Pupils' views about their learning in writing: a qualitative study of a primary school in the North East of England

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Abstract

This study aims to explore pupils' views on writing in primary school through focus group interviews conducted in the North East of England with children aged 7-11 years old. Pupils' views templates were used to stimulate children's ideas about their thoughts and feelings towards writing and acted as a starting point for discussion. All children demonstrated an ability to be involved in a *metawriting* discussion where they reflected on their writing, their strengths, weaknesses and their plans to further improve their writing skills. A certain level of *awareness* about writing was exhibited by all children, however, the more enthusiastic and more able writers had specific strategies in place to take their writing forward. These findings are discussed in terms of their practical implications for pupils' writing development.

Keywords

Pupils' views, writing, primary school, pupils' views templates, awareness, reflective thinking, strategic thinking

Introduction

Writing is a cognitively challenging activity (Fisher et al., 2010; Medwell et al., 2009) and requires a complex set of skills (Higgins, 2015) that can develop with effort and time. Children can find it difficult to know what to do to improve. Pupils' performance in writing is worse compared with reading, maths and science at Key Stages (KS) 1 and 2[1] with a number of children underachieving in writing in England (DfE, 2012). As an example, 17% and 19% of children in KS1 and KS2 respectively had not achieved the expected writing level in the 2012 national teacher assessment in England. Writing performance in KS2 has not improved since then with recent figures showing a decline since 2012. In the 2019 teacher assessed writing component, 22% of pupils did not reach the expected standard in KS2 (DfE, 2019). In KS1, writing performance declined even more with 30% of pupils failing to reach the expected standard in 2018 (DfE, 2018).

Recent research on how children's writing development can be supported in the primary classroom indicates the importance for teachers to listen to the children's viewpoints about writing and adapt their instructional practice accordingly (Gadd et al., 2019). Consulting children on their perceptions and attitudes about writing can shed light on their affective responses (e.g. value, enjoyment, interest), cognitions (e.g. levels of awareness, self-regulation and strategic thinking) and behaviour (e.g. effort, active participation) in their involvement with writing. Encouraging children to reflect on writing through "dialogic talk"

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[1] Key Stage is the legal term for specific years in a pupil's schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales. Key Stage 1 refers to Years 1 and 2 (5-6 years) and Key Stage 2 refers to Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 (7-11 years).

(Ruttle, 2004, p.77) can allow them to understand and communicate their personal constructions about the writing process and their involvement in it. Such a reflective approach can allow learners to "transform abstract ideas into personal working knowledge" (Flower, 1994, p.262) which will then usefully contribute to teachers' understanding of the children's thought processes and the actions they can subsequently take to improve their instructional practices in writing (Ruttle, 2004).

The aim of this study was to explore pupils' views on writing through focus group interviews conducted at a small primary school in the North East of England with children aged 7-11 years old. Pupils' views templates (Wall, Higgins and Packard, 2009) were used to stimulate children's ideas about their thoughts and feelings towards writing and acted as a starting point for discussion. The findings provide important insights into pupils' writing development during their primary school years.

Review of the Literature

Reflective and strategic thinking are key components of young writers' mental engagement and demonstrate their metacognitive skilfulness in writing. According to Veenman and Elshout (1999), "Metacognitive skills...concern the procedural knowledge that is required for the actual regulation of, and control over one's learning activities. Task orientation, planning, monitoring, checking, and recapitulation are manifestations of such skills" (p.510). Anderson (2007) claims that metacognition is essential in understanding how a task is carried out and developed a model of metacognition that consists of the following main components which are similar to the ones proposed by Veenman and Elshout: preparing and planning for effective learning, organising, coordinating and monitoring the available strategies before

evaluating their use and the learning that took place. More expert writers are able to navigate through this process more efficiently and comfortably compared to weaker writers. More specifically, good writers have been found to show more conscious awareness and better control over their choice of the most effective writing strategies (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Furthermore, using self-regulated strategies, especially planning and self-monitoring, have been found to be strongly correlated with children's self-efficacy in English writing in Hong Kong primary schools (Bai & Guo, 2018). In other words, the more confident young children are in their ability to perform a writing task by focusing on their language, the organisation, content and the process of the task as well as their use of grammar, the more likely are they to use self-regulated learning strategies. However, the direction of the relationship is not clear. It might be that the more able and/or self-efficacious writers are better able to engage in planning and self-monitoring during a writing task while the opposite could also be the case as successful self-regulation might enhance their sense of self-efficacy.

In turn, a sense of high self-efficacy in a writing task reflects confidence in a child's ability to take the necessary steps in executing the task effectively (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). This perceived competence coupled with motivation to write has been strongly associated with better writing scores (Akyol & Aktaş, 2018; Lam & Law) and a sense of writing satisfaction (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). What is clear is that, if children enjoy writing, they are more likely to actively and effortfully immerse themselves in the task. In a recent call to boost children's writing for pleasure (National Literacy Trust, 2018), it is argued that those children who write for pleasure achieve significantly better results in the subject in the classroom. Those who like writing outside the class are seven times more likely to write above the expected level for their age. The research also shows that far too many pupils still do not enjoy writing and this could be holding them back from reaching their full potential.

