The language gap in Australian students' writing

By Lee Walker & Anne Bayetto

Oxford Children's Language Australia
The centre of children's language

Language Gap Report 2021

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FOREWORD

Language is at the heart of education. It unlocks the pleasure of reading, the enjoyment of writing, and the capacity and confidence to explore, learn and apply new knowledge. When at school, it underpins progress, impacts learning outcomes throughout the primary and secondary years, and affects wellbeing and self-esteem. In later years, it plays a significant role in future life chances.

THE OXFORD CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AUSTRALIA CORPUS

Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand (OUP) monitors children's language through the *Oxford Children's Language Australia Corpus*, the largest active database of Australian children's writing in English.

We share insights from the data with the education community to support teachers with planning for students' language and literacy development.

THE LANGUAGE GAP BETWEEN YEARS 5 & 7

This research paper presents the collective analysis of Australian students' writing in years 3 to 7 based on more than 150,000 writing samples and 20 million words collected from Writing Legends. It focuses more specifically on the language gap that emerges in Year 7, reveals insights about the potential relationship between gender and writing proficiency, and includes discussion from some of Australia's leading language research experts. We explore the importance of teaching writing and offer practical advice and support to help educators tackle the divide.

Writing Legends is an online writing program for students in years 3–8. It covers a wide range of writing genres and is designed to engage and motivate children by sparking ideas and modelling great writing.

Powerful tools help teachers recognise and address language skills gaps in students of all abilities.

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Anne lectures in inclusive and specialised education at Flinders University where she teaches undergraduate and postgraduate topics focused on school students who have literacy and numeracy difficulties. Since 1989 she has worked closely with the Specific Learning Difficulties Association of South Australia (SpeldSA) as an academic mentor to its directors. Anne has been a teacher in both mainstream and special classes, an adaptive education teacher, and a district-wide disability coordinator. Anne was the founding member of the South Australian Education Department's Learning Difficulties Support Team and has managed literacy and numeracy action research projects.

Anne has been the reading expert for the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program, offered in every state of Australia. Anne offers professional learning sessions for teachers, leaders, and managers in education sectors across Australia with a particular focus on using evidence-based research to inform practical and sustainable planning and programming.

WHAT NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS SHOW

In 2019, the National Assessment Program – Literacy & Numeracy (NAPLAN) for writing revealed that nearly 96.3% of Year 3 students across Australia met or exceeded the national minimum standard, and at Year 5 it was 92.8%. Continuing this downward trend, the number of students at or above the National Minimum Standard in Year 7 dropped to 89.4%, and in Year 9 it fell to 82.4% (ACARA).

> *The NAPLAN data shows steady to flat progress of children's writing in years 3 and 5, but a decline of 3.1% and 5.4% for years 7 and 9.*

Percentage of students achieving national minimum standards in writing, years 3, 5, 7, 9

Year Level	2009 (%)	2019 (%)	Variance (%)	Progress Over Time
Year 3	95.7	96.3	0.6	⬆
Year 5	93	92.8	-0.2	⬌
Year 7	92.5	89.4	-3.1	⬇
Year 9	87.8	82.4	-5.4	⬇

Source: (ACARA)

RECENT RESEARCH IN THE UNITED KINGDOM SHOWS A SIMILAR TREND

As a comparison to Australian data results, in 2020, No More Marking conducted writing assessments for 112,445 year 7 students from 644 schools in the United Kingdom on a one-hour open-ended writing assessment on the topic of their future career. The assessment task for year 7 was identical to the task undertaken by year 5 pupils in October 2019, and a representative sample of 50 scripts from this Year 5 assessment were included in the judging. Teachers were therefore directly comparing the year 7 performance to the year 5 performance, and indirectly placing the writing on the wider measurement scale.

The results from the year 7 assessment showed that the students performed at roughly the same level as students who took the same assessment in November of their Year 5, that is, year 7 students' writing was judged to be at the same level as that produced by students 22 months younger. However, because it was a formal assessment (in contrast to the writing samples collected by OUP in Australia), the writing attainment might have been impacted by a combination of the summer holiday, school transition, and disruption caused by COVID-19 (No More Marking, 2020).

THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (AUSTRALIA) RESEARCH SHOWS A SIMILAR TREND

While assessment data provides overarching scores, the research we have conducted delves into students' writing and reveals the themes they are writing about and the language they are using to construct their writing.

> *Our language analysis suggests that a major diversion in writing proficiency occurs at a very clear moment in time – the commencement of secondary school – and especially for boys.*

Interestingly, the research does not show that the language gap can or should be wholly addressed by student agency and choice. The Writing Legends program provides significant scope for agency and choice, and yet language weaknesses still pervade students' writing. Allowing a great deal of free choice without also systematically and explicitly teaching the skills of writing may have unintended consequences, thereby widening the gap between proficient and naïve writers. It, therefore, suggests that explicit teaching of writing is critical to the development successful writers.

THE WAY TEACHERS TEACH WRITING IS IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS

In response to this declining trend in Australian students' writing performance, the *Teaching Writing: Report of the Thematic Review of Writing* (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2018) investigated how primary and secondary teachers taught writing based on the premise that:

"The ability to write clearly and purposefully continues to be a critical ingredient for educational success. At school, writing is the principle means by which students both learn and demonstrate what they have learned. Many NSW students are very good writers; they possess mastery of the craft and can write sophisticated, purposeful texts. But for many other students, a lack of writing ability means they struggle to show what they know, and their learning remains untapped or unseen (p. 3)."

Daffern and Mackenzie (2020, pp 1–2, citing Graham (2019) suggest that:

"... while teaching children to write well is seen as an important goal of schooling, 'many schools across the world do not achieve this objective, and an inordinate number of students do not acquire the writing skills needed for success in writing today'. This, according to Graham (2019), has come about because many students are not receiving the instruction they 'need or deserve' (p. 277)."

At the end of this paper, Australian research experts reflect on the research and address some of the recommendations of the NSW Standards Authority's report:

1. The impact of social norms on boys (and girls) as writers (Damon Thomas)
2. An evidence base: why effective teaching should be grounded in research (Susan Taylor)
3. Before entering the classroom: the importance of pre-service preparation for teaching writing (Susan Taylor)
4. Preparing teachers to teach writing (Janet Fellowes)
5. In the classroom: why writing should be taught explicitly (Anne Bayetto)

THE LANGUAGE GAP IN STUDENTS' WRITING

Like reading, writing is a key to achieving success at school, and supports a range of opportunities beyond the school years.

The Australian Curriculum Achievement Standard for Year 7 requires students to understand how the selection of a variety of language features can influence an audience, and when creating and editing texts, demonstrate understanding of grammar, use a variety of more specialised vocabulary, spell accurately and use appropriate punctuation (ACARA).

In the Writing Legends program, 'Language Gems' measure the propensity of use of words that tend to strengthen writing. Language Gems are derived from a list of more than 10,000 words that were chosen from children's writing exemplars from Storyathon.

Our research shows that:

- Boys and girls show a consistent increase of 'Language Gems', or a greater, more sophisticated, repertoire of language as they progress from years 3 to 6
- Year 7 data indicates that boys' use of 'Language Gems' declines, whereas girls show the greatest increase at this year level
- Gender stereotypes pervade students' writing at all year levels.

Storyathon is a free online event conducted each school term for children in years 3–8. Students are challenged to write a microstory that is exactly 100 words. Writing tiny narratives challenges students to concentrate on the language they choose and to experiment with words.

Why is there a decline in boys' writing proficiency in Year 7? Have they disengaged with the writing process, and if so, why? Are social norms impacting boys' motivation to write, or do they require more explicit teaching? Or both?

