Teaching Writing in Today's Classrooms: Looking Back to Look Forward

Edited by

Jan Turbill, Georgina Barton and Cynthia Brock

AUSTRALIAN LITERACY EDUCATORS' ASSOCIATION

Australian Literary Educators' Association Ltd
PO Box 3203
Norwood, South Australia 5067

www.alea.edu.au

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10 Learning to write: Analysing writing samples as part of considering how children become writers

Annette Woods

The author of this chapter discusses insights that can be gleaned about children as writers when schools regularly collect children's writing samples from year to year and use a consistent approach to the assessment of these samples across time.

Introduction

While children today use many tools – iPads, cameras, laptops, design and production software for example – to make meanings and communicate both in school and outside school contexts, *writing* or composing in print text manually is still key to school literacy success and the emergence of a broad range of other literacy capacities and skills (Mackenzie, Scull & Munsie, 2013). Children continue to spend a great deal of time writing in class, and achievement in many other school subjects and learning activities continues to rely on some level of proficiency in producing printed text. And yet the teaching of writing continues to be a second cousin to the teaching of reading. Troia (2007) believes that this may be in part at least as a result of a common assumption that learning to read should precede learning to write. What ever the reasons, despite a lot of writing going on in primary classrooms, there tends to be less teaching of writing in these same spaces (Luke & Woods, 2008).

Recent decades have seen an increase in accountability within education systems. This has resulted in a focus on increased testing such as we see in the systemic testing regimes of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiatives in the US and the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia, as well as in other contexts. While these standardised, systemic tests provide some information about whether children are learning to write, the unintended consequences of stretching their purpose beyond a cohort based, general 'health check' on

the education system has been well documented (Luke & Woods, 2008). However despite these very real issues with tests such as NAPLAN, the results on NAPLAN writing tasks over many years tell us that Australia's children are doing less well at learning to write than they are at learning to read (ACARA, 2014). In other words over the years less Australian children have been recorded as achieving the National Minimum Standard (NMS) in writing than in reading. For example in 2013, less than 90% of Australian Year 7 students reached the NMS in writing, as compared to 94% in reading. The gap grows by Year 9 with only 82% of students reaching NMS for writing and 93% for reading (ACARA, 2013). This result is mirrored in other contexts (Fang & Wang, 2011). For example, a 2012 report by the UK Department for Education (DfE) found that in the early years of primary school, students performed least well in writing as compared to reading, maths and science (DfE, 2012). It is clear that this phenomenon is a result of a multitude of factors, and that in a country like Australia where state systems continue to have different histories of literacy pedagogy and curriculum, it is unlikely that these reasons are the same across all contexts. However it does raise the issue of how we assess writing, and to what purposes these assessments are put. My intention in this chapter is to suggest a simple approach to considering how children are developing as writers over time that could enable schools to make key writing instructional decisions based on evidence of outcomes for children.

The chapter does not address the full range of diagnostic, formative and summative assessments that we could expect to call on as part of a broad ranging approach to assessment of/for/as learning to write print texts in primary classrooms. This is not because assessment and these assessment contexts are not important, but because that is not the purpose of this particular chapter. Instead, in what follows, I suggest that if schools are serving the best interests of *all* of their children, teachers must have an overarching approach to taking responsibility for the development of writing for children across their primary education. While my focus in on texts produced in print mode and with paper and pencils as tools, the overarching ideas and principles suggested could easily be used to consider text production more broadly configured, including texts produced with digital tools. I aim in this brief description to provide evidence of what is

possible from the simple process of regularly collecting writing samples and having a consistent approach to assessment of these samples across the school so that children's development as writers can be followed across years.