Young writers may sometimes be too preoccupied with correct writing and this can act as a stumbling block in their desire or developing ability to write. As they move on through their education, their increased writing apprehension may perpetuate their being haunted by the "doctrine of correctness" and damage their writing potential (Mascle, 2011, p.24). To help address this, young writers should be encouraged to "discover what they want to say" in addition to discovering "how to say it" (Myhill, 2001, p.19) to ensure a good balance in instruction between communicative purpose and technical skills. This balanced approach, which has been emphasised as good practice in the teaching of writing (Louden et al., 2005), will help to remind children the "arguably more important" communicative dimensions of the writing process (Wray, 1993, p.76). In Louden et al's (2005) study about teaching writing in the early years of schooling, effective teachers of writing consider aspects of word and letter formation, but emphasise that neatness of handwriting serves the purpose of "achieving effective writing outcomes rather than being an end in itself" (p.99).

Writing interventions that have been found to have a positive impact on writing outcomes offer learners a set of tools that encourage, through a gradual process of scaffolding (Bruner, 1996), a sense of agency, control and self-regulation over the writing task. An approach called 'Self-Regulated Strategy Development' (SRSD) had an overall effect size of +0.74 which indicated that the children in the intervention schools (including pupils eligible for free school meals) made approximately nine months' additional progress in writing compared to similar children who did not take part in the intervention (Torgerson et al., 2014). SRSD aims to help learners become independent writers by guiding them through a process of exploring topics of interest and having 'memorable experiences', to planning, writing, marking and revising their work and setting writing goals. Explicit instruction, such as modelling the writing task using metacognitive explanations (Wray et al., 2002), providing a clear framework for planning, encouraging self and peer marking, and goal setting, can act as a

bridge (Lundgren, 2013) towards greater learner independence and writing confidence. The aim is for the support to eventually fade out as the responsibility gradually transfers from the teacher to the pupil (Higgins, 2015; Wooley, 2014). Furthermore, in any effective piece of writing, the writer needs to consider a) the writing purpose, b) the intended audience, c) the linguistic, contextual and presentational features of the writing genre, and d) editing and revising the writing (Dombey, 2013). These are all essential components of the SRSD writing approach.

The present study aims to explore pupils' views on writing in primary school. It seeks to investigate what aspects of writing pupils find most enjoyable, what motivational strategies seem to be most effective in enabling the children to complete a writing task, how the children seek to improve their performance and in what ways writing can become a more enjoyable activity. Understanding pupils' views, attitudes and beliefs about writing is a vital component of effective practice as emotional aspects of one's journey and development as a writer can act as a catalyst in facilitating or constraining success along the way (Grainger et al, 2003).

Materials and Methods

Focus group interviews with pupils of primary school age (7-11 years old) have been conducted in a primary school in the North East of England. For these interviews, pupils' views templates (Wall, Higgins and Packard, 2009) were used to stimulate children's ideas about their thoughts and feelings towards writing and acted as a starting point for discussion. Pupils were invited to express on a superimposed structure of speech and thought bubbles their attitudes, beliefs and thinking about writing in the classroom. The templates were used as an empirical tool to uncover pupils' thoughts about the process of teaching and learning in

writing both in terms of external processes (environment, other pupils etc.) and those metacognitive processes that are internal to the pupil (learning and thinking about learning).

The data reported in this study is based on a sample of 67 pupils at Key Stage 2 (Years 3/4/5/6, ages 7-11) who completed the templates and took part in a focus interview in groups of four children. The year group and gender of the children that participated in the study are shown in Table 1. Overall, there were 34 boys and 33 girls that completed the templates and participated in the focus group interview that followed. The data were collected over four visits to the primary school. The groups of children were given permission to leave the classroom for about 30 minutes and meet the researcher in a quiet room which had been made available for the purposes of the research.

Table 1 somewhere here

All children were informed about the aims and purpose of the research and they were asked if they agreed for the discussion to be audio recorded, which all children were happy about. Prior to the start of the data collection, the study had received ethical approval by the School of Education ethics sub-committee at the University of Durham. Parents were informed about the research, the exact process through which data would be collected and how personal data would be processed before providing their consent for their children's participation. They were specifically informed that they could ask for their children and any data they provided to be withdrawn at any point during the research without any negative consequences.

The first part involved the completion of the templates by the children. They were instructed to think of a particular writing task that they had to do in their recent writing work. They were then asked to try and remember what they were writing about and whether they were

alone or with others. They had the option of seeing themselves writing individually, in a pair or in a group of children working together in order to recollect the environment that most closely resembled the one they were in when they were writing. Most of them chose the individual writing template but a few saw themselves discussing their ideas in a pair or group (see Appendix for examples of the three template formats as completed by participating children).

