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Figurative language and narrative writing: insights from high-achieving primary school students

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Abstract

Figurative language is a prominent feature of contemporary primary/elementary English curricula globally, yet little is known about how students at different stages of primary school use figurative language in the context of narrative writing. This study presents a detailed analysis of the frequencies and uses of figurative devices in narratives written by ten Australian Year 3 and Year 5 students who scored highly on Australia's standardised writing assessment in 2022 (NAPLAN). The analysis focused on eight figurative devices identified in the primary year levels of the *Australian Curriculum: English*, including alliteration, assonance, idiom, metaphor, personification, simile, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia. The findings revealed the extent to which the high scoring students used these devices in their narratives, as well as patterns in their use of figurative language to serve their writing purposes, enhancing the quality of their narratives by communicating themes related to the prescribed topic of bravery. The results have several implications for writing-related policies, assessment, and primary school teaching practices.

Keywords Writing · Teaching writing · Primary schools · Figurative language · Figurative devices · Writing assessments

Introduction

Dating back to antiquity, figurative language continues to play an important role in contemporary primary/elementary school English curricula globally, where it is widely recognised as a key element of sophisticated narratives—a written genre privileged over all others in the primary years (Aristotle., 2004; Harris, 2017; O'Halloran, 2014). The emphasis on figurative language is evident in curricula across different countries, including the United States [US] (*Common Core State Standards* [CCSS]), the United Kingdom (*UK National Curriculum*), and Australia (*Australian Curriculum: English* [AC:E]). All three documents recognise the

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importance of figurative language for the development of primary school students' literacy skills. However, the treatment of figurative language in these documents is varied, with differences in when figurative devices like metaphor or simile are introduced, different reasons or purposes given for their introduction, different names used in the same documents to refer to the same concepts (e.g. figurative devices, rhetorical devices, literary devices, figures of speech, etc.), and the lack of a broader unifying framework that explains what the many figurative devices have in common. For example, in the AC:E (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.), *alliteration* is introduced as a tool to support children's early phonological awareness development, *onomatopoeia* is introduced as a device that shapes reader reactions in poetry, and *metaphor* is introduced as a tool that creates imagery in narrative and song writing. This fragmented approach presents figurative devices in isolation; if the devices are taught this way in classrooms, it may limit how students learn about and use them during writing.

Despite the prominence of figurative language in primary English curricula, relatively little is known about how children develop the ability to use figurative language to enhance their writing of narratives (Burrell & Beard, 2018). This paper is motivated by the need to better understand what constitutes effective narrative writing in the primary years, particularly how students use figurative language to enhance narrative quality. This study aimed to address this gap by investigating the figurative devices used by high-scoring Year 3 and Year 5 students when writing narratives for Australia's *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* [NAPLAN] writing test in 2022.

The NAPLAN writing test emphasises the importance of figurative language, especially in its persuasive writing version. Each year, the test assesses writing through either a persuasive or narrative task (ACARA, 2024). The persuasive writing version includes a criterion named *persuasive devices*, and in its marking guide, it explains nine figurative devices: alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, idiom, puns, irony, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). In contrast, the narrative version gives limited attention to figurative language, with only metaphor, simile, alliteration, and personification mentioned as examples of vocabulary choices. Table 1 highlights differences in the marking criteria of both versions of the NAPLAN writing test.

The discrepancy in assessment criteria raises questions about the relative value assigned to figurative language across genres, particularly if these devices are found to be equally significant in narrative writing. Moreover, studies have widely critiqued NAPLAN for its tendency to shape what is taught in classrooms (e.g. Lewis & Hardy, 2017), and there is a risk that teachers will follow ACARA's implicit guidance by prioritising figurative language for persuasive writing, potentially limiting student achievement with narrative writing both in the test and in more authentic writing contexts, if figurative language proves to be valued in the NAPLAN context.

In this study, and in the context of NAPLAN testing specifically, the term *successful* refers to writing by students who achieve high scores on the NAPLAN writing test. We acknowledge that standardised assessments like NAPLAN represent one controversial perspective on successful writing, shaped by standardised criteria and marking rubrics. While this perspective has limitations, particularly in its ability

Table 1 Criteria used to assess the NAPLAN persuasive and narrative writing tests

Criterion	Persuasive test	Narrative test
1	**Audience**: The writer's capacity to orient, engage and persuade the reader	**Audience**: The writer's capacity to orient, engage and affect the reader
2	**Text structure**: The organisation of the structural components of a persuasive text (introduction, body and conclusion) into an appropriate and effective text structure	**Text structure**: The organisation of narrative features including orientation, complication and resolution into an appropriate and effective text structure
3	**Ideas**: The selection, relevance and elaboration of ideas for a persuasive argument	**Ideas**: The creation, selection and crafting of ideas for a narrative
4	**Persuasive devices**: The use of a range of persuasive devices to enhance the writer's position and persuade the reader	**Character and setting**: Character—The portrayal and development of character; Setting—The development of a sense of place, time and atmosphere
5	**Vocabulary**: The range and precision of contextually appropriate language choices	**Vocabulary**: The range and precision of language choices
6	**Cohesion**: The control of multiple threads and relationships across the text, achieved through the use of referring words, ellipsis, text connectives, substitutions and word associations	**Cohesion**: The control of multiple threads and relationships across the text, achieved through the use of referring words, ellipsis, text connectives, substitutions and word associations
7	**Paragraphing**: The segmenting of text into paragraphs that assists the reader to follow the line of argument	**Paragraphing**: The segmenting of text into paragraphs that assists the reader to negotiate the narrative
8	**Sentence structure**: The production of grammatically correct, structurally sound and meaningful sentences	**Sentence structure**: The production of grammatically correct, structurally sound and meaningful sentences
9	**Punctuation**: The use of correct and appropriate punctuation to aid the reading of the text	**Punctuation**: The use of correct and appropriate punctuation to aid the reading of the text
10	**Spelling**: The accuracy of spelling and the difficulty of the words used	**Spelling**: The accuracy of spelling and the difficulty of the words used

to capture the full range of creative and communicative potential in student writing (Carey et al., 2022), we also recognise that those who succeed in the NAPLAN context often demonstrate many sophisticated writing choices that allow their writing to score higher than the hundreds of thousands of other students in their grade levels who write and are assessed under the same conditions on the same day, as we have explored in other publications (Thomas, 2022; Thomas et al., 2015). Our goal in this study is to explore how students who scored highly on the 2022 writing test used figurative language to achieve particular narrative effects, while reflecting critically on how writing such as this intersects with broader notions of quality writing.

