

5-18-2022

## Writing assessment in early primary classrooms: thoughts from four teachers

Elle Mariano  
*Edith Cowan University*

Glenda Campbell-Evans  
*Edith Cowan University, g.campbell\_evans@ecu.edu.au*

Janet Hunter  
*Edith Cowan University, j.hunter@ecu.edu.au*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026>



Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

10.1007/s44020-022-00007-1

Mariano, E., Campbell-Evans, G., & Hunter, J. (2022). Writing assessment in early primary classrooms: thoughts from four teachers. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 1-17.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s44020-022-00007-1>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/641>



# Writing assessment in early primary classrooms: thoughts from four teachers

Elle Mariano<sup>1</sup> · Glenda Campbell-Evans<sup>1</sup> · Janet Hunter<sup>1</sup>

Received: 22 December 2021 / Accepted: 22 December 2021/Published online: 18 May 2022  
© The Author(s) 2022

## Abstract

It is important that teachers are conscious of and reflect upon their views of writing in order to support students to achieve writing outcomes. This study examined teacher views about which aspects of writing they considered most important in years one and two and explored how these views came to be formed. Four West Australian teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, during which they carried out a think-aloud process, voicing their thoughts as they examined, commented on, and evaluated young students' writing samples. These data provided insights into their reasoning as they assessed children's writing in years one and two. Findings revealed that participants focussed on the more surface-level, or secretarial aspects of writing, such as punctuation and 'correct' structure for the genre. The data indicated that teachers were particularly influenced by their knowledge of the contexts in which they worked, including knowledge they shared with colleagues, together with curriculum and systemic documents such as the Judging Standards materials supplied by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) or the NAPLAN marking guides. These results highlight how systemic assessments can shape teacher perceptions of writing more generally than the purpose for which they were originally intended.

**Keywords** Writing assessment · Think-aloud process · Systemic assessments

---

✉ Janet Hunter  
j.hunter@ecu.edu.au

Elle Mariano  
peacock.elle@gmail.com

Glenda Campbell-Evans  
g.campbell\_evans@ecu.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

## 1 Introduction

The complexity of the writing task means that teachers face many challenges when teaching and assessing writing (Korth et al., 2016). Due to these complexities, teachers may have to prioritize the teaching and assessment of certain aspects over others. The research from which this paper is drawn examined teachers' views about aspects of writing they considered most important in years one and two of formal schooling and explored how these views came to be formed. This is significant as teacher views of what constitutes good writing may impact on both writing pedagogy and assessment, and consequently, student responses to the writing task (Baer, 2008; Lambirth, 2016; Mackenzie & Petriwskyj, 2017). A larger study (Peacock, 2020) identified four major sources of knowledge on which teachers might typically draw to inform their assessment of and pedagogy for student writing. These sources of knowledge work together to shape what teachers notice and value. Teacher knowledge about student writing appeared to be guided by:

- *Contextual information*—shared knowledge with colleagues about students, together with understandings about the school context and school priorities
- *Writing knowledge*—knowledge about writing development, together with knowledge about language and the associated metalanguage
- *Pedagogical knowledge*—the teachers' repertoires of specific teaching and assessment strategies for writing
- *System policies*—knowledge about curriculum documents, assessment regimes and reporting requirements.

The discussion of all these elements is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, we aim here to focus on two which were well-represented in the participants' responses and seemed to influence their thinking and practice. First, the participating teachers appeared to draw heavily on their knowledge of the context and student needs, further informed by their colleagues, who they used to validate their assessment. Second, they were strongly driven by their knowledge of the curriculum and the conventions of system policy and assessment practices.

A sociocultural perspective of writing was adopted in this study. This perspective recognizes the importance of the technical aspects of writing; however, these aspects are seen as embedded in the sociocultural practices of the writer and reader (Behizadeh, 2014; Campbell Wilcox et al., 2016; Cuff, 2019). Moreover, writing for academic purposes is shaped by the ideologies of schooling, including what is valued by society and reflected in the curriculum (Bazerman, 2015). From this perspective, writing is viewed as a contextual process, fixed in the writer's cultural background and the sociocultural context in which it is created.

## 2 The English curriculum in Western Australia

Prior to the introduction of a National Curriculum across Australia in 2014, each state or territory was responsible for developing their own curriculum policy and frameworks. The National Curriculum was introduced to achieve greater equity and consistency in educational outcomes across all jurisdictions. Framed by the National Curriculum, each state has licence to make adjustments to meet local contextual needs.

In the state of Western Australia, teachers are guided in their writing instruction by the Western Australian Curriculum: English (School Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA], n.d.). As there are minimal differences between the Western Australian Curriculum: English and the Australian Curriculum: English (Department of Education, 2014), these documents will henceforth be referred to as the English Curriculum. The structure of the new English Curriculum differed significantly from Western Australia's previous curriculum, the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, Western Australia, 2005), which separated the subject of English into Reading, Viewing, Speaking and Listening, and Writing. Instead, the Australian Curriculum: English focuses on three interrelated strands: Language, Literature and Literacy, and writing features in each of these. The Language strand, in particular, introduced a new focus on Knowledge About Language (KAL) which is especially important for writing instruction. As a result, some academics claimed that significant professional learning would be necessary for the required curriculum implementation, especially in relation to KAL, as many teachers may have had fragmentary explicit knowledge (Jones & Chen, 2012; Macken-Horarik et al., 2018, b).

In Western Australia, this curriculum was introduced over a three-year implementation period beginning in 2012 (ACARA, 2012), and involved schools and networks self-identifying their learning needs and upskilling staff through the support of Teacher Development Schools (Department of Education, 2012) and professional learning in leading the Australian Curriculum implementation (Department of Education, 2012; Department of Education, 2013).

