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Caught in the middle: Improving writing in the middle and upper primary years

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Educators in Australia have raised concerns about the quality of writing in the middle and upper primary years, suggesting that many students reach a plateau in their writing development either before, or as, they transition from upper primary through to secondary school. An initial pilot study set out to explore this issue by examining how teachers implement the writing process in their classroom. The outcomes of this study suggested that teacher knowledge is critical in enabling educators to provide support for students to further develop their writing after the initial years of school. This paper reports on a continuation of this research, which is being conducted in 14 primary schools in Western Australia. The second phase focused on building teacher professional knowledge and began to highlight those links between student needs, the areas of essential knowledge that support the composition of text, assessment, and appropriate pedagogies. The paper argues that teachers must develop a deep understanding of a number of grammatical dimensions in order to teach writing more effectively. They must build knowledge about words, sentences and paragraphing as well as improve their understanding of those linguistic devices that aid coherence and cohesion. This study provides schools with an evidence-based research approach to teaching children who are underperforming in writing.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years in Australia, pedagogy and research about writing in the primary years have mainly focused on process writing and genre methodologies. Recent national benchmark data have raised concerns about the low quality of writing in middle and upper primary schools, which has led to on-going problems in the secondary years. These data suggest, in fact, that many students reach a plateau in their writing development either before, or as, they make the transition from upper primary to lower secondary school. Given that much of the success of students in secondary school is measured by their ability to write effectively, it is imperative that there is further inquiry into improving the quality of student writing in Years 3-8. Recent writing literacy benchmark data demonstrated that whereas

around 84% of children in Years 3 and 5 were meeting the benchmark standard, the levels flattened out, and in the case of Year 5 students, even fell slightly. Year 7 percentages have continued to fall steadily in the four years the data have been documented (Department of Education and Training 2007).

This paper reports on a project that aims to build teacher capacity in assessing and teaching the linguistic, textual and contextual levels of writing to students in Years 3-8, who are not meeting the benchmark standard. It has built on a pilot study funded by the Fogarty Learning Centre at Edith Cowan University. An extension of the pilot study throughout 2007 resulted in a collaborative arrangement between the Fogarty Learning Centre and the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA). This collaboration illustrates the power of productive partnerships in research with the education sectors and professional associations of Western Australia. We used a Formative Experimental Methodology (Jacob, 1992; Reinking & Bradley, 2004; Ivey & Broaddus, 2007), with the teachers as co-researchers, to develop a model of writing that provided teachers with essential knowledge about what to assess in writing in order to support the further development of under-performing writers. Through the adoption of this experimental design, we began to develop an assessment model that helped teachers to more skillfully analyse areas of weakness in student writing. As a result, we were able to link the assessment and teaching processes associated with writing in a way that supported a more targeted approach when working with students who were not meeting benchmark standards. This study became known as the Writing Project.

The Writing Project sought to improve the effectiveness of the teaching of writing to middle to upper primary and early secondary students. The Western Australian Literacy and

Numeracy Assessments (WALNA) data (Department of Education and Training, 2007) and National Benchmark data (MCEETYA, 2006) have indicated that the quality of writing in Australian schools is lower than it should be. When children enter secondary school without adequate written literacy skills, there can be a serious impact on the outcomes of their learning in all discipline areas and this, in turn, is highly likely to affect their life trajectories. Therefore, the children targeted in this project were those who:

- would not write – the avoiders,
- had serious difficulties (such as an undiagnosed learning difficulty that manifests in bizarre spelling),
- did not like writing and did not make an effort (not engaged),
- could write but were not developing as writers when engaged in more complex tasks.

Theory

These concerns around written literacy have been reinforced by current debates about the quality of writing demonstrated by students entering tertiary institutions, as reported in the National Literacy Inquiry (2005). Research has shown that writing is a complex cognitive activity that requires sustained, systematic, conscious and on-going effective teaching throughout the school years (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen, 1975; Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Cambourne, 1988; Kellogg, 1994; Hayes & Flower, 1994; Deriewianka, 1990; Hammond & Deriewianka, 2001). As a result of the disappointing student outcomes reflected by state and national testing, and the increasingly complicated cognitive complexity of writing as students progress through school, it has become apparent that there is a need for more structured, intentional and systematic written literacy interventions that can be sustained across the middle years of schooling (Years 3-8).