The study is distinguished in its focus on how high-scoring students themselves use figurative language, rather than considering high quality models of adult writing as the benchmark. Through the analysis of high-scoring narratives written by ten primary school students, we aimed to capture an authentic picture of how young writers use figurative language to enhance storytelling. Specifically, the research sought to answer two questions: (1) to what extent do high-scoring students use figurative devices in their narrative writing, and (2) how does the use of figurative devices enhance the quality of these students' narratives? Through this focus, the study contributes to understandings of how figurative language functions as a tool for achieving success in the NAPLAN context, while also providing insights relevant to curriculum and assessment designers and teachers concerned with writing development more broadly.

Background

The concept of figurative language in Anglophone education dates to Ancient Greece, where it formed part of Aristotle's rhetoric (Aristotle, 322 B.C./2004). Aristotle emphasised the role of stylistic choices to ensure spoken and written texts communicate meaning in ways that impact others (Cicero, 1942). This could be achieved by logical sentence patterning; establishing rhythmical sentence structures; and varying word or phrase meanings for rhetorical effects (Nelson & Kinneavy, 2003). At the heart of these stylistic choices lies figurative language: creative and playful uses of choices that shift the typical meanings of words or manipulate the expected structure of words in clauses and sentences.

The *devices* of figurative language were historically classified as either *tropes* (from the Greek *tropein*, meaning to turn) or *schemes* (from the Greek *schema*, meaning form) (Aristotle, 322 B.C./2004; Corbett & Connors, 1998). Tropes involve shifting or embellishing the usual meanings of expressions to enhance writing style (Harris, 2017; Quintilian, 1920). A well-known trope is *metaphor*, where one phenomenon is described in terms of another, for example: *She was a lighthouse, guiding her son through the stormy seas of adolescence*. Alternatively, schemes involve the manipulation of typical word structure to add emphasis or rhythm (Harris, 2017; Quintilian, 1920). An example scheme is *assonance*, which relies on the repetition of a vowel sound in several close words, as in: *As an eager teacher, he weaved his students dreams beneath those green trees*. A renewed emphasis on

the broad figurative language categories of schemes and tropes could bring some coherence to the fragmented treatment of figurative devices in contemporary curricula.

Given this treatment, it is unsurprising that figurative language has been found to be a challenging aspect of language development for many children, particularly those with additional learning needs (Siqueira et al., 2016). Lazar (1996) explained that understanding figurative devices like metaphors and similes are often challenging for students because they require them to use their inference skills to link disparate elements being compared. A key challenge in this for students is that figurative meanings are often culturally determined, making it imperative for teachers to 'sensitize students to the cultural significance which accrues to particular examples of figurative language in English' (p. 46).

Despite these challenges, research into the development and teaching of figurative language does offer insight into the ways children typically develop these skills and how classroom instruction can support this process. For instance, Manning and Wray (1990) described how children typically develop the ability to comprehend and produce several figurative devices. For metaphors and similes, children in early primary school (i.e. aged 4–7) commonly comprehend metaphors in a rudimentary way, improving considerably by middle primary school (i.e. aged 8–10), and becoming consistent by upper primary school (i.e. aged 11–12). For idioms, children learn them as lexical units rather than by analysing their constituents, with the ability to comprehend idioms relevant to their experiences beginning by age 9. Influenced by typical developmental patterns, Manning and Wray (1990) suggested that teachers can direct primary school students' attention to key words in figurative language phrases and 'use questions to cue the child to connotations of the key words,' such as asking them what is known about sunshine when comprehending the metaphor: *She was a ray a sunshine* (p. 21). This study provided a useful introduction to figurative language development and teaching strategies that can support children's comprehension of figurative language.

Limited studies have focused on figurative language in the context of narrative writing instruction. Svensson (2018) conducted what might be the only longitudinal study into one Swedish child's developing uses of figurative language to achieve narrative writing purposes. Pointing to the considerable gap in the literature for this topic, Svensson (2018) stated:

> [T]here are to be found several gaps in our knowledge regarding the acquisition of figurative language. Most studies have targeted young children's figurative competence, and in addition they have focused on the comprehension rather than the production of figurative language. To my knowledge, there are no studies that from a longitudinal perspective include how children/adolescents use figurative language as a means of shaping literary/narrative style. (pp. 75-76)

Following our own search of the Scopus and ERIC research databases, we also struggled to identify more than a handful of previous studies into primary school-aged students' developing uses of figurative language for narrative purposes, which made Svensson's (2018) research useful to the present study. It was found that

the study's participant, Anna, used figurative language when writing narratives in relatively limited ways in Years 1–5 of primary school (i.e. up to approximately 11 years of age). Her early uses typically occurred at the word and clause level of the text, they were achieved with verbs and adjectives than nominal groups, and were limited to just one or two clauses (e.g. alliteration in "Gertrude giraffe", or noting that a character "took a giant leap"). Overall, Svensson (2018) described such uses as "precursors to more genuine figurative language use" (p. 86). From Year 6, Anna started incorporating figurative language into units that worked at the paragraph level of texts and began to shape her narrative style through more nuanced uses of figurative language, such as linking paragraphs through colour symbolism and contrast, marking transitions between paragraphs and story events, introducing narrative settings through sensual imagery, building themes and plots, and using figures to open up texts for reader inferences. While Svensson (2018) described Anna as an above average writer, it is unclear to what extent her uses of figurative language in Years 1–5 would reflect those made by Year 3 and Year 5 students who score highly on the NAPLAN narrative writing test. The texts analysed by Svensson (2018) were saved by Anna during and following her schooling, and were presumably not written as part of any standardised writing assessment.

As a second study in this area, Cordon's (2007) research in the UK focused on how drawing 8- and 9-year-old primary school students' attention to uses of figurative devices in mentor texts could improve the quality of their own narratives. With support from teachers who provided explicit models, drew attention to figurative language in mentor texts, and guided group discussions, the children 'were able to integrate the stylistic and organizational features of mentor texts into their personal repertoires and use them successfully in their own writing' (p. 29). The analysis of participating children's writing samples before and after this teaching intervention showed that 77 of 96 children progressed at a rate of development that 'significantly exceeded the national expectation for normal progress' (p. 13).

Two further studies explored primary school students' use of figurative language in the context of narrative writing. Burrell and Beard (2018) focused on the writing of 36 9-11-year-olds (i.e. children in Years 5 and 6 in the UK), split into three attainment sub-groups (high attainment, low attainment, and high gains). They found that the high attainment sub-group used considerably more figurative language in their narratives than the other sub-groups, but were surprised that few examples of metaphor, simile, or personification were used by any of the children despite the prominence of these devices in popular children's literature. Of the figurative devices that were used, alliteration and onomatopoeia were most common across the sub-groups, yet specific numbers of uses for the devices were not provided.