### 3 Literature review

#### 3.1 Framing aspects of writing

Writing is a complex task (Bazerman et al., 2017) which involves the writer in a range of simultaneously executed skills and processes. Some of these skills, typically termed secretarial skills, attend to what could be considered the surface features of writing, such as handwriting and keyboarding, spelling and punctuation, while others, referred to as authorial skills, demand more cognitive attention and higher-order thinking, such as the generation of ideas, word choice or sentence manipulation (e.g. Ballock et al., 2018; Cuff, 2019; Humphry and Heldsinger, 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2015; Quinn & Bingham, 2019; Scull et al., 2020; Wilson & Czik, 2016).

The problem with this apparent opposition is that certain aspects may be considered low level by some researchers and high level by others, while other features may be considered to fit both categories thus leading to confusion regarding how certain elements should be labelled. For instance, grammar is often ascribed to the category of secretarial skills, while sentence construction may be described as an authorial skill. Yet grammar is a crucial knowledge set for the construction of effective sentences. The labels that are assigned may influence the importance that is attached to certain aspects and consequently, the degree to which they feature in curriculum and teacher practice.

In addition to the variation in the ways aspects of writing are categorized and defined, there are also a number of different frameworks that seek to guide the view of what is important in student writing. A six-factor model to inform teachers' assessment of student writing (Mackenzie et al., 2013; Scull et al., 2020) identifies text structure, sentence structure and

vocabulary as authorial skills and spelling, punctuation and handwriting as secretarial skills. A further example is Culham's (2003) Six +1 Traits Framework, which identifies six skills or 'traits' of writing—voice, ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice and conventions, with presentation listed as +1. Spelling, paragraphing, grammar, punctuation and use of capitals are all subsumed into the trait of 'conventions', and presentation, which would include handwriting, is considered a + 1 to avoid an over-emphasis on this aspect. However, these secretarial skills do need particular attention in the early years because once they are established to some level of automaticity, this would leave 'cognitive space' for attention to higher level, authorial skills (Kellogg, 2001, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2015; McCutchen, 2006). This understanding might serve to focus teachers' attention to the secretarial skills, to the detriment of authorial skills. Another way of framing these different aspects of writing is to view them on a continuum from constrained to unconstrained skills (Fitzgerald, 2013). While these terms were originally conceived for reading development (Paris, 2005), they have been used more recently to describe literacy development in general, along with writing more specifically (Fitzgerald, 2013; Sawyer, 2010; Teale et al., 2010). Constrained skills describe those that are learned with rapid acquisition and are fully mastered in relatively short periods of time. These typically involve skills where the number of elements to master is both small and finite, for example learning the letters of the alphabet. Constrained skills are typically mastered in relatively uniform ways and rates, often by students at similar ages (Paris, 2005). This contrasts to unconstrained skills which develop over a lifetime and may never be completely mastered. There is more variation in unconstrained skill development, in both the onset and time taken for acquisition as well the level of expertise attained by an individual (Paris, 2005). According to Fitzgerald (2013), constrained skills in writing would include sound-to-grapheme processing and spelling and less constrained writing features would include the generation of ideas and thoughts, the development of voice, the selection of vocabulary, and the ability to engage and impact readers. These are all skills that are difficult to quantify and therefore do not lend themselves to standardized assessment procedures (Fitzgerald, 2013). In this study, the features of writing discussed will be considered mainly through the lens of a continuum of skills from constrained to unconstrained. The terms and frameworks provide useful guidance as they allow for consideration of how the teachers viewed certain aspects of writing. This continuum view provides greater flexibility in that it allows for consideration of how these skills are perceived and used by the teachers, that is their use in context, rather than a strict dichotomous categorization.

### 3.2 Assessment of writing

A number of studies have found that primary school teachers tend to comment upon low level or surface features of writing, such as spelling and punctuation, more than higher level aspects such as the content and meaning of the writing (Mackenzie, 2014; Matre & Solheim, 2015; Matsumura et al., 2002). In contrast, Humphry and Heldsinger (2019) noticed that the assessors in their study relied more on authorial criteria to help discern differences between similarly levelled texts. Their study, however, only involved five participants, who all had extensive experience as National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) writing assessors. In their discussion of the results, Humphry and Heldsinger noted anecdotal evidence from previous exercises which showed that teachers place more weight on conventions than did experienced assessors. These studies highlight the potential for primary school teachers to over-attend to the lower level, constrained aspects of writing.

Due to the limitations imposed by common standardized writing assessments, such as the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) writing task, questions have been raised about the construct validity of such assessments as they do not reflect the whole construct of writing (Behizadeh, 2014; Deane, 2013). Additional issues regarding consequential validity are raised due to the negative impact direct writing assessments can have on the teaching of writing, by narrowing the focus of what is taught, and on individual students who are labelled as poor writers based on a restricted representation of writing, thereby impacting their self-efficacy and engagement in writing (Behizadeh, 2014; National Council of Teachers of English, 2014).

While there are few studies directly linking the assessment of writing to its impact on students in the junior primary years (see, for example Gadd & Parr, 2017; Hawe & Parr, 2014), some influence can be inferred. Studies involving year one and two students have shown that they often focus on constrained, secretarial aspects when discussing good writing (Finlayson & McCrudden, 2019; Korat & Schiff, 2005; Kos & Maslowski, 2001; Wray, 1993). It has been proposed that student views and preferences in writing are a reflection of the teacher's views and practices which in turn can be influenced by school or systemic policies (Baer, 2008; Lambirth, 2016). This idea is reinforced by Mackenzie and Petriwskyj (2017) who believe that children's views of writing are shaped by observing what is valued and prioritized by more knowledgeable others, such as their teacher. This has the potential unintended consequence of creating a divide in students' minds between 'school writing' and other forms of writing they encounter in their everyday life (Healey, 2019; Healey & Merga, 2017; Shepherd, 2018; Werderich & Armstrong, 2013).