The literature that has informed the teaching of writing in the Australian educational context has focused on a number of key theories. These theories can be grouped under three broad epistemological paradigms - the psychological (Vygotsky, 1978; Kellogg, 1994; Berninger, 1999; Hayes & Flower, 1994; Bereiter & Scamadalia, 1983; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen, 1975), socio-cultural (Rogoff, 1991; Smith, 1973; Clay, 1973; Graves, 1984; Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Cambourne, 1988; Lankshear, 1997; Street, 1995; Gee, 1996; Kress, 1997) and linguistic (Myhill, 1999; Kress, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1984; Lankshear, 1997) perspectives. Different ways of thinking about the teaching of writing have arisen from these perspectives – *expressive to transactional* (Britton, 1970), the *whole language or naturalistic approach* (Goodman and Goodman, 1979; Cambourne, 1984), *process writing* (Graves, 1984) and *genre* (Halliday & Hasan, 1984; Deriewianka, 1990). Most of the ways that teachers have approached the teaching and learning of writing within the Australian context have been informed by these different pedagogical views, drawing predominantly from psychological and socio-cultural paradigms and, in particular, the process writing and genre methodologies.

The Writing Project

The Writing Project was based on the outcomes of a pilot study (Rivalland & Wooller, 2006), resulting in a focus on building teacher knowledge as a way of supporting teachers in their attempts at assessing, teaching and improving student writing in Years 3-8. The pilot study was funded by the Fogarty Learning Centre and involved key researchers from the centre together with four classroom teachers, from different Western Australian schools¹, who acted as co-researchers. The teachers involved in this initial study taught children between 9 and 12 years of age. The main research activities undertaken with the teacher participants involved the observation of the teaching of writing in their classrooms, as well as

¹ Perth, Western Australia.

conversations about their planning and thinking when teaching writing. As a way of analysing these data, a full day discussion was held with both the teacher-participants and the researchers, where we looked at the issue of assessment of writing, and explored those areas of essential knowledge about writing that require explicit teaching. The data gathered from this small study suggested that teachers use a diverse set of practices which lead to a range of outcomes for students as writers. These discussions affirmed the need for the development of more effective assessment, planning and teaching processes to support the effective teaching of writing. Emerging from the Pilot Study was a clear research question - *How can teachers help lower performing children to improve their writing so they will be able to meet the needs of secondary schooling?* This question highlighted two areas that required further investigation and these were the drivers for the larger study conducted throughout 2007 and 2008 referred to as the Writing Project. These areas focused on building teachers' knowledge about written language that is supportive of the student writer, as well as an approach to the assessment of writing that was more educative than that currently being used by the teachers. The second focus resulted in the development and trialling of an assessment proforma that emerged from the Composition Model of Writing.

Methodology

The Writing Project developed around a *Formative Experimental Methodology*; a methodology designed to improve interventions/innovations (Patton, 1990; Jacob, 1992; Reinking & Bradley, 2004; Ivey & Broaddus, 2007), where the researchers make adjustments and changes to practice using the information gained from the field. In this case, the innovations and interventions were aimed at improving written literacy for children who were experiencing writing difficulties in the years of schooling spanning Years 3 to 8. The Formative Experimental Methodology entailed asking such questions as: "What is the

problem?” “What needs to be improved?” “How can it be improved?” “Has the improvement helped?” Integral to this methodology is that people can, and will, use information to improve practice and this was evident when conducting interviews with teachers who participated in the project over the life of the study. The methodology included a number of qualitative methods. These methods were teacher interviews, analysis of teacher discussion about teaching interventions linked to assessment, writing samples, as well as information gathered from the Assessment Proforma developed by researchers. This approach valued researcher-teacher collaboration, with its goal being to maximize educational benefits rather than to understand the current status quo.

It emerged from the initial exploration of student writing samples and teacher responses that more attention needed to be given to linguistic understandings and knowledge about the consciousness of action necessary for writers to be able to develop the effective structuring of sentences, paragraphs and whole texts, in order to compose complex texts. Linguistic understanding could include such things as sentence structure, the function of words, or an understanding of how to build cohesion within paragraphs or across the whole text. A greater consciousness of action would suggest that students need to be supported in their ability to deconstruct and reconstruct both exemplar texts, as well as their own writing. Through the deconstruction students and teachers need to be able to “zoom-in” (Anderson, 2006) and focus on one aspect of the text that requires targeted support. The larger study (2007/2008) recognised the need to find ways to engage and inform teachers in the middle years of primary school about such knowledge and skills. It also acknowledged that student capacity to write more complex texts is something that is required by the secondary curriculum and therefore must be supported by teachers across this phase of schooling.