Similarly, Wulandari et al. (2024) sought to determine the range of figurative devices used by 21 Indonesian Year 5 students when writing narratives, finding that the students used 46 unique devices in their texts for many purposes. According to these authors, the children's uses of figurative language enhanced narrative appeal and expression; however, it is unclear from this study which figurative devices were used most by the children and whether figurative language use was associated with the perceived quality of the narratives.

Taken together, these studies suggest that supporting children to understand and use figurative language can enhance their narrative writing, particularly in their creation of engaging and dynamic stories. However, more research is needed to understand the extent that higher achieving students use figurative devices as they progress through the primary school years, and the specific impacts of different figurative devices on narrative quality.

Research context

This study explored high achieving students' uses of figurative language in the context of Australia's NAPLAN writing test. Students complete the test in 40 min, with 10 min recommended for planning, 20 for drafting, and 10 for revising/editing. Students only learn whether a given year's test will require narrative or persuasive writing at the start of the test, and they are not permitted to discuss the test with others or access any external information to support their writing during the test. Each year, students write in response to a brief prompt (i.e. a stimulus). Until 2016, ACARA published previous NAPLAN prompts. Figure 1 shows the 2016 prompt for Year 3 and 5 students. All narrative prompts have used this structure since NAPLAN testing began. Although ACARA stopped publishing writing prompts after 2016, the structure and format of the narrative tasks have remained consistent, including in 2022; the 2016 prompt is included here to illustrate this enduring format, not to suggest a gap in research focus between 2016 and 2022. The 2022 narrative prompt

Fig. 1 2016 NAPLAN prompt for Year 3 and Year 5: imagine

required students to write narratives involving characters being brave in response to a problem.

As explained in the NAPLAN narrative marking guide (ACARA, 2010), students' responses to the prompts are assessed by markers using ten marking criteria (see Table 1). Elaborations are provided for each criterion, and in these, figurative language is mentioned occasionally. For the Ideas criterion, students can achieve the highest score of 5 by using *extended metaphor* in their writing. For the Vocabulary criterion, students achieve higher scores by using *effective simile*, *alliteration,* and *effective personification*. And while figurative language is not mentioned in the elaborations of the Cohesion and Sentence Structure criteria, students are rewarded for having greater variety of clause types and including a sense of rhythm in their sentences, which can be achieved with the use of schemes (i.e. figurative devices that modify the expected order of words in clauses and sentences). The narrative marking guide also gives attention to metaphors and similes in its glossary of grammatical terms (ACARA, 2010, p. 78). While present, the emphasis on figurative language in the narrative marking guide is substantially more limited than the emphasis in the persuasive writing marking guide, suggesting that the test designers perceive figurative language to be more useful for writing arguments. By investigating the extent to which high-scoring students rely on figurative language in their narratives, this study offers a valuable opportunity to explore whether the lesser emphasis on figurative language in the narrative marking guide is warranted.

Method

Data collection

This study investigated the extent and effects of figurative language use by high-scoring primary school writers in the NAPLAN context. Every Australian primary school student is required to complete the test in Years 3 and 5 and it is marked in a consistent manner by trained independent markers, guided by a marking guide, rubric, and moderation process (ACARA, 2024). While the NAPLAN writing test only provides a snapshot of students' literacy and numeracy skills on one day each year, because it is a whole population assessment and involves a carefully managed, reliable assessment approach, students who score highly each year can be considered *successful* in this context. As we discuss elsewhere (Thomas, 2022; Thomas et al., 2015), important questions remain about whether success with NAPLAN writing translates to success in other writing contexts. But insofar as the NAPLAN writing test assesses fundamental aspects of writing (e.g. sentence, paragraph, and text structure; use of grammar and punctuation; communication of ideas; depth and breadth of vocabulary; spelling skills; etc.), we view it as a useful, if limited, measure of student writing performance.

Each Australian state and territory has an administration authority that stores completed NAPLAN writing samples. In Queensland, where the authors of this paper are based, the administration authority is the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority [QCAA]. From a larger set of writing samples, the QCAA

gave permission for the research team to access the 35 highest scoring narratives written by Year 3 and Year 5 students for the 2022 NAPLAN writing test (i.e. 17 by Year 3 students and 18 by Year 5 students). Emphasising the quality of these writing samples, 62,015 Year 3 students and 62,894 Year 5 students completed the test in Queensland in 2022.

From the 35 high-scoring writing samples provided by the QCAA, criterion sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to select five Year 3 and five Year 5 texts for this study that scored perfect marks for the ideas, vocabulary, cohesion, and sentence structure NAPLAN criteria. Since their elaborations mention figurative language explicitly, these criteria were most relevant to the topic of the study. After piloting the in-depth method of data analysis with one high-scoring writing sample, a total of ten writing samples was deemed appropriate for the scope of the study.

As outlined in the literature review, the primary school English curriculum in Australia mentions eight unique figurative devices explicitly, making it more detailed in this area than the CCSS or UK National Curriculum. It can therefore be assumed that Australian primary school students learn about these devices in the year levels they are mentioned, increasing the likelihood that students will use them in their writing. Definitions (adapted from Corbett and Connors (1998) and Harris (2017) and examples of these devices and the timing of their introduction in the AC:E are provided in Table 2.

The decision to focus on high-scoring students was grounded in our desire to better understand what these students do linguistically and rhetorically that allows them to achieve success on the NAPLAN narrative writing test. By identifying the stylistic and structural features that appear consistently in high-performing writing, we can start to understand the qualities that are rewarded under current assessment frameworks. This, in turn, provides a useful foundation for informing writing instruction, not by encouraging formulaic responses, but by illustrating the potential of figurative language (and other language and structural choices we explore in other papers) as tools for narrative enhancement.

We also wish to be clear that our desire is not to suggest that other students should merely conform to the writing styles of writers who score highly on NAPLAN. Rather, we are interested in how these students demonstrate particular forms of writing sophistication under time pressure and within test constraints that allows their writing to stand out amongst their peers' writing in terms of their narrative ideas, how they convey characters and settings, how they construct their sentences and paragraphs, and all the other aspects explicitly assessed in NAPLAN. Their work offers insight into what is possible for primary school students in this influential writing context.