On the one hand, the speech bubble was intended to gather information about the children's awareness and ways of behaving and acting in relation to the writing activity. They were consequently asked to write about what they could say about their work, about what was good or not particularly good in their piece of writing and who they might want to show their work to. The speech bubble invited the children to reflect on their perception of the writing task and included external aspects of the task, e.g. other pupils' learning, practicalities of the activity, teachers and parents (Wall et al., 2009). The thought bubble, on the other hand, invited the children to reflect on their learning and note their thinking about their learning. It was more concerned, in other words, with internal and metacognitive processes. For the completion of the thought bubble, the children were asked to note what they were thinking about before, during or after the writing activity, what they learnt about their writing and about how they write. The interview that followed focused on the children's enjoyment or lack of enjoyment of writing, when they liked writing the most/the least, what they would change in writing to make it better or easier, what they do to try and get better at writing and what support mechanisms they may employ. The last question invited the children to reflect on the advice they would give to children a year younger to help them with learning to write. This question was borrowed from Lambirth's (2016) study, which sought to explore primary aged children's writing discourses.

The templates and the interview transcripts were coded and re-coded following the five stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) starting with the researcher's initial familiarisation with the data to searching for, reviewing and defining the emergent themes. This last stage allowed the story that represented the participating children's views about writing to be told through the in-depth analysis of the data. The analytic themes are presented next.

Results

The analysis of pupils' responses to the templates led to two main categories that represented pupils' choice of words and phrases in the completion of the speech and thought bubbles. The two categories indicated aspects of pupils' reflective and strategic thinking. Pupils' reflective thinking included perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding their handwriting, positive attitudes or apprehension about writing, as well as comments regarding the content of their work or their learning in a specific writing genre and judgments about the quality of their writing work. Pupils' views were categorised as being strategic when specific writing strategies were being mentioned either in relation to a particular writing activity or for their future writing. Table 2 presents example quotes that illustrate pupils' reflective and strategic thinking as described above.

Table 2 somewhere here

As shown in the figure (Figure 1), more than half of the children (37/67) chose to make positive comments about their writing experiences, focusing, for example, on their feelings of

pride, on their enjoyment of writing or sense of satisfaction in completing a good piece of work.

Figure 1 somewhere here

Comments about the quality of the writing and strategic judgments were made by almost half of the children (30 and 28 instances of quality and strategic judgments were noted). As far as comments on quality were concerned, children mentioned that their writing was "good" or their "best work", that it made "sense" and that they had improved, that they took "good care of their writing", and that they used appropriate writing features. In relation to their strategic thinking, pupils referred to having the right attitude ("doing the best I can") or concentrating on the writing task ("write carefully and slowly – as well as I can") or thinking about the structure of their work and trying to include appropriate features for particular writing genres (e.g. "interesting vocabulary", "rich description", "meaning of words", "subordinating clauses", "include information from class novel", "persuasive speech", "using sheet to tell us how to meet the expected standard").

Interestingly, the majority of the pupils who chose to comment on particular writing strategies also commented on the quality of their work (25 pupils). This link between quality and strategic judgments was observed in the comments made by two Year 3 pupils, eight Year 4, seven Year 5 and eight Year 6 pupils. For instance, one Year 3 girl mentioned that her "diary entry was quite good in the middle" (quality judgment) and she was also thinking about the structure of her writing (strategic thinking). A Year 4 boy commented on the importance of taking time in writing and thinking hard (strategic thinking) while he commented on the good quality of his writing and his use of imagination (quality judgment). A Year 6 boy chose to comment on his use of appropriate features for the particular writing

genre (writing an advertisement for a recent visit: *strategic thinking*) and he also mentioned that his writing was good and included "a lot of description": *quality judgment*). Only a small number of children who made strategic judgments did not comment on the quality of their work (eight children) or made comments on quality but did not choose to make any strategic judgments (seven children). Other children chose to comment on the content of their writing (24 children) or mentioned the particular writing genre they were working on (13 children). Others commented on strengths or weaknesses regarding their handwriting (19 children) or expressed apprehension and worry about their writing abilities (e.g. "I thought it was going to be hard"; "Like I had no ideas"; "Difficult to be working at age related expectations").

A comparison of pupils' responses in the templates across years 3 to 6 is presented in the following figure (Figure 2). These developmental trends should be viewed with caution as the number of participating pupils was not consistent across each year group. However, a year by year comparison can still be useful in the identification of possible patterns which can be explored further. As shown in the figure, Year 3 children's comments on the identified themes were fewer compared to children of higher age groups, apart from comments on handwriting which are more numerous in this year group. Positive attitudes to writing were expressed more by children in Years 4 and 6. Feelings of apprehension seemed to grow before declining at the end of primary school. Furthermore, children in Year 6 were happy to comment on the content of their work but made fewer comments regarding the particular writing genre they were working on. Last but not least, comments on the writing quality presented a stable pattern following the first year of primary school but strategic judgments seemed to increase with age. In other words, children seemed to be more strategic in their writing at the end of primary school and continued to make evaluative judgments on the quality of their work.

