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Teacher indexes of Year 5 writing performance

Literacy Learning:
the Middle Years 8.2

Claire Wyatt-Smith and Joanne Pascoe

This article explores the following questions:

- What do Year 5 teachers identify as factors affecting students' writing performance in schooling? Collectively, what do the teacher-generated factors tell us about the different ways that student writers may be 'situated' to engage with school writing requirements?
- What do the factors tell us about how teachers may be 'situated' to assess writing performance?
- What are the implications for practice and literacy education policy, given the prevailing narrow construction of teacher accountability as being centrally concerned with measurable outcomes?

Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point an awareness of the diversity of literacy and its assessment in everyday educational and cultural practice; its complexity as a set of specific practices to be acquired; and the necessity faced by literacy educators to crystallise their understanding of their students' diverse literacy achievements into summative judgements such as ratings and scores. Against this backdrop, our interest in this paper is with exploring the factors that experienced teachers take to influence the writing performance of Year 5 students.

To situate our discussion, we first offer some comment made about the context in which our investigation occurred. In short, the data drawn on in this paper were collected as part of a current Australian Research Council-funded two-year study that aims to provide a quantitative and qualitative picture of the role of human judgement in educational assessment. In the study, teachers' judgements of literacy achievement are used as an instance of human judgement. So, the intersection of teacher assessment with human judgement is a key concern of the study. The evidence base used by teachers in their judgements of literacy capabilities (termed 'indexes') is being detailed using qualitative and quantitative techniques for mapping the interrelationships among the various operative facets of students' performance. This approach makes it possible to examine and directly gauge the impact of evaluative frameworks that constitute the official, publicly available assessment agenda as well as the contribution of otherwise implicit but nonetheless significant determinants of teachers' judgements.

To date, thirty-nine teachers from twenty-one schools have participated in the study. The teachers represent a range of approximately two to twenty-five years teaching experience in state primary schooling. The selection of schools includes cohorts representing a range of socio-economic as well as cultural and linguistic backgrounds and has been drawn mostly from metropolitan and surrounding areas of a large Queensland city. To date, only one rural school has been involved in the study due to difficulties associated with distance. We are currently in Phase Two of the study. Twenty-one teachers from eleven schools have been involved to date, and in this phase, the focus is on identifying and examining the actual processes that teachers rely on in arriving at judgements of students' writing performance. In all, forty-eight teachers will

participate in Phase Two, meeting in groups of four or five for a full day of data collection involving five sessions. Of interest in this paper is the first session in which teachers, working individually, are invited to develop a cause mapping of those factors that they take to affect students' writing performance. (Readers interested in the remaining four sessions of the data collection day are advised to see Appendix A.)

Procedurally, the teachers are each given an A3 sheet of paper with the words 'Writing Performance' boxed in the centre of the page and a pad of post-it notes. They are asked to record the factors on the notes, placing them on the sheet. The teachers are also asked to indicate the relative importance of each factor or index, using the scale of 1 to 3 (1 represents moderately important; two, important, and 3, very important). As the final step in this process, the teachers are asked to draw lines between those factors that they consider to be linked, marking links with causal arrows. At the end of the day, there is opportunity for the teachers to revisit their individual maps for the purpose of confirming or amending the factors identified in the morning session.

Teacher-identified factors

In preparing for analysis, the factors that the teachers identified were compiled in table form, showing the frequency of each factor. After examining the draft table, we decided that the various factors could be grouped into three main categories—child, pedagogy, textual—and then further grouped in related sub-categories, as shown in Table 1 below. The categories are a construct on our part and are taken to be related (rather than discrete), with some overlap occurring among them. For our purposes, the categories serve to indicate the main groupings or families of emphases that the teachers identified as influences on students' writing performance in schooling. In reading this paper, we invite you to consider how the factors identified by the participating teachers resonate with those you would identify as causally relating to students' performance in writing.

Before proceeding, you should know that while we identified and named the broad categories of influences using our terms, we have relied on and reproduced without alteration the terms that the teachers actually used in entering the contents of Table 1. Our aim was to record and reproduce verbatim the teachers' identifiers, wherever possible, without interpretation or other reframing. We have listed the various influences in Table 1 in descending order of priority, as determined by the number of teachers who indicated the particular influence or factor. Additionally, the cumulative score of influence (from the scale of 1 to 3 applied by the teachers, mentioned above) has been recorded for each of the three major sub-categories within Table 1. A limitation of the table is that some teachers did not apply a score to every factor. Such omissions may have diminished the final score or weighting the index would have received if each factor had been weighted.