### 3.3 Writing assessment tools in Western Australia

In Western Australia, the only mandated writing assessment practice in years one and two is reporting to parents at the end of each semester. This includes providing a judgement on the student's progress against the achievement standard using a five-point scale (A to E), along with a written comment. The desire for system validity, that is for assessments to be considered valid and comparable across a range of contexts (Cooksey et al., 2007), has led to Western Australia's School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) creating materials to assist teachers in their grading judgements. This includes rubrics, known as Assessment Pointers (SCSA, 2017a, b), and annotated work samples.

The *Writing and Creating* portion of the Assessment Pointers rubric for year one includes the following criteria: text structure, language features (focused on describing ideas, events and characters using nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives), spelling and punctuation (SCSA, 2017a). The year two rubric only includes text structure, spelling and punctuation (SCSA, 2017b). The Assessment Pointers have been updated numerous times since the initial versions were published. In addition to the Assessment Pointer rubrics, SCSA also provides a few annotated work samples of student writing to exemplify certain grades. Use of these documents is not mandated however, and teachers have the flexibility to use a range of tools and their own professional knowledge to make judgements.

While not administered in years one and two, it is theorized that NAPLAN influences teaching in the earlier years (Mackenzie, 2014). The writing component requires students in years three, five, seven and nine to produce either a narrative or exposition in a single timed writing session (ACARA, n.d.). It has been argued that only very narrow and specific versions of the narrative and exposition genres are rewarded in scoring using the marking guides

(Caldwell & White, 2017; Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015). It could be argued that the NAPLAN writing task is not authentic because the genre is pre-determined, the audience is not specified, and students are marked on what is essentially a first draft. When analysing the NAPLAN marking guides, Perelman (2018) concluded that the mechanical skills of writing were emphasized at the expense of higher order writing skills, with the assessment not aligning with authentic constructs of writing and encouraging poor pedagogical practices that promote formulaic responses. Similar sentiments were echoed by various stakeholders in the recent review of the NAPLAN assessments (McGaw et al., 2020).

The review shows that teachers have access to a range of frameworks and tools to assist with assessment of writing. Although these all pay attention to the same skills, different terms and emphases are apparent. However, the language and emphasis of NAPLAN, as the national testing regime, feature prominently in the experience of teachers across Australia.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Data collection

Four Western Australian government sector year one or year two teachers participated in the study. Participation was voluntary and participants were selected based upon convenience sampling. Due to the small sample size, the demographic information has been summarized to ensure anonymity along with the use of pseudonyms. All participants were teaching in a mainstream context in midsized schools, ranging from slightly below to slightly above average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Teaching experience ranged from six years to thirty-plus years, with two teachers having non-metropolitan experience and one teacher previously working overseas and in the private sector. Most of the teachers' experience was in pre-primary to year three. Two teachers had a combined Early Childhood and Primary qualification (Kindergarten to year seven) and two had a Primary qualification (year one to year seven).

Data were collected through two main sources: a think-aloud protocol and interviews. The think-aloud method involves individuals articulating their thinking as they complete a realistic everyday task (Eccles & Aarsal, 2017; Kumar, 2017). To extend upon the features revealed in the think-aloud process, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. These interviews aimed to explore individuals' subjective views of good writing and allowed participants to articulate their perceptions using their own terminology. Interviews are a useful tool when exploring peoples' perceptions and attitudes, as they afford insight into individual understandings, as expressed in participants' own words (Taylor et al., 2016). The process of data collection occurred over two sessions. In the first session, participants completed a think-aloud on a common writing sample provided by the lead researcher. This sample was a one-page narrative written by a student in year one. In the second session, each participant brought a de-identified copy of a student work sample, which they had chosen as particularly 'good'. Therese and Nancy brought persuasive samples, Jodie a recount, and Katie brought two narratives. Each participant completed a think-aloud using their sample before the semi-structured interview was conducted.

## 4.2 Data analysis

Each interview was initially analyzed individually. Each participant transcript was read multiple times, first using mainly descriptive labelling, resulting in a large number of initial codes. From these codes, three broad categories emerged that were consistent across all four participants: features of writing, knowledge sources and writing pedagogy. A number of codes remained unique to each participant and were treated as their own separate category. After categorizing codes, thematic analysis occurred with a number of themes being identified. The data were solo-coded by the lead author; however, frequent discussions were held with co-authors throughout the process, as recommended by Saldaña (2016), to refine codes and prompt new perspectives.

## 5 Findings

The following section highlights some similarities and points of difference between the four teachers' writing assessment views and practices. From the four knowledge sources identified in the larger study, data relevant to Context Information and System Policy are presented and compared here.

### 5.1 Features of writing discussed

Examining the frequency with which each feature of writing was mentioned by the participants reveals which features are at the forefront of their attention. Table 1 compares the number of times each feature was mentioned by the different participants, with the features arranged in order of frequency. Efforts have been made to include the terminology participants used, to reflect their writing metalanguage; however, in some cases, a slightly different term has been used so that comparisons between the features referred to by participants can be made.

As displayed in Table 1, punctuation was the most referenced feature of writing for Therese, Jodie and Nancy, and the second most referenced feature for Katie. Katie's most referenced aspect of writing was the use of 'correct' text structure and genre features, which was the second most referenced feature for the remaining three teachers. Together, this demonstrates a consistency between the four participants, in that punctuation and aspects of genre were the most referenced features of writing across the think-alouds and interviews.