> *Why is there a decline in boys' writing proficiency in Year 7? Have they disengaged with the writing process, and why?*

Research conducted in the United Kingdom by No More Marking (2020) also shows the gender gap decreasing, for a while, as students progress through school, with the smallest gap apparent in Year 6. In Year 7, however, the gap widens again, showing a trend similar to what we see with our language research.

Use of 'Language Gems' in Writing Legends in years 3 to 7
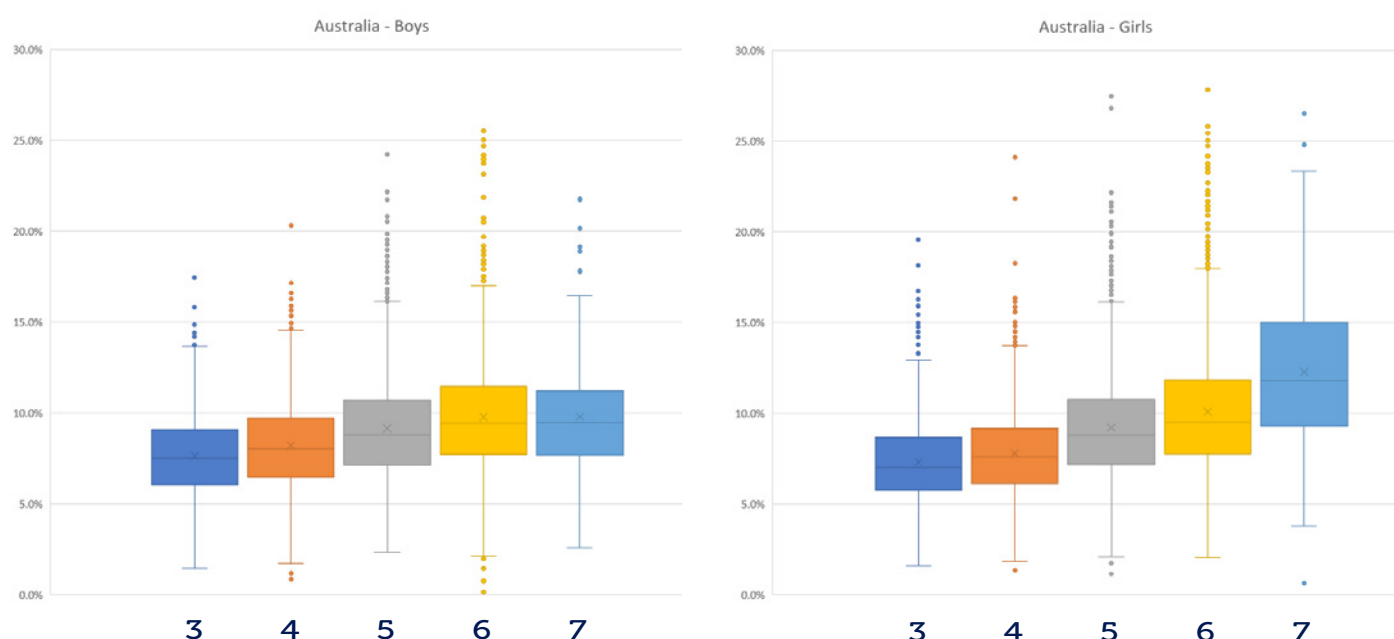
BOYS' & GIRLS' WRITING & THE LANGUAGE THEY CHOOSE TO CONSTRUCT THEIR WRITING

The language students use to construct their writing reflects their skill level and language repertoire.

Boys' language repertoires have not improved by Year 7. Language analysis indicates that boys – of all writing abilities – withdraw from the writing process when they enter secondary school. Shane Hill, creator of Writing Legends, suggests that,
'… 'culture' impacts boys' writing, and in Year 7 it might no longer be 'cool' for boys to write, that some will ignore this social pressure, but many will comply'. Or do boys disengage with the writing process because they lack the skills required to write well, and so they see it as a task that is too hard and not enjoyable?

Girls' writing is more developed and sophisticated, and they show a significant uplift in their language use at Year 7. In contrast to boys, it appears that girls have embraced the activity of writing and see themselves as writers.

The graphs following present relative use of language. Relative usage is a scale between 0 and 100 that is set based on 100 being allocated to the highest data point within the set. The relative usage scale is helpful for noting trends within the data.

SHANE HILL

Shane is founder and creator of Mathletics, Spellodrome, World Math Day, Skoolbo, da Vinci Decathlon, Storyathon and Writing Legends. Collectively, these learning communities have been used by tens of millions of students worldwide. Prior to entering eLearning, Shane was a secondary school teacher in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Nouns & proper nouns

There is no tangible difference between girls' and boys' of use of nouns. Girls show steady decline in use of proper nouns, and boys appear to be more reliant on them.

"I also had to do tons of **Google** meets and **Zoom** meetings because I had to do tons of schoolwork for Mrs Payne. She's my home room teacher. After when I have done all my schoolwork for this week I play tons of **Roblox** and **Minecraft** on my **iPad** and my PC. After gaming I read a book for 20–30 minutes. After reading I watch TV. All I watch on TV is **Garfield** or **Netflix**. After that I shot up like a **NASA** rocket as soon as I opened my eyes, I realised I was falling in a pool of unfinished schoolwork below me."
(Year 7 male)

Use of proper nouns
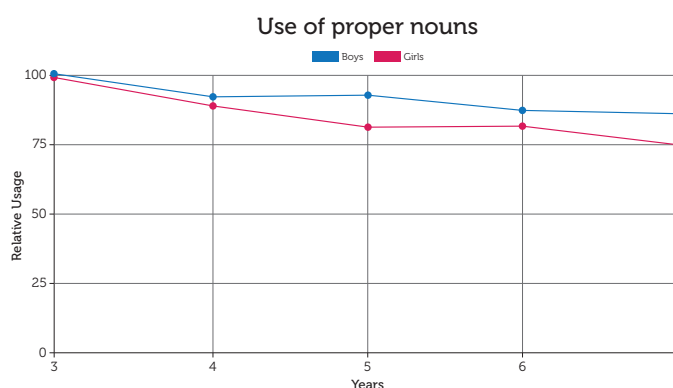
Adjectives

There is consistent use of adjectives from years 3 to 7, but it is consistently higher for girls, and with a marked increase in Year 7.

Use of adjectives
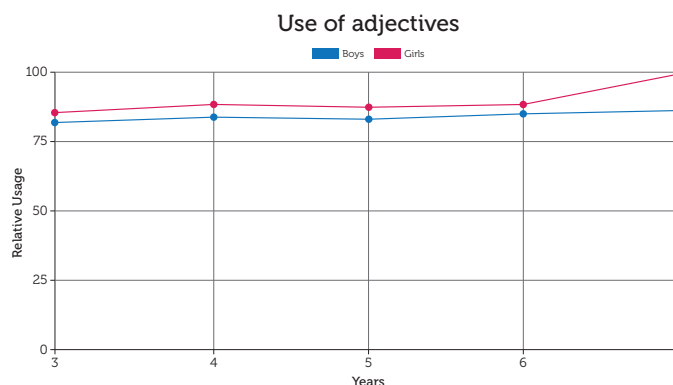
Verbs & adverbs

For both girls and boys, use of verbs trend progressively upwards from Year 3, but in Year 7 boys' use declines slightly. Girls use more adverbs at every year level, but boy's usage converges with girls in Year 7.