Data analysis

The research comprised a qualitative content analysis of figurative language choices made by high-scoring Year 3 and Year 5 students. Content analysis is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts (Creswell, 2008). Researchers quantify and analyse the frequency and patterns

Table 2 Figurative devices mentioned in the primary years of the Australian Curriculum: English

Figurative device	Definition	Example	AC:E references
Alliteration (Scheme)	The repeated use of the same sound at the start of several close or consecutive words	A boisterous banter of students blended with the rhythmic rattle of rolling backpacks	Foundation, Year 1, Year 6
Onomatopoeia (Trope)	The use of a word that imitates the sounds it describes	Over the courtyard she clashed and clattered on the way to the classroom	Year 3, Year 6
Metaphor (Trope)	The comparison of two different things by implying a connection between them	Schools are fertile gardens where knowledge takes root and young minds can bloom	Year 5, Year 6
Simile (Trope)	The comparison of two different things by using 'like' or 'as' to make the comparison	The children gathered around the teacher, like bees around a hive	Year 5, Year 6
Personification (Trope)	Giving human qualities or abilities to things that are not human	The library books whispered enticing stories	Year 5, Year 6
Idiom (Trope)	A group of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent words	The students all passed with flying colours	Year 5, Year 6
Assonance (Scheme)	The repeated use of similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables of close or consecutive words	The playful students stayed late to engage in debate	Year 6
Hyperbole (Trope)	The intentional use of exaggerated terms to emphasis meaning	For maths we were forced to sit and work through a thousand complex equations	Year 6

of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts (Busch et al., 2005). To conduct the content analysis in this study, we followed an eight-step framework outlined by Carley (1993):

1. *Level of analysis*: For the level of analysis, we coded single words and sets of words appropriate to eight figurative devices mentioned in the primary year levels of the AC:E (e.g. metaphor can be achieved with a single or multiple words, while alliteration always involves sets of words).
2. *Number of concepts coded*: Once identified, figurative devices used by the high-scoring children were categorised as schemes or tropes depending on whether they involved variance in the meaning of words (trope) or variance in typical word order (scheme).
3. *Coding for existence or frequency of a concept*: We coded the frequency of the eight figurative devices used by the high-scoring students.
4. *Distinguishing concepts*: The names of certain figurative devices have been updated from the original Greek to more contemporary versions (e.g. personification was classically named prosopopoeia). Whether classical or contemporary names were used in the AC:E, these devices were coded in the samples.
5. *Design and use of translation rules*: Translation rules were created for each figurative device and used to enhance consistency, organisation, and validity of the content analysis. This set of translation rules is provided in the Appendix.
6. *Treatment of irrelevant information*: In the writing samples, students' use of the figurative devices could be described as *relevant* information. However, the study also involved consideration of the impact of figurative device use on the surrounding words and the narratives broadly. In this way, all information in the high-scoring texts was considered relevant to the study.
7. *Text coding*: We used Lumivero's (2024) NVivo qualitative data analysis software to analyse figurative device use in the writing samples. First, the narratives were imported as data sources into NVivo. Next, eight predefined categories or *nodes* were set up for the figurative devices mentioned in the primary years of the AC:E. Coding involved reading through the student narratives and systematically coding instances where each device was used.
8. *Analysis of findings*: With the texts coded, NVivo's query tools were utilised to examine the results. For example, we generated a frequency table of figurative device use, identified students who used figurative devices more frequently or a wider range of devices, and compared the choices of Year 3 and Year 5 students. This analysis allowed us to address the research questions by identifying patterns and draw conclusions about the extent and impact of students' figurative language use.

Regarding Point 7, the text coding process in NVivo was facilitated by the first author, who has experience analysing figurative language use by student writers (Thomas & Brett, 2016). As a pilot, one high-scoring writing sample was fully coded, with translation rules written alongside the coding to outline requirements for figurative devices to be counted. The initial coding was supported by a

co-author, who helped determine when borderline cases should or should not be coded, leading to a refinement of translation rules. The first author used the translation rules to code the remaining nine high-scoring narratives. The data analysis and translation rules were shared with all authors, who reviewed the coding and raised any disagreements or questions. Six discrepancies were identified, leading to a meeting of authors to discuss the results. The discrepancies were discussed by the team until full agreement was reached. We acknowledge that identifying figurative devices in student writing inevitably involves an interpretive element. To enhance the trustworthiness of our analysis, we treated these decisions as opportunities for reflexive dialogue and triangulated across researcher perspectives to minimise risks posed by individual bias. This process of cross-checking and collective deliberation served as a form of researcher triangulation (Patton, 1999), supporting both the consistency and credibility of the findings.

Since six of the eight figurative devices are introduced in the AC:E in Year 5, it was anticipated that the high scoring Year 3 students would have used a smaller range and fewer figurative devices in their narratives. With well-known tropes like metaphor, simile, and hyperbole not introduced in any of the explored primary English curricula until later in primary school, the use of these devices by high scoring Year 3 students was anticipated to be less than by Year 5 students. In addition, it was expected that Year 3 students' use of these devices would be less sophisticated in terms of the impact on narrative quality. However, since these devices are mentioned explicitly in the AC:E, and since higher scores are awarded to students who use such devices for several of the NAPLAN marking criteria, evidence of their controlled use was anticipated in these high scoring texts.

An ethical exemption was obtained from the [University's name] Research Ethics and Integrity Team (Reference Number) to conduct this research. The anonymity of the high scoring students whose work was analysed has been protected at all times. The QCAA deidentified the narratives before providing them to the research team and required that full versions of the texts could not be published. Despite this limitation, we were permitted to include text extracts that highlighted the students' figurative language choices.

Results

Determining the extent of figurative language used in the high scoring texts

First, we calculated the frequencies of figurative devices in each writing sample to address Research Question 1. For each device, we calculated the total occurrences in each writing sample separately, providing raw frequency counts for each device per sample (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 3, the most frequently used devices across all writing samples were (in order of use) onomatopoeia, alliteration, idioms, hyperbole, and metaphor. All ten high scoring students used onomatopoeia at least three times and alliteration and hyperbole at least once in their narratives. In contrast,

Table 3 Frequency of figurative devices used in each writing sample

	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5	**Total**
Alliteration	4	2	3	3	7	1	10	5	9	11	**55**
Onomatopoeia	3	3	11	4	6	10	13	10	12	3	**75**
Metaphor	0	2	4	3	2	4	6	4	1	2	**28**
Simile	0	0	1	0	1	2	2	4	1	1	**12**
Personification	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	2	0	3	**11**
Idiom	0	0	2	0	1	4	9	8	6	8	**38**
Assonance	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	**6**
Hyperbole	3	2	2	1	1	4	5	7	4	3	**32**
Total	**12**	**9**	**25**	**12**	**19**	**27**	**48**	**41**	**33**	**31**	**257**

assonance, personification, and similes were used more sparingly across the writing samples (i.e. 12 or fewer times). To aid comparison, we combined the frequencies of figurative device use by year level (see Table 4).