### 5.2 The features of writing believed to be most important

When discussing the features of writing the participants felt were most important, all four mentioned punctuation, as reflected in Jodie's and Katie's comments:

... I weigh more on the punctuation and spelling, but punctuation is the first thing I look for. (Jodie, i2, p. 5).

So, I think punctuation is always a big one. If they are not using full stops and capital letters correctly, almost consistently by the end of [year level], I do not necessarily think I've done my job properly. (Katie, i2, p. 9).

Spelling was mentioned by two participants (Jodie and Nancy): 'I would look for the spelling as well, to see if they are using the spelling rules that we have learnt and what we are focusing on' (Jodie, i1, p. 2). Therese and Nancy also identified sentence structure as important and Nancy and Jodie both

**Table 1** Frequency of different features of writing mentioned by participants

Writing aspect	Therese	Jodie	Katie	Nancy
Punctuation	18	25	32	31
Text structure & genre features	12	22	42	10
Parts of speech	0	14	14	1
Spelling	4	9	5	7
Detail/elaboration	2	9	7	6
Vocabulary	6	0	8	6
Sentence structure	4	10	5	0
Handwriting	4	0	4	2
Quantity	3	1	1	5
Makes sense	3	1	2	1
Tense	1	0	3	1
Editing	1	0	1	2
Paragraphing	2	0	2	0
Ideas/content	2	0	0	1
Fluent	2	0	0	0
Getting ideas down	0	0	0	2
Mechanics	2	0	0	0
Reader engagement	0	0	2	0
Revising	0	2	0	0
Sequential	0	2	0	0
Voice	1	0	1	0
Creativity	1	0	0	0
Expression	1	0	0	0
Grammar	0	0	0	1
Point of view	0	0	1	0
Sophistication of ending	0	0	1	0
Typing	0	0	0	1

talked about ‘correct’ use of genre structure and features. Therese was the only participant to believe that handwriting was one of the most important aspects of students’ writing, which she felt was essential in the early years for developing automaticity. Jodie was the only participant to emphasize the importance of cohesion in student writing, although she did this by stating the text needed to be in ‘the logical sequence, obviously that it makes sense but it’s in the right order’ (Jodie, i2, p.4).

While Therese, Jodie and Katie all gave succinct answers about the features of writing they considered the most important, Nancy displayed some uncertainty. There were a few instances when she would discuss the importance of a certain aspect before changing her perspective later in the interview. One such example was when she discussed text structure. Early in the interview when discussing good writing, Nancy stated, ‘Well I think the structure is the big thing...’ (i2 p. 4). However, when directly asked if some aspects are more important than others, she took a long pause before responding:

...now it says text structure so I was toying with that because I think it is important but when you asked me to pick what nearly wasn’t important, I thought well would it matter if the structure wasn’t right... but it needs to be right. (i2, p. 6).

It appeared that the participating teachers placed a lot of importance on the constrained, or secretarial skills associated with writing in their year one and two classes with the aim of developing automaticity in the foundational skills at an early age. Therese summed up this idea:

The mechanics of the writing are really important from the junior end of things because if they can get that right then they can improve their writing later on... it makes life

easier for them going forward because it becomes automatic and they can then concentrate further on the content. (i2, p. 4).

### 5.3 Influences on the teachers' views of good writing

When directly asked what had influenced or shaped their views regarding good writing and the most important aspects of student writing in years one and two, all four participants mentioned either moderation or discussion with colleagues. For Nancy, this was the main influencing factor and the only one she directly acknowledged:

And then after just say a test we would get together, well, we have corrected ours separately and then I would say 'this is a B student' and if she did not agree that would be fine but you know that would be really good because we would talk to each other about 'well, I wouldn't have given it a B because...' and then you are just learning that way and you may end up agreeing with the person going, 'you know what, you're right'. (i2, p.6).

The other participants listed numerous influences, with all three stating that their experience teaching those year levels had refined their views. The SCSSA Judging Standards materials, including the annotated work samples, were acknowledged by Katie and Therese as shaping their views regarding student writing, while the NAPLAN writing assessment had influenced Therese and Jodie. Therese was the only participant to discuss the impact of the English Curriculum in prompting a change in her expectations of student writing.

Participants indicated that assessment tools such as the annotated work samples were highly useful but had some limitations, as explained here by Jodie:

Often it was just a bit perplexing because if you have got two work samples online that are a C, they have got different things that are good, different things that are bad. So it definitely helped but then at the same time we might have a great piece of work but it's not as long as that one and the ACARA work samples would highlight the things that are good, so you could go oh well this has got this, this, this but it does not have this. So it wasn't like very clear but clear enough to help us. There were still questions after. (i2, p. 8).

This lack of clarity prompted participating teachers to then turn to their colleagues to validate or support their thinking, as illustrated by Katie:

If there are any who I think are teetering between C/D, C/B, B/A that's when I will go and speak to the other year level teachers and say, 'Look, I've got this, here's a couple of different work samples, you know, what would you say?' (i2, p. 9).

### 5.4 The influence of the NAPLAN writing assessment

While NAPLAN testing does not occur until year three, the participants still referenced this assessment. Jodie, who had experience as a NAPLAN marker, directly stated that this experience had influenced her views on what was important in writing. She described using the progressions in the marking guide to inform her classroom practice and extend students.