Research Design

The way in which the project was designed offered a logical timeframe, allowing researchers time to collect data and to present and discuss the findings with research participants and partners. Critical components of the research process were: identifying a pedagogical goal, determining a range of instructional interventions that had potential to meet the pedagogical goal, identifying factors that inhibited or advanced the effectiveness of the interventions, and making modifications where necessary.

Participants

Participants in the project were 24 classroom teachers from 12 AISWA schools² plus 5 classroom teachers from 2 Department of Education and Training (WA) schools³. These teachers were concerned about the teaching of writing to children across the middle years of schooling and willingly chose to participate in the research. Additionally, some of these schools in this larger project were having more success than others in the results their students had achieved in state and national writing assessments.

Building teacher knowledge to support student writers

Through a close analysis of the literature conducted by the researchers, and linked to discussion generated amongst teacher co-researchers, five grammatical dimensions were identified and considered to be areas of essential knowledge that support the teaching of writing. It became clear to both teachers and researchers that when composing text, an author

² Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia.

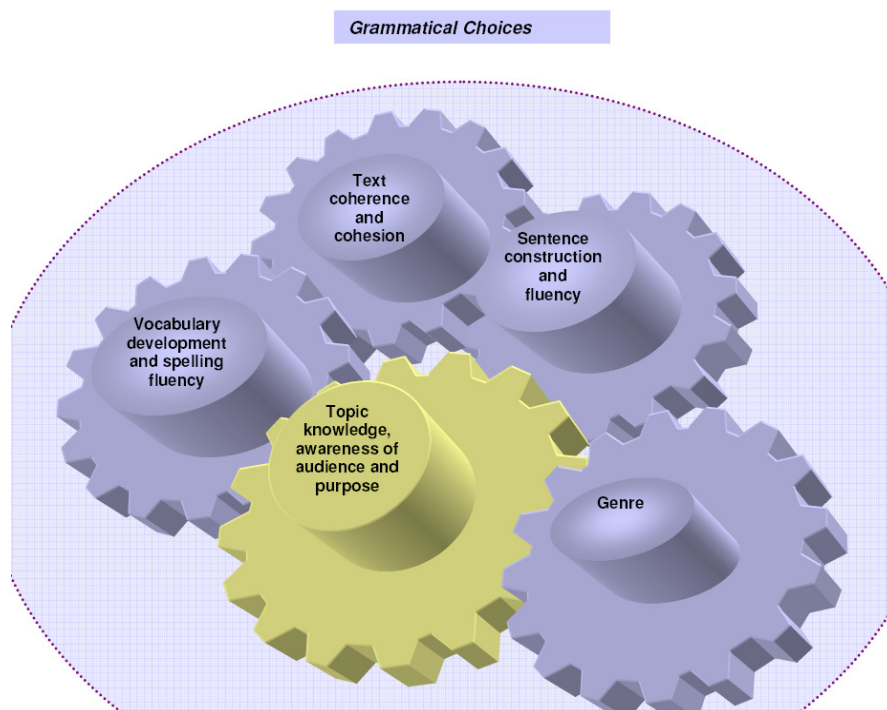
³ DET (Department of Education and Training), WA schools were invited to participate by the Fogarty Learning Centre researchers and were welcomed by Mr Ron Gorman, Literacy Educational Consultant, AISWA.

or successful writer relies on the interplay of these grammatical dimensions. The dimensions are as follows:

- Topic knowledge, awareness of audience and purpose
- Genre
- Text coherence and cohesion
- Sentence construction (inclusive of Standard Australian English)
- Vocabulary development and spelling fluency

This interaction of grammatical dimensions helps the writer to make grammatical choices that will shape meanings to ensure that texts are coherent, purposeful and engaging to read. This relationship has been illustrated through the use of a number of interlocking “cogs” that are in continual motion. The metaphor of “cogs in motion” is representative of an “expert writer” moving between, and within, the different dimensions of the model. It encourages teachers to understand the cognitive and interactive complexity of writing development. The model shows the importance of student writers playing with word choice, sentence structures, text organisation and content knowledge. When composing, writers adjust ideas by reshaping, cutting, pasting, adding, deleting and experimenting with language. The interplay of the different dimensions represents the process that the writer engages in when crafting text. Within each of the grammatical dimensions there is a range of essential knowledge all novice writer should be exposed to. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the interlocking “cogs” that underpin the Composition Model of Writing. The analogy of the “cogs” has emerged from a combination of an exploration of the literature, working with teacher participants and analysis of student writing sample data.