Figure 2 somewhere here

The focus interviews that followed the completion of the templates explored some of the pupils' views about writing in more detail and invited children to reflect on and elaborate on the strategies they employed in developing their writing skills. Firstly, handwriting was a skill that concerned all children and was mentioned by all year groups in the interviews. Some commented on the requirement to write in a joined up way, others found it hard to write long pieces when their hand started to ache or focused on practising and improving their handwriting with time. However, it seemed that the more able writers could understand that neat handwriting was a means to an end, which was about communicating a message to the reader and focusing on the appropriate writing style, as the following comments illustrate:

"I don't really care what stamp I get but all I care about is that you can read my writing and then you can tell me what mistakes I've made by actually reading my writing." (Year 3, boy)

"I always try and do my best handwriting but it puts me off a bit when I'm writing. When you're writing, you have to concentrate more on your style of writing rather than actually writing it." (Year 5, boy)

Some pupils in Year 6 appreciated the opportunity they sometimes had to do their writing on a computer. This allowed those pupils to focus on the structure and style of their writing rather than being preoccupied with the neatness of their handwriting. However, some commented on the autocorrect function of computers which would not allow a true picture of their grammatical skills to be shown. This view is shown in the following comment:

"I would like to write more on computers but the problem is that they would tell you when the spelling is wrong, so you couldn't do it." (Year 6, boy)

All pupils expressed a desire to get better at writing and were happy to discuss some strategies that they had found to be useful or others that would allow them to improve with time. Firstly, pupils in all year groups commented on the importance of reading and found that there was a close association between reading and writing. Many pupils put effort in reading to improve their writing skills. The following three pupils' comments demonstrate their understanding of the importance of reading to enrich their vocabulary with new, appropriate and correctly spelled words:

"If we have good abilities in reading, we will have good abilities in writing, because if we don't know a word, what it means, we figure it out, then we could maybe use that in our handwriting, and if it was words that we didn't think of but they're really good, we could maybe use them." (Year 3, girl)

"… half of the words I don't really understand but I try my best to read it. But the more I read, the more I know how to put sentences into my writing." (Year 3, girl)

"Read lots of books to get better at spelling and find out new words." (Year 4, boy)

Those pupils that seemed to enjoy writing more exhibited higher levels of self-regulation and were keen to take their teachers' advice on board in trying to review, edit and correct their work. Some of these pupils, even as young as 8 years old (at the end of Year 3), were willing to take conscious steps towards managing troublesome instances of feeling 'stuck' by persevering and focusing thought on one step at a time. This is expressed clearly and in a very articulate way by the following Year 3 girl:

"I try to work it out by myself before I ask the teacher. …apparently the more you use stuff that you can't, you are not doing, the more you get better at it and the more you get diamond power. Diamond power is where you get stuck on what you write and stuff, so, say you got stuck on what you were gonna say, you would have to think and you would get diamond

power in your head. ...You know how sometimes you get confused.. but then you think of one thing, one thing at a time, when I try to do everything at once, that would be hard." (Year 3, girl)

All pupils, from all age groups and across ability levels were happy to reflect on and share the personal strategies they had been using or aimed to employ in improving their writing. One Year 3 boy commented on the importance of having the right attitude as a crucial starting point to having a positive mind-set in writing: "My attitude… cause I used to be all grumpy, now I am better". Others mentioned key people in school or out of school that offered encouragement, moral and technical support around writing. In school, the teacher's feedback, help and personal target setting were key components of the constant drive to experience improvement in writing. The teacher created the conditions for a constructive and supportive environment where useful resources were in place to assist with writing, e.g. descriptive word cards, age appropriate spelling lists, dictionaries, thesauruses, access to the internet. Outside of school, the contribution of parents in searching for and offering resources for writing, reminding children to practise and do their homework, and offering constant encouragement were mentioned by most children. A Year 3 boy mentioned accessing resources at home with the parents' help in the following quote:

"My mum helps me with things, she has downloaded this powerpoint and you can just go through loads of slides and it changes every week, automatically, and it goes through punctuation etc.." (Year 3, boy)

All children that participated in the focus interviews agreed with one another that practising writing in the classroom and at home was crucial for seeing an improvement and for meeting the individual writing tasks set by the teacher. Comments such as the ones that follow were common in the discussions with the children and illustrate their understanding of the significance of practice:

"I try to practise at home." (Year 4, boy)

"I kept doing it." (Year 5, boy)

"Every time I get better in handwriting and in writing more." (Year 6, boy)

"You could improve a mistake by writing, writing and writing." (Year 3, girl)

A good feature of the teaching and learning of writing in this school which most pupils enjoyed, was the assignment of a *cold* task and a *gold* task. The cold task took place usually at the beginning of the week before any teaching in the genre, and the gold task was assigned at the end of the week after a week's teaching and learning in the genre.

"Yeah, I like writing during the gold task a lot more than the cold task first of all, cause you've got a plan in your gold task and second of all cause you've learnt the things you need to learn and you've just got everything – you know what to do." (Year 6, boy)

"I think like before I wasn't so clear about how you write a letter but now we've done, I can write a letter properly now, I know where the address goes and the date. So I think I've improved on writing letters." (Year 6, girl)

"When we do the cold tasks, I barely know anything about it so I feel I haven't done my best." (Year 5, girl)

A few children, however, mentioned that they liked writing the cold task more because they felt free to write "whatever" they wanted and, as a result, they avoided the pressure of being judged according to specified standards. One Year 6 girl commented regarding this as follows:

"I quite liked the cold task cause it doesn't matter if you got it wrong because you didn't know what you were meant to be doing."

