The validity of a portfolio approach to instruction and assessment in writing in the primary school

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to Dublin City University, under the supervision of
Dr. Peter McKenna, Education Studies Department

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Master of Arts is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: Regina Murtagh

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Abstract

Assessment is widely recognised as being inherent in quality teaching and learning at all levels of education (NCCA, 1993, 1999). In recent years the emphasis on assessment has shifted from mainly summative functions to assessment for formative purposes or assessment for learning (Resnick and Resnick, 1992). This period has also seen a shift away from the use of standardised measures of achievement towards the broader concept of authentic assessment and performance assessment from which the portfolio has emerged as a dynamic assessment tool and a locus for reflective practice (Black et al., 1994). This study examines the teaching strategies and attitudes of three teachers of classes junior infants, third-fourth, and fifth respectively, in the greater Dublin area to the teaching and assessment of writing through their engagement with portfolios of children’s creative written work. Data was collected through five methods: (i) semi-structured interviews with the teachers; (ii) portfolios of pupils' writing assembled over a two-year period; (iii) open-ended pupil questionnaires; (iv) standardised test of reading achievement; and (v) observation of classroom practice. Within the portfolio collections three models were studied: working portfolios, documentary portfolios and showcase portfolios (Forster and Masters, 1996). Selected pupils' work was analysed by qualitative means for evidence of the writing process, for teachers' instructional and assessment strategies including the use of feedback in formative assessment. Pupil questionnaires captured student reflections on their work and illustrated their metacognitive knowledge in relation to writing. A framework based on Arts PROPEL at Harvard University (Winner, 1991) was used to assess the portfolios and the student reflections holistically. The study provides evidence for the validity of a portfolio approach to teaching, learning and assessment in writing in the primary school. The study also provides support for the view that effective teaching and assessment of writing is a complex and interactive process, which is not dependent on a particular method or approach (e.g., ‘process’ or ‘skills-based’), but is contingent upon several factors. Critical in the teaching-assessing process is the establishment of clear assessment criteria and the use of feedback in the context of formative assessment. The study raises several issues in relation to models of preservice and inservice teacher education and the influence of school climate in teachers’ ongoing development. The study concludes with a comprehensive review of the implications of these findings for classroom practice, teacher education, and for further research.
Chapter 1

Review of the Literature
CHAPTER ONE
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1. Introduction

1.1 It is a widely held view that wherever learning takes place, assessment should play an integral part in the educational process (Gipps, 1996; Horton, 1990; Hyland, Ireland, 1995; Irish National Teachers’ Organisation [INTO], 1997; Khattri and Sweet, 1996; Murphy and Torrance, 1990; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1993; Satterly, 1989; Stake, 1991; Stiggins, 1991;). Assessment is acknowledged to be one of the teacher’s most complex and important tasks (Madaus and Kellaghan, 1992; Stiggins, Conklin and Bridgeford, 1986). With issues such as accountability, assessment, standards monitoring, performance indicators, quality assurance and school effectiveness experiencing widespread currency, assessment has become, in the words of Broadfoot (1996) ‘arguably the most powerful policy tool in education’ (p21). Undoubtedly, the past thirty years or so has seen a mounting interest in educational assessment leading to the conclusion that in the United States (Madaus and Kellaghan, 1992) testing has become more important than other curriculum issues. Moreover, it regularly occupies the centre of the political stage in Britain, the US and in Ireland (Murphy and Broadfoot, 1995; Ireland, 1995; INTO, 1997).

While the earliest record linking assessment directly to a specific curriculum can be identified in the mid-fifteenth century (Madaus and Kellaghan, 1992), the widespread use of formal testing has its roots in the work on intelligence testing carried out in Paris at the turn of the century by Alfred Binet and his colleagues1. The work of the Binet team ultimately led to the first intelligence test, and the construct of intelligence quotient, or IQ. It quickly won widespread appeal and intelligence testing and the science of psychometrics became a dominant feature of the educational and assessment landscape in the United States (Gardner, 1992). The underlying notion in intelligence testing was that intelligence was innate and fixed in the same way as other

1 Binet and Simon, 1905; Methodes nouvelles pour le diagnostique du niveau intellectuel des anormaux. L’année psychologique II: 245-336.
inherited characteristics such as the colour of eyes or skin. This line of thinking led to the belief that intelligence could be easily observed and easily measured, and therefore, individuals could be assigned to levels, classes or schools which were commensurate with their intelligence.

1.2 Changes in thinking
Evidence of a shift in thinking from the traditional, psychometric approach to an approach which fulfils several functions has identified by a number of authors (see, for example Brown, 1991; Gipps, 1996; Lindsay, 1991; and Stiggins, 1991).

According to Caroline Gipps, Glaser’s 1963 paper on criterion-referenced testing (CRT) has been crucial in the development of educational assessment, marking the separation of education assessment from classical psychometrics. Prior to this, the emphasis on norm-referenced testing stemmed from the preoccupation of test theory with aptitude, selection and prediction. However, as Gipps (1996) observes, the psychometric testing model is essentially one of limitation as it measures the fixed attributes of the individual that cannot be changed. The psychometric approach is closely linked with the interpretation of scores in relation to norms. Norm-referencing grades an individual’s performance in relation to that of his or her peers, i.e. in terms of their relative performance rather than their absolute performance. Norm-referenced tests are designed to produce familiar proportions of high, medium and low scorers. Since students cannot control the performance of other students they cannot control their own grades. Consequently, Gipps considers the concept of limitation to be the major disadvantage of the psychometric approach.

According to Gipps, this model of assessment conveys an assumption of the primacy of technical issues, notably standardisation and reliability. In comparing individuals with one another using a certain test or assessment procedure, it is essential that the test is carried out in the same manner for all individuals, scored uniformly and the scores interpreted in the same way. Hence, standardisation is critical in this model of assessment as it contributes to the technical reliability of the test. However, Gipps points out that these requirements can have a negative effect on the validity and
curricular impact of the test. Later in this chapter, other criticisms of standardised tests will be examined in greater detail.

In the new interpretation of educational assessment Gipps asserts that assessment has begun to consider tests that look at the individual as an individual rather than in relation to a group. Gipps believes that in this context, educational assessment is used more constructively 'to identify students' strengths and weaknesses so as to assist (as oppose to measure) their educational progress.' (In Gipps, 1996).

Sally Brown (1990) outlines five themes which she regards as being characteristic of current approaches to assessment. In the first theme, Brown views assessment as a much broader concept and fulfilling multiple purposes. She believes that it is closely integrated with the curriculum and that the concept of 'curriculum' itself is conceived in very much broader terms than in the past. Assessment, therefore, has several functions including the diagnosis of causes of students’ success or failure, the motivation of them to learn, the provision of valid and meaningful accounts of what has been achieved, and the evaluation of courses and of teaching. Further, Brown believes that the emphasis is placed on assessment for summative purposes, that is, a report at the end of a course or period of study which purports to predict future performance, while greater stress is laid on assessment for formative purposes, that is the use of the information gathered to improve the current educational process. (Brown, 1990).

The second point that Brown raises is that there is now a considerable increase in the range of qualities assessed and in the contexts in which such assessment takes place. The traditional ‘academic’ qualities, which were regarded as being more amenable to measurement are no longer considered sufficient in terms of indicating of achievement. Areas of personal and social and behaviour are frequently considered an important aspect of assessment while the definition of ‘achievement’ within even traditional subject areas has expanded considerably (Brown, 1990).

Brown’s third theme concerns the advance of descriptive assessment. She states that this has manifested itself in the form of concern for criterion-referenced approaches that replace or complement traditional norm-referenced systems.
The aim has been to provide descriptions of what has (or has not) been achieved rather than to rely on pupils’ marks or grades, which have little meaning other than as a comparison with the marks and grades of others.’ (p11) (Brown, 1990)

In a fourth theme, Brown states that assessment is ‘concerned with the devolution of responsibilities for assessment to, for example, schools, teachers work experience employers and young people themselves.’ (p11) She points to the fact that the most common forms of assessment to which students are subjected to has been carried out by teachers, but that the assessment which ‘matters’ (i.e. national certification) has been coveted by external examination boards. The recognition that at all levels internal assessment by educational institutions is of crucial importance is changing all that.

Finally, Brown claims in a fifth theme that: ‘certification should be available to a much greater proportion of the population of young people than has been the case in the past’ (p11), thus pointing to assessment that includes, rather than excludes, as many students as possible.

As Stiggins (1991) asserts,

‘...[this] current assessment upheaval is not simply the latest fad to sweep the education scene. Rather, it signals the end of a 60-year era of educational assessment and our passage into a whole new era’ (p263)

1.3 Defining educational assessment
In view of the paradigm shift in approaches to assessment, consideration needs to be given also to the definition of educational assessment.

Duncan and Dunn (1989) see assessment in education as the process of gathering information: by teachers about their pupils, by teachers about their own teaching and by pupils about their own progress.

Satterly (1989) defines educational assessment as

‘an omnibus term which includes all the processes and products which describe the nature and extent of children’s learning, its degree of correspondence with the aims and objectives of teaching and its relationship..."
with the environments which are designed to facilitate learning. The overall goal is not to stop at the description (whether quantitative or qualitative) but to provide information to be used in decision making.’ p3

Madaus and Kellaghan (1992) on the other hand define assessment as ‘an activity designed to show what a person knows or can do. Thus, it is concerned with the appraisal of individuals.’ (p120) They see assessment in the classroom as being based largely on teachers’ observations of students as they go about their normal learning activities. The information which teachers derive from observations and assessments is then used to make important curriculum decisions, such as modifying teaching methods, reorganising the class, emphasising or re-presenting topics, or changing the pace of instruction.

Harlen et al., (1992, cited in Pollard, 1996) describe assessment in education as ‘...the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils’ responses to an educational task. At one end of a dimension of formality, the task may be normal classroom work and the process of gathering information would be the teacher reading a pupil’s work or listening to what he or she has to say. At the other end of the dimension of formality, the task may be a written, timed examination which is read and marked according to certain rules and regulations. Thus assessment encompasses responses to regular work as well as to specially devised tasks.’ (p264)

Wood (1986) argues that the reason why educational assessment should not be based on psychometric theory is that the performances or traits being assessed have different priorities stating that ‘achievement data arise as a direct result of instruction and are therefore crucially affected by teaching and teachers’ (p190). Aptitude and intelligence, by contrast, are traits which are unaffected by such factors.

The definition of educational assessment adopted by Wood (1986) is that it: (i) deals with the individual’s achievement relative to himself rather than to others; (ii) seeks to test for competence rather than intelligence; (iii) takes place in relatively uncontrolled conditions and so does not produce ‘well-behaved’ data; (iv) looks for ‘best’ rather than ‘typical’ performances; (v) is most effective when rules and regulations characteristic of standardised testing are relaxed; and (vi) embodies a constructive outlook on assessment where the aim is to help rather than sentence the individual.
Wood views educational assessment, therefore, as a model of assessment that can support learning and as such, aims to enable the individual to develop and further his or her learning rather than setting the limits to what he/she knows.

1.4 Purposes of assessment
Many writers have defined purposes of assessment and although viewpoints differ, a common thread of agreement exists among all of them.

In their publication, *Assessment and the Secondary School Teacher*, Macintosh and Hale (1976) identified six purposes for assessment: (i) diagnosis: to monitor progress and discover how the pupil is assimilating what is being taught; (ii) evaluation: to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching, leading in many cases to specific action; (iii) guidance: to assist pupils in making decision about future courses or career choices; (iv) prediction: to find out potential abilities and aptitudes and to predict probable future successes both in school and outside; (v) selection: to identify candidates most suitable for a course, a class or university; and (vi) grading: to discriminate between pupils and/or to assign them to a particular group. While the purposes are interdependent with considerable overlap between each one in practice, Frith and Macintosh (1984) observe that diagnosis, evaluation and guidance appear to be pupil-centred, and predication, selection and placement more teacher-centred. However, feedback is a possible outcome in all cases.

The National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) (DES/Welsh Office, 1988) developed a system of assessment that could be capable of serving four purposes:

- **Formative**—so that the positive achievements of a pupil may be recognised and discussed and the appropriate next steps may be planned.
- **Diagnostic**—through which learning difficulties may be scrutinised and classified so that appropriate remedial help and guidance can be provided.
- **Summative**—for the recording of the overall achievement of a pupil in a systematic way.
• *Evaluative*—by means of which some aspect of a school, a Local Education Authority or other discrete part of the educational service can be assessed and/or reported upon.

A further purpose of assessment, that of motivation, has also been identified by Munby *et al.*, (1989):

'If assessment actually emphasises positive achievement rather than reinforcing failure and if it is combined with dialogue and support concerning the identification of future goals and targets, then assessment can be used to *motivate* students.'(p13)

Of the many useful purposes of assessment, the formative purpose is the one which affects the learner most of all in the day-to-day interaction of teaching and learning. It is also a critical factor in this study as it is closely associated with instruction and assessment of writing using a portfolio approach. As Gipps (1996) notes

'While the Macintosh and Hale summary is helpful in analysis, it fails to emphasise the seventh purpose of assessment which is hinted at in the list of purposes in the TGAT Report under the heading 'formative', namely to help students to *understand* their own attainment and progress. The seventh purpose of assessment is not only to guide students and to diagnose their strengths and weaknesses but actually to help them to learn.'

The issue of formative assessment is revisited in Chapter Two as part of an examination of the issues in the assessment of writing.

**1.5 Principles of good assessment**

More recently, principles of good assessment have been outlined by Robert Tierney (1998). These principles emanate from his personal ideals and practices as well as theory and research. They include his child-centred views of teaching, pluralistic and developmental views of children, constructivist views of knowing, and critical theoretical views of empowerment. The principles stem from a concern that new directions in assessment need to be principled and thoughtful rather than whimsical. The thirteen principles are:

a) Assessments should emerge from the classroom rather than be imposed upon it.

b) Effective testing requires teacher professionalism with teachers as learners.
c) Assessment practices should be client-centred and reciprocal.
d) Assessments should be done judiciously, with teachers as advocates for students and ensuring their due process.
e) Assessment extends beyond improving tests to the purposes of assessment and how results from assessment are used, reported, contextualised, and perceived.
f) Diversity should be embraced, not slighted.
g) Assessment procedures may need to be nonstandardised to be fair to the individual.
h) Simple-minded summaries, scores, and comparisons should be displaced with approaches that acknowledge the complex and idiosyncratic nature of literacy development. Straightforward comparisons across individuals are usually arbitrary, biased and narrow.
i) Some things that can be assessed reliably across raters are not worth assessing; some things that are worth assessing may be difficult to assess reliably except by the same rater.
j) Assessment should be more developmental and sustained than piecemeal and shortsighted.
k) Most interpretations of results are not straightforward. Assessment should be viewed as ongoing and suggestive, rather than fixed or definitive.
l) Learning possibilities should be negotiated with the students and stakeholders rather than imposed via standards and assessment that are preset, prescribed, or mandated.
m) Assessment should be assessed in terms of its relationship with teaching and learning, including the opportunities learners are offered and the rights and respect they are accorded.

Clearly, Tierney’s emphasis on fairness, developmental nature, negotiation with students, lack of comparison, complexity of tasks—in short, what could be described as a ‘bottom-up’ approach—marks a radical departure from the more traditional ‘top-down’ model where pupils’ achievements can be reduced to a single score and plotted evenly along a normal curve.
The importance of an assessment model that supports learning is summarised by Gipps (1996) when she argues that any assessment model

'can, and must, be based on a model of assessment which will enhance and support good learning. Unless we do this we will never raise true educational standards.' (p251)

1.6 Approaches to learning

1.6.1 Traditional versus current views

At the same time as the changes in direction in assessment in the past thirty years have been identified, views on learning have also undergone a corresponding paradigm shift. According to Gipps (1996), learning was traditionally considered to be collection of independent pieces of knowledge. This view thus supported a model of teaching and testing separate skills on the assumption that their 'composition into a complex performance' could be reserved for some unascertained time later (Resnick and Resnick, 1992, p42). Current views, according to Gipps (1996), suggest that this is inappropriate.

'Skills and knowledge are now understood to be dependent on the context in which they are learnt and practised; facts cannot be learned in isolation and then used in any context. Complex skills are not complex simply because of the number of components involved in them but because of the interactions among the components and the heuristics for calling upon them. Furthermore, assessing separate components will encourage the teaching and practice of isolated components, and this is not sufficient for learning problem solving or thinking skills.' p256

The work of Resnick and Resnick (1992) in particular has been influential in the redefinition of learning. In their article, 'Assessing the Thinking Curriculum: New tools for Educational Reform' they describe the 'new basics of thinking, reasoning and learning how to learn' (p38) and describe the broader view of education and of learning which is emerging:

'a new vision of education has emerged, fueled partly by the needs of a changing economy and partly by recent research on learning and cognition. According to this view, education must focus on 'higher-order abilities', on problem solving and thinking, on ability to go beyond the routine and to exercise personal judgment. ...conditions of work are likely to change several times during an individual's work life, requiring a capacity for adaptive learning on the job. Employers, like colleges, are calling on the schools to provide educational programs that enable graduates to reason and think, not just to perform routine operations.' (p 38)
The difference in the new approach to learning is summed up in the following statement:

‘While it is not new to include thinking, problem solving, and reasoning in some students’ school curriculum, it is new to include it in everyone’s curriculum.’

Resnick and Resnick (1992, p38)

Abbott (1994) sees learning as ‘that reflective activity which enables the learner to draw upon previous experiences to understand and evaluate the present, so as to shape future action and formulate new knowledge.’ (pvi) This view is echoed by Kathleen Hall (1997), who describes learning in its current definition as: ‘not atomised and mechanistic, rather that it is whole, related to other learning, meaningful and applied, more than recognition, recall of facts.’ (p 72)

In The Intelligent School, MacGilchrist and her colleagues define the ‘traditional’ view of learning as the reception of knowledge, where the learner is passive and the appropriate learning style is formal. In this model, the learner is seen as ‘the empty vessel’ waiting to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The passive learner awaits stimulus which is provided by the teacher, while the learner’s existing knowledge, language, self-esteem, prior experience of learning or preferred learning style are not considered part of the learning process. (MacGilchrist et al., 1997). In the ‘progressive’ model, they see learning as discovery, the learner as active, and the learning style as informal and they elaborate on the view of learning as ‘...much more than the acquisition of facts. It involves questioning, understanding, making connections between existing and new information, and subsequently, being able to make use of this new ‘processed’ information.’ (p19)

1.6.2 Other models of learning and implications for assessment

Other models of learning are Constructivism, Metacognition, Zone of Proximal Development and Multiple Intelligences. The implications for assessment for each of these models are explored in this section.

Alternatives to the linear hierarchy model of learning are found in cognitive and constructivist psychology (see, for example, Light et al., 1991; Resnick, 1987;

1.6.2.1 Constructivism
According to Child (1995) constructivism means that the learner actively constructs both the knowledge acquired and the strategies used to acquire them. Gipps (1996) draws attention to current cognitive theory that suggests that learning is a process of construction, that is knowledge-dependent and tuned to the situation in which it takes place. Gipps believes that learning occurs through interpreting information, rather than through merely recording it. Therefore, instruction is an intervention in an ongoing knowledge construction process. She considers that in constructivist learning theory

'...students learn best by actively making sense of new knowledge—making meaning from it and mapping it in to their existing knowledge map/schema; to be useful new information must be linked to the knowledge structures, or schemata, already held in long-term memory. Thus knowledge is seen as something cohesive and holistic which provides a basis for later learning.'
(p257)

This view of learning is supported by the American Psychological Association (1997) when it describes how the learner constructs knowledge by linking new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.