Assessing writing in primary schools

While there is a growing body of research on writing, and the teaching and assessing of writing, assessment measures for early writers are not prolific (Coker & Ritchey, 2010). Indeed some have suggested that writing assessments are not only under researched, but that the centrality of assessing writing as part of teaching writing well, is somewhat ignored (Huot & Perry, 2009). Much of what is available as assessments of writing, are in fact assessments of the component skills of writing – the Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words Test or Writing Vocabulary Test-which feature in Clay's Observation Survey (Clay, 2013) are two such examples. These assessments remain popular in early years classrooms and, as is the case with their many counterparts, children's results on these specific skills tests are often used to represent children's outcomes as writers. While I don't suggest that what such component tests assess is not *part* of writing and worth assessing, they do not, in my view, assess children's capacity to make meaning by constructing print text. Consequently using them to scale how well children write is misleading at best.

In current versions of NAPLAN, writing is assessed in the subtest – Language Conventions – which contains items that aim to assess spelling, grammar and punctuation, and in a writing task which is marked manually[1] and graded across ten criteria (see http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/writing/writing.html). However there are a many limitations in using NAPLAN writing assessments to follow individual and cohorts of children at a school level. These include the fact that the results are returned to schools many months after the sample is produced and has been externally assessed. Also, samples are collected only twice during the primary years of schooling, namely Years 3 and 5.

1 The NAPLAN writing test will soon be moved to an online version. What changes will be made to the marking procedures of the writing test are still unknown.

I don't propose here one *best* approach to assessing writing. Clearly a full range of quality, just-in-time formative and summative assessments are necessary to support effective teaching and learning of writing in primary classrooms. There are a variety of approaches to assessing writing samples that teachers can draw on. Some are for specific learners such as the Year One Writing Analysis Tool, which advocates making judgements across six dimensions (Mackenzie, Scull & Munsie, 2013). Similarly the *six-traits writing rubric* popular in the US (available at http://www.azed.gov/assessment/six-traits/) requires teachers to make judgements about samples of student writing. Other examples include the *First Steps* materials (1997) which provide a developmental map of children's development in writing, some elements of which can be used to assess a child's capacities in writing sustained text, and various assessment tools designed by state authorities for teachers to use such as the *Qld Year 1 Checkpoint Assessments* trialled in 2011 (Woods & Amorsen, 2011) for example.

In our project (URLearning) we adapted the e-asTTle materials developed by NZ Ministry of Education (http://e-asttle.tki.org.nz/) to design an assessment tool which framed seven dimensions of producing print text across a seven point scale of standards. Below I present some detail about this assessment, but the real purpose of this chapter is not to describe the tool, rather to consider the process of collecting samples over time, so that they may be assessed using the same tool across a student's primary school career, and to consider what such a process could enable educators to know about in relation to cohorts and individual children.

Examining children's writing over time: Collective responsibility for children across their primary schooling

The writing samples discussed in this chapter are part of a much larger corpus of writing samples collected as part of a five-year school reform project which has come to be known as the URLearning Project. The main aim for this project was to investigate what quality literacy pedagogy in schools in high poverty, culturally diverse communities could look like. The school site was a mid-sized school located in the sprawling city outskirts of a large capital city. The community around the school was identified as disadvantaged according to all measures of social and economic inclusion

so the lives of many of the children who attended the school were impacted by poverty.

The samples were collected by classroom teachers and provided to the researchers for analysis purposes. Teachers were asked to provide a class set of writing samples that 'best represents what the students can do in writing'. Some teachers provided us with writing or English books and we selected a recent entry, others had students produce texts specifically for the purposes of collecting the samples, and still other teachers provided copies of the most recent writing task that their students had engaged with. For our research purposes the fact that the samples were produced in different contexts was not of concern. This is because regardless of how the texts were produced, they represented what the teachers thought was indicative of the students' writing and as such were useful for our overall questions about shifts in teachers' expectations and approaches to teaching literacy at the school. The samples discussed here were collected in the final month of each school year (2009–2012), and were immediately coded according to the individual children and the class that they attended for that year.

The larger study involved two coders, purposefully selected from a potential group of seven coders, making judgements about the individual writing samples using the assessment rubric developed for these purposes. The seven criteria and the outside range of the standards statements from this rubric are represented in Table 1 below (for more details about this assessment rubric please see Woods, Sesay, Shield, MacDonald & Doyle in preparation).