- Use of the verb 'said' decreases significantly from Year 5 for both girls and boys, while 'exclaimed' shows a significant increase through to Year 6 (the drop in Year 7 might be associated with less narrative writing). Girls are significantly more likely than boys to use the word 'exclaimed' at all year levels.

  "Astronaut Peterman wanted to go out in space. "Take some pictures and float around a little," he said.

  "That's a great idea!" **exclaimed** astronaut James."

  (Year 7 female)

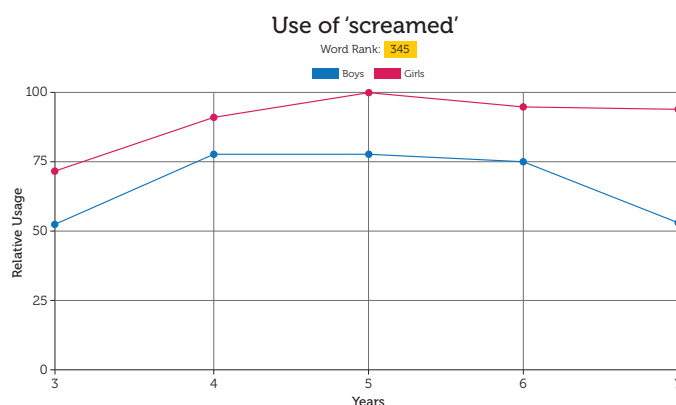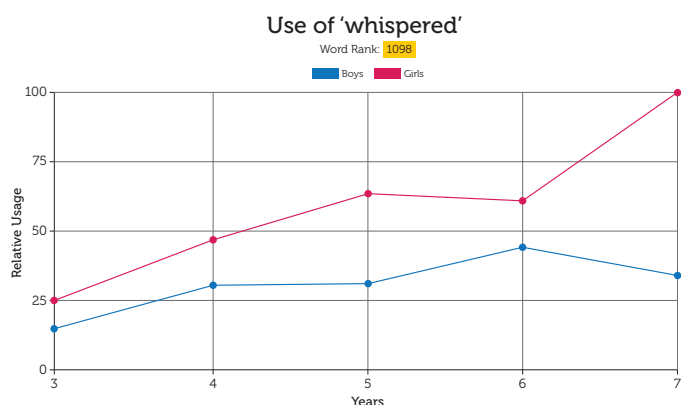- Girls' writing exhibits use of more descriptive verbs, such as 'whispered' and 'screamed'.

  "Oh no!" **screamed** Ed. "It's horrible, it's terrible, it's, it's, it's... A DISASTER!"

  "What is it?" yelled Sed. "Surely it's not that bad."

  "Look, it is that bad!" **screamed** Ed. "How could they do this to us?"

  (Year 7 female)

Use of 'whispered'
Word Rank: 1098

Use of 'screamed'
Word Rank: 345

Commas & exclamation marks

The use of commas doubles from years 3 to 7, whereas exclamation marks decrease by more than 60%. By Year 5, girls are 25% more likely than boys to use commas.

"Now, the entire pack is gliding through the forest, in search of us. In a desperate attempt to change the course of the growling wolf, my fellow camper throws a tree branch in the opposite direction, which, fortunately for us, sends the wolf away to investigate."
(Year 6 female)

Use of commas

Use of exclamation marks
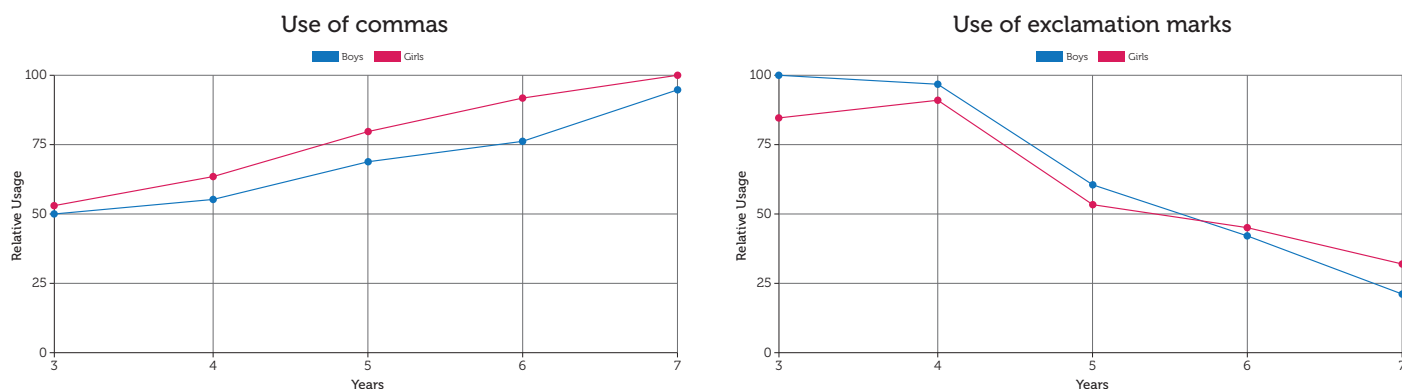
Spelling

While spelling improves over time, boys consistently make more spelling mistakes than girls, and at every year level. The gap widens at Year 7 with the number of spelling mistakes increasing for boys.

Spelling mistakes
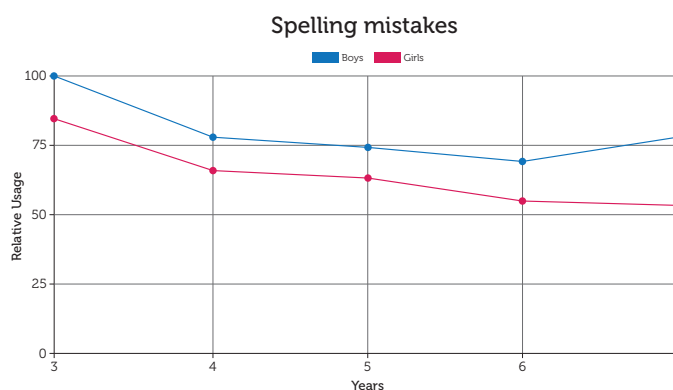
GIRLS & BOY WRITE DIFFERENTLY & ABOUT DIFFERENT THINGS

How and what boys and girls write about reflects the way they think and the way they view the world and their place in it. Gender stereotypes are evident by the themes explored and the words students choose to write. The Oxford Wordlist for years F–2 and the language research conducted for the Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year (years 3–8) also reveal similar insights about gender.

Boys' writing is action oriented

- Boys are more likely than girls to write about computers, games, sport, cars, and planes.

  "Security was chasing me when my sidekick pulled me in to his car. A minute after we heard some sirens, the police were gaining on us until my sidekick shot one of the **cars** down, but there were still two **cars** gaining on us".
  (Year 4 male)

- Boys are significantly more likely than girls to use technology related words, such as 'computer' and 'iPad', and five times more likely to use words related to computer games, such as 'Fortnite' and 'Minecraft'. Fortnite is most popular with Year 5 boys, while Minecraft reduces in popularity from Year 3 onwards.

  "My name is Noah. I'm 8 years old. I'm in year 3. My favourite things are Pokémon, **Minecraft**, ROBLOX and dancing."
  (Year 3 male)

- Boys have a greater tendency to resolve matters with violence; they are twice as likely as girls to use the words 'hit' and 'punch', which often leads to characters dying, and they use the word 'destroy' almost three times more often than girls.