Pupils also enjoyed doing "fun activities", such as drawing or painting to accompany their writing or being provided with real life experiences that can allow the children to mentally translate their visual and sensory experiences into writing. The following comments illustrate these enjoyable and first hand experiences:

"That we sometimes get to do fun activities, that we sometimes get to draw pictures to go with the writing." (Year 4, girl)

"It depends if it's fun, like if we're doing a picture and a caption, I do that really happily." (Year 5, boy)

"…To make it easier, like if teachers told us to write about a forest or a river, then teachers might say 'write about a forest or a river' and people might not have been to a forest or a river before, maybe they can put one on the board or maybe take there." (Year 5, boy)

Others mentioned that writing should be a more sociable activity where pupils can work in groups or pairs to share ideas, peer mark each other's work or work together on projects, such as preparing a poster. The following quotes show that these children can derive pleasure from discussing ideas and supporting one another as part of writing activities:

"The poster activity was fun cause we got to colour in, we got to design the poster, the online safety poster… you got to pick a group, do it with your friends, have a good time. …That's when I learnt how to join up, on that poster." (Year 5, boy)

"Most of the writing we do is independent, it would be nice to help each other. …Obviously, it would be different to your partner's because it's a different work, but you follow the same story and if you get stuck, you can help each other, they know what you are talking about." (Year 6, girl)

Being given the freedom to occasionally choose what to write about seemed to be enhancing levels of enjoyment. A number of children commented on their enjoyment of making up their

own stories where they feel unrestricted by rules or specified content to exercise their imagination and creativity. Fiction was the writing genre that allowed them to do so, such as writing fantasy or adventure stories:

"I like it when we write our own stories, when you can make it all up and have all these amazing adventures." (Year 6, girl)

"I like when I'm writing by myself, I can take characters out of books and then write my own story about these characters." (Year 6, boy)

"I like creating my own stories. …making weird and wacky characters. You can make them as strange as you want to. Once I made an octopus with a cat tail. There is no limit to what you can do." (Year 4, boy)

The following boy commented on the enjoyment he derived from exercising creative thinking in writing as a key component of strategic self-regulation. He enjoys the process of thinking and "finding clues" in the text in order to decide on the most appropriate answer:

"My favourite part is where you get to write like stories and stuff but I still like finding clues in like maybe a comprehension text, and then finding out the things myself…I've got to use the clues of it to get a straight answer." (Year 5, boy)

Others talked about the importance of expressing their thoughts and feelings in writing:

"If anything is in your mind or if you have a certain thing you want to do, you can write it on a piece of paper instead of actually doing it, you can really get into a character." (Year 6, girl)

Discussion

All children demonstrated an ability to be involved in a *metawriting* discussion where they reflected on their writing, their strengths, weaknesses and their plans to further improve their writing skills. A certain level of *awareness* about writing was exhibited by all children. However, the more enthusiastic and more able writers had specific strategies in place to take their writing forward. For these children, the link between *awareness* and *self-regulation* was tighter and more prominent in their comments.

The link between perceived competence and writing motivation has been demonstrated in a variety of studies. Recently, Akyol and Aktaş (2018) conducted a study with 9 year old pupils in Turkish primary schools and found a strong relationship between their motivation for writing, which comprises the value placed on the writing task and their self-efficacy as writers, and their story-writing scores. In other words, the stronger the pupils' beliefs about their writing capacity and the value of the task were, the higher assessment scores they gained. The connection between writing motivation and performance has also been observed with older children at the beginning of secondary school (e.g. Lam and Law, 2007; Troia et al., 2013).

The young writers in this study appreciated that reading supports writing and many purposefully practised reading with the aim to improve their writing. Reading and writing seem to be closely associated with instruction in reading having been found to improve writing skills (Andersen et al., 2018; Corden, 2000; Krashen, 1989; Graham, 2000). Andersen et al. (2018), in particular, argued that an improved decoding ability would enable young writers to overcome barriers to spelling, making the writing process quicker thus allowing cognitive resources to be released and purposefully used for sentence construction and framing of the narrative. Furthermore, critical reading of texts through group work and

interactive discourse can lead to pupils transferring knowledge of literary devices and stylistic features of texts into their own writing (Corden, 2000). Conversely, writing instruction can positively affect the ability to read. In a meta-analysis of true and quasi-experiments, Graham and Herbert (2011) found that teaching children how to write through activities such as extended writing, summary writing, note taking, and answering/generating questions, teaching spelling and sentence construction skills in addition to increasing the time spent on writing, can improve their reading comprehension, reading fluency and word reading.