By allocating a score for each standard descriptor so that each criterion could be rated between 0 to 6, it was possible to combine these scores and allocate an overall score for each writing sample (between 0–42). This is indicated in Table 1 (over page) above where the standard statements for ratings of 0 and 6 are supplied for each criterion. While the rubric used for this research project suited this purpose, schools and teachers could use other tools as appropriate in a tracking process over time. If the purpose is to be able to track children as they develop as writers across their primary school career however, it is important that:

- there is collaborative agreement that the rubric (or tool) will be used

Table 1. Low and high point limits of the seven point standards scale across the seven descriptors on the writing assessment rubric
(Adapted from the e-asTTle materials the e-asTTle generic rubric available at http://e-asttle.tki.org.nz/Teacher-resources/Marking-resources-for-e-asTTle-writing)

Descriptor	Rating 0	Rating 6
Ideas	There is no particular idea evident as the writing is pre-writing	Ideas show insight, originality and some authority and/or reflection on the wider world AND Ideas are deliberately selected, effective and elaborated
Structure and Language	Pre-writing so structural and language ideas are not evident	Structural features are appropriate to purpose, controlled and effective AND language features are appropriate to purpose, controlled and effective
Cohesion	Pre-writing so no cohesion evident	Paragraphs are deliberately structured to direct the reader Ideas are linked effectively within and across paragraphs
Vocabulary	Pre-writing OR copied environmental print so not able to judge vocabulary	Precise language choices consistently enhance meaning and/or mood
Sentence Structure	Pre-writing OR Letter strings	Sentences are deliberately crafted to impact and engage
Punctuation	Pre-writing so punctuation not evident	Control of punctuation to enhance meaning. Few or no errors in punctuation
Spelling	Pre-writing	Spells high-frequency and a range of difficult words with few or no errors

- there has been time and training for teachers to work together to consolidate a shared understanding of the criteria and standards
- the rubric used is such that it can be used to represent writing across the full range of writing capacities from drawing symbols to competent, expert text production.

A process as simple as collecting and assessing one writing sample each year from all students in a school, could be a useful way to analyse the outcomes that are achieved by students. For the purposes of our research project, collecting a sample once a year was adequate, but that frequency is not presented here as best practice, and would not in any context be the only assessment of writing conducted of course. In the section that follows, I present a simple analysis of the outcomes of this process using data from the URLearning project. An analysis of samples collected from students across the first four years of their schooling is used as a demonstration of what can be achieved through this process at a cohort level. I then move to consider what such a process might enable in terms of knowing about how individual children are becoming writers as well.

School-based collective responsibility for improving school outcomes

Tracking the development of individual children across their primary school years is an important dimension of assessment. However, the push to improve outcomes in schools should be focused on school improvement and not used to support a deficit focus on either individual teacher quality or individual children's cognitive abilities. As such it is important to lift the processes aimed at improved outcomes beyond a focus on individual children and individual teachers. When a school takes collective responsibility for children across their schooling the process of reform of pedagogy is likely to be ongoing, sustainable and systematic – all important features of quality reform (Fullan, 2011). The power of this can be seen in the following reporting of the 2009 Prep cohort from the URLearning project.

To provide evidence of the power of tracking cohorts over time, the simple process of recording and considering the development of a cohort of students as writers over time is useful. In Figure 1 below, a simple line graph

is used to demonstrate the mean score given to writing samples using the method discuss above, of those children who began in the preparatory year (Prep[2]) at the URLearning school in 2009. The mean scores represented in this graph have been achieved by adding the scores allocated to writing samples of individual children and calculating the mean for the year level cohort (mean scores for the writing samples of all children are: 2009 – 2.92; 2010 – 11.85; 2011 – 15.21; and 2012 – 18.28). The gain in mean writing scores from prep to Year 3 of this cohort is clearly evident in Figure 1 below.