  "When I went back to high school, bullies started to tease me and then started to **punch** me. I got angrier and angrier and then it started. Scales started to cover my body, my eyes turned green, electricity circled around me. "Run, you idiots," I said. 'Before I **kill** you."
  (Year 6 male)
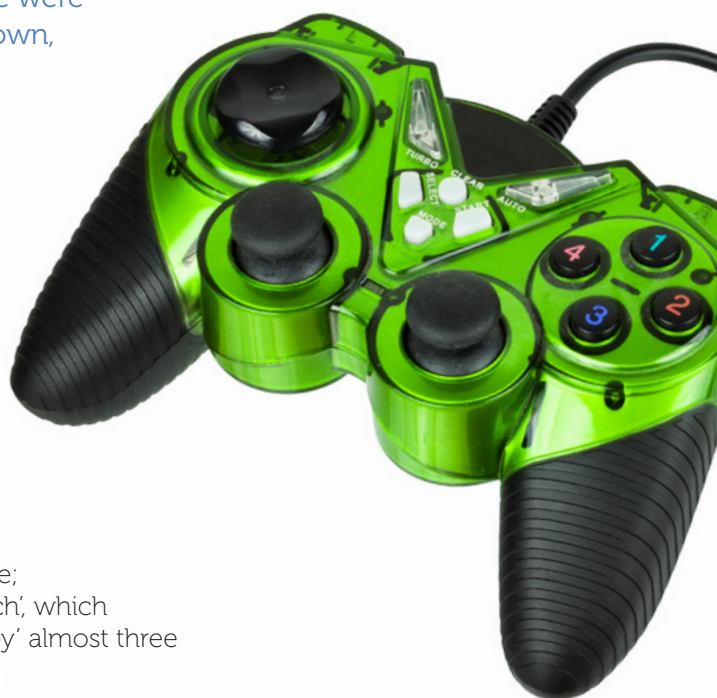
Killing & death in boys' writing

Use of 'kill'
Word Rank: 617
Boys · Girls

Use of 'death'
Word Rank: 821
Boys · Girls

Girls write about relationships

Girls are significantly more likely than boys to describe interactions and relationships between characters, and to convey emotions.

- Girls are significantly more likely to include words such as 'friend', 'family', 'kind' and 'mean' in their writing to describe the interplay of characters.
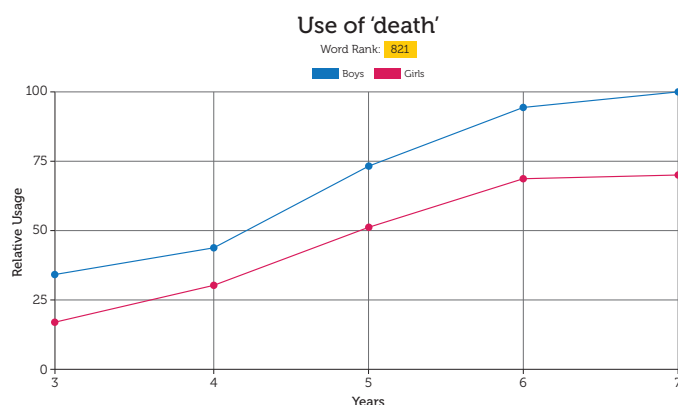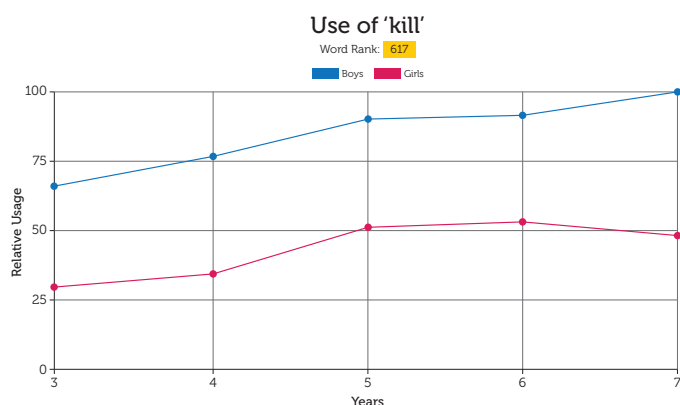
"My mum entered my room and told me my **friend** wasn't coming as she had the flu. I went to her house to see how she was, only to find out she had a new best **friend**. I felt shocked. Why would she lie?"

(Year 4 female)

- Girls are also more likely to include words such as 'listen' and 'understand', suggesting that they are expressing viewpoints in their writing.

"What I love about Hermione is that she is clever and always tries to get her friends out of trouble and she always has clever ideas. She **listens** in class and **understands** what the teacher says and it is pretty useful and she is pretty fashionable… Harry, Ron and Hermione always put their friends and family first, even Harry whose parents are dead."

(Year 3 female)

- The words 'change', 'different', 'confused', and 'answer' increase in use from years 3 to 7, and girls are significantly more likely to show contrast in their writing.

"I looked down and saw my cat meowing at me. I stopped crying and tried to fake a smile, My cat looked **confused**, but so am I. Still sobbing. I looked back at the mirror, I felt shockness to see myself smiling. I blinked and looked back at the mirror."

(Year 6 female)

- The use of the words 'dream' and 'imagination' increases in use for girls and boys, but girls use both words approximately 25% more.

"I am surrounded by white, fluffy clouds. It's like a **dream**. I lie on the ground and feel the soft cloud against my skin."

(Year 7 female)

Girls' & boys' gender preferences

Both boys and girls skew their writing to include characters that match their own gender. This trend is more common amongst boys, and there is a notable change as students progress through school.

- Girls are significantly more likely than boys to include 'mum' in their writing, although there is a clear downward trend, and by Year 7 boys' and girls' usage has converged.
- The use of 'dad' is almost identical for girls and boys, with more than 50% decline in use by Year 7.
- 'Mum' (rank 69) is more commonly used than 'dad' (rank 165).
- Boys are far more likely than girls to include a male character as a leader in their stories, rather than a female, for example 'Trump' and 'queen'.

"I was shocked about an alien spaceship hitting the Earth. It all started when Donald **Trump** blew up the solar system with nukes."

(Year 5 male)

'Trump' versus 'queen'

Use of 'Trump'

Word Rank: 2709

■ Boys ■ Girls

(Chart: x-axis "Years" from 3 to 7, y-axis "Relative Usage" from 0 to 100)

Use of 'queen'

Word Rank: 1784

■ Boys ■ Girls

(Chart: x-axis "Years" from 3 to 7, y-axis "Relative Usage" from 0 to 100)
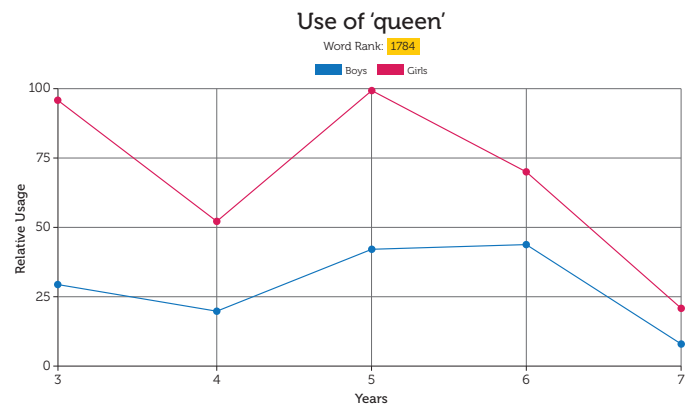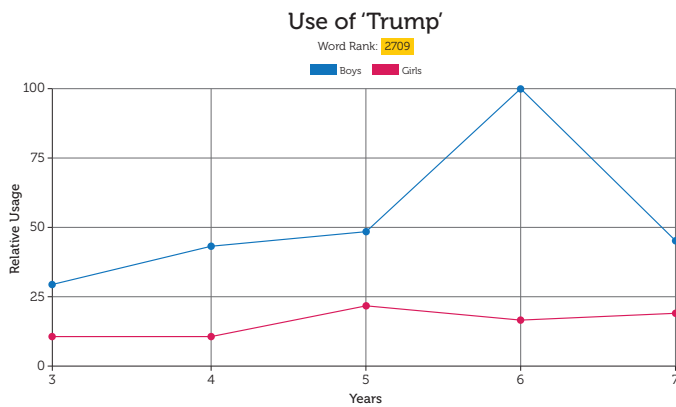
CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Australian students' writing in years 3 to 7 from more than 150,000 writing samples and 20 million words collected, we have identified a language gap that emerges in Year 7 and presented insights about the potential relationship between gender and writing proficiency. We, therefore, suggest that the way teachers teach writing is critical, and the following articles by some of Australia's and the United Kingdom's leading language research experts explore the teaching of writing and offer practical advice to help educators to implement strategies for teacher and student success.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NORMS ON BOYS (& GIRLS) AS WRITERS