Table 1 provides strong evidence of teachers' *insider or guild knowledge* (Sadler 1989) of the complexity of writing performance in schooling and how such complexity arises, as Murphy (1995) states, 'in part from the nature of the tasks and in part from the students themselves' (p. 257). More specifically, emerging from the broad categories of the table is a picture of student writing as interpersonal sites within the institution of schooling where psychosocial, pedagogical and textual factors co-exist and play themselves out to shape whether the writing is deemed more or less successful. In what follows, we briefly discuss each of the broad categories in the order in which they appear in Table 1.

Table 1: What Year 5 teachers take to be the influences on students' performance in writing in schooling

Factor	Frequency of reference	Cumulative score
CHILD FACTORS		
AS CULTURAL MEMBER (HOME & COMMUNITY)		
Home background: language; social; family support & encouragement; environment; importance placed on reading & writing in home; child's circumstances; parental value placed on learning; parent's language usage	17	30-31
Everyday experiences of student/ background experience/ prior knowledge (informal); variety of social experiences	12	24-25
Peer pressure/influence; support	7	10-11
Real life writing activity experience; parental modelling of using reading & writing in every day life; home early childhood literacy support	4	5
Cultural background/ ESL/ language spoken at home	3	8
Parental background and education	1	
Parent/carers' jobs	1	
Subtotal	45	77-80
AS STUDENT		
Student attitude to work/ desire to achieve/ enthusiasm/ motivation/ persistence/ not distracted/work ethic	11	29
Interest in subject/task	5	12
Respect for teacher; relationship with teacher	3	6
Enjoyment of school	2	3-4
Attention to task / time on task	2	3
Perception of self as learner; confidence in ability to perform	2	2
Ownership of work	1	3
Fear of failure	1	3
Trust in teacher	1	3
Able to learn from mistakes	1	2
Relevance of task to child	1	2
Behaviour	1	2
Subtotal	31	70-71
AS LITERATE SUBJECT		
Skills/prior knowledge (formal): sentence construction; vocab. development; grammar; purpose/prior knowledge of generic structure; knowledge of punctuation rules; knowledge of language conventions	15	34
Love of reading; Read lots of books; independent reading habits; enjoys reading	6	13
Enjoyment of writing; attitude to writing; values associated with writing	5	13-14
Research skills (dictionary; info seeking)	2	1
Delight in oral language & new vocabulary	1	
Early oral language experience	1	3
Child's previous positive experiences with writing	1	
Listening to stories	1	2
Subtotal	32	66-67

AS COGNATE BEING		
Ability to comprehend instructions; ascertained /learning difficulties; IQ/ intellectual ability; student abilities/natural ability/ ability to think logically	10	25
Reading ability	8	17
Oral language capacity/confidence	4	11
Subtotal	22	53
AS PHYSICAL CONSTRUCT		
Fine motor skills	3	6
External context (what happened to the child that day)	2	6
Medication; medical condition (ADHD; Asperges ...)	2	4
Tiredness	1	3
Subtotal	8	19
AS PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT		
Self esteem/ confidence	5	13
Willingness to experiment/make mistakes	1	1
Subtotal	6	14
Total	144	299-304
PEDAGOGY-CENTRED FACTORS		
PEDAGOGY		
Modelling of genres; students understand particular genre; scaffolding & deconstruction of genre	5	11
Preparation for writing task by teacher/ teaching-instruction	4	10
Response to writing stimulus in class/Involvement in discussion; extensive discussion of ideas before writing	3	6
Students understand functions of grammar; teaching grammar	2	3
Conferencing with drafts	2	5
Time allowed for vocab. extension/building vocab. charts	2	6
Teaching punctuation	1	3
Working collaboratively with students to compose	1	3
Practice in oral sentence composition & sharing this with other children	1	3
Subtotal	21	50
ASSESSMENT		
Content taught in early school under syllabus; opportunities to learn with previous teachers	4	10
Students understand what is expected; clear expectations & criteria; clear assessment focus	3	
Amount of support given to student	3	9
Self-help; has child clarified problems?	1	2
Amount of discussion/research time	1	2
How it compares with previous efforts	1	2
Note how long it takes for child to put pencil to paper	1	3
Time given to write text	1	3
Subtotal	15	39