Table 4 indicates that the Year 5 students consistently used figurative devices more frequently compared to Year 3 students. The most notable differences included the Year 5 students' more frequent use of alliteration, idioms, similes, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia. The only figurative device used more frequently in the Year 3 texts was assonance.

Although all students had 40 min to write, as expected, the Year 5 students wrote longer texts. To enable a fair comparison, we determined the average number of words used in the writing samples by year level (i.e. Year 3: 1460/5 = 292; Year 5: 2560/5 = 512). Standardised frequency rates were calculated as the number of uses of each device per year level divided by the average number of words per year level, multiplied by 100 and calculated to the nearest whole number (see Table 5). This provided a measure of how frequently the high scoring students used each figurative device per 100 words.

The findings indicated that, after standardising for text length, the Year 5 students had higher frequencies for four figurative devices, the frequencies were the same for

Table 4 Frequency of figurative devices used by year level

	Y3 (n = 5)	Y5 (n = 5)	Total (n = 10)
Alliteration	19	36	55
Onomatopoeia	27	48	75
Metaphor	11	17	28
Simile	2	10	12
Personification	2	9	11
Idiom	3	35	38
Assonance	4	2	6
Hyperbole	9	23	32
Total	77	180	257

Table 5 Frequency of each figurative device used per 100 words by year level

	Y3 (n = 5)	Y5 (n = 5)
Alliteration	7	7
Onomatopoeia	9	9
Metaphor	4	3
Simile	1	2
Personification	1	2
Idiom	1	7
Assonance	1	0
Hyperbole	3	4

two devices, and Year 3 students had higher standardised frequencies for the remaining two devices. The only device that was far more commonly used by the older students was idiom (7 for Year 5 vs 1 for Year 3 per 100 words).

We then determined the combined use of figurative devices per 100 words by year level (rounded to the nearest whole number). We calculated the total use of figurative devices by year level (i.e. Year 3 = 77; Year 5 = 176), divided these totals by the average word count of each year level, and multiplied the results by 100 (see Table 6).

Regarding overall usage, Table 6 indicates that the Year 5 students used figurative language more frequently than the Year 3 students (i.e. 34 figurative devices used for every 100 words written vs 27 by Year 3 students). The older students used more figurative devices overall while also integrating them more densely into their writing, suggesting greater linguistic maturity. But even at Year 3, figurative devices were found to be a prominent feature of high scoring writing samples. Importantly, the analysis only included eight figurative devices mentioned explicitly in the primary school year levels of the AC:E; had it included a fuller range of schemes and tropes, the proportion of figurative language use would likely be even greater.

Exploring how figurative language was used to enhance the narratives

In this section, we pair the quantitative results with a qualitative explanation of how the high scoring students used figurative language to enhance their narratives and communicate themes related to the topic of bravery. Three Year 3 extracts and three Year 5 extracts have been selected to exemplify the roles played by these language choices in middle and upper primary school students' narratives.

Table 6 Total frequency of figurative devices used per 100 words by year level

	Y3 (n = 5)	Y5 (n = 5)
Figurative devices	27	34

Year 3 Extract 1

In Text 3.1, the main character Joe, who dreams of one day caring for zoo animals, got caught up in an attempted animal robbery and eventually worked with a tiger cub to save the animals. The extract shown in Table 7 was taken from the orientation stage of the narrative, before Joe got to the zoo where he and the animals would be captured by criminals.

The author of Text 3.1 used several figurative devices to communicate the dynamic nature of events and foreground the upcoming complication in the narrative. After introducing Joe, the use of an idiom (i.e. '*his eyes nearly popped out*') and hyperbole of the same phrase captured Joe's shocked reaction to the news story. As Joe watched, the combined use of a metaphor (i.e. '[the animals] *flooded* through the gates') and simile (i.e. '*like a tsunami*') created further visual imagery, evoking the reader's sight by depicting a massive, unstoppable force of animals, emphasising the intensity and chaos of the scene. The comparisons to two natural disasters (i.e. floods and tsunamis) evoked a sense of urgency and fear in the animals as they spread across the scene, thereby enhancing the reader's emotional engagement and understanding of the events at the zoo. Two uses of onomatopoeia (i.e. '*popped*', '*rushed*') conveyed the dynamic nature of the orientation, which was further intensified by the final use of metaphor (i.e. '[Joe] *barrelled* into the car'). Collectively, the author's use of figurative devices portrayed pandemonium at the zoo and Joe's immediate reaction, quick thinking, and decisiveness. This built Joe's character and helped to justify his bravery when facing dangerous criminals later in the narrative.

Year 3 Extract 2

Text 3.2 is a narrative about a girl named Abby who was growing up near a forest, which she was forbidden from entering. On her seventh birthday, her family surprised her with a trip into the forest for a nice walk. The following extract (see Table 8) was taken from the middle of the narrative and communicates the main complication.

As discovered in many of the high-scoring texts, the author of Text 3.2 used figurative language to convey danger in a situation, thereby creating a need for bravery. The use of hyperbole (i.e. '*so frightened she jumped*') emphasised Abby's immediate reaction to a fearful event (i.e. hearing a pack of wolves in the forbidden forest). Knowing that Abby was afraid made her brave response more impactful. The following sentence contained two figurative devices, with alliteration (i.e. 'As they walked *f*urther into the *f*orest they all *f*roze') conveying a rhythmic sense of movement followed by a sudden stop. Here, the use of metaphor (i.e. 'they all *froze*') exaggerated this moment of immobilising fear. The use of onomatopoeia (i.e. 'snarling') added a sense of menacing sound to the wolf pack, creating a palpable sense of danger. Together, the uses of figurative language in this complication contributed to the narrative theme by emphasising how forbidden places are often dangerous, but also provide opportunities for facing fears through bravery. The author's use of figurative language lay the groundwork for the subsequent resolution stage, in which the main character's bravery allowed her to protect her family from the wolves.