By Damon Thomas

The gender gap in writing achievement is a historical, global phenomenon. While many factors impact student writing development, gender is one of the most influential. This article explores the impact of social norms on male (and female) students as they become writers.

Decades of standardised writing tests in several countries have found that male students consistently underperform when compared with females (Hyde et al, 1988; Scheiber et al, 2015). In Australia, annual NAPLAN testing since 2008 has made visible the developmental pattern of this gap, with the average Year 3 male already well behind the average female by an equivalent of 8.16 months of learning, which stretches to 11.8 months in Year 5, 20.1 months in Year 7, and 24.1 months in Year 9 (Thomas, 2020). In other words, the average Year 9 male's writing is of a similar standard to that of the average Year 7 female. While the gap widens across the year levels, the clearest widening of the gap occurs between years 5 and 7. Male writing progress and achievement appears to falter in the transition between primary and secondary school.

Though much remains unknown about the gender gap in writing achievement, research has started to reveal more about its nature and causes. While not the focus of this article, cognitive differences associated with the gap have been explored by several researchers (e.g. Berninger et al, 1996). Regarding social norms, the gap may be at least in part attributed to the following factors.

Motivational and attitudinal differences

Almost 60 per cent of male students have little motivation for writing (compared to around 40 per cent of females; National Literacy Trust, 2018). Males may also identify with sets of masculine values that are quite different to the values promoted in schools. Such students have reported feeling misunderstood as writers (Fletcher, 2006), especially since the topics and themes they prefer writing about are often discouraged in class (e.g. fantasy, action, violence, etc.). Motivational and attitudinal issues become particularly concerning in the transition from primary to secondary school when many males become less involved in classroom teaching and learning. Research by Martino (1999) focused on groups of able boys who spoke of intentionally acting dumb and refraining from public displays of knowledge to retain what they considered masculine identities. Compounding this pattern of withdrawal from classroom talk, Myhill (2002) found that teachers direct more attention and questions to underachieving males than any other group during teaching to both engage them and as a disciplinary strategy. The tendency for average- and high-achieving males to become increasingly less involved in classroom discussions may contribute to the gender gap in writing achievement.

Genre preferences

Traditionally, Australian primary school teachers, librarians, and curriculum designers have privileged the teaching of imaginative, story genres over informative, factual genres (Christie & Martin, 1997). This has been problematic for many male students who prefer to read and write factual texts on topics such as sport, science, and history (Barrs & Pigeon, 1994; Chapman et al, 2007). Having access to texts that reflect student interests affects their reading and writing engagement and, by extension, their development throughout the primary and secondary school years. While more research is needed in this area, the focus on story genres may be contributing to the gender gap by privileging female preferences and strengths over those of males (Maynard, 2002).

Teacher perceptions

Jones and Myhill (2004) found that teachers tend to perceive male students as low-achieving and female students as high-achieving. Such gender stereotyping has serious implications due to the notion of *stereotype threat*, in which a person's awareness of stereotypes of social groups they belong to influences actual levels of achievement (Steele, 1997). Hartley and Sutton's research (2013) found that 'girls from age 4 years and boys from age 7 years believed, and thought adults believed, that boys are academically inferior to girls' (p. 1716). In this way, believing that teachers expect males to perform lower in literacy tasks, and believing this themselves, may influence male engagement and achievement in writing.

The impact of social normal on boys (& girls) as writers: implications for teachers

Despite widespread agreement about the connection between writing achievement and a person's life chances, as noted by Gyagenda and Engelhard (2009), there has been a surprising lack of concern amongst the English/literacy education research community about the global gender gap in writing achievement. The gap puts males at a significant disadvantage should they choose to engage in higher education (Reilly et al, 2019), since learning in many higher education courses is assessed via the written mode (Thomas et al, 2018). The following practical implications aim to promote male students' engagement and interest in writing.

Encourage males to explore and write about topics that interest them

As suggested by Fletcher (2006), one way to promote writing development in underachieving males is to afford them more freedom for writing about slap-stick humour,

fantasy, and action-oriented events. To promote stronger writing, guide such males to slow the action down by making explicit how the characters in their texts felt about actions and what they said or thought before, during, and after actions. Encourage males to explore and write about topics that interest them.

Fill your classrooms and teaching experiences with a variety of written genres

Written genres include picture books, novels, atlases, graphic novels, poetry anthologies, joke books, riddle books, and magazines. When talking about favourite books with your class, consider not only narrative texts but the information or persuasive texts that were particularly impressive in achieving their social purposes.

Actively promote masculine identities that value thinking, learning, reading, and writing

This is particularly crucial in the transition between primary and secondary school contexts when young males grapple with complex new feelings and emotions and may have physically moved schools.

Ensure a balance in how you direct attention during classroom talk to males, females, lower- and higher-achievers

If able males are refraining from involvement in learning processes, engage with them one-on-one or in small groups to build their confidence before engaging them in whole-class situations. This point works together with the point above.

Expect great things from all your learners and communicate this to them

Research has shown that when teachers inform students aged 6–9 that males and females are expected to perform to the same standard, the performance of males increases without affecting that of females (Hartley & Sutton, 2013).

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AN EVIDENCE BASE: WHY EFFECTIVE TEACHING SHOULD BE GROUNDED IN RESEARCH

By Susan Taylor

Classroom teachers who are well-informed about research and can transfer this knowledge into best classroom practice will empower their students to achieve their learning goals. This aligns with the principal objective of the NSW Education Standards Authority to 'promote an evidence-based approach to improving education standards' (NESA, 2020).

Individualised teaching for diverse student learning needs

The need for teachers to stay connected with latest research has increased in recent times as contemporary educators have shifted from transferring a tightly controlled curriculum to being flexible, future focused facilitators who need to differentiate the type of learning to suit their individual students. Presenting a 'one size fits all model' through prescribed lesson plans is a teaching practice of the past. Goal number one of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) is a commitment to 'promote personalised learning and provide support that aims to fulfil the individual capabilities and needs of learners'. Therefore, it is essential that future educators develop a more customised approach to teaching and learning.

The expectation to provide individualised learning occurs at a time when classrooms have moved from being largely homogenised spaces to becoming diverse communities. Contemporary educators are required to differentiate learning programs to be inclusive of groups such as students for whom English is a second language or dialect, students with a disability, and those who are gifted and talented (ACARA, 2020). Each of these student needs are unique and specialised and therefore it is important that teachers remain connected to latest research to inform them of best practice teaching for each learning style. It is also worth acknowledging that school populations have become increasingly transient and classroom teachers may face tensions as students sometimes arrive with little notice, resulting in a need to adjust the program quickly (De Gioia, 2011).