TEACHER		
Teacher enthusiasm & encouragement/teacher influence & support/ positive reinforcement	8	15
Teacher competence & knowledge	1	3
Teacher self-review	1	1
Teacher feedback	1	1
Subtotal	11	20
TEACHING CONTEXT		
Individual/ group (mixed ability; gender grouping...)	2	4-5
Classroom atmosphere (noise level ...); classroom environment conducive to learning	2	6
Classroom environment: 'have a go'	1	3
Pressure placed on students to achieve	1	3
Feelings of success for the student	1	2
Subtotal	7	18-19
CONTENT		
Embedding genre or topic in meaningful life context	2	4
Purpose of writing	2	6
Expose child to reading of type of genre they are to write	2	6
Audience	1	2
Subtotal	7	18
Total	61	145-146
TEXTUAL FACTORS		
Use of self correcting / editing strategies	7	12
Spelling ability	5	9-11
Adherence to specific generic structure	5	14
Punctuation	4	9-11
Presentation	3	5
Evidence of original ideas/ creativity	3	8
Understanding of main ideas for paragraphing	2	5-6
Structure of writing	2	5-6
Complex sentence structures	2	2-3
Content of writing appropriate to topic	2	2
Amount of writing on the page	1	2
Correct grammar	1	2
Sequencing of ideas	1	
Development of story lines/ideas	1	3
Verb tense	1	3
Vocabulary quality	1	3
Knowledge of student's previous work/ evidence of development	1	1
Use of skills gained in previous units	1	3
Good to read	1	2
Ability to express themselves through their written text	1	2
Total	45	92-98

'Child' factors

A distinguishing feature of the 'Child' category is how it captures the teachers' wide-ranging knowledge of the child and the diverse, even hybrid indexes that teachers rely on to come to 'know' the child. There are, for example, influences that pertain to cultural memberships outside the school, that is, within home and community, and how factors such as language background, peer pressure, and parental influences are perceived to affect in-school writing performance. A limitation of the data is that we do not have ready access to information about how the teachers gather information about, say, peer pressure or cultural background. What is clear however, is that writing performance is viewed as tied to the students' social situations outside school, a factor over which teachers have little or no control. Also clear is how the mix of 'Child' factors point to the teachers' interest in reading and valuing school writing for the insights that it makes available about the development—psychological and physical—of the writer. So, for the teachers, the writing has meaning not only in terms of the words on the page, but in terms of what it can reveal about how the child is developing as literate subject, as student, and more generally, as a human being. The writing, both as process and as product, appears to be a highly interactive context. It is where teacher and student meet and where the teacher makes a reading of the emerging identity of the child, a finding also addressed by Austin and Freebody (in press) who examine how the category of 'the child' serves as a criterion of assessment. In our study, the teachers' indexes serve to indicate how student writing performance is a site where the teacher calls on knowledges (albeit inferred or assumed on some occasions) of the child's background; of how an individual child is medicated; of the level of trust in the teacher, and whether the child has a high or poor self-esteem, being confident about taking risks or fearful of making mistakes.

Interestingly, of all six 'Child' factors, the teachers' weighted those related to cultural memberships in home and community as being the most important in determining writing performance. This weighting suggests that teachers were aware of how their work in developing student writers interfaced with social worlds and textual practices outside the school. Moreover, there is the suggestion that the fit (or lack of fit) between literate practices inside and outside schooling represents a critical determinant of school writing performance. The observation to be made here is that while the prospects of success are optimum where literacy practices in and out of school are 'in tune', one with the other, what literacy curriculum review procedures are in place and what literacy curriculum possibilities are available where clear disjunctures occur? This matter is raised later in the paper, especially in relation to the influence of new technologies in shaping outside-school literacy practices.

'Pedagogy-centred' factors

Just as the Child factors were multi-faceted and serve to locate the identity of child in the writing, so the pedagogy-centred factors focus on the 'personal' attributes of the teacher (enthusiasm and encouragement), as well as pedagogical style, content, context and assessment influences. It is in this category that we first hear of issues related to epistemology and understanding about roles in assessment. There are factors that show a concern with writing processes and products, and with writer interactions, be they with peers or with the teacher. Further, there are factors that signal teachers' uptake of socio-cultural understandings about language in general and their awareness of key differences between oral and written language in particular. There is an emphasis, for example, on the social purposes of language use, the value of modelling genres in which students are expected to write, as well as preparation for writing, conferencing procedures, responding to drafts and explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary. There is also a marked emphasis on the social nature of in-class assessment practices, with mention made of the nature of assistance given to student writers, the time allocated to the writing, and how the teachers monitor

performance over time, tracking or comparing each newly completed piece with previous efforts. Clearly, the teachers as a group adopted the position that pedagogy and assessment practices make a difference to writing outcomes, though not nearly as much, it seems, as cultural memberships, as discussed earlier.

