and the specific needs and issues of the children in your class. (Refer session one notes – The Reflective Learning Journal)

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