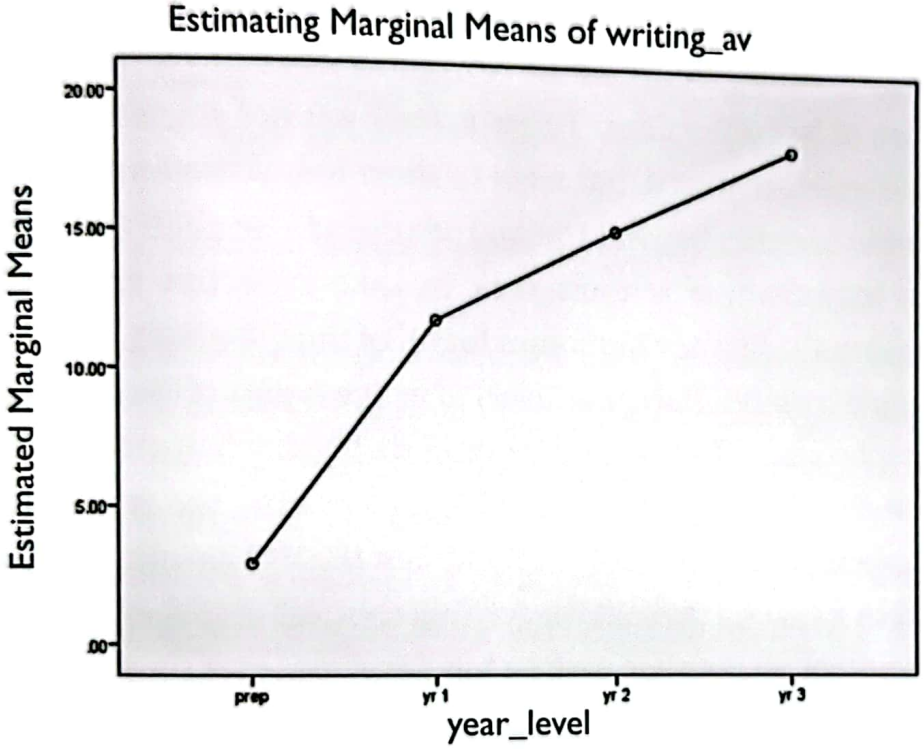

Figure 1. Mean writing task score for 2009 Prep cohort as they progress through first four years of schooling (n=14 as only those children for whom four samples were available are included in this analysis).

The power of such an approach is to consider what schools can do around cohorts who are not progressing in ways similar to the cohort represented in Figure 1. The utility of an approach such as this to keep a watchful eye on groups of students throughout their schooling years is important. If such an analysis is used by groups of teachers and leaders to collectively solve issues related to year level cohorts, a focus on pedagogy and reform is brought to the fore. Such an approach warrants consideration

2 Preparatory year or Prep is the first year of school in Queensland.

as schools work toward designing ways to improve outcomes for *all* of the children who they are tasked with teaching to become effective writers.

Investigating individual children's writing development over 4 years

The simple representation of how a cohort of children progress over the first four years of their schooling above demonstrates the importance of teachers working beyond their individual classes and students. However, part of a teacher's job is to assess and know individual children as well. Here I explore one child's development as a writer over time, by considering just the one sample collected in November of each year across the first four years of her schooling. To reiterate I am not suggesting this is the only assessment required, but wish to show how a simple process like this can provide insights beyond the boundaries of one child and one teacher that are important if schools seek to take collective responsibility of improvements to literacy outcomes for all of their students.

The child included here was selected as she is part of the cohort (n=14) of children who spent the first four years of their schooling at the URLearning school. Melissa[3] began school in 2009 by entering the preparatory year, and progressed through Year 1, 2 and 3 at the URLearning School. In the section that follows, I present the writing samples produced by this child to make comment on how her writing has developed over time and to consider how the simple process of collecting and assessing one writing sample each year across a child's primary school life might provide insights important for individual children, but perhaps more importantly for teachers and schools in pursuit of collective responsibility for student outcomes at their school.