Table 7 Extract and uses of figurative language from the orientation/introduction stage of Text 3.1

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
3.1	One day, there was a kid whose name was Joe. He loved animals. His dream was to become a zookeeper and care for the tigers. on his twenty eighth birthday he decided to apply for the tiger zoo. He turned on the news thinking about it when his eyes nearly popped out. The news was about a zoo. He kept on watching as the tigers and all the other animals leapt out of the holes in the glass and flooded through the gates like a tsunami. He had an idea. Joe rushed to the coffee table to grab his keys. He ran out the door and barrelled into the car	• Idiom: his eyes nearly popped out • Hyperbole: his eyes nearly popped out; [the animals] flooded through the gates like a tsunami • Onomatopoeia: popped; rushed • Metaphor: flooded through the gates; barrelled into the car • Simile: through the gates like a tsunami

Table 8 Extract and uses of figurative language from the complication/middle stage of Text 3.2

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
3.2	Abby got told that they were going into the forest. But when they got there they heard a pack of wolves. Abby was so frightened she jumped. As they walked further into the forest they all froze. There in front of them were grey, fierce, snarling wolves	• Hyperbole: Abby was so frightened she jumped • Alliteration: As they walked further into the forest they all froze • Metaphor: they all froze • Onomatopoeia: grey, fierce, snarling wolves

Year 3 Extract 3

In Text 3.3, three boys went on a rock-climbing adventure in the Amazon Rainforest. As one boy (Charlie) was climbing, he got stuck, and despite their efforts, the others (Leo and Tom) struggled to rescue him. The following extract was taken from the resolution stage (see Table 9):

In this late part of Text 3.3, the increasingly desperate boys heard footsteps and called for help. The idea of hearing and making sound was key to how the characters resolved the main complication, with the author's figurative language choices particularly effective at evoking auditory imagery to stimulate the reader's sense of hearing. First, the use of onomatopoeia (i.e. 'loud, *stomping* footsteps'), emphasised what could be heard when the boys had given up hope. The desperation in their call for help was heightened by the use of personification (i.e. 'the whole forest could hear it!'), communicating extreme volume. As the boys waited for a response, the use of alliteration in 'came closer and closer' matched the increasing tension as footsteps approached (i.e. the repeated /k/ phoneme sounded like footsteps and the boys' heartbeats), immersing the reader in the moment. The author's use of hyperbole at the beginning (i.e. 'so loudly the whole forest could hear it!') and end of this conclusion (i.e. felt more relieved than ever.') served to amplify the urgency of the situation, and the eventual relief shared by the characters and reader. Together, this author's layered use of figurative language emphasised the need for bravery and showed the boys' courage and relief when facing the unknown.

Together, these extracts provide examples of how high-scoring Year 3 students in 2022 used figurative language for several important literary purposes in their orientations/introductions, complications/middles, and resolutions/conclusions. Figurative devices were used to evoke vivid imagery related to chaos, fear, danger, extreme conditions, hopelessness, and courage, providing scenarios that required characters to demonstrate bravery. Such choices communicated a theme that *bravery involves the determination to protect loved ones despite fear/risks to personal safety*.

Year 5 Extract 1

In Text 5.1, the main character Jack wakes up to loud noises that turn out to be the wizard Merlin, who, after being transported through time, ends up defeating the evil Witch of the Lake in Jack's backyard. The following extract is from the narrative's orientation, before meeting Merlin (see Table 10).

Many of the high-scoring texts began with orientations set in the middle of action. In Text 5.1, the author's use of onomatopoeia (i.e. 'Crash!' 'Bang!') for the first two words, followed by hyperbole (i.e. 'A cacophony of *deafening* noises') conveyed an immediate disruption and the threat of something unknown, as Jack was noisily pulled from his sleep. The immediacy of these actions was also highlighted by the metaphor 'bolting upright', communicating how Jack sat up suddenly, straight as a bolt. The hyperbolic description of Jack's '*insatiable* appetite for adventure' contrasted with his later apprehension creeping down the stairs, conveying an internal conflict that set up the need for bravery. Personification of the environment (i.e. 'twinkling stars *peeking*') and alliteration (i.e. *b*etween the *b*illowing, grey

Table 9 Extract and uses of figurative language from the resolution/conclusion stage of Text 3.3

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
3.3	Suddenly, Leo and Tom heard loud, stomping footsteps. They called for help so loudly the whole forest could hear it! Soon, the footsteps came closer and closer. Not much later, they could see a man walking towards them with climbing gear as well. When the man arrived beside the three friends, he helped Charlie down the cliff. Now that Charlie was safe, they all thanked the man and felt more relieved than ever	• Onomatopoeia: loud, stomping footsteps • Personification: the whole forest could hear it! • Alliteration: came closer and closer • Hyperbole: They called for help so loudly the whole forest could hear it!; they all thanked the man and felt more relieved than ever

Table 10 Extract and uses of figurative language from the orientation/introduction stage of Text 5.1

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
5.1	Crash! Bang! A cacophony of deafening noises woke Jack up from his deep slumber. Immediately bolting upright in his bed, Jack, an inquisitive 10-year-old boy with emerald-green eyes sparkling with curiosity and an insatiable appetite for adventure, peered out the window. There were twinkling stars peeking between the billowing, grey clouds. There was a gleaming blue object amongst the purple blossoms of the Jacaranda trees. Clash! The peculiar noises commenced. Apprehensively creeping down the creaky stairs one agonising step at a time, he quickly searched for the nearest defensive weapon—a cricket bat. With his fertile imagination running wild, a montage of terrifying scenarios raced through his head	• Onomatopoeia: Crash; Bang; Clash; creaky • Hyperbole: A cacophony of deafening noises; an insatiable appetite for adventure • Metaphor: bolting; appetite; montage • Personification: stars peeking between the billowing, grey clouds • Alliteration: appetite for adventure; between the billowing; creeping down the creaky • Assonance: creeping… creaky • Idiom: his fertile imagination running wild; terrifying scenarios raced through his head

clouds) added to the mysterious atmosphere, while a further use of alliteration and assonance (i.e. '*cree*ping down the *crea*ky stairs') emphasised Jack's nervousness. As he considered the noises, the use of idioms (i.e. 'his fertile imagination *running wild'*; 'terrifying scenarios *raced through his head'*) portrayed the mental challenges of being brave when facing the unknown. Though the main actions in the story had yet occurred, the author's figurative language use in the orientation/introduction created a sensory experience for readers, exploring bravery as a complex interplay of curiosity and fear, and an internal and external struggle. The author's nuanced choices presented bravery as a multifaceted concept, making for a more developed exploration of what it means to be brave.

Year 5 Extract 2

Text 5.2 told the story of a brother and sister who bravely volunteered when a violent neighbouring village demanded either two children be sent as a tribute or the children's own village would be destroyed. In the following extract (Table 11), the children have volunteered and are travelling between the villages where they expect to meet their end.

In this extract, the student's use of figurative language built a sense of apprehension as the two characters reached the neighbouring village. Alliteration and onomatopoeia (i.e. 'as he reached the *g*ates, he *gulped*') conveyed the brother's increasing fear of what was to come. The author personified the gates (i.e. *'tall and menacing, looming over them*') and used a simile (i.e. '*like a deadly, snarling beast'*) to portray the obstacle as intimidating. Verb metaphors were used (e.g. 'steel dragons *prowling* the perimeter'), transforming the gate into a symbol of the danger lurking behind, thereby amplifying the bravery required for the siblings to proceed. For the narrative to conclude, the characters would need to act in the presence of imminent danger. Together, the author's figurative language use created a more detailed, emotionally charged scene that presented bravery as the willingness to act despite danger. This elevated the siblings' act of approaching the village into an engaging struggle of confronting one's fears through bravery.