Children participating in the study commented on the enjoyment they derive from choosing to write about topics of interest, especially when they can make up their own stories. Students often voice a strong desire to have some autonomy and freedom in writing where they can exercise a degree of choice over the content of their writing work as opposed to set writing tasks constantly assigned by the teacher (Grainger, Gooch & Lambirth, 2003). Giving students opportunities to choose what to write about can enhance their engagement (Higgins, 2015) and motivation for writing (Chakraborty & Stone, 2008).

Writing has primarily a communicative purpose and the importance of this should not be underestimated in writing instruction. When children are free from the psychological constraints that the fear of writing can generate, they can then think about the communicative aspects of their composition and avoid getting absorbed by the 'skills discourse' practices that emphasise the technical aspects of writing while undermining creativity (Lambirth, 2016). They can use their imagination to develop ideas and make choices regarding their organisation in a coherent piece of writing that addresses a certain type of audience, serves a particular purpose and has value as a writing form. This process can help young writers develop creativity in writing as a core component of their growth and their self-esteem, rather than as 'a fanciful extra' (Grainger, Goouch & Lambirth, 2005, p.13). Young people, even underachieving boys, affirm a preference for the creative freedom that they can experience in

writing when they are allowed to use their voice and imagination (Myhill, 2001) within a learning environment where their ideas are valued (Edwards & Jones, 2018).

Some pupils expressed a desire to work with peers in writing, to share ideas in preparation for a writing task, develop writing projects together and review each other's work. The evidence suggests that collaborative writing is a powerful tool for creating dialogic spaces (Wegerif, 2011) that allow children to engage in 'metatalk' about writing (Herder et al., 2018). This type of cooperative discussion enhances reflection, extends children's thinking about writing and helps them develop metacognitive understanding of the writing process (Humphris, 2010). Children can be explicitly taught to engage in higher order talk through teacher modelling, coaching and offering gradual scaffolding for student-led discussions within a safe environment that provides ample opportunities for children to engage in meaningful discussions (Peterson, 2019).

Furthermore, some evidence suggests that writing with computers can be beneficial when compared with pen and paper writing (e.g. Graham et al., 2012, 2015). Goldberg, Russell and Cook's (2003) meta-analysis of relevant studies conducted between 1992 and 2002, provided evidence that, when writing on computers, school-aged children exhibit higher levels of motivation and engagement in writing while producing work of greater length and higher quality. The writing process when using computers becomes more collaborative and iterative with students revising their work throughout the writing process, giving and receiving feedback from peers and taking advantage of the teacher's input from the start of the writing process.

If every writing class is made up of 'a community of successful learners' (Zaragoza & Vaugh, 1995) where learners feel safe, accepted and able to meet the writing task requirements, they can experience a heightened sense of self-efficacy. Their belief in their ability to succeed in a writing task within a supportive, open and non-judgmental learning

environment, can create the right conditions for transformation and change (Deithloff, 2002) which can be manifested through an enhanced sense of agency. The core properties of agency are, according to Bandura (1997), an individual's intention, forethought, self-regulation and self-reflection. Developing writing expertise is a conscious process that requires 'mindful attention' (Smit, 2004), concentration, effort and a reflective stance towards the writing task. This dynamic writing process where drafting and revision form an integral part of, can lead to *knowledge transformation*, a deeper level of learning and engagement with writing, as opposed to *knowledge telling* (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). These skills can be empowering for young writers and can lead them to take ownership of the process of writing in a deliberate attempt to achieve their writing goals, especially when they realise that they have the power to control their writing and the meaning that they desire to convey (Thakeray, 2011).

Conclusion

The study's strength lies in documenting young children's discourse about writing in primary school providing a safe space for the exploration of their thoughts and feelings with the use of pupils' views templates. However, it was limited in its scope and does not purport to make broad generalisations across different educational contexts and geographical areas. It was conducted in one small primary school with a sample of 67 children and, even though, the findings were rich and insightful, they were derived from a single educational institution. Hearing what children in primary school have to say about writing can hopefully steer teachers towards adopting more engaging teaching and learning strategies in writing. Other primary school teachers may be able to relate with the findings and adapt them for their own

needs and professional circumstances (Bassey, 2001). In particular, as a close link has been found in this study between strategic thinking and pupils making quality judgments about writing, teachers need to actively seek to help weaker writers develop a more conscious awareness of writing strategies.

Equipping children with a toolbox of resources that can be used strategically according to the writing task at hand, can support young children's perceived ability to cope effectively and meet the demands of the task. The majority of the pupils in the study that were keen to share and expand on their strategic thinking during writing, paid conscious attention to the quality of their work. This link between the use of writing strategies and pupils' evaluative judgments about the quality of the writing provides some tentative support for the importance of developing a bank of writing strategies through explicit instruction.

If pupils have those strategies at hand, they might be better able to recognise good writing quality and strive to incorporate writing features that will enhance the content and quality of their writing. In this case, pupils are likely to develop a higher sense of competence, self-efficacy and motivation to write. A more positive affective response can then spiral into deeper thinking and strategic decision making supporting the children's writing development as they move through primary school and beyond. In light of the study's findings, teachers can think about the importance that needs to be attributed to the communicative functions of writing, the tight link between reading and writing, children's desire to work with peers in collaborative writing projects and use computers where appropriate, as well as their expressed interest in pursuing topics of interest in their writing.