Therese also reported that the NAPLAN marking guide had informed her views of good writing. Her school had completed a writing task in years one to six that was marked against the marking guide. Therese believed this was good practice, as it provided data for all year levels (instead of just years three and five) and helped prepare students for NAPLAN: 'I think it's a way of making sure that the students are ready for NAPLAN and that they are able to put their best work into NAPLAN and it gives us a focus...' (i3 p. 5). Katie described a practice at her school where teachers marked students' writing samples and compared the accuracy of marking against the assigned NAPLAN score:

So we have done it individually, and this is with our own samples and then we have shared samples and cross judged and then just recently we looked at the year three's NAPLAN writing using the persuasive ruler, graded them on *Brightpath* and then you can convert it to a NAPLAN score and then we looked at their actual NAPLAN scores. (i1 p. 7).

In contrast to the other participants, Nancy only mentioned NAPLAN once or twice in passing. She did not dwell on it or discuss it in a way that revealed she placed great value or importance on it, or that it was heavily influencing her classroom practice.

While there were some minor differences between the teachers, for the most part they had similar views regarding which aspects are most important in student writing. When describing both good writing and student writing in general, the participants appeared to focus most on the more constrained aspects of writing. This included 'correct' use of simple punctuation and the inclusion of appropriate genre features in the text. The teachers' discussions of student writing appeared to focus on specific aspects and features in a fragmentary manner, with limited consideration of how the text functioned as a whole. As a result, the teachers seemed less concerned with judging a text holistically to consider whether it achieved its particular purpose to entertain, persuade or inform. Aspects of writing that would be considered more unconstrained, such as creativity and the ability to engage the reader, were only discussed in a limited capacity by two participants. It appeared that the participants' understanding of good writing was mainly shaped by systemic policy and documents. This included the Judging Standards materials published on SCSA's extranet to assist in making judgements for reporting purposes and NAPLAN marking guides. The views of colleagues did appear to be another way in which these participants' understanding of writing was developed; however, this seemed to be mainly through the avenue of grading verification. As their colleagues were also using the above-mentioned tools, it appeared these discussions with colleagues just reinforced the aspects of writing prioritized in the systemic documents.

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Constrained and unconstrained writing skills

As constrained and unconstrained skills are terms that predominantly have been used in relation to reading, there is less literature on their application to the features of writing. At the most constrained end of the continuum would be spelling and handwriting, with punctuation and grammar being slightly less constrained and composition of ideas the least constrained (Fitzgerald, 2013; Sawyer, 2010; Snow & Matthews, 2016). Attention to constrained skills is valuable in the junior primary years, as once these are developed to

automaticity, this allows ‘cognitive attention’ to be directed towards higher level processing such as generation of ideas and composition.

Analysis of the findings revealed that the participants appear to mainly focus their attention on the more constrained aspects of writing. When directly asked which aspects were most important in students’ writing in years one and two, all four participants emphasized punctuation. In addition, spelling, sentence structure and ‘correct’ use of genre features were each discussed by two participants, while handwriting and cohesion were discussed by two individual teachers. This is evidenced by the frequency of text features mentioned throughout the interviews with punctuation, text structure and genre features being the most referenced, closely followed by and vocabulary, spelling, elaboration and sentence structure.

Some of these features of writing, such as punctuation, sentence structure and genre features, can be viewed as writing knowledge that could be considered as both constrained and less constrained, but we argue that the ways the teachers referred to them here reflected a more constrained view. For example, participants seemed to focus on punctuation in reference to correct usage and as rules to be mastered. Proficiency in writing different genres develops over a long period of time (Tolchinsky, 2016) and, therefore, in some cases control of the linguistic features of these may be considered less constrained knowledge. The way in which the participants referenced genre, however, was in a constrained way focused mainly on following or adding in particular features or structures, without consideration of how these features combine to allow the text to function as a whole to meet its communicative purpose.

The finding that the participants appeared to place greater value on the more constrained aspects of writing supports previous research (Mackenzie, 2014; Matre & Solheim, 2015; Matsumura et al., 2002) that has found that primary school teachers comment more frequently upon the surface features of writing than on the content, meaning and communication of ideas. There may be a number of reasons why teachers may focus greater attention on the constrained features of writing (Mackenzie, 2014). The first possible explanation is that this focus on constrained skills is an accurate reflection of teacher viewpoints. That is, based on their knowledge and understanding of writing and its development, the participants feel that in years one and two, the development of automaticity through a focus on constrained aspects of writing is more important than less constrained features such as the content of the text or communication of ideas. This finding supports the inference that participating teachers understood the importance of developing constrained skills to automaticity, but perhaps as a consequence, neglected to also focus on the less constrained features of writing. Writing is a communicative tool, yet none of the teachers discussed whether the student’s text was effective in achieving its communicative purpose. When classroom practice and assessment focus too heavily on the surface features of writing, it can unintentionally imply to students that this is what is important and valued in writing and lead to overemphasis on these aspects (Baer, 2008; Lambirth, 2016; Mackenzie, 2014).

Another explanation for the emphasis on constrained features is that due to the complexities of writing, teachers focus on the aspects they are most comfortable and confident in identifying (Mackenzie, 2014; Matre & Solheim, 2015, 2016), and this may reveal that they lack in-depth writing knowledge that would assist in identifying and discussing the more complex aspects of writing (Matre & Solheim, 2015). This aligns to the body of literature that highlights Australian teachers’ weak explicit understanding of language (Love et al., 2014; Jones & Chen, 2012; Macken-Horarik et al., 2018, b). The initiatives put in place by SCSA to facilitate teachers’ management of the change in curriculum perspective seems to have heavily influenced teachers’ knowledge about writing and writing instruction. Finally, the focus on

constrained aspects of writing may reflect an accountability agenda, where teachers focus on the aspects of writing measured in national testing, which are often the more measurable and objective aspects (Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015; Mackenzie, 2014).