'Textual' factors

The third main category, textual factors, is a mix of aspects, some concerned with surface elements of presentation and amount of writing on the page; some with technical accuracy or correctness; and some concerned with students' attempts at making and shaping meaning. In terms of accuracy, there is mention, for example, of 'adherence to specific generic structure' and 'correct grammar', and for meaning making, there are other references to how the writing could be 'good to read', showing students' 'ability to express themselves through their written text', and 'evidence of original ideas/creativity'.

The inclusion in this category of 'knowledge of student's previous work' is deliberate, indicating how even here, the textual and social merge. So, for the teachers, the textual features of any piece of student writing can provide clues about increasing mastery or control over genres, grammar, punctuation or vocabulary. It is as though as the teachers receive and read each successive piece of writing, be it a draft or final version, they locate it in its own intertextual history, relating it to other pieces produced by the student at some earlier point in the school year.

Overall, the composite of factors in the three categories discussed to this point indicate that teachers have access to a potent mix of different ways of knowing (Belenky et al. 1986) writing performance and the student writer; ways of knowing that are inherently context dependent (occurring within the classroom), historical (occurring at points in time over the school year), and interactional in nature (involving teacher and student or student and peer/s). By elaboration, the factors could be used as a construct for reconsidering the different ways that students may be 'situated' to engage with school writing requirements. Alternatively, they can be viewed as the terrain on which teachers may be variously 'situated' as they engage with and ascribe meaning and value to school writing. It is to the issue of how teachers are positioned on this terrain that attention now turns.

Teachers' positioning

It is worth repeating here that the writing performance indexes of all twenty-one teachers were drawn on to construct the framework proposed in Table 1. So, the table presents the large-scale terrain of factors relevant to the group of teachers as a whole. It is reasonable to expect that such terrain could make available a range of different, even competing positions for individual teachers to take up on the matter of writing performance and the factors that influence it. Of special interest then are the index selections made by individual teachers and what these indicate about the discursive positions taken up by individual teachers, as evidenced in their cause maps.

In addressing this issue, we studied all twenty-one maps. They revealed markedly different constructions of writing performance, with no two being identical. Also evident was how the maps indicated a diversity of teacher positions, ranging from those that could be characterised as largely child-centred to those that were largely pedagogy-centred. There were no examples of maps that were exclusively focused on textual features. For illustrative purposes, two authentic maps have been reproduced in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, each one being discussed separately below.

This listing of indexes focuses attention on parents, peers and the child as vital determinants of writing performance. Interestingly, parents are mentioned four times, first in terms of their careers/jobs; second, background and education; third, the support and encouragement given to

Table 2.1: Teacher A Indexes

Perception of self as learner
Parents careers/jobs
Parental background & education
Peers – how they can influence performance
Child's perception of parents using reading/writing in everyday life & importance model
Parental support & encouragement
Use and delight in oral language & new vocabulary
Early oral language experiences & play with words
Confidence in ability to perform as a writer
Willingness to experiment with writing and make mistakes

the child; and fourth, the ways in which parents use 'reading/writing in everyday life' and provide literate models for the child. Additionally, there is a possible fifth reference implicit in the mention of 'early oral language experiences and play with words'.

Noticeably missing is mention of the impact of pedagogy. Similarly, no mention is made of the student writer's increasing control of textual features. In this map, writing performance is taken to be shaped by the child's cultural membership in the home and community as well as by features intrinsic to the person of the child (see for example references to the affective or attitudinal qualities of confidence, delight and willingness to experiment.) It is as though writing performance is construed as resulting from factors over which the teacher has little, if any influence. This is in stark contrast to the list shown below, central to which is a view of pedagogy as being a powerful determinant of writing performance.

Table 2.2: Teacher B Factors

Embedding the genre in a meaningful life context.
Scaffolding of genre being taught. Lots of deconstruction of genre.
Building vocab. charts and teaching grammar & punctuation required to write the genre
When writing individually ensure use of generic structure and quality of vocab.
Teacher modelling the talking through of writing a genre. Thinking aloud.
Working collaboratively with children to compose a piece of writing.
Lots of positive reinforcement.
Attitude to writing and the purpose of doing the writing.
When speaking quality of vocab. & sentence complexity used to express themselves
Child's ability to express themselves orally during class discussion & when asking /answering questions.
Child's reading ability/level.
Exposing child to lots of reading of the type of genre child is expected to write.