'Knowledge widens and deepens as students continue to build links between new information and experiences and their existing knowledge base. The nature of these links can take a variety of forms, such as adding to, modifying, or reorganizing existing knowledge or skills...unless new knowledge becomes integrated with the learner’s prior knowledge and understanding, this new knowledge remains isolated, cannot be used most effectively in new tasks, and does not transfer readily to new situations. (APA, 1997 p18)

Implications for assessment
This view of student learning that sees students as active constructors of their own worldview, including school subject matter, means that an atomistic model of assessment cannot be practiced. Consequently, the implications for assessment are that levels of understanding and complexity of understanding, rather than recognition or regurgitation of facts, needs to be assessed. As Khattri and Sweet (1996) remark,
'...in order to strengthen all students’ educational experiences and to better meet all students’ needs, assessments that concurrently allow for an understanding of students’ learning processes and knowledge base and that support variations in pedagogy are required.' (p4)

1.6.2.2 **Metacognition**

Thinking about one’s own cognitive system is referred to as *metacognition* (Gage and Berliner, 1998; Gipps and Murphy, 1994; Raphael, 1989). Metacognition has been defined as ‘having knowledge (cognition) and having understanding, control over, and appropriate use of that knowledge’ (Tei and Stewart, 1985, p46). According to Gipps and Murphy (1994) ‘Metacognition is a general term which refers to a second-order form of thinking: thinking about thinking...It is a process of being aware of the and in control of one's own knowledge and thinking and therefore learning...’ (p24)

According to Tei and Stewart (1985), two types of metacognition exist. The first relates to the knowledge that successful learners have about various aspects of the learning situation which includes their own capabilities and limitations as learners. The second type refers to the self-regulatory activities that successful learners engage in to achieve comprehension when reading, solutions to a problem or learning in general. Examples of activities that show awareness of one’s knowledge (the first type) include: knowing the state or level of one’s understanding; knowing what is needed to learn in order to know or understand; knowing the value or utility of taking corrective action to remedy failures. Examples of self-regulatory activities that produce understanding (the second type) include: analysing the task to identify effective strategies; monitoring the effectiveness of the strategies; planning the action one will take throughout a task; identifying the important ideas; establishing and looking for relationships; self-questioning and self-testing (Tei and Stewart, 1985). Additional metacognitive strategies identified by Gipps (1994) to help plan, arrange, monitor and control one’s own learning include searching for connections and conflicts with what is already known, creating images, and making judgements pertaining to the level of understanding required for particular tasks (Gipps, 1994). The ability to process metacognitive strategies develops during early to middle childhood (American Psychological Association, 1997).
Implications for assessment
Since learners' self-awareness and control over thinking and learning processes promotes higher levels of commitment, persistence, and involvement in learning, learners need to feel that what they are being taught and how they are assessed is relevant to their own purposes. Learners also require assessment contexts where their personal interests, values, and goals are highly regarded and accommodated. (American Psychological Association, 1997; Gipps and Murphy, 1994)

1.6.2.3 Zone of Proximal Development
In the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), learning takes place at two levels: the level at which a child succeeds on his/her own in a variety of tasks or on a battery of tests. The second level is the level at which the child succeeds when given leading questions or when the teacher initiates the solution to a problem. The Zone of Proximal Development, therefore, is the distance between the actual development as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

The Zone of Proximal Development defines functions that have not quite matured but are in the process of maturation and are likely to reach fruition in the near future. A full understanding of the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development requires a re-evaluation of the role of instruction in learning. In this model it is believed that children have the capacity to learn through instruction a wide range of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. As Wood (1998) states

'For Vygotsky, then, co-operatively achieved success lies at the foundations of learning and development. Instruction—both formal and informal, in many social contexts, performed by more knowledgeable peers or siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, acquaintances and teachers—is the main vehicle for the cultural transmission of knowledge.' (p27)

Although this fact seems to be of little significance in itself, it is of fundamental importance in that it demands a radical reconsideration of the principles concerning the relation between learning and development in children (Vygotsky, 1978).
Implications for assessment
In the context of the classroom, rather than waiting for the right developmental stage to be reached, the teacher provides the 'scaffold' for the learning to occur. The teacher plays a proactive role by assessing the stage where the pupil is at, and subsequently, by providing the appropriate scaffolding for learning (Vygotsky, 1987). The capacity to learn through instruction and therefore direct teaching is central to these concepts.

1.6.2.4. Multiple Intelligences
In reviewing studies of intelligence and cognition, Howard Gardner (1985) has formulated a belief in the existence of a number of different intellectual strengths, or competences, each of which may have its own developmental history. While these intelligences are typically listed as seven (spatial, logical-mathematical, linguistic, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal), he cautions against the notion of an incontrovertible and universally accepted list of intelligences, arguing that specific intelligences exist not as physically verifiable entities but only as potentially useful scientific constructs.

Gardner's work emphasises that learning encompasses more than facts and figures. He believes that this entails the acknowledgement that learning takes place through the senses as well as the mind. It occurs through reflection and analysis on real experiences, the making of connections between new and old experiences, and through selection and decision-making processes that involve feeling and emotions as well as intellect and reason. The theory of Multiple Intelligences has been applied in classroom situations to complement the different ways in which learning takes place and to encourage the development of each area of intelligence (e.g., Arts PROPEL, Winner, 1991; Multiple Intelligences Project, University College Cork, Hanafin, 1997).

Implications for assessment
Gardner believes that current methods of assessing the intellect are not sufficiently refined to allow assessment of an individual's potentials or achievements in diverse tasks such as learning a foreign language, composing with a computer or plotting the stars. He believes that the problem lies less in the technology of testing than in the
ways in which we usually think about the intellect and in our ingrained views of intelligence. In the context of Gardner's work, Lazear (1994) believes that when assessing the intelligences of students what is required is 'a profile of their intelligences, not decontextualized scores' (p208). Gardner argues further that intelligences should not be assessed in the same ways at different ages, but that it should be approached through puzzles and creative challenges and through encouraging children to 'have a go' at problems. This would offer a far more valid way of assessing profiles of individuals than the standard measures of paper-and-pencil tests designed for efficient, group-administration. Consequently, as MacBeath (1997) observes, the assessment question that should be posed to students is not 'how smart are you?' but rather, 'how are you smart?'

1.6.2.5. **Criticisms of new models of learning**

Although criticisms and perceived weaknesses of the new models of learning have been documented (see, for example, Berieter, 1994; Griffin, 1997; Philips, 1995; White, 1998), Gage and Berliner (1998) observe that:

>'The cognitive-learning theories are thought by some to be a little overstated, a little too illogical or too obvious, and a little too difficult to refute ... they all suggest ways to teach that are different from those emphasised in the past. And the new teaching methods arising out of arguments about which cognitive perspectives are supportable deserve attention separately from the strength of the perspectives.' (p256)

1.6.3. **Learner-centered psychological principles**

Recently, the work of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education sought to direct attention on the contributions of psychology to understanding the learner in educational contexts, and to examine ways that a focus on the psychology of learners and learning could contribute to school redesign. The work, which was begun in 1990 and finally published in 1997, highlighted 14 learner-centered psychological principles which would provide a framework for improving the quality of teaching and learning in American schools.

*Nature of learning*

The APA defines learning as a 'complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.'(p18). It also acknowledges that 'The successful learner, over time and with support and
In addition to examining the nature and goals of the learning process, the APA report clearly outlines twelve principles of learning. It states that (i) learners can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways and (ii) can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals. It recognises (iii) the importance of higher-order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations, and for creative and critical thinking. It acknowledges that (iv) learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices. (v) The learner’s motivation is seen as a critical factor, which in turn is influenced by the individual’s emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking. (vi) Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control. (vii) Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. The report recognises that (viii) learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account. It notes that (ix) learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others. The report ascertains that (x) learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity. It sees (xi) learning being most effective when differences in learners’ linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account. Finally, the report states that (xii) setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress—including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment—are integral parts of the learning process.

1.6.4 Summary

Older models of the learner as a passive recipient of knowledge have begun to fade as new models of the learner as an active social constructivist have come into focus (Gage and Berliner, 1998). The traditional model of teaching and learning consisted of a specific body of information that could be transmitted to the learner. Assessment thus consisted of checking whether the information had been correctly received. In the
newer models, learning is viewed as a process of constructing knowledge and meaning from an existing personal base. It is therefore, more complex, more diverse and more idiosyncratic than originally conceived. Consequently, the assessment instruments required must to be flexible enough and precise enough to track the learning process itself, and interpret the qualities and the complexities of the learning taking place.

As Gipps (1996) argues,

‘If we are to develop assessment to support learning, and which sits within the educational assessment paradigm rather than the psychometric model, we will need to develop assessment programmes which use performance assessment and teacher assessment.’ (p259)

1.7 Irish Context

1.7.1 Brief history of testing in Ireland

Tests and examinations have featured in the primary system at several points in its history from the ‘payment by results’ system of the late 1880s (Coolahan, 1987), to the focus on minimum standards in Gaeilge, English and Arithmetic in the Primary School Certificate Examination which was compulsory for all pupils in primary schools between 1943 and 1967. However, only about a quarter of students ever sat the examination (Madaus and Greeney, 1985). The examination also faced continuous opposition from the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) who believed that it led to a narrowing of the curriculum in the senior classes in the primary school and that a compulsory terminal examination for children at this age was inappropriate (Naughton, 1998). As the Primary Certificate was abolished, a grading scheme was introduced by the Department of Education in 1968 to provide a record of pupils’ progress, especially in the last two years of primary education. However, the terminology used to indicate the standard of attainment in various subjects was considered vague—‘lag, cuíosach, maith, an-mhaith’ (weak, fair, good, very good)— and therefore it was eventually deemed ineffective (NCCA, 1990, p82).

1.7.1.1. Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990)

The characteristics of assessment have been highlighted in a number of policy documents (e.g., INTO 1997; NCCA, 1990, 1993; White Paper, 1995). The earliest of
these, the Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, identified the following general principles on the nature of assessment:

- The system of assessment should be related to and reflect the content and objectives of the curriculum.
- Assessment should provide information on how pupils are performing and their potential ability in relation to the aims and objectives of the curriculum.
- The results of the assessment should provide a basis for decisions about pupils' further learning needs.
- There should be continuity between classes and schools (primary and post-primary) in relation to such procedures. Thus, there is a need for a moderating component in the assessment.
- Assessment procedures should be comprehensive enough to allow for the full range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum.
- The procedures should allow for effective communication of relevant information to parents, teachers, Department of Education, and other agencies (NCCA, 1990, p81).

1.7.1.2. NCCA (1993)

While affirming the principles, purposes and functions of assessment identified by the Review Body, the 1993 NCCA Assessment subcommittee in its report Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Towards the New Century acknowledged the important and central role that the teacher as professional plays in the assessment of pupils at primary level.

1.7.1.3. National Education Convention (1994)

At the National Education Convention (1994) there was substantial agreement on some of the issues pertaining to assessment in the context of raising achievement standards in schools and identifying under-achievers in the early years of school. It was agreed that standardised tests should be considered as part of assessment and reporting procedures in schools to provide normative and diagnostic information. Such information would provide a basis for devising teaching programmes but fears
were expressed that this information could have a negative impact on schools if used for accountability purposes.

1.7.1.4 White Paper (1995)

In 1995, the Irish Government published a White Paper on education, *Charting Our Education Future*. Among the many far-reaching statements on education at all levels, the document made several important statements on instruction and assessment at primary level.

The White Paper envisaged that each school would be responsible for presenting its policy on student assessment in its school plan. Classroom teachers would carry the main responsibility for identifying and responding to learning difficulties, while the assessment process would ‘focus on the identification of the student’s potential rather than on her/his perceived limitations’ (p25). The emphasis on potential, rather than limitations, could be interpreted as a move away from assessment serving mainly summative functions to assessment that also serves formative functions, thus reiterating the purposes of assessment outlined in the earlier NCCA reports and the report from the Task Group on Assessment and Testing [TGAT] Report (1988).

In describing the nature of assessment, the White Paper specified the diagnostic, formative and continuous nature of assessment, while emphasising the balance between informal assessment tools, such as teacher assessment, and formal assessment tools, such as standardised tests.

While many of the aspirations in the White Paper have been widely welcomed, it is the issue of standardised testing at the end of first and fifth classes—the equivalent of testing at ages seven and eleven in England and Wales—which has created the greatest disquiet among teachers, as stated on page 28:

‘... students will be assessed by their teachers at the end of first and fifth class in order to evaluate the quality of their learning and to identify any special learning needs that may arise.’(p28)

However, it is the concept of aggregating assessment scores for the purpose of evaluating schools that has been deemed unacceptable by teachers. Many express fears
of ‘league tables’ of school performances published in daily newspapers and the ensuing negative effects on schools as evidence of their concern. For example, in the 1997 publication *Teaching and Learning: Issues in Assessment*, the INTO adopt the view that:

‘The administration of tests for the purpose of aggregating assessment outcomes for each school is totally undesirable, inappropriate and unacceptable because of the danger that it will narrow the focus of the curriculum, distort the purpose of assessment and cause irreparable damage to the pupil teacher relationship, where confidentiality and trust is so much a part of the teaching learning process.’

Although the White Paper states that assessment ‘is not an end in itself and should not dominate the work of the school (p28)’ and that ‘the purpose of assessment is not to rank schools’ (ibid), it remains to be seen how this policy becomes manifest in schools.

### 1.7.2 Learning in the Irish Context

Evidence of changes in approach to learning may also be seen in McCarthy and Granville’s 1997 publication, *Design in Education*. The central thesis of their paper is that design can serve to fulfil many of the objectives of education for a learning society in which education is seen ‘less as the transmission of a body of knowledge and more as the development of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes which will prepare young people to participate fully in a constantly changing society.’ (p1).

*Primary School Curriculum (1999)*

Evidence of greater diversity in learning and a greater emphasis on learning and the learner may be found in the recently published *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (1999) and in the Curriculum Statements and Teacher Guidelines accompanying each subject area. The approaches to learning within each subject area are rooted in the pedagogic principles of the 1971 curriculum which were reaffirmed by the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990) and the government White Paper (1995). They include the full and harmonious development of the child; due allowance for individual differences; activity and discovery methods; integrated curriculum; environment-based learning. In the *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (1999) the principles of learning are expanded to cover fifteen broader
principles which emphasise the centrality and uniqueness of the child in the learning process. It acknowledges the child’s natural curiosity, individual differences, the child’s previous knowledge and experience, and the context of the child’s environment. The principles of learning also encompass the developmental nature of learning, the importance of guided activity and discovery methods, the centrality of language, the importance of developing the aesthetic dimension in learning and of understanding the social and emotional aspects. The Introduction recognises that learning is most effective when it is integrated. Higher-order skills, problem-solving skills and skills that facilitate the transfer of learning should be developed and fostered. Finally, assessment is identified as an integral part of teaching and learning.

The role and nature of assessment is also highlighted in the Primary School Curriculum: Introduction (1999) where emphasis is placed on the assessment of all areas of the curriculum and the various aspects of learning. Attention is given to the range of assessment tools from informal approaches (e.g., teacher observation, projects, portfolios) to more formal tools (e.g., diagnostic tests, standardised tests). However, more specific guidelines on the function, purpose, outcome, range and frequency of use of such assessment tools has yet to be formalised by the NCCA.

1.7.3. Innovations in assessment
Recent work on the development of curriculum profiles at the Educational Research Centre (INTO, 1997; Murphy and Shiel, 1996, 1997; O’Leary, Shiel and Forde, 1995; Shiel and Murphy, 1998) augurs well for innovation in assessment and expansion of the range of assessment tools currently available for use in Irish primary schools. In addition, the use of portfolio assessment in the Multiple Intelligences project at University College, Cork (Hanafin, 1997) and the exploration of assessment issues and strategies (Hyland, 1998) paves the way for critical work in this area in the future.

1.7.4. Summary of Irish context
There is much evidence to suggest that Irish educators recognise the importance of assessment and the need to communicate to students, parents, other teachers, managers and administrators the achievements of students in all areas of the curriculum. It is recognised that learning is more complex and more involved and that,
therefore, a more complex picture of what is going on in classrooms needs to be painted. To do this, however, requires a more extensive range of assessment tools than has been used previously.

As in other jurisdictions, recent developments in assessment have attempted to embrace a range of new approaches, for example teacher assessment, curriculum profiles and active process-based assessment tasks. The assessment paradigm shift from a broadly psychometric, norm-referenced, examination-based model towards an educational assessment model follows international trends and has been well illustrated in the assessment debates (e.g., Broadfoot and Gipps, 1996) as outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

It remains to be seen, however, how readily the new approaches to assessment will take affect in conjunction with the implementation of the revised primary curriculum and how meaningfully they will be adopted by teachers, parents, managers and Department of Education and Science officials.

1.8 Standardised Testing

_Calls for reform in educational assessment_

As outlined in the beginning of the chapter, the extent to which the psychometric approach to assessment (in the form of norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests) has been the predominant approach to assessment in many countries over the past sixty years is well recognised in the literature (Wood, 1993). While some benefits have accrued from the use of such tests (see, for example, Kellaghan _et al._, 1982), several factors have contributed to the questioning of the purposes and effects of standardised testing. Factors that have led in particular to a consideration of alternative forms of assessment include: (i) the paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of the nature of intelligence, learning and therefore, assessment (Gipps, 1995); (ii) a growing body of criticism of standardised testing systems (see, for example, O’Leary, Shiel and Forde, 1995); (iii) educators’ reaction against pressures for accountability based upon multiple-choice, norm-referenced testing; and (iv) the demand on the part
of the business community that students entering the workforce be competent enough to compete in an increasingly global economy (Khattri and Sweet, 1996).

1.8.1. Criticisms of standardised tests
Advocates of alternative theories of learning argue that traditional standardised tests do not reflect current understanding of how students learn and that they are based on out-moded theory of learning that stresses accumulation of isolated facts and skills. They believe that people learn in meaningful and purposeful contexts by connecting what they already know with what they are trying to learn and that standardised tests do not reflect this current knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Gardner, 1983; Kantrowitz and Wingert 1989; Resnick 1987a,).

According to Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (1995), traditional standardised tests fail to measure many of the important aspects of learning and do not support many of the most useful strategies for teaching. In addition, Snow and Lohman, (1989) contend that cognitive tasks require both declarative (content) and procedural (process) knowledge and that some types of procedural knowledge are not amenable to assessments that rely exclusively on standardised tests. Darling-Hammond et al., (1995) propose that assessment must therefore be based on students’ abilities to produce a wide variety of products and performances, to manipulate concrete materials as well as symbols, to frame and solve tricky problems with several possible solutions, to express themselves effectively orally and in writing and to work individually as well as in collaboration with others (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995).

Other criticisms of standardised tests are that they fail to measure significant learning outcomes and complex abilities (Aschbacher, 1991; Eisner, 1993); they provide little information about pupils’ level of understanding or quality of thinking (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Gipps, 1991); they narrow the curriculum by focusing attention on low level knowledge, skills and tasks (Hambleton and Murphy, 1992; Madaus et al., 1992; Mehrens, 1992; Munby, 1989; Stake, 1991) while 'higher order skills' in virtually all subject areas, and students’ abilities to perform 'real world' tasks are neglected (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Resnick, 1987a; Sternberg, 1985). They focus on superficial content coverage and rote drill on discrete skills (e.g. filling in the blanks, multiple choice) at the expense of in-depth projects and other thought-
provoking tasks that take more time (e.g. essays, debating, discussing literature, problem-solving and creating products) (Boyer, 1983; Darling-Hammond, 1990a; Darling-Hammond, 1991; Darling-Hammond and Wise, 1985; Goodlad, 1984; Hambleton and Murphy, 1992; Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1989).

Bradekamp and Shepard (1989) believe that standardised tests are poor diagnostic tools as they (a) do not provide information about how children tackle different tasks or what abilities they rely on in their problem solving; (b) promote a view of children as having deficits that need to be remediated rather than as having individual differences, approaches to learning, and strengths that can be support and developed; and (c) fail to provide enough information about areas of difficulty to inform instructional strategies for addressing them.

The use of norm referencing in standardised tests has been criticised for imposing a purely statistical model of academic achievement. A child's rank order within a class or within the total population is seen has having no obvious implications for teaching, and test items may be selected on the grounds that they spread out performance rather than for their educational interest. Norm-referencing has also been criticised for being elitist and being obsessed with differentiating children and sorting them into a hierarchical order (Bailey, 1989; Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer, 1989; Croll, 1990).

Norm-referencing places students from nondominant cultures at a disadvantage in demonstrating what they know and can do (Garcia and Pearson, 1994; Median and Neill, 1988); it underrepresents the performance of low achievers in seeking to maximise discrimination between high achievers and low achievers (Hambleton and Murphy, 1992; Horton, 1990); it leads to further inaccuracies in identifying students for special education and remedial education, and further limiting the curriculum to which these children are exposed (Darling-Hammond 1991; Oakes, 1985;).

Standardised tests often replace the professional judgements of teachers, even though teachers have the most intimate knowledge of pupils' achievement (Larter, 1991a). As the results of these tests are often communicated to pupils and parents in the form of grades, marks or written comments (e.g. excellent, very good etc.), it is also argued
that have little meaning, and little value in identifying a pupil’s strengths and weaknesses (Harris and Sammons, 1989; Munby, 1989; Waltman and Frisbie, 1994).