Melissa

In her first year of school, Melissa engaged in a great deal of copying from the board and practising the skills of handwriting and mechanics of producing print texts. This is evidenced in her writing sample collected in late November of this year. When asked to provide writing samples that best represented the writing achievements of the students in the class, Melissa's

3 Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this chapter.

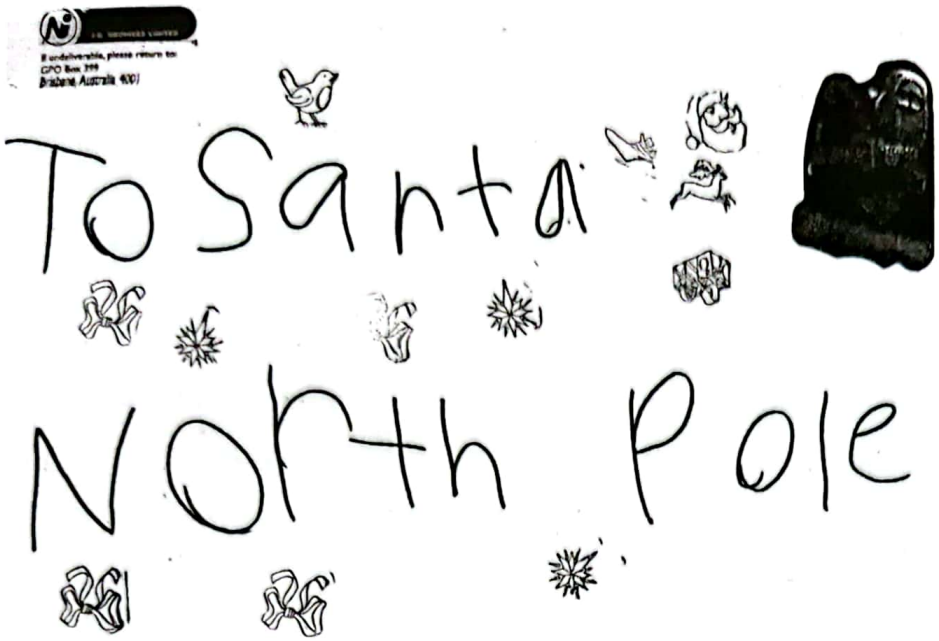

Figure 2. Melissa's text at the end of Prep

Prep teacher organised a lesson where the children copied a message to Santa onto a large envelop and then decorated the message with stamps and stickers. Melissa's message seen in Figure 2 below is indicative of the texts submitted by all of her classmates.

As this text has been copied from the board with strict requirements about what constitutes 'good writing' it is difficult to make judgements about Melissa's actual skills in producing written text and her capacity to relay ideas, draw on appropriate structures and formats to convey meaning, or to use her own vocabulary and cohesive devices to produce meaning. There is also little opportunity to judge other components of writing such as sentence structure, punctuation and spelling. It is possible to see that she has developed some understanding of letters and words at least. The task set provides more insight into what is considered as writing in Melissa's Prep classroom than necessarily what Melissa is capable of as a writer.

After two years of schooling, Melissa is writing her own texts and making meaning through these texts. The sample (see Figure 3 below) is a simple recount of what Melissa had been up to with her family on the weekend. She presents several ideas related to the topic with some elaboration – she made Christmas presents and played whilst visiting at her Nana's house. She demonstrates some understanding of the retell genre and the text generally flows in an appropriate sequence. There is a

range of personal words used, and some indication that she is using an increasing number of high frequency words – *the, and, went, weekend, was* for example. She has not yet mastered the ability to develop sentences that are varied in structure but syntactically correct, instead adding additional information through the repetitive use of the additive conjunction *and*. There is evidence that when not sure of spelling she relies on the phoneme grapheme relationships evident in words – *sisders* – and examples of how this strategy has failed her in some instances – *playd*. Unlike her text a year ago where it seemed evident she was unsure of the distinction of capital and lower case letters, by the end of Year 1 Melissa is sometimes using capital letters correctly and beginning to think about other punctuation.