## 6.2 Systemic and contextual influences on teachers' writing assessment practices

This discussion will show how teacher participants drew on the knowledge about writing that they shared with their colleagues, and how this was largely influenced by systemic documents, practices and requirements.

The participants mainly used the SCSA Judging Standards materials (<https://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/home/assessment/judgingstandards>) and the advice and professional knowledge of their colleagues when judging student writing. In addition, the NAPLAN writing assessment appeared to be influencing the teachers' practice in subtle ways. The SCSA Judging Standards materials, including the Assessment Pointer rubrics and the annotated work samples, appeared to be shaping participants' views of good writing, along with guiding their assessments. Two participants, Therese and Katie, were consciously aware that the SCSA documents had influenced their ideas of good writing, while all four participants referenced them numerous times throughout their interviews. It is important to note, with regard to purposeful writing, that neither the year one nor the year two rubric encourages the teacher to determine if the writing achieved its purpose. The main differences between the rubric levels are the degree of detail, moving from simple texts to detailed texts, and the ability to write for different purposes and audiences. Other than mentioning that students will write for different purposes and audiences, the rubric does not provide clarity about how to determine how successful the writing is in achieving its purpose. These features involve some level of subjectivity and it is therefore difficult to assign an objective measure. This suggests that if teachers were more explicitly secure in their knowledge about writing, they may feel more confident to make decisions that involved a degree of subjectivity.

Teachers' reference to curriculum and systemic assessment documents suggests the importance the participants' schools place on NAPLAN scoring and could perhaps indicate an ideal from the school leaders' perspectives where teacher judgements would align to NAPLAN writing standards. This links to the idea that teacher judgements are becoming discounted with increased emphasis on NAPLAN data (Klenowski, 2013).

While it is positive that teachers are using documents provided by the system, thereby seeming to improve consistency and comparability across school contexts, some issues are also raised. The Assessment Pointers rubrics only measure a narrow range of writing features, which is acknowledged on each rubric with the statement that the pointers 'exemplify what students may demonstrate rather than a checklist of everything they should do' (SCSA, 2017a, p. 1; SCSA, 2017b, p. 1); however, other than Jodie echoing that the rubrics are not a checklist, the teachers did not seem to recognize that they could look beyond the few features of writing identified in the rubric, especially when making judgements. This is concerning as important aspects of writing such as the effectiveness of the text in achieving its purpose, the quality of the ideas and the creativity of the student are minimized, with the rubric instead breaking writing into a series of individual, measurable skills to be mastered (Lambirth, 2016; Perelman, 2018). The data from this study appear to support the assertion that standardized, system documents are impacting on classroom practice, with teachers focusing on those easiest to measure aspects of writing which are reflected in the SCSA rubrics, as these are the areas they are held accountable for in justification of grades.

While rubrics play an important role in helping make criteria explicit, especially when they are shared with students, Matre and Solheim (2015, 2016) have highlighted the importance of the flexible use of rubrics, with teachers combining their professional knowledge and judgement to consider how particular features are used to achieve a purpose and how the text functions as a whole. These authors caution that if teachers use a rubric only in a checklist-like manner, they risk losing the importance of valuing writing as a meaning-making tool. Likewise, Humphry and Heldsinger (2019) advocate for teacher discretion when using criteria, and warn that construct irrelevance, a validity concern, can be introduced when forcing assessors to apply all criteria, to all texts, in the same manner. Our study highlights that teachers are potentially using the system documents in a rigid manner and could benefit from further professional learning in writing and writing assessment practices.

While this study focused on the school years prior to NAPLAN testing, it does appear from these participants' interviews that this specific writing assessment was impacting on writing pedagogy and assessment in the classrooms of these year one and two teachers. This aligns to the anecdotal evidence of Mackenzie (2014), who found that the pressures of NAPLAN can begin impacting teachers from the early years. This early focus on NAPLAN is significant in light of Perelman's (2018) report on the NAPLAN writing test in which he highlights the significant weighting placed on the mechanics of writing (41.6% of marks) over the higher order communication of ideas. Additionally, Healey and Merga (2017) discuss the impact writing assessments removed from authentic communicative purposes can have on students, resulting in a distorted view that writing is based on rules that need to be followed. The data from this study reflect NAPLAN's overemphasis on the mechanics of writing. This may be having an impact on classroom practice, as many have theorized that classroom practice will begin to prioritize the aspects that are assessed (Matre & Solheim, 2015; National Council of Teachers of English, 2014; Perelman, 2018). This also has the effect of devaluing the aspects of writing which are not reflected in the assessment (Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015).

## 7 Conclusions

While no teacher explicitly mentioned accountability pressures in their interviews, a common theme relating to accountability emerges through their emphasis on the SCSA rubrics and the influence of the NAPLAN writing assessment in the junior years. Through the assessment practices of reporting to parents and the availability of NAPLAN data to the public through the *MySchool* government web site, teachers' work becomes more visible. Parents and the media are able to judge and compare school results, despite validity concerns about using the NAPLAN data for such purposes (Thompson et al., 2018). The comparison of schools places increasing pressure on teachers to prepare students so that their school can be reflected in a positive way, an issue highlighted in the recent NAPLAN review (McGaw et al., 2020). While there is a range of tools and resources available to teachers to support their assessment of student writing, it seems that they may not always be aware of these resources and are heavily influenced by NAPLAN, possibly because that is what they are most familiar with and what is seen to count. The interviews from this study highlighted that pressure to conform to NAPLAN expectations occurs for teachers even in year one and year two. As student performance on these assessments is what teachers and schools are held accountable for and scrutinized against, it appears that classroom assessment practices have begun to prioritize or mirror the aspects that are valued in these assessment tools, thereby framing what teachers look

for in all writing tasks. This is particularly concerning as the NAPLAN writing assessment does not reflect the version of literacy espoused in English Curriculum (Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015). While this study did not look at teachers' classroom practice, further investigation is warranted to explore whether what is emphasized in the NAPLAN writing assessment is shaping the focus of writing instruction in primary classrooms.