1.8.2. Calls for reform
As a result of the many criticisms of standardised tests, alternative approaches to assessment have been initiated at school, district and state level in many countries across the world (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995). These approaches are frequently referred to as ‘alternative’ because they engage students in ‘real world’ tasks rather than in multiple choice exercises, and students are evaluated according to criteria that are important for actual presentations or performances in that field (Wiggins, 1989, 1993). Three terms that are commonly used, sometimes interchangeably, are ‘alternative assessment’, ‘performance assessment’ or ‘authentic assessment’. According to Khattri and Sweet (1996)

‘alternative assessment’ is intended to distinguish this form of assessment from traditional, fact-based, multiple-choice testing;

authentic assessment is intended to highlight the real world nature of tasks and contexts that make up the assessments; and

performance assessment refers to a type of assessment that requires students to actually perform, demonstrate, construct, develop a product or a solution under defined conditions and standards’ (p2)

1.9. Authentic Assessment
Within the realm of alternative approaches, the term ‘authentic assessment’ (first proposed by Archbald and Newmann, 1988) has emerged as a generic term to describe a wide group of assessment procedures which aim to provide alternatives to traditional paper-and-pencil, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced objective tests (Bateson, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Torrance, 1995).

According to O’Leary, Shiel and Forde (1995),

An assessment is considered to be authentic if it involves the performance of a task that is valued in its own right…. unifying principles underlying all these assessments include the requirements that pupils engage in tasks that are meaningful and challenging, that a ‘real-world’ context is simulated and that
Among the claims made by Darling-Hammond, Ancess and Falk, (1995) are that authentic assessment (i) directly measures actual performance; (ii) provides a broad range of continuous, qualitative data that can be used by teachers to inform and shape instruction; (iii) aims to evaluate students abilities and performances more fully and accurately; and (iv) provides teachers with information that helps them develop strategies that will be helpful to the real needs of individual children.

Items and procedures that are commonly found in authentic assessments are: essay examinations, research projects, scientific experiments, oral exhibitions, performance debates, arts, portfolios, group projects, investigation, experimentation, cooperation, written, oral and graphic presentations (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995). Also included in this list are ‘hands on’ demonstrations, collections of students’ work, portfolios, curriculum profiles, formal and informal observations of students at work and teacher judgements of student achievement (O’ Leary et al., 1995).

1.9.1 Characteristics of authentic assessments

In the original work of Archbald and Newmann (1988) the principal features of authentic assessment that were developed focused on reporting and on the tasks used. The authors believed that (i) ‘reporting should present the level of mastery of tasks and the nature of the task used to measure that mastery [criterion referencing], and (ii) tasks presented to students should be worthwhile, significant and meaningful’ (p1). Subsequently, the authors have expanded the principal characteristics to include emphasis on (i) the importance of collaboration with other students when undertaking a task; (ii) allowing access to tools and resources during the course of an assessment; (iii) encouraging students to assume ownership of their work and to use their own discretion; and (iv) using time flexibly (Newmann and Archbald, 1992).

Grant Wiggins (1989) has identified four common characteristics of authentic assessments upon which Darling-Hammond et al., (1995) have also elaborated. First, the authentic assessments are tasks designed to be truly representative of performances in the field. They are contextualised, complex and intellectually challenging,
involving students own research and use of knowledge and metacognitive skills, thus allowing room for individual learning styles, aptitudes and interests helping to develop competence and identify hidden strengths. For instance, students actually do write for real audiences, rather than taking spelling tests or answering questions about what they have written, and they actually conduct science experiments rather than answering questions about them.

Second, the criteria used seeks to evaluate the fundamentals of a performance against clearly-articulated performance standards, expressed openly to students and to others in the learning community, rather than being kept secret in the typical way that examinations are kept secure. When students know the task and standards in advance, this is not considered ‘cheating’ as the task may be inherently complex and intrinsically valuable. The criteria employed are explicit and reflect school-wide aims. They are also multifaceted and represent several aspects of a task rather than one single dimension or grade. In this way, criteria is used to guide teaching, learning and evaluation in a way that highlights the goals and processes of learning.

Third, self-assessment plays a vital role in authentic assessment, requiring the students to work against standards, to set goals, to evaluate, to revise and modify their work. Performance standards take the concept of progress seriously, making refinement and improvement of products a central aspect of the task and its evaluation; allows students at all levels of developed competence the opportunity to see, acknowledge and receive credit for their own growth.

Finally, students are often expected to present their work orally and in a public forum. This deepens their learning as it requires them to reflect on what they know and causes them to present it in a way that helps others to understand; ensures understanding of concept or topic is genuine. In addition, public recognition increases the importance of the task and contributes to motivation and energising of students.

Darling-Hammond et al., (1995) believe, therefore, that authentic assessment encourages an intelligent, rich curriculum, rather than one that is narrowed through teaching and coaching for multiple choice tests. They also add that authentic
assessment can provide the opportunity for assessment to be directly aligned with educational values, goals, and practices. Bateson (1994) makes the distinction between typical traditional test items and authentic test items when he concludes that: ‘authentic tasks are the domain of achievement or interest; interpretation of the item or instrument is not necessary because the assessment is the product itself’ (p235). This concept contrasts sharply with a traditional test item that may require the test interpreter to infer the level of achievement or interest in a specified domain.

1.9.2. **Performance Assessment and Authentic Assessment**

O'Leary et al, (1995) note that a related term, ‘performance assessment,’ also enjoys widespread currency in the literature and is often used as a synonym for ‘authentic assessment’. However, differences between performance assessment and authentic assessment are outlined clearly by Carol Meyer (1992). In performance assessment, the student completes or demonstrates the same behaviour that the assessor desires to measure. There is a minimal degree, if any, of inference involved. For instance, if the behaviour to be measured is writing, then the student writes, rather than completing multi-choice answers. In authentic assessment, the student not only completes or demonstrates the desired behaviour, but also does it in a real-life context. ‘Real life’ may be defined in terms of the student (for example, the classroom) or in terms of an adult expectation. The significant criterion for the authenticity of a writing assessment might be that the locus of control rests with the student; that is, the student determines the topic, the time allocated, the pacing, and the conditions under which the writing sample is generated. Meyer (1992) cautions that we should be aware when presenters or writers use these terms and whether or not they use them interchangeably.

1.9.3. **Arguments in favour of authentic approaches**

Despite the fact that the effects of many programmes in authentic assessment are still unclear, O'Leary et al, (1995) point to some research evidence to suggest that authentic approaches can deliver on their promise of authenticity. As a result of performance assessment projects, they found that (i) teachers modified their teaching strategies to include a greater range of writing activities; (ii) teachers showed a greater knowledge and understanding of their pupils’ progress while providing greater support for pupils experiencing difficulties; (iii) the goals of education were demystified for
teachers while the nature of excellent performances was illuminated; (iv) primary teachers' professionalism was extended by virtue of their direct involvement in the assessment of their pupils' work. Among the case studies describing the uses of authentic assessment in schools Darling-Hammond, et al., (1995) found many favourable results. In a New York secondary school the use of portfolios for graduation purposes emphasises collaborative learning, performance project and self-and peer- assessment. In Delaware, they report on an interdisciplinary project with senior students that combines their vocational and academic work in a product they design and produce, accompanied by a research and oral report they deliver to a team of teachers. The products include such diverse items as a house built to scale, dentures, satellite dishes, geological models, designer clothes and antique beds, while assessment of these performance-oriented tasks focuses on analysis, integration of knowledge, invention and highly developed written and oral expression. In addition, the students are required to demonstrate ability to see multiple viewpoints, weigh conflicting claims, and defend their views with credible evidence. In Brooklyn, the use of the Primary Language Record provides a narrative report to parents to supplement assessment tools such as running records and reading logs. These assessments enable teachers to evaluate progress, design useful learning opportunities, and involve parents, other teachers, and the students themselves in assessing and supporting their growth and development. As the authors assert, these schools want to establish how students learn as well as what they learn i.e., ways that help them support learning more effectively. They observe that in some cases the assessments are so firmly embedded in the curriculum that they are practically indistinguishable from instruction.

1.9.4. **Difficulties associated with authentic assessment**

However, many difficulties with authentic assessment have also been found. Of these, reliability, validity, comparability and fairness of alternative assessment strategies are the most frequently encountered. Theorists such as Messick (1994) warn that these issues must be addressed with the same thoroughness as they are in more traditional forms of assessment. Bateson (1994) argues that definitions of authentic assessment that focus on the assessment as the product in itself 'neatly protects it from any
questioning about important issues such as are contained in the traditional psychometric views of reliability and validity' (p235).

Fuchs (1994) points to inherent difficulties in the use of performance assessments in a number of case studies and encapsulates these problems when she states:

‘Teachers vary considerably in their ability to (a) accurately identify student competencies on different skills, (b) insightfully note information about students' strategic behaviour, and (c) relate these descriptions to specific instructional techniques.’ (p33)

Stiggins (1995) believes that replacing a relatively efficient, objective pencil-and-paper testing system with one that is far more labour intensive and expensive raises issues of costs, and the fact that performance assessment may be too expensive in that the complexity of new assessment methods requires a ongoing commitment to investment in the professional development of teachers. These concerns are also cited by Maeroff (1991) who regards alternative assessment as labour-intensive, time-consuming and imprecise.

1.10 Portfolio assessment

1.10.1 Background

While portfolios have been developed on the model of the visual and performing arts tradition of presenting showcase work at the end of a proscribed period, portfolios in classrooms are currently used as a flexible instructional and assessment tool. Writing teachers and other educators have adapted the concept of portfolios in various ways for use with process-approach writing curricula (Belenoff and Dickson, 1991; Gentile et al., 1995; Graves and Sunstein, 1992). Portfolios can represent a range of efforts and as well as discernible achievements in ongoing classroom activities. Valencia (1990) believes that portfolios resonate with the desire to capture and capitalise on the best work a student has to offer and that, by their very nature, they encourage the use of many different ways of evaluating learning. Others argue that the strength of a portfolio system lies in its adaptability to diverse curricula (Grady, 1992), to students of different ages and grade levels, and to a range of administrative contexts (Zimmermann, 1993).
The concept of portfolios as an assessment tool has also arisen from the debate surrounding authentic approaches to assessment and in recent years there has been increased interest and emphasis on the use of portfolios in the classroom (Bartley, 1997; Calfee, 1994; Gentile et al., 1995; Hyland, 1998). The Primary School Curriculum: English, (1999), for instance, recommends the use of portfolios for assessment purposes since

"...portfolios can contribute to a picture of the child's development over a period and can facilitate discussion between teacher and parent and between teacher and pupil in relation to his/her language activity and learning." (p64)

However, critics have identified the lack of research into their use (e.g., Herman and Winters, 1994) while studies in the use of portfolios in large-scale assessments have identified difficulties (Callahan, 1997; Koretz et al., 1994; Supovitz et al., 1997) and successes (LeMahieu, Giotmer and Eresh, 1995). Herbert (1992) describes the use of portfolio assessment in classrooms as leading to 'benefits far beyond what any of us could have imagined' (p58) because of the 'new ways of looking at children's learning' (p58). Bartley (1997), in using portfolios with student teachers reports on the feedback illuminating and exceeding his expectations. He found persuasive evidence that many student teachers had taken the opportunity to reflect on their growth as teachers and appreciated the opportunities to document this growth. This he considers evidence of the 'functional worth' (Messick, 1989) of this mode of assessment in the context of preservice training of teachers.

In discussing a portfolio approach to reading assessment, Valencia (1990) refers to the 'intuitive appeal' (p338) of portfolios. She outlines theoretical and pragmatic reasons in the form of four guiding principles that substantiate her claim that portfolios have integrity and validity that no other type of assessment offers. Valencia believes that a portfolio approach is grounded in authentic tasks that are integrated into ongoing classroom assessment; it can chronicle development as it evolves and changes; it samples a wide range of cognitive processes, affective responses and literacy activities; and it provides for active, collaborative reflection by both teacher and student.
1.10.2. **Definitions**

Many proponents of portfolios for instructional and assessment purposes offer definitions of portfolios. Tierney, Carter and Desai (1991) describe portfolios as:

‘...systematic collections by both students and teachers. They can serve as the basis to examine effort, improvement, processes, and achievement as well as to meet the accountability demands usually achieved by more formal testing procedures. Through reflection on systematic collections of student work, teachers and students can work together to illuminate students’ strengths, needs and progress.’ (p41)

Arter and Spandel (1992) define a portfolio as

‘...a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student’s efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s). This collection must include student participation in selection of portfolio content; the guidelines for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of student reflection' (p36)

1.10.3. **Dimensions in portfolio design**

**Reflection**

A key factor underpinning all portfolio types is that of reflection. Dennie Palmer Wolf (1989) and the research team at Harvard Project Zero (Winner, 1991) devote considerable attention to this aspect of portfolio assessment, recognising that pupils' reflections on their work are essential for documenting their growth in learning. (Wolf, 1989). This issue is closely linked with what Gredler (1995) sees as the main intent of portfolios, that is to develop self-reflective autonomous learners.

Other issues or dimensions identified by Seidel *et al.*, (1998) in the design of portfolio assessment are the purpose, audience, range of work and presentation. The concept of ownership is given added emphasis by Forster and Masters (1996).

1.10.3.1. **Purpose**

As with other forms of assessment, different portfolio models serve different purposes and raise different questions about evidence of curriculum attainment. Forster and Masters, (1996) believe that the assessment purpose encompasses issues such as whether the portfolio will be used by the teacher to informally monitor the pupils’ development, to formally assess the pupils’ achievement, to communicate information
to parents, or used by the pupils themselves as a form of self-evaluation. Seidel et al., (1998) list the purposes for portfolios somewhat differently as: demonstrating specific skills within a discipline; recording students’ grasp and use of essential information; or recording students’ ability to communicate what they may have learned. In the context of assessing writing, Calfee (1994) states that the purpose of a writing portfolio is to provide students with an opportunity for richer, more authentic assessment of their achievements and to show their potential, given adequate time and resources.

1.10.3.2. **Audience**
An aspect that is closely associated with the purpose of portfolios is the question of audience. According to Seidel et al., (1998), this impacts significantly on the portfolio design as different audiences demand different forms of evidence as demonstration of learning.

1.10.3.3. **Time frame**
Issues of the complexity of the students’ understanding, the process of learning through trial-and-error, and the students’ level of perseverance are taken into account under the time frame element (Seidel et al., 1998).

1.10.3.4. **Content and range of work**
In some instances, the portfolio is little more than a manila folder containing whatever the child has managed to put in it, or whatever the teacher has happened to assign. In exemplary situations, however, a portfolio is a more systematic collection of the child’s writing samples and avoids peripheral material. The question of the range of work addresses the issue of whether early drafts should be included and compared with later drafts, thus tracking growth and development (Seidel et al., 1998). Other content issues raised by Forster and Masters (1996) include whether it should contain everything pertaining to a subject area, including non-school information, a prescribed collection of samples, or a limited number of showcase items.

1.10.3.5. **Ownership**
The question as to who decides what goes into a portfolio is matter of ownership. A portfolio could contain an individualised collection of a student’s day to day work samples or the classroom teacher may decide that notes on interviews, conferences, test results or other pieces of information should also be included (Forster and Masters, 1996) Aspects of self- and peer-assessment skills and the student’s perspective on his/her own learning may also be included. Student reflection is essential for documenting the student’s growth in learning (Wolf, 1989).

1.10.3.6. **Structure and manageability**
Finally, the organisation and interpretability of the portfolio are important issues when reviewing the structure of the portfolio while the issue of the manageability of portfolios for display and storage are considered in the context of overall presentation (Seidel et al., 1998).

1.10.4. **Models**
From these dimensions, Forster and Masters (1996) identify three leading portfolio models:

(a) Working portfolios: these include miscellaneous collections of ongoing and completed work such as notes, sketches, half-finished drafts, and final copies.

(b) Documentary portfolios: these are collections of pupils’ work assembled specifically for assessment. They contain both the final products of pupils’ work, and evidence of the processes that pupils used to develop those products.

(c) Showcase or best portfolios: these are collections of the best of pupils’ work, containing only finished products.

1.10.5. **Selecting a portfolio model**
The documentary portfolio would appear to be the most useful model for assessing student achievement in children’s writing as it would inherently contain both process and product. It may, for example, contain not only a broad range of finished pieces of writing, but also initial drafts of those pieces and an accompanying student commentary on the development process for one or two samples. The drafts and commentary would be selected to provide evidence that a teacher may use to assess
how well a student planned, drafted, revised and reflected on their writing. (Forster and Masters 1996, p23). However, the other models can also serve useful purposes, and in the context of the current study, examples of all three models are presented.

1.10.6. Advantages of portfolios
Portfolios are acknowledged as a means of improving the quality and utility of assessment (Herman, Gearhart and Baker, 1993).

Several advantages of portfolios are elucidated by Tierney, Carter and Desai (1991). These include benefits for students, parents, teachers and administrators. First, they believe that students at all ages appear empowered by portfolios and are provided with opportunities to develop, share and reflect upon their work. Students assume ownership of the portfolios and have a more positive and in-depth sense of their progress and goals across time. Second, they argue that assessment is characterised by collaboration rather than competition and that parents can see at first-hand what their children are achieving. They believe that literacy activities that students pursue outside of school (e.g., leisure time reading and writing, songwriting) can be represented in school. Third, teachers can develop a view of the student that is more fully informed in terms of what each individual child has achieved. In addition, assessment practices that are student-centred and focus on helping the learners assess themselves can be easily promoted by teachers. Record-keeping is enhanced by portfolios as receipts of what students are actually doing are available to teachers. Finally, they believe that at an administrative level, portfolios offer a vehicle for pursuing audits of classrooms and individual performance that represents what students and classes are doing.

1.10.7. A framework for assessment
Portfolios offer a framework for assessment that facilitates student reflection in conjunction with collating, recording and presenting. This framework allows for greater involvement of pupils in the decision making processes surrounding their learning and helps them to become aware of what and how they learn. (Tierney, Carter and Desai 1991)
Researchers at Project Zero (Winner, 1991) have developed a comprehensive list of dimensions along which student portfolios can be assessed. The dimensions are grouped under four major headings: Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to work. The authors contend that the dimensions which are listed under the Production heading can be based on the work presented by the student and can be fairly assessed by an outside evaluator, but that the other three dimensions require evidence from classroom observations of the student’s working style and participation in critique sessions.

1. **Production (Thinking in the domain)**
   - Craftsmanship. The student is in control of the basic techniques and principles of the domain.
   - Pursuit. The student develops work over time, as evidenced by revisions that are productive and thoughtful. The student pursues a problem in depth and returns to a problem or theme from a variety of angles.
   - Invention. The student solves problems in a creative manner, experiments and takes risks with the medium and sets own problems to solve.
   - Expression/Point of View. The student expresses an idea or feeling in the work in a powerful, moving way. The student is engaged in more than just technique: student is trying to ‘make a statement’, or put his own ‘personal stamp’ on the work.

2. **Perception (‘Seeing’ in the domain)**
   - Capacity to make discriminations in works from a wide variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.
   - Awareness of sensuous aspects of experience. The student shows heightened sensitivity to physical properties of the environment related to the domain in question.
   - Awareness of physical properties and qualities of materials. The student is sensitive to the properties of the materials used.
3. Reflection (Thinking about the domain)

- Ability and inclination to assess own work. The student can evaluate his or her own work, articulate and defend perceived strengths and weaknesses, and does so regularly.
- Ability and inclination to take the role of critic. The student develops the ability and tendency to evaluate the work of others and has a sense of the standards for quality work in the domain.
- Ability and inclination to use criticisms and suggestions. The student can consider critical comments about own his/her work, and can incorporate suggestions where appropriate.
- Ability to learn from other works of art within the domain. The student can use work by artists for ideas and inspiration.
- Ability to articulate artistic goals. The student has a sense of self as an artist, as evidenced by the ability to articulate goals for a particular work, or more general artistic goals.

4. Approach to work

- Engagement. The student works hard, meets deadlines and shows interest. The student shows care and attention to detail in the presentation of the final product.
- Ability to work independently. The student can work independently when appropriate and incorporate learning from life experiences.
- Ability to work collaboratively. The student can work collaboratively when appropriate.
- Ability to use cultural resources. The student knows where to find help and information: books, museums, tools, other people.

(Winner, 1991)

However, as Calfee (1994) warns, simply collecting pieces of student work does not assure that meaningful assessment is taking place. Arter and Spandel (1992) also emphasise that although portfolios have the potential to tell detailed stories about a variety of student outcomes, there is an obligation to make the story reflect, and not distort, reality. Questions of validity, broadly construed, consistency across raters and
tasks must be addressed. Unfortunately, patterns of classroom curriculum and instruction do not always produce the designs needed for systematic assessment. Issues (similar to the dimensions of portfolios) that require clarification include what the portfolio should contain, how a child’s work should be evaluated, what standards should apply, what should happen as a consequence of the results; and how the various audiences should be informed of the results (Calfee, 1994).