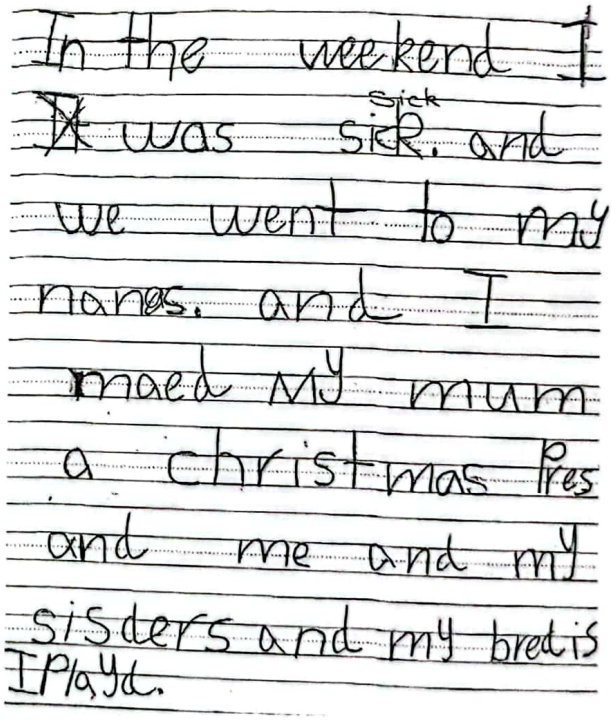

Figure 3. Melissa's text at the end of Year 1

By the end of three years at school and at the end of Year 2, Melissa is managing text to make meanings and convince people of her opinions. There are issues with over generalisation of punctuation such as demonstrated by the over use of capital letters, and spelling errors introduced as a result of continuing to rely on grapheme phoneme relationships that do not serve her well – *rile* for example. However her text (Figure 4 below) demonstrates an understanding of persuasive texts and some of the formal conventions around school expositions, and follows a basic structure of this genre.