Figure 1 – The Composition Model of Writing



Model explanation

Dimension 1: **Topic knowledge and awareness of audience and purpose** are central to the way writers use all of the other skills and processes when successfully composing written text. The three areas that make up this dimension act as a fulcrum for all the other aspects of composing.

Dimension 2: **Genre** represents the way in which texts are organised to meet their social purpose and focuses on text organization and top-level structures.

Dimension 3: Focuses on **coherence and cohesion**, that is, the way writing holds together to ensure that the whole text meets the genre requirements and has the logic needed to make it complete and comprehensible by the reader. Text coherence holds the whole text together to provide connected meaning. Cohesion is created by language linking devices that occur both between and within paragraphs, as appropriate for the text structure. These include: pronouns, ellipsis (leaving something out), substitution, lexical cohesion, building lexical

chains (words that add to the meaning of the text and maintain a theme), conjunctions, paragraphs and grammar.

Dimension 4: Sentence construction and fluency, is,

“...marked by logic, creative phrasing, parallel construction, alliteration, and word order that makes reading feel natural. Fluent writing is free of awkward word patterns that slow the reader’s progress; instead, the language underscores the overall meaning of the piece, provoking the reader with a subtle road map.... (Culham, 2003:178).”

Sentence construction and fluency is underpinned by those foundational aspects of standard English usage that can help writers to be conscious avoiders of error (Emmitt & Pollock, 1999).

Dimension 5: Vocabulary development and spelling fluency reflects the importance and power of words when composing text; and the capacity to use words without conscious effort to spell them correctly. Word choice is inextricably connected to “*voice*”: that which connects the reader to the text and establishes a relationship between the reader and the author (Spandel, 2005). Selecting the right words can draw the reader into the text by creating interest, building tension, generating excitement, or using humour. Control of words allows a writer to create visual images, stir emotions, and convey ideas with clarity and precision. Being able to draw on an extensive vocabulary allows writers to bring their text to life using strong verbs, powerfully descriptive adjectives and adverbs, and by using devices such as simile and metaphor. When readers have both an extensive vocabulary and can spell these words without conscious effort, they are able to concentrate most effectively on composing.

Linking the Composition Model to the assessment of writing

The teachers in the larger study (2007/2008) felt they needed to know more about how to assess the more complicated grammatical dimensions of student texts represented through the Composition Model. This led to the development of an Assessment Proforma. The proforma was presented to the teacher participants for trialling in their classrooms and it became a primary tool for teacher reflection throughout the life of the project. Below is an example of the proforma that teachers were asked to use and in doing so, were able to follow the writing development of a number of their students. The rationale behind the Assessment Proforma was to help teacher-participants analyse student writing in far greater depth and, at the same time, facilitate the teacher’s understandings of the Composition Model. It was also considered important to develop a tool that promoted and encouraged teacher reflection and closer teacher scrutiny of student writing with the result that teachers’ actions were far more targeted to student needs. In fact it was hoped that the Assessment Proforma could become a tool for moving teachers’ thinking about their practices when supporting the student writer forward and for helping them to reframe, and even develop, new practices.

Figure 2 – Assessment Proforma

Assessment Proforma		
Step 1: Has the purpose/audience/topic been appropriately identified and demonstrated?		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Activities
Does the text match the purpose, audience and topic, eg describing, explaining, instructing, arguing or narrating? Is there evidence that the writer has sufficient knowledge and/or experience about the topic? In narratives, is the reader's interest maintained through selective disclosure, tension or humour?		
Step 2: Has the appropriate genre been selected?		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Recommended Strategies
Is the text structured to meet its purpose, eg recount, narrative, report, description, explanation, exposition?		
Step 3a: What grammatical choices have been made, and how effectively have they been used?		
Text Coherence and Cohesion		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Recommended Strategies
Do details seem to fit where they are placed through logical and effective sequencing? Are paragraph breaks effective and appropriate? Is cohesion maintained effectively by the use of lexical chains and reference ties?		
Step 3b: What grammatical choices have been made and how effectively have they been used?		
Vocabulary development and spelling fluency		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Recommended Strategies
Are words specific, accurate and appropriate, according to needs of audience, purpose and topic? Using spelling analysis from Words their Way: Which error patterns are evident? • Phonetic • Incorrect choice pattern • Incorrect use of conventions • Morphemic error • Severe problems		