1.10.8. Problems when using portfolios as assessment devices

Arter and Spandel (1992) identify a number of problems that can arise when using portfolios as assessment devices. These are that: (i) the work in the portfolio may not be really representative of what the student knows and can do; (ii) the criteria used to critique the product may not reflect the most relevant or useful dimension of the task; (iii) the work that a student puts in the portfolio may make the viewer wonder what is authentic about it; (iv) there may be aspects of the portfolio process that make a student unable to really demonstrate what he/she knows or can do; and (v) conclusions drawn from the portfolio can be heavily influenced by the person doing the evaluation.

However, Arter and Spandel (1992) believe that criteria can provide a schema for thinking about student performance. They state that the benefits for clear criteria are that they help to clarify instructional goals and expectations and they provide a means of judging student performances. Additionally, by involving students in the development of criteria, students become empowered to recognise strong or weak performances.

As the authors remark

'Students cannot assemble a portfolio without using clearly defined targets (criteria) in a systematic way to paint a picture of their own efforts, growth, and achievement. This is the essence of assessment.' (p37)

In using portfolios in classrooms, Seidel et al., focus on three basic issues: collecting and organising work; reviewing work and reporting the results. Of these, they believe that the task of reporting results is considered the most challenging.
‘To encapsulate a careful reading of the work in the grade “B+” misses much of
the point. An alternative is the narrative report, a more detailed synopsis and
analysis of the portfolio...grades are not the assessment; they are the
technique used to report the outcome of an assessment. The act of making the
judgment or assigning the grade is the actual assessment.’ (p163)

Because the practice of using portfolios as an assessment tool is still in its infancy,
many authors argue that portfolios should complement and not replace other
standardised measures (for example, Herman et al., 1993; Irwin-DeVitis, 1996).
Others believe that it is very important that portfolios do not replace large scale
assessment. Finally, Dochy and Moerkerke (1997) call for small scale performance-
assessment studies to help teachers and measurement theorists to refine their criteria.

1.10.9. Conclusion on portfolios
When designed and used well, portfolios can be very beneficial for student learning,
teacher professionalism, communication with parents, and measuring certain types of
student learning (Buell, 1991; Arter and Spandel, 1992). However, there are some
difficulties associated with the use of portfolios also. In terms of design, there appears
to be no one 'right' way to design a portfolio system as consideration needs to be given
to the different dimensions: purpose, content, time-frame, audience and sense of
ownership.

One of the most critical factors in any portfolio model is the assessment criteria that is
used to evaluate it. Poorly conceived tasks, fuzzy criteria and extraneous performance
requirements can affect student performance. Finally, the single, most beneficial part
of the portfolio process is allowing teachers the time and support to discuss and
articulate what is valued in a performance (Arter and Spandel, 1992).

1.11. Reliability and Validity
1.11.1. Change in emphasis
The move away from traditional paper-and-pencil tests towards more authentic
approaches to assessment has also identified a change in the perspectives of educators
and psychometricians in relation to reliability and validity. In Gipps’ (1991) view,
traditional assessment methods, especially standardised objective tests, primarily
reflected the need for tests to be reliable, while, in authentic assessment approaches, the emphasis has shifted to the validity of assessments.

1.11.2. Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the accuracy with which a test measures the skill or attainment it is designed to measure. Deale (1975) defined reliability as consistency, meaning how far the test would give the same results if it could be done again by the same children under the same conditions. He pointed out that this was, of course, a theoretical definition since such conditions would be almost impossible to impose, and therefore, a perfectly reliable test would be equally impossible to produce. The factor of variability, even if it inevitable, needed to be reduced to an acceptable minimum, and to do this he found it necessary to identify the principal sources of variability as: (i) variations in performance of the pupil taking the test; (ii) variations in the test; (iii) variations in the marking.

The effects of the first two sources of variability can be lessened by giving a series of several tests at intervals (the same test at a later stage: test-retest procedure; alternate forms of the ‘same’ test on similar populations: parallel forms; comparing the performance of two halves of the population: split-half procedure) and by using a statistical analysis which gives a coefficient of internal consistency. The third source can be neutralised by the use of several markers where judgements are aggregated, or by the establishment beforehand of firm criteria governing the award of marks and ensuring consistency between the judges (inter-rater reliability) and between the

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2 These may stem from extraneous influences such as physical or mental or nervous conditions and anxiety and stress related to taking the test. While little can be done to prevent these factors, the teacher can take them into account when interpreting the results.

3 The test can only measure a small sample of the pupil’s ability and a different sample could give a different result.

4 Except for objective tests, the marker’s judgement can be as variable as the pupils’ performance. The problem can be most troublesome in marking essays and is least likely to create difficulties in short-answer tests. Variations can occur for a variety of reasons: for example, as a consequence of an interruption during the marking of a selection of scripts, resulting in different standards being applied after the break; or the marker’s standards being affected after marking a set of either very good or very bad scripts; or the teacher subconsciously being influenced by knowledge of the pupil whose work is being marked.
judgements of the same rater (*intra-rater* reliability) (Frith and Macintosh, 1984; Gipps, 1994).

Deale (1975) identified five factors which can enhance the reliability of an assessment as the (a) length of tests; (b) choice of test technique; (c) techniques used in writing questions; (d) method of test administration; and (e) method of marking. In performance assessment, the issues of test administration and method of marking are more commonly referred to as consistency of approach and consistency of standards and are considered to have the most bearing on the reliability of an assessment (James and Conner, 1993). However, Gipps (1994) contends that reliability needs to be reconceptualised as the traditional concept contains three major areas that pose problems under scrutiny. First, it is almost impossible to measure achievement ‘accurately’, bearing in mind all that is known about the context of an individual’s performance and how this interacts with assessment mode. Second, the standardised administration procedure which is inherent in psychometric testing is not appropriate in an educational assessment context which may seek to elicit best performance. Third, measures of internal consistency are dependent upon a high degree of homogeneity in test items and the assessment of unidimensional skills or attributes. Such unidimensionality may lead to a test that contains artificial constructs and a narrow range of modes and contexts, and result in a test that is inherently unfair to students.

In performance assessment, consistency of judgement of tasks is greatly dependent on a high level of inter-rater reliability, which in turn is contingent upon a careful process of training of raters and the provision of scoring rubrics. Increasing the number of tasks in an assessment also increases reliability—a factor recognised by Deale in 1975; and more recently by theorists such as Dunbar *et al.*, (1991) and Linn (1993).

Despite the manageability and time consuming difficulties associated with moderation procedures, Gipps believes that

‘Moderation is a key element in performance assessment, not only in terms of improving inter-rater reliability, but to moderate the *process* of assessment too.’ (p121)
Further, the act of coming together to discuss performance or scoring adds to teacher development and impacts favourably on teaching.

1.11.3. Validity

Deale (1975) defined validity as the quality which a test should have if it is to achieve the outcome(s) that is/are intended. Although ensuring that a test is valid is not considered an easy task, Frith and Macintosh (1984) argue that it is vital that attention is devoted to this aspect since the information derived from an invalid test is not only useless, but could be dangerously misleading. The degree of validity achieved by a test can be judged through the subsequent analysis of the test results. This can provide information upon what actually happened and the results can compared with intended outcomes.

Deale (1975) suggested several forms of validity:

(a) Face Validity - The test should look as if it is testing what it is intended to test.

(b) Criterion Related Validity - The relationship between scores on the test and some other criterion such as estimates or results of an external examination\(^5\).

(c) Content Validity—the extent to which a test adequately covers the syllabus to be tested. To have good content validity a test must reflect both the content of the course and the balance in the teaching which led up to it.

Almost twenty years later, Gipps (1994) recognises the limitations of this view of validity with its emphasis on different types, when she states that it ‘...has led to a situation in which, all too often, evidence is provided about only one or two of these types of validity in test development’ (p59). Among many authors in the field of educational assessment, Gipps believes that the traditional definition of the validity itself has undergone considerable change years as an expanded view of validity has been proffered by several theorists (e.g., Cronbach 1988; Messick, 1989; Linn and Dunbar, 1991). Linn and Dunbar (1991) proposed that validity needs to consider a

\(^5\) These could be either: (i) Concurrent: test results compared with another measure of the same abilities at the same time; or (ii) Predictive: test results compared later with another criterion, such as success in
range of factors, such as evidence of intended and unintended consequences for teachers and students, the degree to which a performance assessment task transfers to other domains of achievement, the fairness of an assessment for different populations, the cognitive complexity of the processes and problem-solving strategies involved, the meaningfulness of the problems for both the student and the teacher, the comprehensiveness of the content coverage and finally, the justification of the cost.

In a refinement of the theory of validity, Linn (1994) regards validity as a unitary concept with construct validity as the unifying force. He believes that it is the consequences and uses of assessment results that are validated rather than the assessment itself. In this argument, the twin concepts of evidential and consequential validity pertain to 'the qualities a test measures' and to 'the appraisal of social consequences' of a test respectively (Messick, 1989, pp 16-17). Hence, construct validity is needed not only to support test interpretation but to justify test use (Gipps, 1994).

In their most recent publication, Linn and Gronlund (2000) reiterate that understanding of validation has come to include an evaluation of the adequacy and appropriateness of the uses that are made of assessment results and that this expanded view of validity leads to a focus on the consequences of particular uses of assessment results. The authors thus point to five issues in describing the nature validity, stating that (i) validity refers to the appropriateness of the interpretation of the results; (ii) it is a matter of degree; (iii) it is always specific to some particular use or interpretation (iv) it is a unitary concept; and (v) it involves an overall evaluative judgement. The authors believe that there are many ways of accumulating evidence to support or challenge the validity of an interpretation or use of assessment results. They argue that the traditional categories of accumulating evidence (content-related, construct-related, and criterion-related evidence) do not take into account that the consequences of uses and the interpretation of assessment results also influence validity.

**Authentic assessment and validity**

...
The question of evidential validity is one that is closely related to authentic assessment. In an extension to the concept of evidential validity, Khattri and Sweet (1996) refer to the term ‘pedagogical validity’, that is, the degree to which an assessment is connected to the curriculum and the extent to which it identifies information for instructional purposes. They argue that ‘one-to-one mapping of assessment tasks to curricular areas is the most important and the fairest piece in the assessment puzzle’ (p 15). Further, they believe that the concept of evidential validity can be extended to include the idea of assessment as a diagnostic tool for a student’s educational needs.

Accordingly, in the context of authentic assessment, proponents argue that in having greater construct and consequential validity than traditional tests, authentic assessment focuses attention on a broader curriculum, assesses a wider and more sophisticated range of skills in a way that reflects learning processes, improves the quality of teaching and learning and presents a fairer measure of pupil achievement. As Wiggins (1994) asserts:

‘What is wanted is truly valid assessment. We must keep in mind, then, that efficiency is at odds with effectiveness in testing; mere scores are at odds with rich feedback.’ (p139)

1.12. Conclusion

Assessment is a critical aspect of teaching and learning. The past thirty years has seen a paradigm shift from psychometric, objective, standardised, mechanically-scored assessment tools to more subjective, naturalistic, authentic approaches, to the assessment of processes as well as products, and to the involvement of students in the assessment process. This period has also seen a shift from summative assessment to formative assessment—an issue which is revisited in Chapter Two. In terms of criteria for defining quality in educational assessment there has been a shift in emphasis from reliability to validity.

Bateson’s (1994) observation on approaches to assessment is worth noting:

‘Teachers must see and become part of projects that use a mutually supportive combination of the older, tried-and-true methods and techniques, and the more recently developed methods with which researchers are less secure. It must be
demonstrated ...that the best decisions will be made if the data on which the decisions are based come from multiple, complementary methods using a variety of data types. It must be clearly demonstrated that if one relies on a single method or a single source of data, there is a much greater potential for erroneous and invalid decisions.' (p238)

Learning has also undergone a corresponding change from views of it as narrow, atomised, mechanistic, recall of facts to broad, related to other learning, meaningful and applied. This is reflected in theories of learning such as metacognition, constructivism, zone of proximal development and multiple intelligences. The nature of intelligence and the nature of learning are now conceptualised differently and in a broader way than heretofore. As Valencia (1990) remarks, ‘Learning is too complex and assessment too imperfect to rely on any single index of achievement.’

At this point in primary education, there is evidence of some changes taking place in educational policies on teaching, learning and assessment, although the role of standardised tests as a dominant mode of assessment remains unclear. From this context of authentic assessment and the changing conceptualisation of the nature of learning emerges the realm of portfolios, which represent a useful mechanism for documenting students’ work in a way that concurs with current views on assessment and learning. A key feature of portfolios is the importance of student reflection on their work and on developing self-assessing, autonomous learners. Within this framework, therefore, the cycle of teaching, learning and assessment can be seen as one continuous educational movement with each aspect inextricably linked with the others.
Chapter 2

Instruction and assessment of writing
CHAPTER TWO

INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

2.1 Introduction
The term ‘writing’ is used to refer to all aspects of writing, from children’s earliest
efforts to form letters and words, to older students’ use of increasingly complex and
extended writing pieces for various audiences and for a range of purposes. This
chapter is concerned with the processes involved in learning to write. It describes
advances in the understanding of the developmental stages involved and outlines
teaching strategies assumed to contribute to the achievement of effective writing
skills. The chapter also explores the ways in which writing can be assessed at primary
level.

Writing serves many pedagogical functions. Among them, writing can be seen as a
means of drawing upon previous knowledge and experience in interpreting new ideas,
a means of consolidating and reviewing new information and experiences, and a
means of reformulating and extending knowledge (Hildyard, 1994). While often
considered to be a solitary activity, writing is a transaction between the personal,
social and cultural environment and therefore the writing process must be seen as
encompassing these factors (Rosenblatt, 1989).

2.2 Models of the Writing Process
A number of models of the writing process have been put forward in the past twenty
years. It is often referred to as ‘the composing process’ to distinguish it from more
limited views of writing i.e. handwriting, spelling, grammar, which are themselves
components of the overall process. A unifying factor in many of the models is the shift
in emphasis in teaching writing from the product of writing activities (the finished
text) to ways in which text has been developed: from concern with questions about
content (e.g., ‘What has been written?’) and a summative approach to assessment
(e.g., ‘What is it worth?’); to questions relating to the process (e.g., ‘How was it
written?’) and a formative approach to assessment (e.g., ‘How can it be improved?’).
The most influential models have been those of Hayes and Flower (1980) and Bereiter
2.2.1 Hayes and Flower (1980)
The theory of writing proposed by Hayes and Flower (1980) suggests that writing is a highly complex, goal-directed activity that is invoked in a recursive manner. It develops over time as writers move from the production of egocentric, writer-based texts (typically, students writing everything they know on a topic without considering what the reader wants or needs to know) to reader-based texts, which are written with the reader in mind. This model has been criticised for being too vague as little attention is given to how text is actually produced, or too generalised as it cannot be applied equally to all writing tasks (Hildyard, 1994). Criticism has been made of the basic research tool, protocol analysis, on the grounds that thinking aloud while writing interferes with the process (Furneaux, 1998).
2.2.2 Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987)

Another significant cognitive model is that of Bereiter and Scardamalia’s (1987). They propose a developmental view of writing, with two models: less skilled writers operate at the level of ‘knowledge-telling’ while more skilled writers are involved in ‘knowledge-transforming’. In the ‘knowledge-telling’ model the writer is assumed to draw upon both content knowledge and discourse knowledge and essentially tells all he or she knows in order to complete the writing task. In the ‘knowledge-transforming’ model the writer transforms his or her knowledge as the writing proceeds; that is the writer actively reworks the content during the process of writing (Hildyard, 1994). Problems arise in explaining how or when writers move from one stage to the other, or if all do (Furneaux, 1998).

The social stage appeared in the 1980s when studies in sociolinguistics, Halliday’s functional linguistics and educational ethnography led to criticism that the above approaches to the writing process omitted the crucial dimension of social context. Educational movements in America such as writing across the curriculum and the British primary level National Writing Project have emphasised that writers do not function as solitary individuals, but as members of a social and cultural group. This influences the content and the process of their writing and how it is perceived.

2.2.3 White and Arndt (1991)

Although there is not, as is sometimes thought, one ‘process approach’, there are many useful process writing techniques which feed into a variety of approaches. White and Arndt’s diagram (1991, p 4; see figure 2.2 below) provides a framework which tries to capture the recursive nature of writing. Activities to generate ideas (e.g., brainstorming) help writers tap their long-term memory and answer the questions about what they know about a topic. Focusing (e.g., fast writing) deals with the overall purpose of the writing. Structuring is organising and reorganising text to enable students to present their thoughts and ideas in a way that is easily understood by the reader. The transition from writer-based thought to reader-based text occurs during the drafting stage. Several drafts are produced and each is influenced by feedback from teacher and/or other students. Essential evaluating skills are developed through using activities such as reformulation and the use of checklists. Feedback focuses initially
on content and structure. Once these aspects are satisfactory, discussion on language is incorporated into the text along with other amendments before the final version. Reviewing is standing back from the text and looking at it afresh to consider whether it is right. The overall aim is to create meaningful, purposeful writing tasks that develop the writer's skills over several drafts. An essential aspect is the collaboration between learners and teachers which results in changes in teacher and learner roles.

Figure 2.2
White and Arndt's (1991) diagram of process writing

![Diagram of process writing]

2.3 Emergent Literacy
The belief that knowledge of literacy emerges gradually from birth through school-going years is proposed by several authors in the field of emergent literacy (see, for example, Clay, 1975; Hall, 1987, 1993; Strickland and Morrow, 1989; Teale and Sulzby, 1986). The term emergent literacy signals a belief that, in a literate society, young children are in the process of becoming literate. These writers argue that young children's writing develops and matures over time, although not all children develop at the same rate nor do all children learn in the same way. Children begin school with various experiences and knowledge about language. This knowledge about language enables children to learn to write by building on what they already know (Freedman, 1994). The most powerful model for effective writing available to young children is the teacher and in junior classes the regular demonstration of the kind of writing behaviour expected of the children provides an important support for the children's initial efforts. Often the teacher's response to the child's description of his/her own
drawing will involve collaboration, questioning and discussion of a suitable caption (Hall, 1991). This enables the teacher to observe the children’s emerging knowledge of the vocabulary of writing. Gradually, the teacher may introduce other media such as a blackboard, a sheet of newsprint or an overhead projector to demonstrate how he/she chooses an idea, makes rough notes, changes what has been written, crosses out, adds and rearranges words, finds the spelling of a word from a caption in the classroom, attempts spelling, makes mistakes and corrects them.

2.4 The Writing Process

In the context of this study, the model of the writing process is based on the five broad stages which have evolved from the work of Jane Emig (1971), James Britton (1978), Donald Graves (1983, 1994) and Lucy Calkins (1994). These are the stages that writers move through as they compose and although the names of the stages vary, they generally referred to as: (i) prewriting, (ii) drafting, (iii) revising, (iv) editing, and (v) sharing. The process involves practices that recur throughout each stage. These stages also reflect the approach to writing that is incorporated in the Primary School Curriculum: English (Government of Ireland, 1999) and described more fully in the Teacher Guidelines: English (Government of Ireland, 1999).

‘The approach to writing outlined in the curriculum presupposes a gradual development of the child’s ability to write through the actual process of writing.’ (p14)

‘The process of writing is as important as the product because, it is through consistent practice in using that process that children learn to write.’ (p76)

This emphasis on process encompasses such issues as self-selection of topics, drafting, revising and editing, writing for a range of audiences and purposes, developing a sense of ownership, having the opportunity to share the work, to interact with others and to learn from the teacher in the role of mentor at various stages of the process.

In the following section each stage of the writing process is considered in detail to highlight the cluster of techniques employed by both the students and the teacher in the process of creating a piece of writing.
2.4.1 Prewriting
This is the preparation stage in the writing process. It provides background for writing and it is the stage when children choose topics and generate ideas for writing. It is also a time when children plan their writing and learn about the structure of various forms of written language such as stories, letters, poems or informational texts. Evidence from research suggests that mature, skilled writers spend more time in planning than either average or novice writers (Wray, 1994). Through support from the teacher however, children can learn more mature strategies for planning and revising which have a positive effect on the structure and quality of their work (Fitzgerald, 1987). Further, by encouraging children to take responsibility for choosing their own topics for writing, a greater sense of ownership and involvement in the writing task, as well as a clearer sense of audience may be observed (Graves 1983, 1994).

Ownership, Purpose and Audience
The child’s sense of ownership occurs when children are involved in selecting their own topics, exploring their experiences and opinions and elaborating on their points of view. The concept of audience is also a powerful motivator of student writing, as Britton and his associates (1975) observed, and children should be aware of their intended audience, either real or imagined. While considerations change as the children write and revise, they must begin with at least an emerging concept of audience, purpose and form as they begin to write their first draft. More importantly, when children ask questions such as, ‘What is the purpose of my writing?’ and ‘Who is my writing addressed to?’ both the form which the writing will take and their sense of ownership become more clearly established. As children engage in discussion, thinking, reading, gathering information, webbing (concept mapping), sketching ideas or jotting down important points, they begin to recognise the wide range of purposes (for example, to record, inform, explain, entertain, or persuade others), forms (for example, diary writing, writing stories, poems or reports) and topics that they have available to them.