Year 5 Extract 3

Text 5.3 told the story of Darcy who feared public speaking and recognition. When the school principal called his name to accept an award during assembly, Darcy ran from the auditorium and missed out on his award. A blue genie appeared and Darcy wished for bravery to accept the award. The following extract (see Table 12) describes how the complication was resolved through a twist that concluded the narrative.

In the extract, the author used several figurative devices to illustrate Darcy's journey from false confidence to confronting a difficult truth. The combined use of metaphor and hyperbole to start (i.e. '[I] felt my mind *blossoming into a downright superhero'*) conveyed how empowered Darcy felt after meeting the genie. Uses of onomatopoeia and alliteration (i.e. *'jumped,' 'rushed,' 's*chool and *s*talked,' *'h*ome and *h*opped') created a series of dynamic and energetic scenes that reinforced

Table 11 Extract and uses of figurative language from the complication/middle stage of Text 5.2

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
5.2	Sprinting towards the building she left her brother behind, too focused on their goal to care about anything else. He raced after her and as he reached the gates, they gulped. The gates were tall and menacing, looming over them like a deadly, snarling beast. They had huge metal spikes lining the top and steel dragons prowling the perimeter	• Alliteration: as he reached the gates, they gulped; prowling the perimeter • Onomatopoeia: they gulped; a deadly, snarling beast; • Personification: The gates were tall and menacing, looming over them • Simile: looming over them like a deadly, snarling beast • Metaphor: huge metal spikes lining the top and steel dragons prowling the perimeter

Table 12 Extract and uses of figurative language from the resolution/conclusion stage of Text 5.3

Text	Extract from high-scoring narrative	Figurative devices in extract
5.3	The next day I jumped out of bed and felt my mind blossoming into a downright superhero. I rushed to school and stalked to the principal's office. Jubilant and confident, I accepted my awards right there and then, anxious to show my parents. I sprinted home and hopped between feet waiting to go in the house. But as soon as I tried the front doorknob, I noticed the latex looking suit that the genie wore. I pondered for a bit and then it came to me. It was the placebo effect. The effect that tricks the mind into believing something weird or crazy. My parents had placeboed me! Fury surged through my veins and the windows rattled as I stomped toward my parents. They had it in for them. I stayed brave for the rest of my life anxious to take risks. But even though my own parents used science against me, I still believe in magic	• Metaphor: my mind blossoming into a downright superhero; Fury surged through my veins • Hyperbole: a downright superhero; the windows rattled as I stomped toward my parents • Alliteration: school and stalked; home and hopped; latex looking; parents had placeboed • Onomatopoeia: jumped; rushed; hopped; rattled; stomped • Idiom: They had it in for them

Darcy's newfound bravery. As a twist, Darcy realised his parents used the placebo effect on him, leading to the need for a different kind of bravery to confront his parents' deception. The use of a verb metaphor (i.e. Fury *surged* through my veins) and an idiom (i.e. 'They *had it in for them*') powerfully expressed Darcy's emotions and desire for justice. The author's uses of figurative language enhanced the narrative by communicating a nuanced exploration of bravery as the confidence to act when afraid and to seek justice.

Conclusion and implications

This study investigated high-scoring primary school students' use of figurative language for narrative writing in the context of the 2022 NAPLAN writing test. It revealed patterns in the frequencies and functional uses of eight figurative devices mentioned in the AC:E. Notably, the findings support and challenge aspects of existing research and policy related to figurative language development, and raise several implications for primary teacher practice.

A key finding was the prevalence of onomatopoeia and alliteration in the Year 3 and Year 5 narratives, reflecting similar findings from Burrell and Beard's (2018) investigation into 9–11-year-olds' narrative writing use of figurative language. Overall, these devices accounted for approximately half of figurative devices used (i.e. 130/257 uses). Both devices were used strongly by Year 3 and Year 5 students alike (i.e. 27 vs 48 uses of onomatopoeia and 19 vs 36 uses of alliteration respectively). One explanation for the prevalence of these devices is their early introduction in the AC:E, with alliteration introduced in the Foundation year and onomatopoeia introduced in Year 3 (ACARA, n.d.).

In contrast to Burrell and Beard's (2018) findings, the high-scoring Year 3 and Year 5 students also showed a strong ability to use metaphor and hyperbole to enhance their narratives. Four of the five Year 3 students included at least two metaphors in their narratives, even though metaphor is not introduced in the AC:E until Year 5. This suggests high-scoring Year 3 students are capable of using metaphors. In a developmental sense, Manning and Wray's (1990) research found that 4-year-old children can comprehend metaphors in a rudimentary manner, but that their comprehension increases substantially by the age of 8. Metaphors are taught from Year 4 in the CCSS, which might represent a more appropriate point of introduction since high-scoring students are already rewarded for their use in Year 3. With students generally capable of comprehending metaphors well by the age of 8, further research is needed to determine whether an earlier introduction to metaphor, hyperbole, and other figurative devices in classrooms would increase their use by Year 3 writers. Research by Cordon (2007) found that drawing middle primary school students' attention to uses of figurative devices in mentor texts increases the uptake of these devices in students' writing, so this represents a promising area for further investigation.

There were notable differences in the high-scoring students' uses of the other figurative devices. Year 5 students were far more likely to use idioms (i.e. 3 vs 35 uses), which can be explained by Manning and Wray's (1990) findings that children

only *begin* to comprehend idioms by the age of 9. In Burrell and Beard's (2018) study, high attainment 9–11-year-old writers used idioms sparingly, compared to even rarer uses by low attainment writers. The far greater use of idioms by high-scoring Year 5 students in the present study supports the introduction of idioms in the AC:E in Year 5.

Despite showing a strong ability to use metaphors, the high-scoring Year 3 students were less likely to use similes (i.e. 2 vs 10 uses) even though both devices require students to draw on similar inference skills (Lazar, 1996) and both devices are typically introduced at the same time in primary school English curricula (ACARA, n.d.; Department for Education, 2013a). Similarly, personification was only used twice in the five Year 3 texts, compared to 9 uses by Year 5 students. Despite this lower use, no students in Burrell and Beard's (2018) UK study used personification in their narratives, so the use by Year 3 and Year 5 students in the present study suggests that high-scoring students are able to do so in this context.