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Are verbs used effectively to convey meaning?		
Are nouns and modifiers used effectively to convey meaning?		
Step 3c: What grammatical choices have been made and how effectively have they been used?		
Sentence Construction		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Recommended Strategies
Are sentences varied in length and structure in a way that is appropriate to the genre? • Simple • Compound • Complex • Compound-complex		
Is there evidence that the writer is aware of how the language sounds?		
Step 3d: What grammatical choices have been made and how effectively have they been used?		
Standard Australian English Usage		
Question	Teacher Comments	Teacher Action/Recommended Strategies
Has punctuation (comma, apostrophe, colon, exclamation mark, quotation marks, semi-colon, hyphen, dash) been used appropriately and effectively? Is there agreement between/consistency of – • Tense • Noun – pronoun • Noun – verb • Singular – plural • 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd person • Active/passive voice		
Step 4: Zoom in/zoom out according to steps 1, 2 and 3		
• Main teaching focus:		

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The following section presents three Case Studies which share the experiences of teacher participants who trialled the draft project materials throughout 2007 and 2008. These cases demonstrate the impact of building teacher knowledge around the Composition Model and the value of more targeted assessment of student writing. They also begin to illustrate the impact of teaching that is more closely aligned to students writing “needs”. When the teachers are more aware of which grammatical dimensions require greater support, together with a heightened awareness of how this support should be developed, there **is** an impact on writing outcomes. It was evident from the feedback of the teachers involved in this study that they found the link between the Assessment Proforma and the Composition Model of Writing critical when endeavouring to support their students as writers. The following comments were made by the Case Study Teachers:

“Useful as an evaluation tool.” Catherine

“Broke down different aspects of language.” Von

“Encouraged me to make suggestions of strategies that were more closely linked to the targeted areas of need.” Catherine

“Easily highlights areas of need and allows me to see the progression of student knowledge over time.” Tessa

Case Study 1 – Von

Von was an early-career teacher working in an inner-city school in Perth, Western Australia. The school caters for a diverse student population, many of whom come from low socio-economic standing. There were a large number of Indigenous students in her class. When joining this project she expressed three major concerns:

How can I motivate the student who is reluctant to write?

How can my teaching be more explicit when supporting student writers?

What linguistic knowledge do I need in order that my teaching is far more effective?

Von's students were in Year 4 and 5 students⁴ and a number of the children were reluctant to write at all. Compounding this problem were three students who were non-writers. Von found the Assessment Proforma extremely useful. It encouraged her to refer to the Composition Model when analysing student work and informed her choices when deciding on the teaching focus needed by her selected students. Eventually the Assessment Proforma became an integral component of Von's analysis of student writing.

After assessing the writing of the children in her class, Von decided that sentence construction was a major issue. As a result of exposure in the workshops to alternative ways to build linguistic knowledge with student writers, Von devised a number of teaching and learning "games"/activities that focused on engaging reluctant writers in sentence construction. While visiting her classroom, we saw a sentence construction activity borrowed from the UK Literacy Strategy materials⁵. The concretising of writing tasks was a powerful pedagogical approach, as was the "talk" that surrounded these games, and both helped to build the metalanguage needed when discussing the composition of text. It was within this activity that we witnessed a number of obviously reluctant and challenging students actively and enthusiastically discussing word choices and word functions, constructing sentences and then transcribing these sentences. We overheard children talking about needing a "verb" and a "conjunction" as well as "some punctuation to finish it off". It was very obvious that Von had helped the children to develop a metalanguage for talking about the function of words and the ways in which sentences are constructed. It was also highlighted that often writing is seen as a quiet, individualised activity that shunned excessive talk, and the children in this classroom needed a more active approach when composing text.

⁴ Children aged between 9 and 10 years old.

⁵ Website: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/63317/>

When discussing the writing outcomes with Von it was apparent that engaging in the assessment of writing that was systematic and linked to the areas of essential knowledge helped to increase her awareness of which dimensions required greater support. This resulted in a teaching emphasis that was far more focused, paying attention to the role of words in sentences, and the impact of these word choices on sentence construction.

Case Study 2 – Catherine

Catherine taught a group of Year 4 and 5 students⁶ in a northern suburban school in Perth, Western Australia. Catherine's school also had a very diverse student population. Her major concerns were:

How can I motivate the students to write much more interesting sentences?