2.4.2 Drafting
During the drafting stage the focus is on composing. Since the main aim at this stage is to compose a text, less emphasis may be placed on the mechanical aspects of
writing such as punctuation and spelling. As the children’s intentions emerge on paper, they frequently reread the text to establish how their work is developing with regard to the original plan. They may delete sections of text, add others and rearrange them to make their intentions clearer.

2.4.3 Revising
During this stage, the children revise their ideas. This is the point where writers clarify the material in order to meet the needs of readers through changing, adding, deleting and rearranging material (Hoskisson and Tompkins, 1987). According to Donald Murray (1992) ‘Revision is the process of seeing what you’ve said to discover what you have to say’ (p10). ‘Good writing’ can be defined as ‘rewriting’ as revising and editing are essential to improving student writing. By revising, students learn not only to write more effectively but to rethink and reconsider their positions.

2.4.4 Editing
Editing is the penultimate stage in developing and preparing a piece of work for its intended audience. This is the time when concern for the mechanics of writing such as capitalisation, punctuation, spelling, and grammar come to the fore, as well as the surface features such as handwriting and neatness. Through developing proofreading skills children learn to become responsible for their own work and form a greater sense of ownership and independence in their writing.

The use of conventions in the writing process
Traditionally, teachers have based their assessment of children’s written work on the number of spelling, punctuation and other mechanical errors (Hall, 1995). In the process writing class the teacher places more emphasis on the child’s compositional ideas and skills, dealing with mechanical aspects at a later stage in the process. Difficulties in spelling should not determine the purpose and nature of the writing and allowing children to use inventive spelling (see Chomsky, 1971) enables them to use vocabulary from their oral language and from their reading which can be woven into their writing. Learning about punctuation during the course of their everyday writing also gives children a deeper understanding of the functions of punctuation than when
they learn them in the traditional manner with practice exercises on each one (Calkins, 1980, Graves, 1983).

However, Graves (1990) makes the following assertion:

Make no mistake, component skills are important: if children do not learn to spell or use a pencil to get words on paper, they won’t use writing for learning, any more than the other children drilled on component skills. (p34)

2.4.5 Publishing/Sharing
Publishing makes the effort of editing and proof-reading worthwhile and it is brought to life through sharing with others students, at home or with a wider audience. Published writing is usually presented in a number of ways: as a class anthology, newspaper, poster or as an individual ‘book’ and illustrated by hand by the child, printed with the class word processor or typed by an assisting adult. Through the process of sharing and reflecting on their own work, children find out whether they have fulfilled their intentions for writing and they develop a greater concept of author (Graves, 1990). Seeing their work in published form enables them to identify more readily with published authors whose work they have read (NZ Ministry of Education, 1996).

*Synthesising stages in the writing process*
Although it is useful to consider the writing process as a series of stages, it is very important that all stages are regarded as a continuous problem-solving process that enables students to grapple with complex ideas. Rigid sets of procedures (e.g. planning on Monday, drafting on Tuesday, revising on Wednesday etc. ) are counterproductive to the problem-solving nature of writing. According to Freedman (1994), studies of the specific nature of this problem-solving process reveal that, even given the same topic, different writers compose differently and solve different problems. It is important, therefore, to be cognisant of the different ways in which students engage in writing tasks and the different patterns of learning that emerge in the classroom.
2.5 Studies of the writing process model

2.5.1 Studies in favour of the writing process model

A significant source of evidence which finds in favour of the process approach to writing is that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] (1992). In this, evidence is presented that teaching the cluster of writing techniques known collectively as ‘process writing’ is associated with higher average writing proficiency among students. Students whose teachers always had them do such activities, especially in combination, had the highest average writing scores. Students who did certain pre-writing activities on the actual NAEP test also had higher average proficiency scores than other students. According to the National Centre for Educational Statistics (NCES) 1996 report, ‘teachers’ encouragement of ...process-related activities was strongly related to average writing proficiency’ (NCES, 1996).

2.5.2 Criticisms of the writing process model

While the major influence on the reviewing and redrafting aspects of writing has been the work of Donald Graves (1983), his work has not been beyond criticism. Some critics have suggested that his work is more evangelical ‘reportage’ than research, as there are few references to where his model is found not to be valid and the influence of teacher enthusiasm (the so-called ‘Hawthorne effect’) is not discussed (Beard, 1990). Beard questions whether teachers tacitly signal what they are really seeking during ‘child-centred’ conferences and whether extensive redrafting leads to major restructuring of texts by young children. Beard also notes that Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) are cautious about primary children redrafting their work, finding that exhortations to redraft can lead to superficial tinkering which may threaten to diminish the overall effectiveness of the text. Nevertheless, Graves’ work has justifiably drawn attention to the benefits of children reviewing their work and has broadened interest in and understanding of the development of writing strategies that children can employ.

2.6 Assessment of writing

While research on the development of writing is considered a relatively new area of study, the assessment of writing as an area of research is still in its infancy. Many of the issues raised in the literature on assessment of writing refer to assessment on a large scale, at state level or for terminal examination purposes. Consequently the focus
lies on the merit of various testing instruments in large-scale situations and the reliability and validity of such instruments. However, for the purpose of this study, this chapter examines two aspects of assessment that arise at classroom level and are inherent in the writing process: the use of feedback and the development of assessment criteria. These issues come to the fore during the ‘conference’ stage of the writing process. The use of feedback and the development of assessment criteria are also critical aspects of instruction in writing, formative assessment and therefore, essential in a portfolio approach to assessment of writing. The use of feedback and the development of assessment criteria occur most often during the ‘conference’ stage of the writing process.

2.6.1 Conferences

The use of writing conferences have been developed by Graves (1983, 1994) and others (e.g., Atwell, 1983; Calkins, 1994) as a means of providing feedback to students during the writing process. A conference is a kind of linguistic bridge that can provide the child with the cues and probes for extending writing (Kavanagh, 1995). Conferences may be conducted on a one-to-one basis or with a small group. They give children a chance to explain and substantiate their answers, ask questions and discuss problems encountered. They also provide opportunities for the teacher to assess understandings and skills in an informal way.

While serving a useful purpose at the revising stage, conferences can occur at other points in the writing process: (a) at the initial stage: a child might have a conference with the teacher to help select a suitable topic for writing; (b) at the drafting stage: a child might bring pieces of writing to a conference to seek assistance with specific problems in writing he or she may have encountered and to discuss solutions; (c) at the editing stage: the focus may be directed towards the correction of mechanical errors, spelling, punctuation, etc., isolating particular problems and giving individual instruction, as necessary (Hoskisson and Tompkins, 1987); (d) at the revising stage: the teacher may take the children back to the original reason for writing their selection, keeping them in touch with their ‘energy source’ for writing (Graves, 1983). Conferences can be most effective when they occur at an early stage of the writing process rather than at the end. According to Graves (1983), ‘When children speak
first, much time is saved' (p146). Conferences usually conclude with the child explaining what he or she plans to do next with the composition.

2.6.2 Feedback
In a study of children's writing in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education emphasised the importance of providing children with feedback on the work they are doing to enable them make sense of their learning (NZ Ministry of Education, 1996). The kind of feedback that children receive as they write is an important issue in the teaching and learning of writing. In addition to being genuinely interested in their writing, students need to grapple with pieces of writing, or aspects of a piece of writing, that are too challenging for them to manage alone but they can manage with the help of others (see The Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky, 1978, as outlined in Chapter 1). The results of studies undertaken in both the United States and the United Kingdom indicate that the most effective assistance students can receive is an individualised, oral response from the teacher during the writing process (Freedman and McLeod, 1988). Such responses clarify for writers whether they are communicating what they intended to communicate in the way they intended. A second type of support can come from peers when they are organised by teachers into peer response groups. These groups are most effective when students are generating ideas, although they are less reliable for providing feedback on drafts of texts (Freedman, 1994).

According to Freedman (1994), the least helpful form of feedback for students is the traditional comments that teachers write on students' papers after a piece of writing is completed. These comments often accompany a grade on the writing often function more to justify the grade than to teach the students and furthermore, when students read the comments they often misinterpret them. Feedback, in the process of formative assessment, is also considered by Tunstall and Gipps (1996) to be a prime requirement for progress in learning. In a study of teachers' verbal feedback in infant classrooms, Tunstall and Gipps (1996) identified four forms of feedback. The types are placed on a continuum representing evaluative-descriptive approaches to assessment. In seeking

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6 Each type is subdivided creating a dualistic structure: Type A – rewarding and punishing; Type B – approving and disapproving; Type C – specifying attainment and improvement; and Type D –
to articulate approaches to feedback that encourage a positive learning environment, the authors argue that the judicious combination of both evaluative and descriptive types of feedback by the teacher creates the most powerful support for learning. They also note that there are dangers in making feedback to individual children public, but at the same time, they find that public feedback involving the whole class in discussion, in ways which shift the locus of responsibility to the children, provides some of the most extensive learning opportunities (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996).

In their publication, *Inside the Black Box: Setting Standards*, Black and Wiliam (1998) review the connection between formative assessment and the raising of standards. While finding several studies to support the view that formative assessment does indeed raise standards, they place a particular emphasis on the use and types of feedback employed in the teaching learning process. They argue that ‘frequent assessment feedback helps low attaining students and students with learning disabilities enhance their learning’ (p4) and that it improves learning where it gives each pupil specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without reference to overall marks. They claim that the feedback itself, to be effective, should be about particular questions relating to the student’s work, advising him or her what can be done to improve, and it should avoid comparisons with other students. The authors argue that in order to trigger the formative process during feedback, ‘the dialogue between pupils and teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas’ (p12).

### 2.6.3 Writing assessment criteria

Developing clear assessment criteria is an essential aspect of the teaching-learning-assessment cycle embedded in the writing process and an integral aspect of a portfolio approach to instruction and assessment. Teachers can connect teaching, learning, and assessment in a meaningful way when goals and standards are made explicit. In this constructing achievement and the way forward. The authors believe that Types A and B are evaluative or judgemental types and lead to performance-goal orientation. At the other end of the continuum, Types C and D are descriptive types and lead to a mastery goal orientation. Feedback Type D is described as learning-orientated in that it includes many of the strategies identified in constructivist approaches to learning, as well as self-regulating strategies.
way teachers’ expert judgement becomes a vehicle for informing learners about their progress toward specified goals for guiding them toward improvement (Diez and Moon, 1992). Fox (1990) emphasises the importance of criteria for teachers in the assessment of writing:

‘Defining criteria of attainment is helpful, in so far as it makes clearer to all concerned the nature of what is to be learned and the way in which the process and products of writing are to be judged’

(Fox, 1990, p133)

Peacock (1996) proposes that the involvement of the students themselves in developing specific criteria for evaluation enables the teacher to refine his/her understanding of writing assessment. In middle and senior classes in particular, interesting discussions arise when children begin to look at the qualities of effective writing in different genres and apply that knowledge to their own work. Even if the children’s writing is not assigned a particular score, the process of identifying the qualities of good writing can be a very worthwhile learning experience. An example of assessment criteria based on four aspects of writing: content, style, organisation, presentation, devised with a group of 12 year olds is given here:

**Figure 2.3**

Assessment criteria based on four aspects of writing devised with a group of 12 year olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Style of writing</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing should be: interesting, humorous, serious, exciting</td>
<td>The writer should consider the sense, use your imagination, create mental images, express feelings, emphasise some words, include good description, make it easy to follow and understand, use direct speech, use interesting words and sentences</td>
<td>In putting your piece together, have a good start, middle and end, use paragraphs, take a new line when someone else speaks</td>
<td>Your piece of writing should have: a good title, complete sentences, capital letters, correct spelling, proper punctuation, neat handwriting, It should be neatly presented.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Donald Murray (1979) identifies characteristics of good writing as having meaning, authority, voice, development, design and clarity.

**Figure 2.4**
Qualities Of Good Writing (Murray, 1979)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Meaning</td>
<td>There must be content in an effective piece of writing. It must add up to something. This is the most important element in good writing, but although it must be listed first it is often discovered last through the process of writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Authority</td>
<td>Good writing is filled with specific, accurate, honest information. The reader is persuaded through authoritative information that the writer knows the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Voice</td>
<td>Good writing is marked by an individual voice. The writer’s voice may be the most significant element in distinguishing memorable writing from good writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Development</td>
<td>The writer satisfies the reader’s hunger for information. The beginning writer almost always overestimates the reader’s hunger for language and underestimates the reader’s hunger for information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Design</td>
<td>A good piece of writing is elegant in the mathematical sense. It has form, structure, order, focus, coherence. It gives the reader a sense of completeness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Clarity</td>
<td>Good writing is marked by a simplicity which is appropriate to the subject. The writer has searched for and found the right word, the effective verb, the clarifying phrase. The writer has removed the writer so that the reader sees through the writer’s style to the subject, which is clarified and simplified.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Murphy and Shiel (1996) developed the following holistic rating scale based on three aspects of writing: conventions, structure and quality. Each aspect is considered on a scale of 1-5 points; the quality rating is doubled and added to the other two to give an overall score. The five levels of quality and the characteristics which determine these are presented here:
Figure 2.5
Holistic Narrative Writing Scale (Murphy and Shiel, 1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five levels of quality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emerging/Insufficient story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Developing story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Competent story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Commendable story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Exceptional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten characteristics to be considered as determinants of the level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Clear sequence of events present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Story development with little or no irrelevant description or exposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Reactions and feelings related to events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Good organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Originality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) Fresh vigorous word choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Variety of interesting details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) Use of dialogue to vary style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Coherent sentence structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(j) Correct punctuation, capitalisation and spelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the above authors emphasise the importance of making criteria known in advance to the students. In this way, assessment becomes a matter of gathering evidence from the student’s performance to support a judgement whether specific criterion has been met (Diez and Moon, 1992).

The two aspects of writing assessment described above: feedback and the development of assessment criteria relate in particular to the role of the teacher in the teaching-learning-assessment cycle. The findings of the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991) as described in Chapter One on assessment dimensions of portfolios: Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to Work, are also of direct relevance to the issues of assessing writing. They may also be considered as overarching aspects of assessment of portfolios. They are especially relevant also in the context of this study.
2.7 Summary

Writing is a recursive process and progress is often unpredictable. These views of writing are found in the ‘writing process’ model espoused by many authors in the field (e.g., Britton, 1978; Calkins, 1994; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; 1994; White and Arndt, 1991) and are reflected in the approach to writing underpinning the revised primary curriculum in English (Government of Ireland, 1999). Formative assessment is critical in the writing process. Assessment therefore is best undertaken through close observation of the student at work and through the provision of valuable feedback at the time of writing. Identifying criteria and sharing this with the student makes the process of assessment more effective and transparent. This can enable the student to make significant progress, and to be aware of his or her writing strategies, strengths and weaknesses. Hence, the role of the teacher is vital in the development of the child as a writer.

According to Freedman (1994) the writing portfolio provides the most valid data for evaluating an individual’s writing abilities and development across time. As a tool for teaching and assessing writing, portfolios provide an ideal mechanism, promoting and reflecting the students’ growth over time. As an assessment concept, portfolios may be evaluated along the dimensions devised by the Project Zero team: Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to Work.

Inherent in the relationship between the assessment of writing and its teaching is the question of how to generate the conditions of assessment that approximate the conditions under which good writing is known or is likely to occur. Creating an environment that encourages high standards, provides stimulating ideas and allows time to write, may not be enough to extend the children with a good deal of potential or to enable the child with learning difficulties to achieve a reasonable standard. The use of feedback in the teaching-learning process is critical to improved performance. The gathering of multiple samples of students’ work in order to track the process itself, the range of work and the student’s actual progress in writing are necessary features of writing assessment.
As Wiggins (1994) recommends:

‘Let us, therefore, work to insure that our writing assessments do the best possible job of teaching students about how writing works and how writers really work - given the limits imposed by uniform assessment procedures. Let us strive to insure that we use criteria as close to the heart of a genre or problem as possible, not merely the most safe and generic dimensions. Let us strive to have assessments in which we gain insight into the students’ ability and willingness to strive for a quality product through feedback and revision.’

(p139)
Chapter Three

The nature and purpose of the current study
CHAPTER THREE

A RATIONALE FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

3.1 Assessment and learning

The context for the current study lies in two separate, but complementary, forces: the demand for increased accountability and transparency in educational assessment methods and the desire for learning to be challenging, active and meeting the needs of all students. Both of these forces are fueled by the ultimate desire of raising standards in education as a whole. These issues operate within the national as well as the international spheres.

The international context on assessment and learning is outlined in Chapter One. In recent years the emphasis on assessment has shifted from mainly summative functions to assessment for formative purposes or assessment for learning (Resnick and Resnick, 1992). This period has also seen a shift away from the use of standardised measures of achievement towards the broader concept of authentic assessment and performance assessment from which the portfolio has emerged as a dynamic assessment tool and a locus for reflective practice (Black et al., 1994). The related approaches to learning which reflect child-centred views of teaching, pluralistic and developmental views of children, constructivist views of knowing, and critical theoretical views of empowerment (Tierney, 1998) are also described.

The Irish context for assessment emerges from various documents which have been published in the past ten years (e.g. NCCA, 1993; White Paper, 1995) while the issue of assessment and approaches to learning are drawn into sharp focus by the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

In the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) increased emphasis is placed on the new methodologies and approaches and an increased emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning. This is evident in the Primary School Curriculum: Introduction (Government of Ireland, 1999), in which the three pedagogic principles
dealing with activity and discovery methods, an integrated curriculum and environment-based learning are augmented to fifteen broader principles. These expanded principles give even greater attention to the breadth and depth of the child's learning experiences and the assessment of that learning. The current views on learning are also apparent in the nature of the content objectives which encompass content and methodology, exemplars, and the emphasis on increased sophistication of teacher knowledge in terms of school planning, organisational planning, classroom planning and approaches and finally, in the extensive sections on teaching methodologies.

3.2 Assessment and instruction in writing

The issue of standardised tests for children in first and fifth classes and the elimination of literacy (and numeracy) difficulties within five years were among the proposals which featured in the White Paper: Charting our education future (1995). Since then, no change from this position has been signalled by the Department of Education and Science. However, standardised tests alone are unlikely to eliminate literacy and numeracy problems or to raise standards; neither will they provide useful information on a child's progress in all subject areas across the curriculum or components of the curriculum, such as writing. Furthermore, as outlined in Chapter One, experience in other countries has shown that standardised tests can drive the curriculum in harmful ways (Hambleton and Murphy, 1992, Mehrens, 1992; Munby, 1989). It is imperative that the issues of alternative approaches to assessment (e.g., authentic assessment, portfolio assessment) and assessment in other areas of the curriculum (e.g. writing) are addressed for the purposes of raising standards in education, providing an approach to assessment which supports learning, while ensuring that such approaches are transparent, valid and worthy of pursuit.

Among the new approaches underpinning the teaching of writing in the Primary School Curriculum: English (Government of Ireland, 1999) is the process approach. This emphasis on process encompasses such issues as self-selection of topics, drafting, revising and editing, writing for a range of audiences and purposes, developing a sense of ownership, having the opportunity to share the work, to interact
with others and to learn from the teacher in the role of mentor at various stages of the process. The issue of assessment of writing is clearly outlined in the section on assessment which emphasises the importance of using assessment tools such as portfolios to create a picture of the child’s development over a period. The theories of writing and assessment of writing are outlined in greater detail in Chapter Two.

3.3. The context for the study

The study grew from an earlier project titled The Drumcondra Writing Project which originated at the Educational Research Centre, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra during the 1995-1996 school year. The purpose of this study was to collate portfolios of children’s written work in natural settings over the course of the school year. Participants included up to three teachers from all classes in the primary school, junior infants to sixth class. In all, approximately 500 portfolios were created, yielding approximately 2,500 writing samples. From these portfolios, a range of styles, approaches and standards quickly emerged. They included illegible offerings, incomplete drafts, transcripts from the blackboard, formulaic exercises, extensive stories in strict chapters as well as complete, final gems. Glittering among the pile was the work from a small number of classrooms. This work attracted attention for several reasons: the care with which the teacher delivered the work, her obvious commitment to the subject ‘writing’, but most of all, the quality of the pupils’ writing portfolios. Three of these teachers were invited to participate in Phase II of the writing project, which entailed a further examination of the pupils’ work and of the teachers’ approach over the course of the following school year.