The rapid timeframe in which teachers needed to adapt to online learning in response to COVID-19 and the subsequent 'learning from home' phase is further evidence of contemporary teachers' ability to pivot quickly to respond to a variety of needs. While there is an abundance of online teaching resources instantly available, quality can vary, and teachers need to use critical literacy to navigate it. Connection to research about what works best for a diverse range of students will give teachers confidence to make considered decisions under time pressure.

Teacher accountability

The expectation of transparency in classrooms, particularly in relation to parents, has placed pressure on teachers, and so understanding research can provide a solid basis for them to draw from if their teaching approach is questioned. Neoliberalism ideology has resulted in schools being placed in competition against each other in a marketplace for enrolments. In this sense, educators have become part of an 'accountancy and accountability' culture where teachers' worthiness is judged by the NAPLAN results their students receive (Connell, 2009). Parents are stakeholders who believe it is their right and indeed their duty to closely oversee what their children are being taught (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010). Teachers who are readily able to cite research to support their choices of classroom practice will be better placed to feel confident and professional if they are asked to justify educational decisions.

Learning progress, outcomes, and data

Contemporary educators also need to engage with data on learner progress and outcomes, and so staying strongly connected to research beyond their university years is critical (Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019). Classroom teachers need to incorporate regular, timely assessment to their program planning. This may involve conducting formal testing as well as creating and interpreting data in the form of graphs, tables and summaries. Good teachers are curious teachers, they remain informed about research trends, and are willing to see how current evidenced-based practice relates to their own pedagogy and the results of their individual students. In this sense, reflexive practitioners can have an inquiry-based approach toward their own classroom and contribute to research by sharing their understandings. Ideally, a cycle develops where teachers are both informed by, and themselves inform, educational research.

Educators of the 21st century need to be adaptive to be able to differentiate learning for a diverse range of students in changeable settings. They engage readily with data and are held accountable for the results of the students they teach. Grounding teaching practice in research enables teachers to feel secure and confident in their educational decisions. As the nature of both teaching and learning continues to evolve, there is a need for schools to build evidence-based practice as the firm foundation of every classroom.

Ensuring effective teaching is grounded in research: implications for teachers

- Pre-service teachers engage closely with educational research throughout their studies to complete their university degree. This engagement can be connected to the classes they teach. Graduate teachers can actively seek to keep connected with the university they attended, and this could be encouraged by both university academics and school executive staff. Some universities have 'hub' schools they liaise with as well as academies to share research directly with practising teachers.
- Teachers can subscribe to academic journals that publish educational research.
- Joining educational associations and attending conferences related to particular curriculum areas can be informative. For example, the Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) both publish accessible research that directly relates to classroom practice.
- There is a wealth of information available for teachers online, in books and through social media groups created by teachers. While this accessibility and collaboration is useful for busy teachers, it is important that teaching pedagogy and content is chosen with a critical lens. Teachers can practice this critical literacy by always checking the validity of references and ensuring that teaching and learning concepts are evidence-based before they introduce them to their students.
- Teachers may consider designing and conducting a research project, based on sound contemporary educational knowledge, in their own school. They can then share their findings with other teachers, perhaps in a local school's network event such as Teachmeet (www.teachmeetnsw.net).

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BEFORE ENTERING THE CLASSROOM: THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-SERVICE PREPARATION FOR TEACHING WRITING

By Susan Taylor

The ability to write well is a fundamental skill that enables students to have a voice and is connected to success in all school subjects. It also follows children beyond their school years and influences their ability to gain and maintain employment. The practice of teaching writing is a specialised skill that has become more complex in contemporary times. It is essential that all pre-service teachers are well prepared for this endeavour and graduate with a wide repertoire of skills and practices that will enable them to teach writing well.

Teaching writing: knowledge and confidence

'Teachers of writing are faced with the dilemma of selecting an appropriate instructional approach in a climate of heightened educational accountability, rapid technological change and rich cultural diversity' (Daffern & Mackenzie, 2015). An additional pressure for pre-service teachers is that much has changed surrounding the teaching of writing since they were in primary school and secondary school. Pre-service teachers may also experience lack of confidence in their own writing skills, particularly their knowledge of grammar because some who are currently at university passed through school during an era where there was a greater variance in how grammar was taught. A lack of knowledge can result in feel inadequately prepared to instruct future generations in written grammar. Pre-service teachers who are EALD students might also feel additional anxiety about having errors in their writing and grammar publicly exposed in front of their students and colleagues through the teaching of writing (Adoniou, 2014). As has been widely reported in the media, concern surrounding the literacy levels of pre-service teachers has resulted in the need for them to pass a LANTITE English test prior to graduating. There is, however, controversy about the equity of the administration of this test as well as recognition of the adverse effect of further eroding pre-service teachers' confidence and sense of identity (Dwyer & Wills, 2020).

Teaching writing: a gradual release model

The best way pre-service teachers can be well prepared to teach writing is through a gradual release model, where university students have excellent writing lessons modelled for them by experienced teachers. They are then be able to be guided as they undertake the teaching themselves, perhaps initially teaching a small group of students. Once they and their supervising teacher feel confident, pre-service teachers can teach writing to whole classes independently. This is a cycle that is best repeated many times, varying the level the writing lesson is aimed at as well as the genre of the writing being taught, so that each pre-service teacher builds a wide knowledge base. This gradual release model can take place while on practicum and is ideally reinforced in university through lectures and tutorials so that knowledge about theory and practice are not limited by existing in separate spheres (Dillon, 2017). The inclusion of university assignments that require pre-service teachers to reflect on their observations and explicit teaching of writing is another helpful way of ensuring that they are well prepared before they enter the classroom.

Writing is a difficult skill to master and a difficult skill to teach

'Writing is a difficult skill to master and a difficult skill to teach' (Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2020). As well as being confident writers, it is important that pre-service teachers have plenty of exposure to the pedagogy involved in the best practice of teaching writing. It is essential to recognise that social interactions during lessons directly impact the ability of students to write well (Vanderburg, 2006). For this reason, pre-service teachers need to practice fostering rich, complex oral discussions in their writing lessons. This is likely to be a markedly different approach than the way they were taught to write. Writing lessons in classrooms have changed from individuals silently completing worksheets to groups of students, seated on flexible furniture, engaging with technology, and planning and discussing writing that relates to authentic purposes (Duke et al, 2012).

The role of the teacher has evolved to being more flexible and more demanding; they facilitate important pre-writing discussions while simultaneously monitoring when it is best to explicitly model and guide writing skills. Pre-service teachers benefit from deliberate exposure to this contemporary style of teaching writing while on practicum placement. Ideally, this can be further reinforced if university lecturers and tutors are also well-versed with 21st century writing pedagogy so they can model this practice to their students.

Explicit teaching of writing to students

For students to become successful writers, they need regular, explicit feedback about their work from their teachers (ACARA). It is important that pre-service teachers are purposefully taught best practice when providing feedback on writing, because it is a complex skill. A pedagogical balance when giving feedback needs to be considered by teachers by focusing on secretarial elements (the mechanics of handwriting, spelling and punctuation) and authorial elements (organisation of ideas and information to communicate to audiences). Teachers who lack confidence in addressing the authorial aspects are more likely to over emphasis the secretarial, which is not necessarily helpful for their

students (Daffern & Mackenzie, 2015). Hence, pre-service teachers would benefit from being cautioned not to cover their students' writing with red pen and correcting every spelling and punctuation error, but instead focus on holding writing conferences to discuss broader authorial and structural issues.