Future research can usefully replicate the study's design with a larger sample of primary schools and in different geographical areas to assess the extent to which these findings can be generalised more broadly and further developed. The findings could help the development of professional packages on enhancing writing competence for primary school teachers. These

can then lead to testable interventions and evaluated for their effectiveness using randomised controlled trials.

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# Appendix

Individual working: Girl, Year 4

Paired working: Girl, Year 3
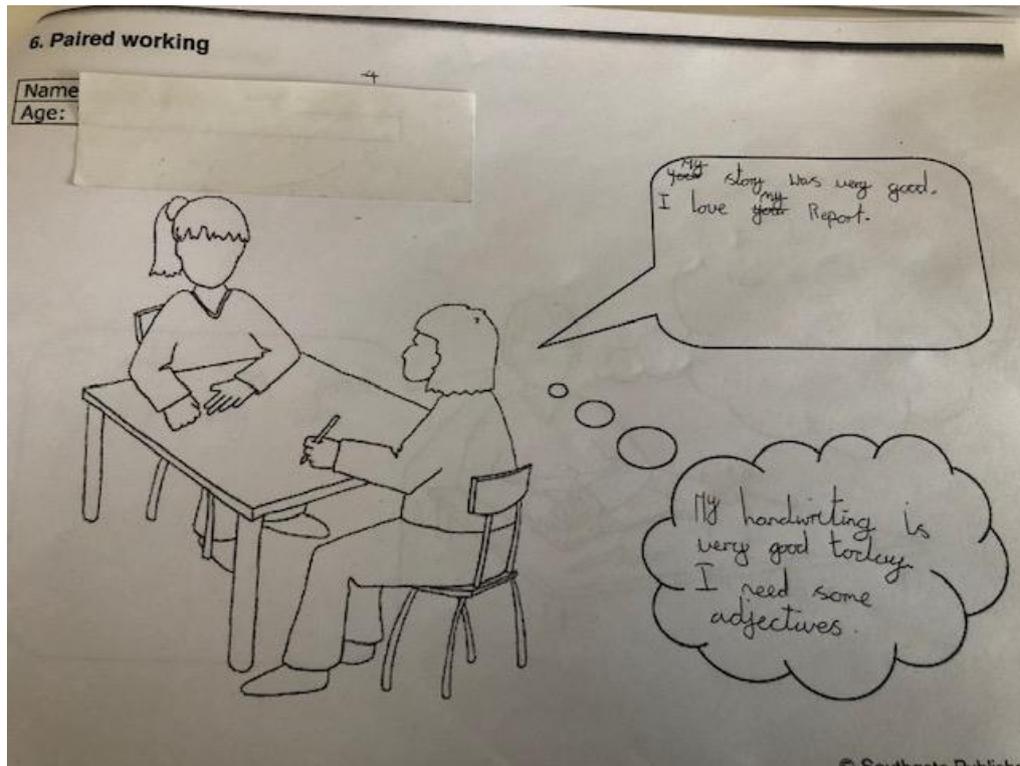
Working in a pair: Boy, Year 5
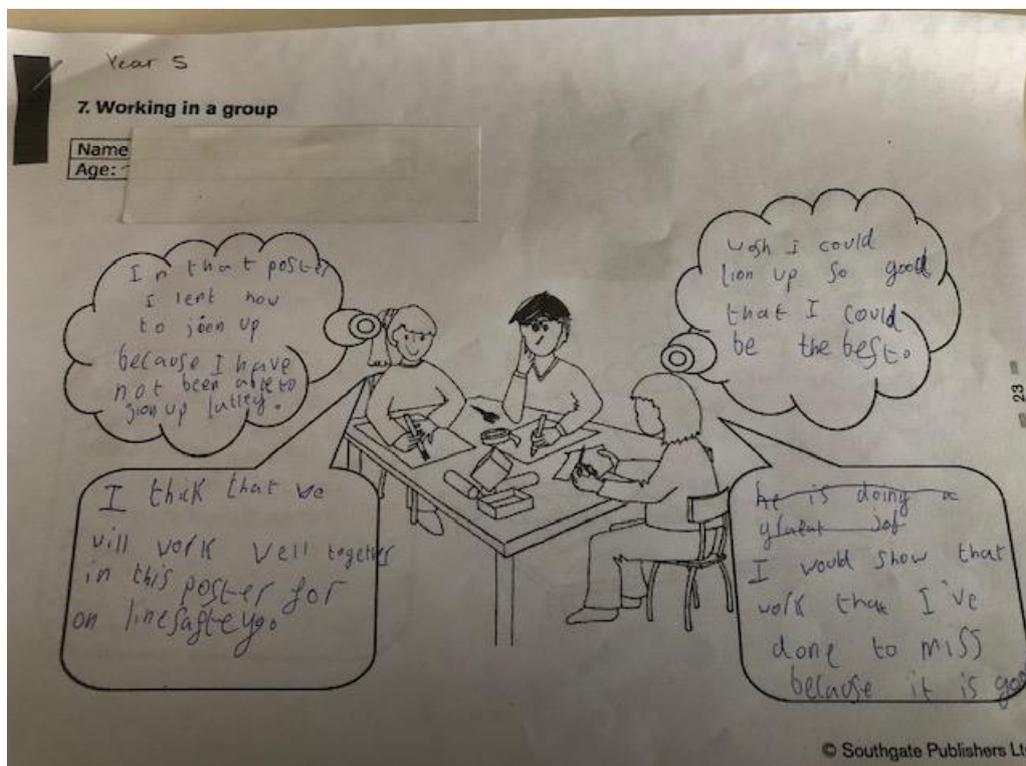
Tables