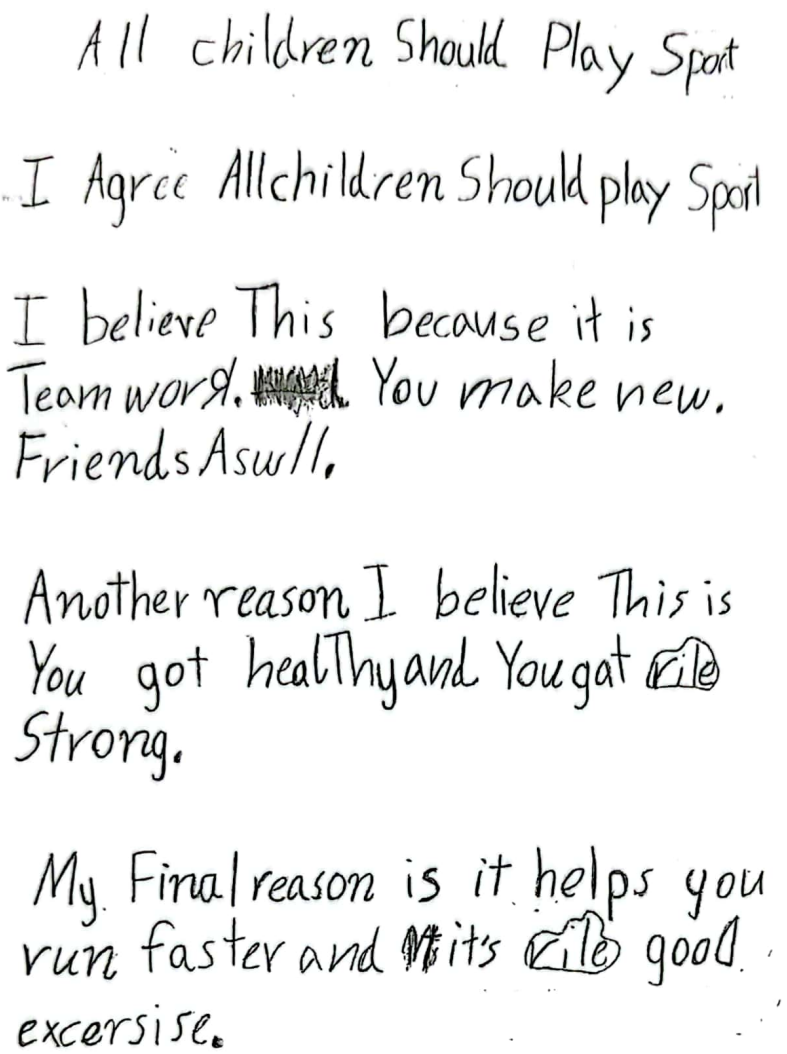

Figure 4. Melissa's text at the end of Year 2

After four years of schooling, at the end of Year 3, Melissa demonstrates her ability to elaborate on ideas to produce an entertaining narrative text (see Figure 5 below). The bears engage in a number of naughty revenge tasks, and the humorous twist at the end of the story whereby the bears find they have ruined the Big Giant's house and not the house of Goldilocks remains unresolved, leaving readers to come to their own conclusions. There remain issues with punctuation, spelling, handwriting and sentence structure, however, as a first draft, this narrative demonstrates well- developed understandings of the generic and language structures of narratives, and children's reading books in particular. As an example, the stylised large bubble print often used in this type of story, and repetitive phrases such as *splash splash splash* demonstrate an engagement with similar texts and a command of the purpose and audience of the text she has produced.