The findings of this research highlight the need for education systems to provide further guidance to teachers on how to assess student writing. There needs to be a focus on the need for specific criteria for assessment purposes to be balanced with flexibility and assessor discretion, based on teacher knowledge about writing, when determining how to best assess a particular sample. Drawing on teachers' propensity to consult with colleagues, there seems to be a missed opportunity to formalize communities of practice for teacher learning. The teachers' focus on constrained aspects of writing highlights that they may also benefit from professional learning regarding the importance of unconstrained and harder to measure aspects of writing. Additionally, due to the influence the NAPLAN writing assessment appears to be having in years one and two, this adds further support for the need to revise the writing assessment, drawing on Perelman's (2018) report and the recent NAPLAN review (McGaw et al., 2020). This assessment, along with its guiding documents, seems to be having an impact beyond the scope intended and it is therefore more important than ever that the assessment itself reflects the principles of the English Curriculum.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2012). *Australian Curriculum implementation survey (February 2012)*. <https://www.acara.edu.au/>
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and reporting authority. (n.d.). Writing. NAP National Assessment Program. <https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/writing>
- Baer, A. L. (2008). Creating a shared definition of good and bad writing through revision strategies. *Middle School Journal*, 39(4), 46–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2008.11461644>
- Ballock, E., McQuitty, V., & McNary, S. (2018). An exploration of professional knowledge needed for reading and responding to student writing. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(1), 56–68.
- Bazerman, C. (2015). What do sociocultural studies of writing tell us about learning to write? In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (2nd ed., pp. 11–40). Guilford Press.
- Bazerman, C., Applebee, A. N., Berninger, V. W., Brandt, D., Graham, S., Matsuda, P. K., Murphy, S., Wells Rowe, D., & Schleppegrell, M. (2017). Taking the long view on writing development. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(3), 351–360.

- Behizadeh, N. (2014). Mitigating the dangers of a single story: Creating large-scale writing assessments aligned with sociocultural theory. *Educational Researcher*, 43(3), 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14529604>
- Caldwell, D., & White, P. R. R. (2017). That's not a narrative; this is a narrative: NAPLAN and pedagogies of storytelling. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(1), 16–27.
- Campbell Wilcox, K., Jeffery, J. V., & Gardner-Bixler, A. (2016). Writing to the common core: Teachers' responses to changes in standards and assessments for writing in elementary schools. *Reading and Writing*, 29(5), 903–928. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-015-9588-6>
- Cooksey, R. W., Freebody, P., & Wyatt-Smith, C. (2007). Assessment as judgment-in-context: Analysing how teachers evaluate students' writing. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13(5), 401–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803610701728311>
- Cuff, B. M. P. (2019). A review of approaches to assessing writing at the end of primary education: Drawing upon historical and international practices. Ofqual Strategy Research and Risk directorate.
- Culham, R. (2003). 6+1 traits of writing: The complete guide. Scholastic Professional Books.
- Curriculum Council, Western Australia. (2005). Curriculum framework curriculum guide - English. Curriculum Council.
- Deane, P. (2013). On the relation between automated essay scoring and modern views of the writing construct. *Assessing Writing*, 18, 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2012.10.002>
- Department of Education. (2012). Department of Education annual report 2011-12. <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/annual-reports>.
- Department of Education. (2013). Department of Education annual report 2012-13. <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/annual-reports>.
- Department of Education. (2014). Review of the Australian Curriculum: Final report. <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/review-australian-curriculum-final-report>.
- Eccles, D. W., & Arsal, G. (2017). The think aloud method: What is it and how do I use it? *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 9(4), 514–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2017.1331501>
- Fang, Z. (1996). What counts as good writing? A case study of relationships between teacher beliefs and pupil conceptions. *Reading Horizons*, 36(3), 249–258.
- Finlayson, K., & McCrudden, M. T. (2019). Teacher-implemented self-regulated strategy development for story writing with 6-year-olds in a whole-class setting in New Zealand. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 33(2), 307–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1568328>
- Fitzgerald, J. (2013). Constructing instruction for struggling writers: What and how. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 63(1), 80–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11881-011-0063-z>
- Frawley, E., & McLean Davies, L. (2015). Assessing the field: Students and teachers of writing in high-stakes literacy testing in Australia. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 14(2), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-01-2015-0001>
- Gadd, M., & Parr, J. (2017). Practices of effective writing teachers. *Reading and Writing*, 30(7), 1551–1574. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-017-9737-1>
- Hawe, E., & Parr, J. (2014). Assessment for learning in the writing classroom: An incomplete realisation. *The Curriculum Journal*, 25(2), 210–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2013.862172>
- Healey, B. (2019). How children experience creative writing in the classroom. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 42(3), 184–194.
- Healey, B., & Merga, M. (2017). A phenomenological perspective of children's writing. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(3), 199–209.
- Humphry, S., & Heldsinger, S. (2019). Raters' perceptions of assessment criteria relevance. *Assessing Writing*, 41, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2019.04.002>
- Jones, P., & Chen, H. (2012). Teachers' knowledge about language: Issues of pedagogy and expertise. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 35(2), 147–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.764759>
- Kellogg, R. T. (2001). Competition for working memory among writing processes. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 114(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1423513>
- Kellogg, R. T. (2008). Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Journal of writing research*, 1(1), 1–26.
- Korat, O., & Schiff, R. (2005). Do children who read more books know “what is good writing” better than children who read less? A comparison between grade levels and SES groups. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 37(3), 289–324.
- Korth, B. B., Wimmer, J. J., Wilcox, B., Morrison, T. G., Haward, S., Peterson, N., Simmerman, S., & Pierce, L. (2016). Practices and challenges of writing instruction in K-2 classrooms: A case study of five primary grade teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45(2), 237–249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0774-1>
- Kos, R., & Maslowski, C. (2001). Second graders' perceptions of what is important in writing. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(5), 567–584.