The vantage point for this study therefore is an endpoint, a high point in the midst of many troughs. Having arrived at a high point in the teaching of writing, the overall question that emerges is ‘How did we get here?’ From this researcher’s point of view, it was evident that some studies already conducted in this area had reported negatively on the teaching of writing in particular (Hall, 1995; Kavanagh, 1995). Indeed, similar findings could possibly be reported if one were to examine the work of each of the teachers who participated in Phase I of the original Drumcondra Writing Project. But in order to learn how one reaches high points, it was decided that the focus of the study would lie on how the steps to reach this high point were measured and what
underlying processes and experiences were involved in getting there. In other words, what are the approaches to the teaching of writing adopted by the teachers, and how do they measure their progress along the way? Additional, critical questions are: is what we see worthy of our admiration? Are we looking at all the evidence from the right perspective?

3.4 Research questions in the study
From this context, the following three main research questions and additional subordinate questions emerged:

Q1. What are the approaches to instruction in writing employed by the three teachers in the study?
- What kinds of learning are taking place for the pupils?
- To what extent does the teacher’s influence impact on the pupils’ work?
- Are the teachers’ approaches in line with current theories on learning and with the new curriculum in English?

Q2. What kind of assessment methods do the teachers employ in order to enhance their students’ learning?
- Is there any evidence of feedback?
- Is the feedback effective in guiding further learning?
- How important is record keeping and reporting of pupils’ progress in the teaching-learning-assessment cycle?

Q.3 Does assessment through portfolios of writing in the primary school provide a valid means of assessment?
- Is there evidence that accrues from portfolios that may not be available with other assessment tools?
- What are the lessons to be learned from various portfolio models?
- Are these applicable or transferable to other areas of the curriculum?

The following chapters seek to address each of these questions.
Chapter Four

Design and methodology
CHAPTER FOUR
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

4.1 Overview
This study involves an qualitative analysis of the use of portfolios in the teaching of writing. The method of inquiry used in the study is that of within-site case study involving multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 1998). For the purpose of the study three schools were selected on the basis of the approach to writing that they adopted in their classrooms. Several portfolios of pupils' writing are examined in Chapter Five as well as individual samples of work. Pupils' reflections on the writing process and on their understanding of the assessment of writing are presented in Chapter Six. An analysis of the each teacher's approach to instruction and assessment in writing is described in Chapter Seven. This chapter also includes a description of the type of schools involved and observational notes from each classroom itself. Similarities, differences and recurring issues in the teaching and assessment of writing and in the use of portfolios as an assessment tool are described in Chapter Eight.

4.2 The Sample
The sample comprised three primary schools in the greater Dublin area. One class from each school was selected. All classes were of mixed ability children and were co-educational. One infant class, one class of fourth class pupils and one class of fifth class pupils were involved in the study.

4.3 Duration
The study took place over two years. For the purpose of this study, the timeframe for analysis of the portfolio differed. In the infant classroom, the portfolios are examined on the basis of work in the first year only. In the fourth class, the portfolios represent work over a two year period, while in the fifth class, a showcase model (Forster and Masters, 1996) is used which focuses on a particular endpoint in fifth class.
4.4 Instrumentation

The research instruments employed for the purposes of this study were as follows:

1. Qualitative analysis of pupils' writing samples in portfolio collections
2. Open-ended pupil questionnaire to evoke reflection (analysed using qualitative and quantitative procedures)
3. Classroom observations
4. Semi-structured teacher interviews
5. Standardised tests of reading achievement

4.4.1 Analysis of pupils' writing samples in portfolio collections

While the portfolios from all three classes were collected systematically over a two-year period, for the purpose of this study, the following portfolios are presented in detail:

(a) From the junior infant classroom, four portfolios of children's writing collected during year one of the project. The work in these portfolios document the pupils' growth in writing during the year and are referred to as 'documentary portfolios' (Foster and Masters, 1996);

(b) From the fifth class pupils, samples of work from a particular time in the year are presented from 9 pupils. This exemplifies the 'showcase' model of portfolios (Foster and Master, 1996);

(c) Finally, from the fourth class group, portfolios from five pupils containing samples which span the period from third to fourth class are presented. The portfolios include samples that were requested by the teacher as well as the pupils' own preferences, working drafts and final copies. These portfolios exemplify the 'working' portfolio model (Foster and Master, 1996).

4.4.2 Pupil questionnaire

A questionnaire to be administered to the children in the study was devised. The questionnaire comprised nine questions designed to encourage reflection on the
writing process and to yield information on the teaching and assessment of writing. In addition, the questionnaire sought information on the students’ attitudes to writing and their understanding of the purpose of writing within the context of their school life as well as in the future. The questions were framed in an open-ended way and no choices were given. This allowed room for the pupils to reflect on the writing process and to respond as freely as possible.

The questions focused on:
(i). The type of writing that the pupils liked best
(ii). The process of writing
(iii). Source of ideas/starting points
(iv). Revising
(v). Sharing
(vi). Feedback from teacher
(vii). Use of grades and comments for assessment
(viii). Parental expectations
(ix). Writing in the broader context

The responses given by the students were grouped and coded in the following manner:

(i) **What is your favourite kind of writing?**
1 personal 2 narrative: fiction 3 narrative: non-fiction
4 comedy 5 horror 6 adventure

(ii) **How do you go about writing it?**
1 just start writing 2 brainstorm ideas
3 ideas from teacher 4 make a plan, then write
5 don’t know

(iii) **Where do you get your ideas from?**
1 books 2 television
3 teacher 4 own experiences
5 out of my head 6 environment

(iv) **Do you change anything when you have finished?**
1 yes 2 no 3 sometimes
If so, what do you change?
1 ideas, 2 structure, 3 spellings
4 grammar 5 layout 6 verbs 7 adjectives

(v) Do you show your work to your friends in class?
1 yes 2 no 3 sometimes

What kinds of things do your friends say when they read your writing?
1 positive comments 2 negative comments

(vi) How does your teacher correct your work?
1 lots of cross outs 2 makes alternative suggestions
3 asks/writes questions on the side 4 writes a comment
5 does nothing, just ticks at the end

Does your teacher say anything to you about your writing?
1 positive comments 2 negative comments
3 suggestions for improvement 4 specific comments on work

(vii) Does your teacher give you grades, like A, B C or D, or a mark out of 10, or a comment such as Excellent, Very good, Good or Fair?
1 grades 2 mark out of 10 3 comments

How does your teacher help you improve your work?
1 suggests alternative ideas 2 suggests alternative vocabulary
3 corrects grammar 4 suggests a different structure
5 puts us in groups

What sort of writing does the teacher like to read best?
1 neat, well presented 2 interesting adventure
3 good description 4 features - metaphor, simile
(viii) When you take your writing home, what does your family say about it?

1. positive comments
2. negative comments
3. they don’t comment
4. room for improvement

(ix) Do you think it is important to be good at writing? Why?

Yes because...
1. good for exams
2. good for jobs
3. good for life
4. good for other subjects

4.4.3 Observations

A programme of visits to each teacher was arranged which ensured that classroom observation could be included as part of the study. The observational notes were collected with the aim of providing context details that could be put together with the transcripts of the interviews. They focused, for example, on the layout and organisation of the classroom, the grouping arrangements, the school and classroom environment, the rapport between the teacher and the pupils and the atmosphere in the classroom.

4.4.4 Teacher interviews

The purpose of the teacher interviews was primarily to gain insight into classroom practice in order to determine what particular aspects of the teachers’ approaches to instruction and assessment contributed to effective practice. A teacher who had participated in Phase 1 of the Drumcondra Writing Project filled the role of informant for the study. A full interview was conducted with her in the first instance. This was audio-taped and transcribed in full at a later date. Verification with that the views recorded were correct were ascertained through a follow-up meeting.

The interviews were conducted in an informal manner and were audio-taped and transcribed in full at a later stage. Following a qualitative mode of enquiry, the interviews were carried out like daily conversations. The atmosphere was casual; some questions were broad, while others were more in-depth. No answer choices were provided. The major guidelines from DePasquale (1970) in conducting the interview
were observed. Each interviewee was selected carefully and was willing to be interviewed. Before starting a taped interview, the interviewee was well informed of the mutual rights with respect to tapes and transcripts made from the interview. Each interviewee was made aware of the subject and purpose of the interview and was clearly willing to give useful information on the research problem. The researcher was also thoroughly grounded in the background and experiences of the person being interviewed. During the interview, the researcher assisted the interviewee in keeping a focus on each question and on keeping the conversation related to the research problem. However, the researcher aimed to conduct each interview in a spirit of objectivity and scholarly integrity, and to comply with the stipulations agreed upon.

The interviews covered ten areas that are integral to the teaching and assessment of writing. These included:

(i) Importance of writing
(ii) Writing process
(iii) Genres
(iv) Mechanics
(v) Organisation
(vi) Assessment
(vii) Recording
(viii) Reporting
(ix) School policy
(x) The teacher within the broader context

(i) Importance of writing
Firstly, do you consider writing to be an important component of the curriculum? About how much time per day/per week do you devote to the teaching of writing?

(ii) Writing Process
The writing samples which you submitted to the ERC last year seemed to be very worthwhile, can you describe you enabled the children to reach that stage?

To what extent do you employ process approaches to writing instruction?

What emphasis do you place on drafting? sharing? revising? Publishing? Where do your pupils’ writing prompts originate from: mainly from you, mainly from classwork, from the pupils themselves or a combination of sources?

Do you consider the concept of ownership to be important for the child?
To what extent do you employ the conference approach in reviewing a child’s writing?

Can you describe what might a typical lesson in writing be like in your class?

(iii) Genres
What is the most important aspect of writing that should be taught? What sorts of genres/range of purposes for writing do you teach? How do you select these?

- What emphasis do you place on writing poetry, stories, personal writing, personal response?
- How do you approach writing non-fiction?
- Do you consider ‘functional writing’ (as found in many workbooks) to be important?

(iv) Mechanics
What emphasis do you place on the teaching of mechanics/conventions of writing?

- spelling, punctuation, grammar

How important do you consider handwriting to be?

(v) Organisation
How do you organise or arrange the children for writing?

- Do you use a whole class approach, groups or an individual approach?
- To what extent do you cater for individual differences? How often and for how long?
- What strategies do you use with a child who is having difficulties with writing?
- How do you cope with the range of writing abilities in the class?
- How do the children keep track of what they have written?
- Do you encourage your pupils to take their writing home?
- To what extent do you encourage writing outside the classroom?
- Do you think there are benefits which your pupils accrue from writing as a direct, or an indirect, result of your approach to the teaching of it?

(vi) Assessment
What do you look for in your pupils’ writing?

- What criteria do you use to establish the level of achievement reached by the child?

Are your pupils aware of this criteria?

What do you actually do when responding to children’s writing?

- correct spelling, insert punctuation, make a positive comment, help the child to clarify an idea?
Do you encourage your pupils to share and evaluate their own work and the work of others?

Do you ever work with a colleague in responding to your pupils’ writing?

(vii) Recording

Do you keep records of the pupils’ progress in writing?
If so, what format do these take: anecdotal notes, scores, grades?
Do you encourage your pupils to keep track of their own progress?
Do you keep notes of writing conferences?

(viii) Reporting

What evidence do you refer to in assessing your pupils’ writing or in reporting on progress in a report card?
Who sees these notes or reports which you record?

Are reports from previous teachers made available to you when you assume a class?
What information is contained in these reports?
Do you consider this information useful?

Reporting progress to parents

How do you report to parents?

Do you think the grades or comments which you may record for a child at the end of the year reflect what might have been learned during the course of the whole year?
Do you think that the parents of the children whom you teach recognise or understand what you have achieved with your pupils in terms of their writing development?
To what extent would a result on a standardised test of reading achievement influence your reporting on a child’s progress in writing?

(ix) School policy

Is there a (written/unwritten) policy on writing and assessment in your school?

Do you meet with any of your colleagues in school to discuss approaches to the teaching and assessing of writing? How often?

What aspects of these discussion do you find useful?

Remedial Teacher

On the basis of what criteria are pupils selected for remedial instruction?

To what extent does your writing programme influence that selection?

Do the children receive instruction in writing with the remedial teacher?
Does your remedial teacher share your views on the teaching of writing?
How often do you exchange progress reports, either formally or informally?
Is it important that you share the same views?

(x) The teacher within the broader context

What factors influence your teaching?
- School policy
- National policy i.e. Curaclam na Bunscoile
- Available textbooks
- Own philosophy
- Inservice course/person
- Book or article

To what extent do you feel you have control over your teaching and thinking?
What impedes your practice/enhances it?
What aspect of teaching writing do you most enjoy/least enjoy/good at/not good at?

If there was something you could change about the way in which writing is currently taught in Ireland, what would that be?

4.4.5 Standardised tests

The pupils' scores in standardised tests of reading achievement were used obliquely, as an independent measure to indicate the pupils' performance in relation to the rest of the class and in order to identify high, middle and low achievement within the construct of literacy. Their use in the context of assessment, recording and reporting was also questioned in the teacher interviews.

4.5 Data Collection Procedure

Teachers were invited to participate in Phase 1 of the project, the Drumcondra Writing Project. Contact was made with the principal of the school to confirm the teacher's participation in the project and to inform him or her of the purpose and duration of the project. The teachers were asked to submit a portfolio of their pupils' writing in natural conditions, collected over the course of the school year. In order to maintain focus on the work, the teachers were contacted at specific intervals—October, December, February and May—and reminded to include writing samples from those months in their portfolios. Many teachers included samples from before or after those dates as well. As a result of analysis of the writing samples at the end of the first year
(see Murphy and Shiel, 1996), four teachers were asked to participate in the project for a second year. One of these teachers became an informant for the subsequent Phase II, thus allowing the main focus for the second year to rest on the practices of three teachers in different schools and in different teaching situations. Principals and teachers were again informed of the nature of the project in the second year. It was explained that the study would entail the collection of additional writing samples, the examining of the teacher's approach to instruction and assessment in writing through semi-structured interviews and some classroom observation, the examining of the pupils' understanding of the writing process and assessment procedures through completing a pupil questionnaires, and the examination of the pupils' test scores in standardised tests of English reading.

4.6 Data Analysis Procedure

The data is analysed as follows: first, the portfolios from the pupils are examined individually, looking at the quality of the writing, evidence of growth and development and evidence of the approach to instruction favoured by the teacher. The individual pupil's responses to the questionnaire are presented in addition to the analysis of the portfolios in order to compare the pupils' perceptions and reflections on the process of writing and how it is assessed. Next, the portfolios from the class as a whole are examined. Finally, following the descriptions, the data from across the three classes is analysed for specific themes, (a cross-case analysis), information is aggregated into large clusters of ideas and details that support the themes are provided (Cresswell, 1998).

The pupil questionnaires from the fourth and fifth classes are analysed collectively in a quantitative mode. The responses from the pupils are coded and summarised into tables. In this way, patterns within each class and similarities and differences between the classes can be easily observed.

The observations comprise a 'narrative description' of the 'facts' about each case as recorded by the researcher (Stake, 1995). The analysis of this description is aggregated with the other sources of information—writing portfolios, questionnaires and
interviews—to support the themes (Cresswell, 1998) and develop issues (Stake, 1995).

The interviews with the teachers were first transcribed in full, excepting details that would render the school, the individual teachers or the pupils identifiable. Analysis of the data encompasses a within-case analysis (a detailed description is given of each case and themes within the case) followed by a cross-case analysis (thematic analysis across the cases, as well as interpretations of the meaning of each case) (Cresswell, 1998, p63). Some aspects of the analysis involve ‘direction interpretation’. This is where the researcher looks at a single instance and draws meaning from it without looking for multiple instances of it. Stake (1995) describes this as a process of pulling the data apart and putting them back together more meaningful ways.

Finally, the data is aggregated and analysed once more as a ‘cross-case analysis’. This involves examining themes across cases to discern themes that are common to all cases. This combined data has resulted in a clear picture of what is taking place in each of the classrooms.

4.7 Methods of Verification
The convergence of sources of information, views of the researcher, different theories, and different methodologies represents the triangulation of ideas (Denzin, 1970) to help support the development of themes. In case study research, Stake (1995) places emphasis on sources of data and suggests that the researcher triangulate differently based on ‘data situations’ in the case. The data in this study is verified through triangulation of the various methods and sources of research. First, the information extrapolated from the pupils’ writing portfolios is compared with the pupils’ responses and reflections given in the questionnaires. Second, the approaches to instruction and assessment in writing as observed by this researcher are added. Third, the interviewees are asked to consider the transcripts of their interviews to confirm that what has been written is indeed a true reflection of their current practice. Finally, the responses given by each teacher to questions relating to the teaching and assessment of writing in their classrooms is compared with (a) the pupils’ writing
portfolios; (b) the pupils’ responses to the questionnaires; and (c) the observations made by the researcher.
Chapter Five

Analysis of the pupils’ writing portfolios
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS OF THE PUPILS' WRITING PORTFOLIOS

5.1 Analysis of the pupils' writing portfolios in Mrs Hughes' junior infant class - the 'documentary' portfolio model.

In Mrs Hughes' class I focused on seven junior infant children whose portfolios of writing were collected during the 1995-1996 school year. The work of four of these children: Thomas, Laura, Vincent and Vicki, is examined in greater depth here. What is remarkable about the writing from Mrs Hughes' class is the diversity of content produced by junior infant children and the standard achieved by the end of the year. Yet, it is clear that these children are not exceptional, nor did they come to school with writing skills acquired from elsewhere.

5.1.1. Thomas
Thomas's first attempts at writing are typical of a junior infant child in the early part of the school year. He begins with his own name, first name and surname, in large, loosely formed letters, covering the full (A4) page. By December he manages a complete sentence, with lines between the words to indicate spacing and an accompanying illustration:

I like the train

In March his spring story is more elaborate. Left-to-right orientation is clearly visible in his formation and apart from the letters r and p, the other letters are formed correctly. He provides a personal viewpoint of spring with a unique text, as each of the other children do.

Spring
I like spring
I like birds
I like growing flowers

His writing in June is a little more disorganised and lacks attention to spelling, but depicts an emerging sense of story and personal engagement:

Our Tour
We went on a bouys
We hat a grt time
The tour was great

5.1.2. **Laura**
The first sample of writing presented from Laura reads

_Emma is here_

The text is impersonal, based on words from a basal reader. The letters are not well formed, especially _e_ and _h_. The letters are large, off-line and the spacing between them is poor. In December, Laura presents two sentences and an illustration of her family. The letters are smaller, formed with greater control and spaced between words are indicated with short lines. She writes

_Here is my family_
_I like my family_

On the topic of spring in March, Laura provides a title and her own opinion:

_Spring_
_i luke birds singing._
_i luke to ride my bic [bike]._

Although she has some difficulties with the mechanics of spelling and capitalisation, her control of the pencil is more firm, the words are carefully aligned and show a clear left-to-right orientation.

In June, Laura writes more extensively about her holidays.

_I loved my holiday in the Canaries._
_I wenent swimming in a deep pool._

Her sentences are now punctuated and her theme is once again personal and expressed with confidence. She does not feel bound to write about the school tour to the farm as her classmates did, but can offer her own story.

5.1.3 **Vincent**
Vincent’s writing in October reads:

_Here is Daddy at the cirusc_ [circus]
His theme relates to his personal life but he has not mastered the mechanics of letter formation. Several letters are formed incorrectly such as a and y; r is indistinct, h is reversed. The writing is large and is not aligned horizontally.

In December, Vincent writes:

*My spider is catching a fly.*

He provides an illustration, depicting his spider very clearly. His ownership and involvement is clearly evident. His letters are formed more distinctly and a clear left-to-right orientation is visible. He indicates the spaces between the words with short lines and the size of the letters is smaller and neater. By March, Vincent is moving towards two sentences strung together. His text is based on the common theme of spring. He provides a title for his work and commences his first word with a capital letter:

*Spring  
Frogs are in the water birds are in the trees*

In June, following the visit to the farm, Vincent provides a full colour illustration of his favourite creature, the peacock. He writes:

*I like the peacock.*

Although it is not clear how much further Vincent has progressed since March, his text is again unique and personal.

5.1.4. **Vicki**

Vicki’s first efforts at writing in October show her desire to produce what she thinks writing is about – abc’s – and clearly matches the phase which Gorman and Brooks (1996) label ‘Stage 2- Strings of Letters’ in their description of emergent literacy stages in young children. Her writing covers the full page.

```
abc
abc
abc
ba
ba
ba
b
```
In December she writes a full sentence, with an accompanying illustration. Her theme is family and she writes:

*Daddy is going for a walk.*

Her words are separated by short lines which indicate the spaces. By March, Vicki presents a text of four sentences, some strung together. She has developed a clear sense of purpose and her writing is smaller and well controlled.