Table 1: Number of participating children by gender and year group

Study participants	Gender		
Year group	Male	Female	Total
Year 3	7	5	12
Year 4	12	10	22
Year 5	8	9	17
Year 6	7	9	16
Total	34	33	67

Table 2: Illustrative quotes of pupils' reflective and strategic thinking

Reflective thinking	*Handwriting strengths & weaknesses*	"I think my handwriting gets neater every day." (girl, Year 3)"
		"Does it make sense and is it good handwriting?" (boy, Year 3)
		"In that poster I learnt how to join up because I have not been able to join up lately." (boy, Year 5)
	Positive attitude to writing	"I am proud of my work and I want to show it to my mum." (boy, Year 3)
		"I am proud that I did my best and I put in my best ideas." (girl, Year 4)
		"I learnt that writing is hard to start but it's fun when you are doing it and hard to stop." (girl, Year 4)
		"I like that writing makes me concentrate." (girl, Year 4)
		"My story was very good. I love my report." (girl, Year 3)
	Apprehension	"This is a very hard question. I think I will get this one wrong." (boy, Year 3)
		"If it would be too hard." (boy, Year 4)
	Content	"I was writing a story about police. I love the part were the robber gets put in jail." (boy, Year 4)
		"I wrote about Europe on the computer." (boy, Year 4)
	Quality	"I think my piece of writing is interesting with a lot of vocabulary." (girl, Year 5)
		"I was proud because I got some of my targets and I got a green stamp." (girl, Year 5)
	Learning in the genre	"I liked the paragraphs I did in my instructions." (girl, Year 3)
		"I learnt how to do an informal letter and I now know that I can do it." (boy, Year 5)
		"I learnt how to write a biography and I was thinking how to do it." (boy, Year 5)
		"I learnt mainly that different styles of writing have different things that need to go in." (boy, Year 6)
Strategic thinking		"What's my diary entry going to start with and I have also learnt about how to do my diary entry." (girl, Year 3)
		"I need some adjectives." (girl, Year 3)
		"I could maybe extend my vocabulary but keep the lines short in my poem. I learnt that I should put as much description as possible." (girl, Year 4)
		"I learnt not to give up on my work even if it isn't my best." (girl, Year 4)
		"If you use a wider range of conjunctions you can make your sentences bigger." (boy, Year 4)
		"I liked it how I used subordinating clauses and interesting adjectives to make my writing link together. I also liked my way of thinking about this adventurous story." (girl, Year 5)
		"I write carefully and slowly to make sure I am doing everything as well as I can." (boy, Year 6)

	"What should I write about? How should I write it? How long should I write it? How much description should I put in?" (boy, Year 6)

Figures

*Figure 1: Instances of reflective and strategic thinking in the pupil views templates*
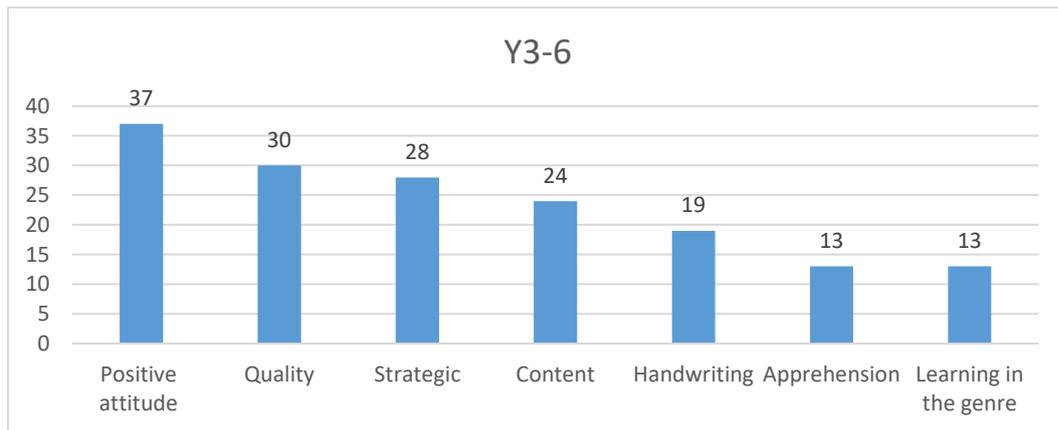
Figure 2: Developmental trends of pupils' views as recorded in the templates

Developmental trends
Y3-6