Unlike the preceding table, there is not a single reference in this listing to parents. Instead, there are repeated references to the term 'genre', with emphasis given to how quality or effective pedagogy is taken to include explicit teaching of generic structure and linguistic features. Also evident is an emphasis on language use for social purposes and how writing performance is taken to relate to teacher modelling, collaboration with students in writing processes, and opportunities to engage in reading and speaking activities. So, while both tables include reference to 'attitude', it seems that the second table locates student attitude to writing in relation to textual

opportunities in classroom talk and other social interactions rather than to socio-demographic factors outside the school.

Implications

This paper has mapped the terrain of factors that teachers take to influence Year 5 writing performance. It has shown how, for teachers, students' efforts at writing represent sites where pedagogical, psychosocial, and textual worlds can and do intersect. Further, the teachers' collective set of factors lends weight to published writing research, some dating back more than two decades, indicating how a complex of factors can affect writing quality. These include: knowledge about the topic; difficulties encountered during the composing process; and attitudes to writing covering general self-esteem, attitudes to particular topics, and one's confidence as a writer (see for example, Baker & Quellmalz 1981, Freedman 1983, Graves 1978, Shaughnessy 1977, Wyatt-Smith 2000).

The paper has also shown how teachers take up radically different discursive positions in relation to writing performance. More specifically, it opens the possibility for considering how writing pedagogy and teachers' ways of reading and ascribing value to student writing may have as much to do with these positions as they are to do with the qualities of the writing itself. In this way, the paper provides an opening for posing vital questions about teacher accountability: What are the constructions of accountability available across the terrain of factors, and more specifically, in the two individual maps presented in the paper? What is the balance of accountability between in-school and out-of-school stakeholders including teachers and parents/carers?

In conclusion, a word about four notable omissions in the teachers' selected indexes. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, gender has not been identified, though data from the teachers' think-alouds indicate their awareness of a connection between gender and students' writing content and presentation features. Also missing are references to explicitly defined standards and their function in determining the quality of writing performance.

The third major omission relates to technology or more specifically, to technological literacy—of writing and reading on-line. It is as though accessing and evaluating internet texts, emails, CD-ROMs and other multimedia resources—all increasingly common in leisure and work practices—have not found a place in some teachers' ways of talking about in-school student writing. There is an urgent need to redress this situation, responding to the imperative for in-school literacy practices to have relevance and connectedness to out of school contexts.

Finally, in terms of writing performance and current literacy policy contexts, it is of interest that syllabus documents with a focus on writing were given so little emphasis while other national and state policy initiatives in literacy education have been totally excluded in the teachers' selections of factors to date. The teachers did not mention, for example, current moves in Queensland to outcomes-based syllabus documents. Similarly, no mention was made of national moves to measure and report students' writing achievement against national benchmarks, even though some of the data were collected in the week prior to the Year 5 students sitting the statewide Aspects of Literacy and Numeracy testing program. This suite of omissions could well point to how teachers tend to contextualise student writing performance within the local classroom world rather than in relation to larger, ever changing global communication and policy contexts!

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Appendix A:

Session 2: Each teacher is paired with a research assistant to tape-record 'a think-aloud' session. In the session, the teachers are encouraged to speak out the factors they are thinking about as they mark each of the student samples they have brought from their own classrooms. The final mark allocated is recorded and photocopies of these writing samples are later taken for the project records. It is stressed that the purpose of the think-alouds is to record the factors the teachers are actually taking into consideration in the marking process. The teachers' own class samples are referred to as 'in context' samples, as they know the students and the pedagogy involved in the production of the writing samples.

Session 3: In this session the teachers look at the 25 samples chosen to reflect a variety of abilities and types of writing collected from a variety of year 5 state school classes. The samples had been collected in Phase One of the study. The teachers are asked to use the same grading system they used on their own students' scripts to assess these 'out of context' samples. A limited amount of background information on the way in which these pieces were produced, e.g. 'draft copy; some class time research; historical diary', is provided. As with the previous session, each teacher's think-alouds are recorded individually.

Session 4: In this session the teachers revisit the 25 'in context' and 25 'out of context' student samples, assessing them on this occasion against the national benchmark for writing, Professional Elaboration, Year 5.

Session 5: A brief revisit of the cause mapping occurs in this session to allow the teachers to confirm or amend their initial selection of writing performance factors. Also, this is the moderation session in which teachers are able to hear and discuss the judgements of the other teachers on one sample of their students' work. To the other teachers, this is an 'out of context' judgement (unless the teacher has a teaching partner present). The conversations reconciling the 'out of context' with the 'in context' judgements are tape-recorded.