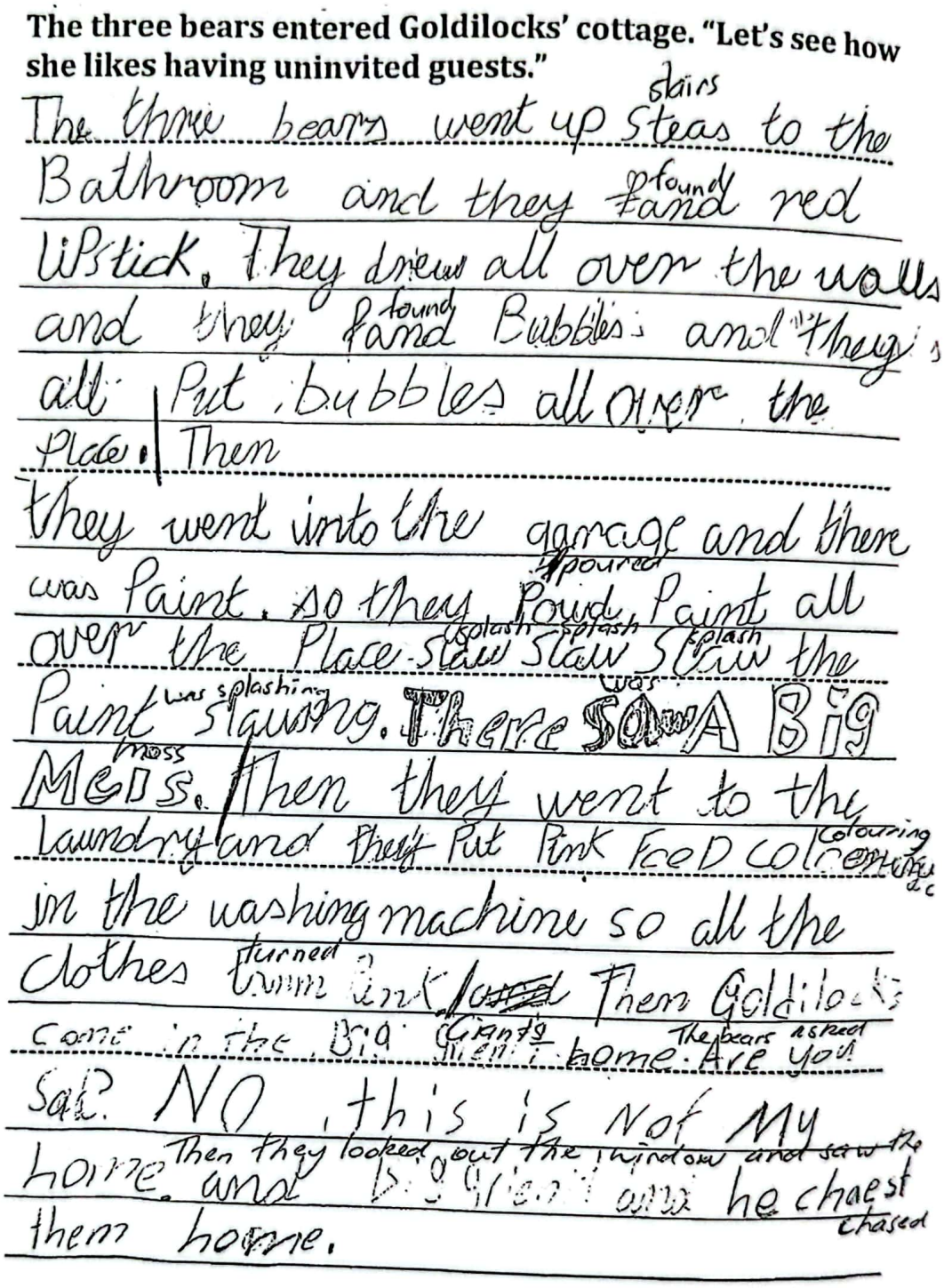

Figure 5. Melissa's text at the end of Year 3

Melissa's writing samples collected across the first four years of her schooling demonstrate a relatively smooth transition from an early, beginning writer able to perform as the teacher requested by copying accurately from the board, into a writer of stories who introduces her own ideas and manipulates texts and textual devices to create meanings for her audience. Of course not all of Melissa's peers progressed in these ways. At the end of three and four years some were still copying text written by

teachers and teacher assistants. For those students, this simple collection of four texts could highlight issues with their writing that could then be the target of appropriate pedagogical support.

The comparison of individual students with that of their cohort can be used to suggest specific issues that need addressing. In the case of Melissa, after a slow start she outperformed the mean achievement of her cohort across the years, and this is noteworthy. Details of the cohort and Melissa's individual scores are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Mean scores for all students who began Prep in 2009 on writing samples across four years of schooling Prep-Year 3 (2009–2012) and comparison to the score achieved by Melissa for her writing sample each year.

	Mean score for writing samples of all Prep (2009) students	**Melissa's score**
Prep (2009)	2.9	0
Year 1 (2010)	11.8	16
Year 2 (2011)	15.2	18
Year 3 (2012)	18.2	24

What was working for Melissa that was working less well for other students in her class and in other classes? Were there patterns across the cohort, as the children passed from one class to another? These and many other questions can feature in a shared and collaborative discussion of students' outcomes over time.

While the assessment of Melissa's writing presented above is partial, it is enough suggest how further investigation of children's writing is warranted. Comparisons of peers through this simple process, while not possible in this chapter, would have provided evidence that some were not becoming writers easily. In these cases teachers across the years could then work collectively to provide effective writing instruction in order to shift these patterns of writing development.

Conclusion

As Street (2001) reminded us 'an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings' (p. 430). While Street was referring to the ethnographic practice of literacy researchers, this call is as relevant to teachers working in schools collectively to improve the outcomes of their students. A key element of such reform must be to take solutions beyond individual teachers and students. One way to achieve this is to take collective responsibility for assessing, tracking and analysing the development of skills, knowledges and capacities of children as literacy learners over time.

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Annette Woods is an Associate Professor at the Queensland University of Technology. Contact: annette.woods@qut.edu.au.