What are a number of ways to encourage an interest in words?

How can my assessment of writing inform my teaching for individual students?

This teacher also used the Assessment Proforma to acknowledge what the students could do, as well as discovering which grammatical dimensions required additional support. The increased focus enabled her to make far more informed choices about what to teach.

Information gained from the targeted assessment encouraged Catherine to pay attention to the dimensions that dealt with sentence construction and fluency, as well as vocabulary development and spelling. However, like Von she also explored the function of words and how authors employed their knowledge of these word functions to achieve the greatest effects when engaging their audience. As a way of targeting the different levels of focus Catherine adopted the pedagogical approach of “zooming-in and zooming-out” (Anderson, 2006) of exemplar texts. Exemplar texts are well-written and carefully crafted examples of writing by published authors. Catherine paid particular attention to the literary genre of “Thriller”.

⁶ Children aged between 9 and 10 years old.

Through the deconstruction of exemplar texts she was able to explain the impact of effective sentences on the reader, and how word choice had a bearing on that effectiveness. She demonstrated to the students what a well-written, attention grabbing first sentence “looked like”. This led to the children exploring the construction of ‘fantastic’ sentences and then generating their own.

Another area of concern for Catherine was text coherence and cohesion. In the students’ writing of the “thriller”, the focus was on their ability to *build tension* as a way of engaging the reader. One technique she employed was to ask children to write shorter pieces of text and, in particular, deconstruct and reconstruct first paragraphs. Catherine used the knowledge gained through exposure to the different dimensions of the Composition Model to support her teaching which resulted in her refining and re-focusing her teaching. In doing so she was able to improve the writing of the “Thriller”, the narrative that the students were being asked to compose.

Case Study 3 – Tessa

Tessa taught Year 7 in a large northern metropolitan school in Perth, Western Australia. Her school achieved relative success in the state literacy assessments, but there were concerns about the writing skills of the year seven students. When embarking on the project Tessa posed two focus questions:

What makes a sentence a sentence?

What do we mean by “powerful words” and why is it that they create a strong response and clear image for the reader?

Tessa used the Assessment Proforma as a diagnostic tool. She found that sentence construction and fluency, as well as vocabulary development and spelling, appeared to be

problematic, a common theme that was consistent across many of the participant schools. These findings reiterated that the students in a majority of the case study classrooms worked relatively successfully with whole text structures, but needed additional support when working at the word, sentence and paragraph levels. As a result of the analysis Tessa found that many of her students required **constant** scaffolding when constructing paragraphs and that this became more problematic when they were required to write far more extended text. Furthermore, she was conscious that these children would soon be moving onto secondary school where the complexity of written tasks tended to increase.

Through “zooming-in” (Anderson, 2006) and focusing on the construction of the paragraph, the students in her class became far more aware of the importance of this device as a way of building cohesion (Myhill, 2008). Prior to the emphasis on constructing paragraphs more carefully, many of the children did not use paragraphs at all, or only tended to use them as “graphic” organisers (Ibid 2008). This ineffectual use demonstrated a limited understanding of the function of paragraph where they were often seen as a collection of white spaces between “chunks” of text.

Tessa found that using the Composition Model as a way of understanding the Assessment Proforma ensured a more strategic approach in her teaching and this enabled her to begin to improve the writing outcomes of her students. It became evident that through “zooming-in” on the paragraph she encouraged her students to craft their writing of this aspect of their text far more carefully.

Conclusion

This Writing Project research has highlighted a need to build teacher knowledge about language that supports the teaching of writing, as well as the assessment of writing. The paper argues that it is necessary for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of a number of grammatical dimensions which are articulated through the Composition Model of Writing. Teachers need to build knowledge about words, sentences and paragraphing as well as to improve their understanding of those linguistic devices that aid coherence and cohesion. In so doing, they will be able to support the struggling student writer in the middle and upper primary years of schooling with greater confidence. A second and equally important consideration is the role assessment of student writing. The Assessment Proforma became a tool for moving teachers' thinking about their practices forward and for helping them to reframe, and even develop, new practices when supporting student writers. It's use reinforced that assessment needs to be far more targeted, enabling teachers to be more specific/strategic/careful when deciding on their teaching focus. The outcomes of this research have begun to provide schools with an evidence-based research approach to teaching children in the middle and upper primary years who are underperforming in writing.

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