- Kumar, V. (2017). The think aloud method: Some concerns addressed. *Journal of Modern Languages*, 15(1), 13–25.
- Lambirth, A. (2016). Exploring children’s discourses of writing. *English in Education*, 50(3), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eie.12111>
- Love, K., Sandiford, C., Macken-Horarik, M., & Unsworth, L. (2014). From ‘bored witless’ to ‘rhetorical nous’: Teacher orientation to knowledge about language and strengthening student persuasive writing. *English in Australia*, 49(3), 43–56.
- Macken-Horarik, M., Love, K., & Horarik, S. (2018). Rethinking grammar in language arts: Insights from an Australian survey of teachers’ subject knowledge. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 52(3), 288–316.
- Macken-Horarik, M., Love, K., Sandiford, C., & Unsworth, L. (2018). *Functional grammatics: Reconceptualizing knowledge about language and image for school English*. Routledge.
- Mackenzie, N. M. (2014). Teaching early writers: Teachers’ responses to a young child’s writing sample. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37(3), 182–191.
- Mackenzie, N. M., & Petriwskyj, A. (2017). Understanding and supporting young writers: Opening the school gate. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(2), 78–87. <https://doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.42.2.10>
- Mackenzie, N. M., Scull, J., & Bowles, T. (2015). Writing over time: An analysis of texts created by year one students. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 42(5), 568–593. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-015-0189-9>
- Mackenzie, N. M., Scull, J., & Munsie, L. (2013). Analysing writing: The development of a tool for use in the early years of schooling. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23(3), 375–391.
- Matre, S., & Solheim, R. (2015). Writing education and assessment in Norway: Towards shared understanding, shared language and shared responsibility. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 15, 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2015.15.01.05>
- Matre, S., & Solheim, R. (2016). Opening dialogic spaces: Teachers’ metatalk on writing assessment. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 80, 188–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.07.001>
- Matsumura, L. C., Patteny-Chavez, G., Valdés, R., & Garnier, H. (2002). Teacher feedback, writing assignment quality, and third-grade students’ revision in lower- and higher-achieving urban schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103(1), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499713>
- McCutchen, D. (2006). Cognitive factors in the development of children’s writing. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (1st ed.). Guilford Press.
- McGaw, B., Loudon, W., & Wyatt-Smith, C. (2020). *NAPLAN review final report*. State of New South Wales (Department of Education), State of Queensland (Department of Education), State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training), and Australian Capital Territory. <https://naplanreview.com.au/>
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2014). How standardized tests shape - and limit - Student learning. <http://www2.ncte.org/>.
- Paris, S. G. (2005). Reinterpreting the development of reading skills. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40(2), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.40.2.3>
- Peacock, E. (2020). *What constitutes “good” writing in junior primary? Four Western Australian teachers discuss their views* (dissertation). Edith Cowan University, Edith Cowan University, Research Online, Perth, Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia.
- Perelman, L. (2018). Towards a new NAPLAN: Testing to the teaching. NSW Teachers Federation.
- Quinn, M. F., & Bingham, G. E. (2019). The nature and measurement of children’s early composing. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 54(2), 213–235. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rq.232>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Sawyer, W. (2010). Writing (in) the nation. *English in Australia*, 45(2), 7–20.
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority. (2017a). Judging standards in year 1: English. <https://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/extranet/login>.
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority. (2017b). Judging standards in year 2: English. <https://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/extranet/login>.
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority. (n.d.). Western Australian Curriculum - English v8.1. <http://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/home/p-10-curriculum/curriculum-browser/english-v8>
- Scull, J., Mackenzie, N. M., & Bowles, T. (2020). Assessing early writing: A six-factor model to inform assessment and teaching. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 19, 239–259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-020-09257-7>
- Shepherd, R. P. (2018). Digital writing, multimodality, and learning transfer: Crafting connections between composition and online composing. *Computers and Composition*, 48, 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2018.03.001>
- Smow, C. E., & Matthews, T. J. (2016). Reading and language in the early grades. *The Future of Children*, 26(2), 57–74.
- Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. L. (2016). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc..

- Teale, W. H., Paciga, K. A., & Hoffman, J. L. (2010). What it takes in early schooling to have adolescents who are skilled and eager readers and writers. In K. Hall, U. Goswami, C. Harrison, S. Ellis, & J. Soler (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary perspectives on learning to read: Culture, cognition and pedagogy* (pp. 151–163). Routledge.
- Thompson, G., Adie, L., & Klenowski, V. (2018). Validity and participation: Implications for school comparison of Australia's National Assessment Program. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(6), 759–777. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1373407>
- Tolchinsky, L. (2016). From text to language and back: The emergence of written language. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Werderich, D. E., & Armstrong, S. L. (2013). Examining the conceptualizations, perceptions, and practices of adolescent writers. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 52(4), 339–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2013.812167>
- Wilson, J., & Czik, A. (2016). Automated essay evaluation software in English language arts classrooms: Effects on teacher feedback, student motivation, and writing quality. *Computers and Education*, 100, 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.05.004>
- Wray, D. (1993). What do children think about writing? *Educational Review*, 45(1), 67–77.

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.