The ability to teach writing well depends on both personal confidences to model excellent writing and familiarity with a range of best teaching practices. It is essential that pre-service teachers are provided with opportunities, both on practicum placement and in the university setting, to participate in the gradual release model. Ideally, they will observe the best practice of the teaching of writing, including facilitating oral discussions and providing feedback, be provided with opportunities to have supported guided practice, and to ultimately be able to teach writing independently with confidence before they enter the classroom.

The importance of pre-service preparation for teaching writing: implications for teachers

- Pre-service teachers who experience anxiety regarding their own writing skills, including grammar, can actively seek opportunities to remedy these issues while they are still at university. Many universities offer free assistance for students to enhance their writing skills. They can complete online tutorials or attend face-to-face small group tutoring sessions that are specifically targeted to improve writing. Hence, once they graduate and need to model effective writing for their students, they can feel confident.
- Pre-service teachers can be proactive in seeking opportunities to observe and teach writing lessons while on practicum placement. They can deliberately ask the classroom teacher they are placed with to please ensure they gain experience with the specialised skill of teaching writing. There may also be opportunities to observe other teachers in the school teach writing (perhaps at a different stage level or in different subject area) to add breadth to their own repertoire of skills.

- Similarly, newly graduated teachers can ask their teaching mentor or supervisor to provide opportunities to observe or team teach writing lessons with more experienced teachers. During these lessons, particular attention can be paid to the feedback process. Pre-service and newly graduated teachers can benefit from observing and then practising how experienced teachers balance the secretarial and authorial aspects in their feedback on student writing.

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PREPARING TEACHERS TO TEACH WRITING

By Janet Fellowes

Writing is a complex undertaking that requires the coordination of knowledge and a range of skills, processes and strategies. It entails knowledge of language, understanding of print and written texts and ability with the skills relevant to the act of using the alphabet code to transform oral language to its written form. Additionally, writing requires the application of various cognitive processes (e.g. generating ideas, translating ideas into text) and strategies (e.g. planning, revising) which are important to successfully achieving communicative goals. The writer must also consider and manage the constraints imposed by the writing context, the topic, the communicative intention, and the audience (Graham, Gillespie & McKeown, 2013). The many requirements for competency make writing a multifaceted and difficult use of language (Fisher, 2012; Graham et al, 2013).

Writing and learning to write benefit students' growth as readers (Jouhar & Rupley, 2020; Shea, 2011; Graham & Herbert, 2011; Graham et al, 2013). Writing and reading are communicative tasks; they have many skills in common. Thus, the teaching of knowledge and skills important to good writing serves to enhance use of the same knowledge and skills when reading (Graham & Herbert, 2011). Additionally, students reading comprehension is improved when they have the opportunity to write about the texts they read (Graham & Herbert, 2011).

The significance of learning to write and of becoming a competent writer is apparent when considering the range of circumstances in which writing figures in people's everyday lives. It is a versatile communicative tool that serves to achieve a variety of personal and academic goals; it features in educational, occupational, personal, and social situations. Nonetheless, it would seem that, despite its relevance to people's life, it is not receiving appropriate attention in schools and teachers are not always employing effective instructional practices (Brenner & McQuirk, 2019; Graham, 2019; Fisher, 2012).

Teachers' knowledge, skills, and disposition

Teachers need to enter classrooms with the requisite knowledge, skills and disposition critical to the effective teaching of writing and they need regular opportunity to reflect on and develop their ability as writing teachers throughout their professional careers. It is acknowledged that teacher education courses can only provide the basics of what is a challenging, multi-faceted skill to learn and to teach and that continual in-service teacher education is crucial to ensure teachers' depth of knowledge and teaching competency in this area (Oliveira, Lopes & Spear-Swerling, 2019).

Research examining the learning and development of writing is relatively undeveloped (Myers et al, 2016; Street, 2013; Graham et al, 2012; Myhill & Fisher, 2012;

Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016); it is only in the past 30 years or so that it has begun to take on some momentum though it continues to linger some distance behind that of reading for which the volume and scope of the research is substantially greater (Myhill & Fisher, 2010; Brenner & McQuirk, 2019).

Nonetheless, writing research of the past 30 years or so has afforded better understanding of the features of effective writing and the factors that influence the teaching and learning of writing. It has shed light on the issues surrounding classroom writing practices (e.g. Fisher, 2012; Brenner & McQuirk, 2019; Graham, 2019) and has elucidated understanding of the significance of teachers' knowledge (e.g. Moats, 2014; Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016; Oliveira et al, 2019; Graham, 2019) about the effective teaching of writing and how students learn and develop as writers.

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum has assisted to clarify the important relationship between language and literacy learning. The implication of the Australian Curriculum for English, Language strand (ACARA, 2012) is clear; the effective teaching of written communication (and other modes of literacy) requires that teachers have knowledge of English language and of how it is used to create purposeful and meaningful texts. Wyatt-Smith & Jackson (2016) highlight research that questions the classroom preparedness of pre-service teachers in relation to knowledge about language and how it works in the context of writing.

Enhancing the preparation of pre-service teachers to teach writing

Brenner & McQuirk (2019) suggests that teacher education courses have tended to focus more on the teaching of reading and dedicated less time to the teaching of writing. They and other authors (e.g. Fisher, 2012; Oliveira et al, 2019; Brindle et al, 2015) while acknowledging the range of factors that affect the teaching of writing in schools and the demands and constraints placed on teacher education courses, proffer possibilities for enhancing the preparation of pre-service teachers to teach writing.

Preparing teachers to teach writing: implications for educators

- Ensure writing is addressed as a separate subject rather than within a reading or literacy course (Brenner & McQuirk, 2019)
- Ensure pre-service teachers' learning encompasses the range and depth of language and writing knowledge (content and pedagogical) and that they are provided with the tools to connect this knowledge to classroom practice (Oliveira et al, 2019; Carey, Christie & Grainger, 2015)
- Use varied, cognitively engaging, task-based learning and authentic writing activities to teach knowledge about language (Carey et al, 2015; Turner, 2020)

- Introduce pedagogical frameworks for writing that align with the approach to writing taken in the Australian Curriculum (Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016)
- Emphasise the complexity of practices required for the teaching of writing and ensure that students are aware of the simplistic views of teaching writing that shape some commercial writing or literacy programs (Fisher, 2012)
- Ensure students understand the need to explicitly teach some elements of language and writing and how this might be done (Moats, 2014; Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016)
- Provide pre-service teachers with a repertoire of instructional practices for developing students' knowledge, skills, and understandings for writing and facilitating their growth as writers
- Ensure that instructional practices come from a strong evidence base (Oliveira et al, 2019; Brindle et al, 2015), that is, they are informed by research rather than outdated practices, current trends, or narrow commercial programs
- Assist pre-service teachers to develop their writing identities (Myers et al, 2016); to see themselves as writers and to view writing as an enjoyable endeavour. Their writing identities need to be such as to positively shape their classroom practice.
- Challenge pre-service teachers current understanding of writing and beliefs about how writing should be taught as this will strongly influence how they construct their future writing classroom (Fisher, 2012; Myers et al, 2016)
- Convince preservice teachers of the importance of writing and foster in them a positive attitude to the teaching of writing. Teachers who are more positive about the teaching of writing are more likely to use evidence based instructional practices (Brindle et al, 2015)
- Provide a strong focus on writing standards and exemplars and the analysis of writing samples, and ensure the knowledge and understanding needed to accurately interpret curriculum standards and use them to assess students' learning
- Encourage critical discussion about writing standards and comparison of those provided through the annotated samples of quality writing in the Australian Curriculum, the NAPLAN assessment criteria, and the A–E reporting standards

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IN THE CLASSROOM: WHY WRITING SHOULD BE TAUGHT EXPLICITLY

By Anne Bayetto

There are many interconnected and interdependent components that independent and successful writers use to record their knowledge and thoughts. One part of being a writer is authoring (e.g. generating or responding to set topics, using appropriate contextualised vocabulary, and writing coherent and grammatical sentences and paragraphs). However, for writers to be understood by readers, they also need to use a shared medium of communication when revisioning and editing e.g. legible, handwriting, and correct spelling, capitalisation and punctuation. Added to these is the need for writers to know what genre should be used for particular contexts (e.g. informative, persuasive, narrative). With so many writing skills to be acquired, and simultaneously merged, it is evident that there are many components that students may not be able to be self-teach (Hochman & Wexler, 2017; Ray & Graham, 2019).