*Spring*
*it is spring.*
*birds are singing.*
*flowers grow.*
*the baby animals are born*

Finally, her text in June is even more extensive and personal as she writes about her school tour to the farm.

*I liked the fox and the rabbit*
*I liked the sheep and the lambs hens and*
*liked the*
*the chickis*

### 5.1.5 Assessing the portfolios

*-Based on the assessment dimensions developed by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991): Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to work*

Even with such young children, it is possible to applying the assessment dimensions developed by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991) and to find evidence in the collections of writing of achievement of several of them.

**Production**

- **Craftsmanship:** It is clear that the pupils are in control of the basic techniques and principles of the domain. They write real sentences with a communicative purpose.
- **Pursuit:** The pupils have developed work over time, evidenced by the drafts they have submitted. They have given thought to their written work.
• Invention: The pupils have used invented spellings in places where words have been unfamiliar or difficult, showing that they are prepared to solve their writing problems in a creative way and take risks with the medium.

• Expression/Point of View: The pupils express their ideas and feelings in the written work, evidenced in simple sentences such as *I luke to ride my bic* [bike], *I loved my holiday in the Canaries*. The pupils seek to put their own 'personal stamp' on their work.

**Perception (‘Seeing’ in the domain)**
There is little evidence from just the portfolios alone of student perception in the domain, however, there is some ‘Awareness of sensuous aspects of experience’ when the writer says, for example: *I luke birds singing*.

**Reflection (Thinking about the domain)**
Again, it is not possible to deduce from the writing portfolios alone the children’s ability to reflect in the domain and evidence of this aspect needs to be gleaned from the teacher’s statements in the interviews. However, there is some sense of the students demonstrating the ‘Ability to learn from other works of art within the domain’ in that what they write is based on their knowledge of literacy in a wider context than the prescribed reading-writing textbook and workbook. The students are aware that they can draw from several sources in composing their texts.

**Approach to work**
• Engagement: In their engagement with the texts, the students made particular efforts to present their work in a legible and clear fashion. Their texts were often accompanied by illustrations.

• Ability to work independently: The individual nature of the writing suggests that the students have learned to work independently when appropriate and can incorporate learning from other life experiences outside the classroom.
5.1.6 Discussion

Approaches to instruction and assessment

The portfolios of writing from the pupils in Mrs Hughes point to several distinguishing instructional and assessment issues. First, she encouraged variety in the pupils' writing: the texts are all different, with each child finding his/her way of expressing the theme or topic from his/her own point of view. While there are similarities in terms of language usage and topics, the children's writing is quite individual. Second, the individual nature of the texts coupled with the personal opinions expressed by the pupils within them provide evidence of a the pupils’ sense of ownership of their writing (Graves, 1983). Third, the level of achievement reached by the pupils at the end of the year differs significantly from that achieved by other junior infant children at the same stage. While recognising that children move through stages of development at different rates (Gorman and Brooks, 1996) it is clear from the writing portfolios of these children that they their progress has been consistent, sustained and stable. Mrs Hughes has recognised the needs of these children and has enabled them to progress from one level to the next with ease, integrating the assessment information she has observed with the learning needs of the pupils. In this sense, she has identified the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1987) for her students and maximised their learning potential. It is also appear that she has a clear knowledge of each child’s progress and potential and manages to engage their interest in writing throughout the year.

Fourth, it is clear that Mrs Hughes fosters confidence in the children in their writing to the extent that she can generate risk-taking in her students as she encourages them to use words outside the standard vocabulary in their readers or workbooks. Fifth, Mrs Hughes chooses writing themes that reflect the interests of the children, their concerns and preoccupations, avoiding a prescribed writing vocabulary or curriculum.

Mrs Hughes had the confidence and the experience to submit samples of writing which were ‘imperfect’: large loosely formed letters, unspecified themes, illustrations, personal viewpoints. She did not feel bound to transcribe the texts from the readers or workbooks, although these tools were also available to her as part of the school
approach to the teaching of reading and writing. This freedom in her teaching initially
distinguished Mrs Hughes from the other teachers in the original writing project.
Looking closely at the writing portfolios from the students, it is clear that her
approach benefited students who exhibited different abilities at the beginning of the
school year and enabled them to make commendable progress. From the diversity of
samples, and the individual nature of the writing, and the high standard achieved in
such young students, it is possible to deduce that Mrs Hughes’ approach to the
teaching of writing reflects current theories of learning such as constructivism and the
Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and a formative approach to assessment
that is closely aligned with the children’s learning needs.
5.2 Analysis of the pupils' writing portfolios in Ms Kelly's fifth class- the 'showcase' portfolio model.

The writing in Ms Kelly's class stood out from other writing samples submitted for the Drumcondra Writing Project during the 1995-1996 school year for a number of reasons. From the beginning, Ms Kelly attended very carefully to the organisational issues, ensuring that the writing was submitted on time, that each sample was numbered according to the class list, and that drafts from individual pupils carefully labelled. From the pupils' perspective, the handwriting was always extremely neat and legible and final texts were either typed or handwritten written in stylish joined-writing using a fountain pen. The texts were usually long (up to five A4 pages) and were well presented displaying a high standard of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation and grammar.

Although these issues of organisation and presentation of work could be regarded as surface features, the first message they emanated was one of commitment. Looking beneath the surface to the content itself, it was evident that the writing content was of a high standard in terms of quality, originality and structure, features that are typically associated with features of quality writing (Murphy and Shiel, 1996).

Method of selection of writing samples
In the first year of the study, portfolios of the pupils' writing were collected at four intervals throughout the school year: October, December, February and May. Due to the limitations of this study I decided to focus on a cross-section of pupils from this class whose portfolios would reflect the range of ability high, middle and low achieving students. These were selected on the basis of Mrs Kelly's rating of their achievement, my own judgement and with reference to standardised test scores in reading\(^7\). The writing that is studied here was selected at a given point in the year (March). The students presented their final drafts for study. In this sense, the writing portfolios are used as 'showcase' models (Forster and Masters, 1996).

\(^7\) Percentile ranks using Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (1994) were used as a guide.
Three students from the middle range of the class: Andrew, Kieran and Louise

5.2.1 Andrew

In March Andrew writes a two-page story called *My Amazing Adventure*. The following is an extract from the story.

*One dark horrible night, I couldn't sleep. It was the rain that kept me awake. I sat up all alone in my bed when suddenly a blinding flash of light appeared. I ran to my bedroom window with curiosity. I drew back the curtains and saw a glowing orb. I went to close the curtains when suddenly this strong yellow beam struck me. I couldn't move. My eyes were constantly rotating around. Before I knew it I was on board the craft. I was barely conscious but I saw little green men (Human Like) with big black eyes. They came towards me with syringes and knives. I started shouting and screaming at the top of my lungs, but nobody heard me. The human like creatures put a plastic sheet of foil over me. The gases from the foil knocked me unconscious.*

**Comments**

Andrew's story opens with a sense of dread and moves into action-packed science fiction that is violent and threatening. He uses descriptive words effectively to convey the mood and atmosphere of the scene—'blinding flash', 'glowing orb', 'human like creatures', 'big black eyes'. He also conveys his sense of terror with conviction—'I started shouting and screaming at the top of my lungs, but nobody heard me'.

**Responses and reflections from questionnaire**

Andrew describes his favourite type of writing as fiction. He states that he gets his ideas from the title. The changes that he makes involve changes in adjectives, verbs or names. He confirms that his teacher likes to read adventure stories with good adjectives. In this sample, it is clear that his writing exemplifies the genre most favoured by his teacher. Andrew sees writing as serving a need for the purposes of terminal examinations and for securing a job in the future: 'it will help you in your leaving cert and maybe when you're looking for a job'.

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8 Percentile ranks in the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (1994) were as follows: Andrew 68th, Kieran 50th and Louise 50th.
5.2.2 Kieran

Kieran’s fictional story in which he describes a character with the same name as his own. He presents the final draft beautifully typed into clear paragraphs, with clip art illustrations between each one.

There was once a friendly little boy named Kieran Kelly. He was going into his second year of school and he loved it. He was on his way home from school when he heard a screech “BANG”. He had been knocked down by a truck. That accident had changed his life forever.

By the time he was eighteen he was finished college and he was glad to be finished. He had murdered his teachers, stabbed everyone in his class, threw all of his principals off the roof of their schools and was expelled sixteen times from school all over America.

The police heard he had murdered his ruthless mother and drunken old father and was on the run. They knew where he was so he ran away to live in a hotel in Vegas. It had a pool on the roof and had a casino on the bottom floor. He went down to gamble in the casino every night and lost all his money even when he cheated.

The ‘friendly little boy’ who turns into a violent teenage delinquent, cheating and gambling in a Los Vegas casino fits the category of horror/fiction, rather than a story of Kieran’s life as it is. The story unfolds as a string of progressively degenerating events rather than an intrinsic story. While it is not possible to conclude that the writer aspires to this lifestyle, or that he sees himself having similar experiences in the future, the writing lacks personal involvement and conviction as a piece of writing.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire

Kieran describes his favourite writing as fiction and says that he gets his ideas for his writing from books and things he sees on TV. He says that he does not change his writing very much when he has finished, apart from spellings. He describes his teachers’ favourite writing as action or fiction. He believes that it is important to be good at writing ‘because some jobs you need to be good at writing’.

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5.2.3 Louise
Louise writes one and a half pages of first-person narrative on the topic of a road accident. The full text is transcribed here.

The Accident
I was travelling at a very high speed. The rain was pouring down. It splashed on the back window. My dad did not have his seat belt on. We were on our way back from school. We had not seen the traffic lights change red. My dad put on his brake immediately. Too late. Crash!

He went flying though the front window. One man jumped out of his car and ran over to my dad. He checked his pulse. There was blood everywhere. I was too terrified to move. I heard the siren of the Ambulance coming.
A woman came over to me, to see if I was O.K. She opened the door of the car. One of the Ambulance crew came to see if I was feeling O.K. She put a blanket around me.

"Where is your mum?" she asked.
"At work" I replied. I was so frightened. "Is my daddy O.K.?"
"I'm not sure yet" she replied. "But I'm sure he'll be just fine. How about I take you to the Ambulance. What's your name?"
The woman was tall with long curly brown hair. She had green blue eyes. She was wearing a green suit.
"Sally. I am six years old" I replied. "What's yours?"
"I'm Helen." She answered.
It was six o Clock. I was sitting in the visitors room for my daddy. A nurse came out to talk to my mum. She said he would be fine. They wanted to keep him in for 48 hours to see if he would improve.
The next day we went to the hospital. We were allowed go to my daddy's bed, he was a lot better. He had a lot of cuts and bruises but he was fine.

Although Louise encounters some difficulties with the mechanics of writing, in the areas of spelling and punctuation, her use of quotation marks is good, and she uses dialogue effectively. She writes with a sense of energy and honesty, and clearly creates a scenario around which she builds her story.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire
Louise describes her favourite type of writing as fiction because 'I love writing about fantasy lands'. To go about writing a story she says that she thinks about it in her head and then would put it on paper. She says her ideas come from books or stories she reads. The aspects of her writing that she changes when she has finished are mainly grammatical: adjectives and verbs although sometimes she changes the title. Her friends offer her more ideas for her writing and more interesting adjectives when they
read it, while her teacher would comment on the opening. She also describes the teacher’s method of helping her improve as ‘putting us in groups and discussing the problem’. She describes her teacher’s favourite kind of writing as adventure stories. Louise believes that it is important to be a good writer because ‘you need good writing skills for tests and exams’.

Three students from the top range of the class: John, Graham and Shaleen

5.2.4. John

John’s seven page, handwritten crime story in clever dialogue has all the hallmarks of television influences and could almost be used directly as a script for a television series.

New York Under Siege

“You know what I want” demanded the druggie over the phone line.
“Ok! Ok!” replied Chief Smith, “we’ll try. But it’ll take some time!”

Just then the S.W.A.T. team arrived.
“What the...?” swore the leader of the S.W.A.T. team.
“It’s thought”, told Chief Smith to the S.W.A.T. team’s leader Kingstinn, “that up to forty civilians could be in there, been held hostage!”
“It’s gonna be a long night”, muttered Kingstinn as he gazed up at the Empire State Building.

“Up to forty people are being held hostage, is this true Chief Smith?” blurted out a reporter as her camera crew recorded the brief interview with Smith.
“Get outa my face!” was the reply she got from the black-haired chubby man as he rubbed his unshaven face. He walked towards the cops barricade his trench coat bustled like a cape behind him. He’d been here all night and he had nothing to eat since yesterday lunch time. A reporter ran up to him as he ducked under the barricade. “No comment”, he mumbled before she could ask anything as she leaned as far as she could and shoved the microphone in his face. He’d got’n used to it over the years, it came with the job.

The maturity and insight of John’s writing is quite remarkable, evident in the way he describes the police chief’s response to the reporter: ‘he’d gotten used to it over the years, it came with the job’. Later, he captures the essence of the dilemma that faces his central character.

“Come on”, shouted the druggie, “You have it don’t you”.
“Hey,” shouted Kingstinn “heroin don’t grow on trees!”

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9 Percentile ranks in the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (1994) were as follows: John: 96th, Graham: 81st, and Shaleen: 77th.
"I'll kill someone" threatened the druggie. Smith heard his shaky voice, the craving was growing stronger, he would kill someone if the package wasn't delivered soon. Smith radioed the L.A.P.D. Two days ago they captured 20kg of heroin, street value roughly 4.1 million. He was hoping they'd lend him some.

"No way," said a shocked chief, "out of the questions! Is this some sort of joke, I need this haul for evidence!"

"Yea well forty hostages need it too", said Smith angrily.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire
John describes his favourite writing as fiction and the sources of ideas as television and books. He describes the only changes that he makes as being to the title. His teacher helps him improve by 'putting me in a group of people in my class who need to improve the same think then the teacher discusses it with us'. He describes the teacher’s favourite writing as exciting, adventurous and fiction. He thinks that it is important to be a good writer because ‘you need to be able to put down on paper what you think for a job interview or an exam’.

5.2.5 Jerome
Jerome writes a two and a half page story about a boxer. The central character is called Wardy, which is Jerome’s nickname. The first page of the story is presented here.

Wardy (THE BOXER!)
It was a Saturday night in Dublin city and it was as cold and frosty as it could get. Saturday night meant boxing night.

"Now here is a new entry to the ring!" exclaimed the boxing referee with the crowd all around him roaring like tigers. Then Wardy came into the sight of the referee. He was practicing his jabs as every boxer would do as they entered the ring.

"His name is Wardy. He is six feet tall and he weighs one hundred and eighty lbs. He is twentyfive years old and he calls himself 'The Irish Fish'," announced the referee.

Wardy jumped over the ropes and into the ring to see a heap of muscle in the oppisit corner. His opponent was six foot six and he had blond hair. He looked like he could win, 'The Worlds Strongest Man' compition.

Using two sentences, Jerome cleverly sets the scene for his action story, immediately building a sense of anticipation: 'Saturday night meant boxing night'. He moves
skillfully between direct speech and third person narrative, balancing the nervousness of the boxer with the eagerness of the crowd, thereby creating a sense of tension. His effective use of metaphor: 'a heap of muscle', and simile: 'roaring like tigers', adds to the atmosphere of the story.

**Responses and reflections from questionnaire**
Jerome describes his favourite type of writing as fiction and action. He starts his stories by thinking of a title and this was a significant factor in his story above. When he showed his writing to his classmates they said they liked his mix of nickname ('Wardy') and film title ('The Boxer'). He says that his teacher compliments his writing and that once she wrote 'disgusting'. While he does not say whether this was a comment on the presentation of his work, or the content, one can assume from the style of writing that Jerome favours that the comment referred to his descriptive writing, and this was positive in that it was accurate. He says that his teacher advises him to use better adjectives and similes to improve his work. She believes that his teacher likes action and fiction stories best of all. Jerome thinks that it is important to be good at writing because 'you have to be able to write to get a good job and in journalism the only thing you do is write'.

5.2.6 Shaleen

Shaleen 18-page story is called *The Hidden Secrets of Willington's Valley*. The opening paragraphs are presented here.

“Now call, does anyone know what Winnington's Valley is famous for?” questioned Mrs Paterson in her strong country accent. But all she saw was wan blank faces but suddenly Ten Jason raised his hand screeching “Miss, Miss”. “Yes Ted,” replied Mrs Paterson, “but DON’T SCREECH at me.” “Because everyone makes wills,” joked Jelly Belly in his indistinct accent. “Noooo, go and STAND in THAT CORNER” shouted Mrs Paterson. “Seriously, why are you still acting as the class ‘clown2? I’m fed up with you.”

Jelly Belly plodded off unsteadily to the corner with a sullen face.
“Well, does anyone know?” asked Mrs Paterson with the slightest bit of hope but all she saw were blank faces. Not a single person had the slightest bit of expression in their faces. They seemed like the dumbest class in the world. “Do you know? Sometimes I feel like leaving my job,” staggered Mrs Paterson with anger.

“Well, in 1520, Sir Charles Willington found gold here and legend has it that he was a wonderful and generous man and he built this very town with his wealth and shared his riches with many people and has also hidden treasures. In March 19 1526, the building of Willington’s Valley was accomplished. March 19 has even become a holiday.”

“Hey tomorrow is the 19.” shouted Jenny Green excitedly. “Will we be having a day off”

Although the opening paragraphs in the story do not relate to the plot, this introduction is presented as part of an extensive piece of writing. Shaleen provides the context for the story in this opening, and she draws the reader in through the use of fast-moving dialogue. Later in the story she writes more descriptively,

Rosie gobbled her lunch hungrily like a hungry lion. Rosie took out her wooden box remembering what she had seen earlier. She opened the box and inside she found a piece of shrivelled paper, folded and she unfolded it carefully. She couldn’t believe her eyes. It was a treasure map. She wiped her eyes but saw the same thing. Her heart started thumping faster and faster and faster. She picked up the house keys and raced outside slamming the door. She was so excited that she didn’t realise that she nearly knocked down Posie, her arch-enemy.

Posie felt very inquisitive.

“What’s her rush?”

She decided to spy on Rosie in undercover...

While Shaleen provides a mundane context for the story, she soon incorporates elements of action and adventure giving her work a modern crime story feel.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire
Shaleen describes her favourite type of writing as humour, horror and fiction. Her ideas come from television, her surroundings and books. She describes the method in which she goes about her writing as thinking of a basic idea and then writing as she goes along. The changes that she makes after she has finished involve changes to ‘adjectives, openings, putting stronger words and endings’. Shaleen states that her teacher helps her to improve her work by calling her up to have a discussion about it and having a small group for improving grammar. She describes her teacher’s favourite writing as funny, exciting, adventurous and fiction stories. Shaleen believes
that it is important to be good at writing because ‘when you are in secondary, you have to get a lot of points and when you have to write letters to universities, the universities judge you by the way you write and if you are a writer, a poet or a journalist, you have to be a good writer’.

Three students from the lower range of the class: Brendan, Cian and Laura\(^{10}\)

5.2.7 Brendan

Brendan’s sample of writing is based on the television series, _The X-Files_.

_The X-Files_

Mulder crawled through the grass as he searched the place where the sighting was. As soon as he got to the sighting he jumped. He stared at a dead man up in a tree. Suddenly he saw a person, a monster, a thing. He ran after it. It was very fast but Mulder kept up. It became green. Then it fell. While Mulder was running Scully was watching the man. BANG. He had gone. Instantly the spaceship flew away. Mulder could see the person. The spaceship landed Mulder grabbed it.

Later on, in the laboratory when nobody was in, the door opened. A green monster got out and he looked like this: big eyes, 2 horns, fangs and big hands and feet.

_He threw a knife at the window and it smashed. He zoomed back into the spaceship and flew away._

As an example of science-fiction writing inspired by television, Brendan’s story is very true to the genre in terms of content. The story is presented as a series of events and, as in the television series, little insight is given on the personal feelings and reactions of the central character, Mulder, as the action unfolds.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire

Brendan describes his favourite writing as fiction. He thinks of a title and uses that as his starting point. He states that if he changes anything it is usually the addition of another character or more adjectives. He describes how his teacher helps him improve his work: ‘she calls us into small groups and teaches us their, there and they’re or too, to and two’. The writing that his teacher likes best is comedy and adventures and he

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\(^{10}\) Percentile ranks in the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (1994) were as follows: Brendan 47\(^{th}\), Cian 34\(^{th}\) and Laura 19\(^{th}\).
Cian writes a six page story about a man who is very overweight.