There are some similarities and differences between the findings of this study and those of Svensson (2018). Svensson's analysis of writing by her participant *Anna* showed that in Years 1–5, her uses of figurative language were limited to the word and clause level and typically incorporated figures or precursors of figures in one or two clauses at a time. It is possible to describe the high-scoring Year 3 students' uses of figurative language in a similar way; as shown in Texts 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, the students often peppered figurative devices across their narrative orientations, complications, and resolutions at the word and clause level. But in Year 5, high-scoring students were more able to incorporate these devices in more nuanced ways at the paragraph level of the text, such as the sustained use of related figures in Text 5.1 to build a sense of mystery and to communicate a contrast in the protagonist Jack's apprehension and interest in adventure, or in Text 5.2 where several devices are used to simultaneously convey the danger of the neighbouring village and the bravery of the twin protagonists. The high-scoring students demonstrated a strong capacity to use figurative language in ways that Svensson's (2018) participant Anna only developed in Year 6 and junior high school, and since Anna went on to become a professional writer, this emphasises the quality of writing produced in potentially stressful, constrained test conditions by the high-scoring students.

As explained in the literature review, markers of the NAPLAN persuasive writing test are explicitly trained to identify students' uses of figurative devices for one of the ten marking criteria (i.e. Persuasive Devices), supported by a detailed explanation of many devices in the glossary (ACARA, 2010). By comparison, the narrative version of the NAPLAN writing test (ACARA, 2010) replaces the Persuasive Devices criterion with one focused on Character and Setting, and only a handful of figurative devices are mentioned throughout the entire marking guide. This study has revealed that figurative language was a key feature of the analysed high-scoring students' narratives in 2022, with its use increasing in density and sophistication from Year 3 to Year 5. It is therefore concerning that the NAPLAN narrative writing marking guide downplays the importance of figurative language. Figurative language is certainly useful in persuasive writing (Thomas & Brett, 2016), but it also functions in several important ways in narrative writing. The lack of emphasis on figurative language

in the narrative marking guide is problematic because NAPLAN resources have been found to influence what is taught in classrooms (Lewis & Hardy, 2017). It is important to avoid a situation where scoring highly on the NAPLAN test requires students to go beyond the choices outlined in the marking guide, and yet, this study's findings suggest this might be a reality. Further research into the writing choices that characterise higher- and lower-scoring NAPLAN narratives would help to determine whether the narrative marking guide gives sufficient emphasis to this and other aspects of language.

The study also has practical implications for writing instruction in primary school classrooms. The high-scoring narratives were full of figurative language, despite the downplaying of figurative language in the narrative marking guide. With this in mind, teachers who *teach to the test* by disproportionately teaching prominent choices in the NAPLAN marking guide might inadvertently stifle their students' writing and prevent them from scoring as highly as the students in this study. These high-scoring students showed how figurative language can enhance elements of storytelling in several important ways, as we have explored. Instead of focusing too heavily on addressing the NAPLAN criteria, teachers might instead expose students to creative uses of figurative language in varied story forms, helping them to understand and enjoy the effects of playful and symbolic language for storytelling, which may improve their NAPLAN narratives as a by-product.

Lastly, it is crucial that classroom practices promote writing choices that are characteristic of successful writing in different contexts. Our hope is that this study provides insight into the writing choices made by high-scoring primary school students in the context of Australia's national writing test. These students' narratives demonstrate a capacity for imaginative, figurative expression that goes well beyond descriptions of figurative language use in the narrative marking guide (ACARA, 2010), offering examples of how writing in this context can exhibit creativity and quality despite the test's constraints.

This study represents an initial step in a broader research agenda aimed at understanding how students make linguistic, rhetorical, and structural choices across a range of writing contexts. Future research will involve comparative analysis of higher- and lower-scoring NAPLAN narratives to explore how student writing choices vary across achievement levels, and how teaching might better support a wider range of students to develop expressive and effective writing skills. In addition, we plan to examine student writing from more authentic contexts (including but not limited to classrooms) to understand how figurative language and other writing choices are made when students are not writing under the constraints of high-stakes testing. Future studies could also explore how students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds draw on alternative figurative traditions, including those informed by First Nations languages and knowledge systems. These investigations will provide a more comprehensive account of writing development and inform pedagogical approaches that foster broader success with writing.

Appendix: Translation rules

Alliteration: Alliteration coding required there to be at least two uses of the same sound at the start of words in close succession (i.e. no more than two words apart) (e.g. 'prowling the perimeter'). Use of the same letter(s) at the start of words did not necessarily constitute uses of alliteration. For example, in 'climbing challenge' the words start with different sounds (i.e. /k/ and /tʃ/), and so would not be coded as alliteration. Uses of alliteration deemed unintentional or coincidental would also not be coded, such as 'that the' or 'was worth'.

Onomatopoeia: Authors have defined onomatopoeia in different ways over time, splitting it into types or groups. This study drew on Ullman's (1962) description, which split onomatopoeia into two types: primary and secondary. Primary onomatopoeia involves "the imitation of sound by sound" (i.e. where the word used imitates the acoustic experience, as in the words: buzz, crack, growl, roar, or squeak) (p. 84). In contrast, secondary onomatopoeia involves "the sound evok[ing], not an acoustic experience but a movement" (e.g. the words quiver, slink, squirm, or wriggle) or "some physical or moral quality, usually unfavourable" (e.g. sloppy, grumpy, sluggish, or wry) (p. 84). All uses of primary and secondary onomatopoeia were coded in the high-scoring students' narratives (e.g. rattled, snarling, stomping).

Metaphor: All instances of noun metaphor (e.g. his insatiable appetite for adventure) and verb metaphor (e.g. they flooded through the gates) were coded.

Simile: Any uses of 'like' or 'as' were identified and examined to determine whether they drew comparisons between targets and bases (e.g. The gates (target) loomed over them *like* a deadly, snarling beast (base)).

Personification: Any instances of human traits were applied to non-human phenomena were coded as personification. For example, the gates were tall and menacing; stars peeking between the clouds; and so loud the whole forest could hear it!

Idioms: Since idioms are phrases or expressions with meanings that are not predictable from the literal meanings of the words, any expression or phrase where the meaning was figurative rather than literal were coded (e.g. his fertile imagination running wild; terrifying scenarios raced through his head). In uncertain cases, an online *idiom calculator* (available here: https://www.thefreedictionary.com/) was used to check if an expression in question appeared.

Assonance: Instances of assonance were coded when at least two words in close proximity (i.e. no more than two words apart) shared the same vowel sound (e.g. 'creeping down the creaky stairs' – involves repetition of the 'ee' (/i/) vowel sound).

Hyperbole: Any expressions that involved the use of deliberate exaggeration for emphasis were coded as hyperbole (e.g. a cacophony of deafening noises; yelled so loud the whole forest could hear!).

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