Difficulties in knowing what to do may manifest in one or more of the previously mentioned areas, so for students to become increasingly proficient and confident writers, teachers would logically provide structured, systematic, and explicit instruction about these sub-skills as well as allocate time for students to have many opportunities to write so they can apply the skills that have been taught (Harris, Graham, Aitken, Barkel, Houston & Ray, 2017). Ultimately, teachers aspire for students to be able to write what they need to write, or choose to write, with self-reliance and confidence, but "...the task of initiating, self-regulating, and completing written work can remain an overwhelming challenge" (Hashey, Miller & Foxworth, 2020, p. 2).

As with any developmental academic skill, scaffolding the explicit teaching of writing would expectedly support students' openness and willingness to be involved as they would feel more optimistic about their abilities to achieve what they have chosen to write or are asked to write. Teachers apprentice students into knowing how to write by their extensive use of modelled and shared writing where they 'talk aloud' as they work their way through the cyclical steps of authoring, revisioning, and editing. Further, teachers would use their reading programs to enhance awareness about writing because students who are regularly read to, and who read both a wide range and number of texts, will be better able to reflect on the craft of many writers (Graham & Hebert, 2010; ILA, 2020; Tompkins, Smith, Campbell & Green, 2019).

The use of explicit writing instruction leaves nothing to chance as it cannot be assumed that years spent at school will see a commensurate improvement in writing skills. Ciullo and Mason (2017) and Graham (2013) make the point that writing instruction, and any intervention or remediation approaches, must start in the early years of formal education so that students' writing competencies become well established. This focus on teaching writing, starting in the first year of school, is evident in the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2016). It is in the early years of school that students are learning the rudimentary skills to be able to record their thinking and knowledge onto a page or screen. However, by middle primary, students are expected to write more widely for a variety of purposes and across a range of learning areas. It is not a 'given' that just because students have been well taught to write (e.g. narratives) that they will automatically know how to write other genres (e.g. information reports, explanations, description, and persuasions). It is logical that teachers would explicitly teach students how to write for *particular* learning areas, for example, how to write like a biologist, art critic, historian, book reviewer, and mathematician.

Teaching writing: implications for teachers

Explicitly teach writing and never stop teaching it

For students to become independent and successful writers, teachers must explicitly model how to work through the process of turning thoughts into coherent text, or as Graham (2013, p. 7) states, 'explicitly teach writing skills as well as writing processes and strategies'.

Keep explicitly teaching listening, interacting, and speaking skills

Even students with precocious spoken language may not automatically be competent writers as writing requires a different use and application of language when it is written. Students who have weak oral language skills will likely struggle with authoring as they can only write words they already speak; these students need intentional and targeted oral language instruction.

Keep explicitly teaching vocabulary

As stated above, students will only write the words they know how to speak so teachers need to continue to program specific instruction of new vocabulary (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013; Olinghouse & Wilson, 2013) and provide many opportunities for students to use these newly learned words when writing.

Explicitly teach the full range of genres

Olinghouse & Wilson (2013, p. 45) make the point that 'writing is a complex process, involving the coordination of many high-level cognitive and meta-cognitive skills' so it is understandable that these sub-skills are not necessarily, and readily, generalised by students when they are asked to write in different genres. Each genre has its own unique requirements so they must systematically and explicitly be taught with teachers offering sufficient practice opportunities for students to feel assured and confident.

Explicitly teach writing across learning areas

Writing instruction should not be limited to English or literacy lessons. In a major and recent meta-analysis, Graham, Kiuhara and Mackay (2020) found that writing in different learning areas 'was equally effective at improving learning in science, social studies, and mathematics as well as the learning of elementary, middle, and high school students' (p. 179). They also state that teachers need to ensure students had the pre-requisite writing skills for content learning to occur and they need to provide explicit writing instruction.

Opportunity, opportunity, opportunity

Development of independent and successful writing skills requires regular and consistent practice: students need to spend more time writing (Hochman & Wexler, 2017; NCTE, 2018).

Explicitly model that writing can be playful

Not all writing at school should be focused just on finessing genre writing. Offer students many opportunities (teachers too!) to write about self-selected topics and respond to light-hearted prompts and essential questions.

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IDEAS FOR DEVELOPING VOCABULARY

By Jane Wooldridge

Jane Wooldridge shares some practical ideas to help children build their vocabulary.

Tier 1 words are basic words used often in everyday conversation, e.g. go, play. Tier 2 words are complex words that are more likely to occur in academic settings, e.g. compare, neutral. Tier 3 words are highly specialised, subject-specific words, e.g. isosceles (Beck & McKeown, 1985).

Tier 2 vocabulary activities

- Discover and explore words in the context of books, stories, and common or current events in pupils' lives, rather than in isolation. Involve pupils in working out the meaning of a word from the context or in developing a definition.
- Poorer readers will only have access to more advanced vocabulary if they are exposed to good quality texts above their reading age. So, plan for plenty of shared reading with the class. Specifically explore vocabulary a few times a week.
- When sharing a book with a pupil or the class, select words they may be unfamiliar with. Talk about them, display them, sort them (is it a noun or an adjective?), act them out, discuss synonyms and antonyms. Use the words in vocabulary games for pairs or groups of children.
- Show video clips or pictures to illustrate words or phrases that occur in the book you're reading, for example: The dog snarled viciously.
- Provide a cardboard bookmark for each pupil to record unfamiliar words as they read independently.

Share frequently to discuss meanings and consider how to use them.
- Build a depth of knowledge of new words by revisiting them often, in different ways, and in different contexts, for example, for bitterly cold: watch a video of a snowstorm, handle some ice cubes, act out being "bitterly cold", draw a picture of people on a bitterly cold day (What are they wearing? How can we show the wind?).
- Create an excitement about discovering new words. Talk about how everyone continues to learn new words throughout life from reading, television, conversations. It is OK not to know what a word means – we can find out. Sometimes we have heard a word but we are not sure how to use it.
- Synonyms can rarely be used in exactly the same way. Explore shades of meaning and the most suitable word for a particular context. Discuss precise meaning and differences, for example, staggered, walked, wandered.

Tier 3 vocabulary activities
- When planning a science or history topic, make a list of vocabulary that pupils will need to know. Display, refer to, and revisit this list often. Share pictures for as many of the words as possible.
- Send the list of words home. Ask pupils to carry out an orientation project before the topic starts. They should produce a video, photos, a picture or a performance, to illustrate a few of the words. Pupils can then present their project to the class.
- Provide opportunities for pupils to act out, draw and watch videos of the focus vocabulary.
- Try to share fiction with the class that links with the science or history topics, drawing attention to subject-specific vocabulary.

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