Jimbo-Bimbo-Lily
Jimbo-Bimbo-Lily was a little fat man. He was forty-two stone and only twenty years of age. One day he was playing with his friends when he was asked to join a running club.
"How do you expect me to run if I'm forty-two stone," Jimbo questioned.
"Get fit," answered Billy-Bob. (His friend).
On Saturday morning Jimbo awoke early to get ready for the running club.
"Oh my God, these people are skinny," Jimbo cried at the running club.
After running he was exhausted so he headed off to bed. His bed was almost touching the roof of his bedroom and it was about seven feet tall. He slipped off his clothes into his P.J.s and dozed off. The next morning Jimbo decided to go on a diet because he would never become a famous runner if he didn't. this was his time table:

Breakfast: box of cornflakes
Lunch: 48 sandwiches
Dinner: 20 heads of cabbage

P.S.
That is nothing compared to his first time table

Cian uses a writing structure that is somewhat similar to his peers: three opening sentences to set the scene, followed by direct speech to provide insight into the central protagonist. His use of exaggeration adds to the humour of the text and Cian manages to continue the story in a similar vein for the remaining six pages.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire
Cian describes his favourite types of writing as adventure and comedy. He describes the way in which he goes about writing as sitting down and waiting for funny ideas to come into his head. He says that he gets his ideas from television. When he has finished writing the changes he makes are to 'more exciting words', such as murmured, muttered and yelled. He describes his teacher's favourite writing as
adventure and comedy. He believes that it is important to be good at writing because ‘colleges have to see your writing before they take you in’.

5.2.9 Laura

The full text of Laura’s sample is presented here.

The Ruby Ring

This story is taking place on a dark cold dusty night when Sarah was strolling home from her friends house. Sarah saw a bright red ruby ring that was shining up at the pitch black sky.

See are family is very very poor. So I kept on strolling but then Sarah turned back because it could cost a fortune. So she picked it up and ran. And said, “I will bring the ring home.” Like I said it could cost a fortune and then I can surprise them on a time when they don’t expect anything.

Sarah brought the ring to a jewellers. The man in the shop said, “it is worth 10 MILLION pounds!”. Sarah said, “could you give me the money and I will give you the ring now.” You will have to wait two weeks until I get the ten million pounds. “but I need it now, “ Sarah said. “OK”. I will come back in two weeks”. So you better have the money.

So Sarah cycled home. And when she got home she said, “why don’t we have a lot of money? When tears were rolling down her cheeks and her face went bright red. Her mother and Father said, “we don’t have a lot of money because neither of us work in a shop.” And we just work at home in the kitchen and living room.

So then Sarah went strolling up stairs and went fast asleep in her bed. Two weeks later Sarah went back to the jewellers and he had the money. But Sarah forgot the ring. So she skated home like a flying bird and she got the ring and then came back like a flying bird.

And then the man said, “if you give me the ring I will give you the money. “OK said Sarah”. Give me the money and here is the ring. So they swopped. So Sarah went skating home. And when she got there she said to her father and Mother “we are rich I got ten million pound,” because I found a ruby ring which was worth a fortune. And they lived happily ever after.

Obvious difficulties with mechanics, spelling, punctuation, shifting tenses and first and third person narrative. Yet, the she structures her story well with a clear beginning, middle and end, marking sections with paragraphs. She uses quotation marks well. It is clear that Laura has tried to use some of the techniques recommended by her teacher: two or three short sentences that provide the setting for the story,
paragraphing and direct speech. Other techniques are less effective and somewhat inappropriate, for example her use of adjectives (‘dark cold dusty night’), descriptive words (‘strolling up the stairs’) and similes (‘skated home like a flying bird’). In effect, the writing reflects Laura’s efforts to incorporate techniques into the writing genre which is considered desirable by her teacher and classmates.

**Responses and reflections from questionnaire**
Laura describes her favourite writing as fiction. She thinks of words to write down or brainstorms to get her ideas. When she has finished writing, the changes she makes are spellings, capital letters and full stops. She describes how her teacher corrects her work; ‘first we read it over and then we put in more detail to describe it more’. She helps her to improve her work ‘by telling us where our mistakes are sometimes coming down to us and helping us’. Laura believes that it is important to be good at writing ‘just incase you want to be a journalist or to work in a bank’.

**5.2.10 Assessing the portfolios**
*Based on the assessment dimensions developed by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991): Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to work*

Using the portfolios and writing samples of the pupils as a basis, together with their reflections and responses to the questionnaire, it is possible to assess the portfolios on some aspects of each dimension of portfolio assessment as outlined by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991).

**Production**
- **Craftsmanship:** The pupils have a good command of the basic techniques and principles of the domain. Sentences are well constructed, punctuation and spelling is largely accurate and ideas are communicated clearly.
- **Pursuit:** The pupils have developed work over time. Their writing is extensive, running to several pages in most cases while remaining close to the original topic.
- **Invention:** The pupils show imagination and invention in their stories, conjuring up images from science fiction, horror and adventure. They weave complex plots and convey their stories with a sense of realism.
• Expression/Point of View: Each pupil's story is unique and represents the child's own interpretation of the topic. While themes are modelled on stories from television in some cases, the pupils' personal style is reflected in the work.

Perception ('Seeing' in the domain)

• Capacity to make discriminations in works from a wide variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods: While the writing samples presented in these portfolios come from a particular time of the year and are largely of the same genre—adventure—they also depict different settings and perspectives: first and third person narratives, non-specific settings, imaginary places (e.g., Willington's Valley) local Dublin scenes (e.g., boxing night) and places in America (e.g., New York).

• Awareness of sensuous aspects of experience: The pupils show heightened sensitivity to physical properties within their writing and convey this effectively ('as cold and as frost as it could get'; 'her strong country accent'; 'the black-haired chubby man, as he rubbed his unshaven face').

Reflection (Thinking about the domain)

Some evidence of the pupils' ability to reflect on their writing portfolios may be found in their reflections and responses in the questionnaires.

• Ability and inclination to take the role of critic: In terms of completion and cohesion of their writing, the pupils display a sense of the standards for quality work in writing.

• Ability and inclination to use criticisms and suggestions: The pupils respond well to their teacher's suggestions for improvement, especially in grammar, punctuation and spelling. They also try to incorporate techniques such as the use of simile and metaphor and sentences that 'set the scene' for their story.

• Ability to learn from other works of art within the domain: The pupils refer to books they have read as providing a background to their writing, although television and film are also instrumental.
Approach to work

- Engagement: The pupils show great care and attention to detail in the presentation of their final written samples.
- Ability to work independently: It is not clear from the portfolios whether the students worked independently or collaboratively or how they sourced their work. However, they describe working in groups with the teacher on particular topics.
- Ability to use cultural resources: Several pupils mention books as the source of their ideas, while television also plays a significant part.

5.2.11 Discussion

In this showcase collection of writing portfolios a number of instructional and assessment issues can be identified. The writing is neat and uniform with a high standard of spelling, punctuation and grammar achieved, even by the low-achieving students. The writing samples show a pattern in their structure, even when the content differs: a strong descriptive opening to set the scene, use of dialogue, the inclusion of metaphors and similes, and efforts to employ more varied verbs when describing speech or movement.

This portfolio collection reflects the importance the teacher attributes to certain genres: action, adventure, crime and humour in particular. The children’s writing is characterised by an absence of personal involvement, of feelings or home themes, although a sense of ownership and individuality are evident.

A number of pupils refer to the teacher’s method of helping them improve their writing as ‘putting us in groups and discussing the problem’. Her approach is systematic and effective and it appears that little time is lost dwelling on other aspects of creative writing. The teacher’s own interests appear to have an enormous bearing what the children produce ‘she likes comedy and adventure’ – consequently that is what the children write. Many themes and topics are chosen from television programmes and while written in a similar style to television scripts, they have a freshness of themselves. There is an absence of personal voice in some cases, indicating that the pupils may be somewhat distant from the process itself.
Redrafting and revising are not recognised as essential elements. The writing is constructed through a method that works: good hand-writers, competent and accurate writers. Such characteristics are highly desirable among students at this age—they will leave school being able to read and writing proficiently and accurately and produce lengthy texts on demand.

In responding to the question ‘Do you think writing is important?’ most children mentioned the functional worth of writing—as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Conscious of examinations, it appears that the children are aware of the need to be able to produce work of a high standard. Although the writing can seem formulaic, the writers are prolific in their output, and most have mastered techniques which will serve them well in the future.
5.3 Analysis of the pupils’ writing portfolios in Mrs Begley’s third-fourth class the ‘working’ portfolio model.

Usually, Mrs Begley hand-delivered the writing samples. Each sample bore a remark at the back, in pencil from Mrs Begley, outlining the context in which the writing was created. The initial drafts were included and other samples, completed around the period of request were included as well. Mrs Begley usually telephoned to confirm that the samples had arrived and that I understood how they had been generated, but it was the personal nature of the writing in the portfolios from Mrs Begley’s class that made them stand out from the others.

Mrs Begley was very happy to participate in the second year of the writing project. She was also in the situation of continuing with the class of children from third to fourth. Hence, the writing samples and portfolios from the children in her class were collected over a two-year period. This afforded an excellent opportunity to get to know the children over a longer period through their writing and to observe their growth. Because Mrs Begley’s students included drafts of their work and various stages, items of interest and reflections on the writing process, the model of portfolio that can be best ascribed to their work is the working portfolio (Forster and Masters, 1996).

Method of selection of the portfolio samples

In selecting portfolios of children’s work for in-depth study, I used the following criteria: the portfolio needed to contain several samples of work over the two-year period, including the final questionnaire on the writing process; the portfolios needed to reflect the range of ability in the class: high, middle and low achieving students\(^{11}\); special consideration was given also to include the portfolios from children for whom English was a second language (ESL) and traveller children; and finally, children whose portfolios illustrated particular expressive qualities were also selected. The portfolios are not a representative sample but they illustrate a wide range of issues in

\(^{11}\) These were selected on the basis of Mrs Begley’s rating of their achievement, my own judgement and with reference to standardised test scores in reading achievement, the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (1994).
the teaching and assessment of writing. They also show how the skills of writing have developed in this classroom over a two year period.

5.3.1 Linda (a pupil with learning difficulties)

The first portfolio of children's writing to be studied comes from Linda who has learning difficulties in reading and writing. She attended the special class in the school but has now returned to the mainstream class. This first sample was written on December 6th 1995.

_Snow_

_We had our first snow fall last night. We could not see the foot ball field. It was very cold outside this morning. We all put on our coats, and hats, and gloves. It just snowed for a little while. It was slushy snow came down. It came down from the north. The mountains are patchy with snow. We can not see the cottages. The snow came from Siberia and from Maxim's and Masha's country. We can see the pine forests with the clear snow. In the mountains we can see some things and we can't see other things. There are slopes evry were. We can see brighly white fields._

Although she has difficulties with conventions of writing such as spelling, punctuation and grammar (shifting tenses), Linda is developing the ability to describe her environment from the unique perspective of the classroom. As she describes the landscape outside, she relates the geographical features of mountains and weather conditions in a personal way to the children from Russian whom she knows in the classroom: 'The snow came from Siberia and from Maxim's and Masha's country'. Her description is therefore contextualised by her classroom environment and that environment in turn provides a stimulus for her writing. The integrated nature of Mrs Begley's teaching is evident in this piece of writing and the holistic way she considers the children and their growth as writers.

In February Linda writes an adventure story using many descriptive words.

_My Story_

_My cousin and I set out together. We plodded across the fields. It was a fine sunny day is summer. We were laughing and joking, we hid and scampered through the woods. When we came to a pathway we saw a rusty old gate. That Brown [gate] creaked loudly. An overgorwn garden lay inside the gate. Broken rusty windows and splintered. I entered quietly, hush tiptoe. A big hall_
had dust on the mirrors. There were cobwebs on the mirrors and walls. Big stairs and stepped softly. Then we heard noises.

Despite difficulties with the conventions of writing, Linda uses descriptive words effectively: scampered, rusty, old, loudly, overgrown, broken, rusty, hush tiptoe—resulting in an atmospheric piece of writing. The commonplace daffodil is described with sensitivity by Linda in March.

Our Daffodil

Our daffodil it grew very big while we were away. It grew because it had peace and quiet. It is very nice. It has orange in the middle and yellow on the outside. It has nice tips of yellow on the outside. It has nice tips of yellow on the orange. And it has nice green leaves grown. And nice brown soil. And when the sun shines on it it is shiney and bright. It is a lovely daffodil and we make sure we look after it properly. We make sure we give it lots of water. On Friday so it won't die. It needs lots of water on Friday so that it will survive till Monday. It gets lots of peace at the weekend because there was no people around. So it is nice and orange and yellow. It is a very delicete flower. We don't touch it incase it breaks. It is beautiful but we hope it will grow more beautiful.

Linda's use of colour and personification portray her close relationship with this ordinary flower: 'It gets loads of peace at the weekend because there was no people around'.

In May Linda offers a very personal piece of writing on her favourite item of clothing.

My Best Dress

I have a Black and White dress. I like wearing my dress. It feels good on me. But I am not allowed to wear it in school. Because it is school rules. But I always, wore my dress at home and When I am going for a meal with my family. My sisters are jealous of my dress. I love my dress. My dress has laces going true the black and it is almost bare with the lace going true it. The white belt is leather. It has a Bit of White in the middle of it and a bow at the Back of it. I love my dress.

This writing is intimate, personal and has a strong sense of the author's voice. She describes how she feels about her dress: 'I like my dress' and later, 'I love my dress' and how it feels to wear it: 'It feels good on me'. She also describes others' feelings towards her: 'My sisters are jealous of my dress'. Despite the spelling problems, this is a very convincing piece of writing.
In her description of the wasp’s nest in May, Linda integrates expository writing with personal experience. This writing originated with the wasp’s nest which one of the other children brought into the classroom.

The wasp’s nest

The wasp’s nest is a grey twirly thing a lot of wasps were in it. They build them in sheds and attics mostly warm places. Wasp’s are very scary and they give you relly bad stings, you can die if they sting you on the head. It is very sore when they sting you. I never got stung before The nest is made out of paper. There is a little hole in the nest so they can get in and out to breade. A lot of people are afraid of wasp’s My sister has a big white nest up in her attic. It is very very big. I hate wasp’s The nest has little holes in it so that they can breade. My sisters nest is the bigest nest I ever saw in my life. I hate wasp’s.

At the end of the school year Linda wrote a letter to this researcher in which she reflects on her own growth as a writer.

I found writing the storys interesting. I youst to have a problems with my spellings, and my writing but my teacher said I have improved. I enjoy writing for you. I wish I could keep writing for you. I am going to be a writer when I grow up. I hope first I will work on my spellings, and capatal letters.

I am very into writing. sometimes my hand gets tired because I write very fast. I did a lote of pages. Some times I do very small writing but it has got bigger and better. I like writing about my best dress.

Despite her difficulties with writing, Linda has a positive attitude to her work: ‘I am very into writing’ and she also indicates her long term interest in the comment: ‘I am going to be a writer when I grow up’.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire

Linda describes her favourite kind of writing as mystery and ‘describing stories’. She outlines the manner in which she goes about her writing as first, thinking before she writes and then getting words which she puts them into sentences. She says that she puts good words together from her poetry file. She cites several sources for her ideas: her head, the teacher, her English reader, poetry books, environmental posters and other images. Linda says that she changes a lot of words when she is finished ‘to get it just right’. Her teacher helps her improve her work by helping her put sentences together; she starts a sentence for her and then she goes on. She describes her teacher’s favourite writing as ‘story writing, story writing with pictures and colours and sounds in it’. Linda thinks it is important to be good at writing because ‘writing is
for yourself’. She adds that ‘you’re making yourself proud and your family and your teacher. You have to make it important to you because it’s your writing for you and your have to make yourself feel good about writing’. She concludes her statement on the importance of writing by saying ‘I am proud of myself’.

5.3.2 Stephen

Stephen is a high-achieving student with a deep commitment to writing. He writes with a keen sense of colour and description. In the first sample, written in October, he describes a picture which the teacher presented to the class.

_Today I am talking about a painting of Claddagh Harbour. It is a harbour in Galway. The first thing that I notice is that it is dappled in light and dark blue. White is another colour that stands out from the rest of the painting. In my opinion, I think it is late autumn because the yellow clouds are chasing each other in the sky._

_It is an Irish speaking place in Galway. I would say it is about 5 o’clock in the evening. You could almost feel the movement of the boats in the water. By looking at the sky, I can tell the colour of the water, because of the reflection._

_There are children sitting by the water. One boy’s blonde hair is reflected in the water. Another child is running around in the background. A young toddler is looking around the rockpools._

_One fisherman is wearing a black jersey and a white cap. He appears to be getting his boat ready to go out fishing. His boat is blue and white._

_I think that the painting creates an atmosphere of one going got for a boat trip or a picnic. The texture of the warehouse appears to be a charcoal-like roughness. The colour makes me feel like I am actually there._

As a writing exercise, the teacher has succeeded in developing Stephen’s observational skills very well as he translates the images into words, paying close attention to colour, size, texture and atmosphere. Travel to foreign lands also features prominently in Stephen’s writing. He incorporates this interest in his piece ‘My Special Pet’ which was a topic given to the whole class in May. His final sentence is a precise encapsulation of his sentiments.

_My Special Pet_

_My special pet is a very special penguin. His name is “Quacky”, because he often quacks like a duck. My penguin's best friend is “Zippy” the zuccini from Africa (mainly from one hundred and four down the road). I taught him the map of Asia and he taught me penguinese. This is the penguinese letter ‘A’ - His nickname is “March hare” because after dinner he goes bonkers._
He makes clay models of his cousins. For some reason, he himself comes from Pakistan. He sleeps on top of me at night. Well, he was a giant vampire penguin, but, just then, metamorphosis took place, and he was transformed into the cool penguin that he is today. The only places in the world that he hasn’t been to are Afghanistan and Iraq. He can say the words “My-name-is-Quacky-the-penguin” in English. His favourite place in the world is Vietnam. He love it in Asia. His favourite toy is a plastic model of a scorpion. For breakfast he has coke and jam on burned toast. He is nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine eons old. I love my penguin dearly. Excuse me while I pamper him for a while.

At the end of May, Stephen explores the writing of argument on the theme of family hierarchy.

Would you rather be the youngest or the oldest in a family?
I have two tiers in my family, one side is my Dad’s, on that side I am the oldest child. On my Mam’s side, I am the youngest and only child. On my Dad’s, there are two children younger than I am. On is nearly four years old, the other one is eleven months old. When you are the oldest it is a great responsibility. But when you are the youngest you get away with more things and get to help the adults a lot. I know about being both because I am both. Being both or either of them, there are advantages and disadvantages. When you are older you can understand more and take in more information.
I am nine years old and have to deal with a great responsibility. I have to try and respect one side and not offend the other and vice-versa. It is very hard to cope with this but I’ve learned to cope with it. I am always helping my Nanny and Mam. I am double-related to the eleven month old baby. I am her big brother and her godfather. I feel a great responsibility to the baby as well.

His honest, personal viewpoint leads the teacher to write at the end of his text:
‘Excellent. Are you sure you want me to send this?’ to which Stephen writes ‘Yes, Ok.’. The experience of writing about such a personal topic is not one which intimidates him.

In his letter to me as researcher at the end of the year he reflects on the process of writing, and assesses his own progress. This aspect of self-assessment is an essential feature of the portfolio approach.

Ever since I started writing, I have been able to express myself quite a lot, I have learned to write a lot better (compared to what I was writing before the essays). I can also do creative writing a bit better. It helped me a lot.

The final sample from Stephen is taken one year later. His uses descriptive words to great effect. The unusual use of the present tense unfolds like a stream of consciousness and contributes to the enchanting but vividly real atmosphere in his writing.
A day in summer

By the sea, no shoes and not a worry in the world, what a dream about summer! It happens! Looking up at the sky to see a sheet of pure blue with seagulls dashing across it. Sunbathing in a pool of 30 degrees celsius. Crabs scuttling by. Golden sand glistening beneath. Staring at the cool, clear, crystal sea. African sounds all around.

Dipping your feet in the ocean without realising that you are going deeper. Fish swimming, swirling and jumping around you. Multicoloured rainbowfish nibbling at your legs and stomach. Breathing through a snorkel and looking through a mask. Semi-dead purple jellyfish being washed on to the whole beach. Swimming over coral reefs, watching slithering eels going in and out of the pink hued tunnels.

Out of the water, onto the beach, half-dry. Over on the rocks, the only shaded place there! Rock pools glistening from the light of the sun. The heat getting unbearable. It is now between 40 and 50 degrees celsius. All of a sudden, clouds start to appear in the distance. The African sunshine fades away, and a vision of Monsoon Season comes to mind. Thunder rumbles and a hint of rain on the wind. Time to dash indoors under a palm tree. The drops fall as big as tennis balls. Steam rises.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire

Stephen’s favourite kind of writing is horror, adventure and mystery. He describes his method of going about writing:

‘I try to begin with a strong sentence, with good pictures and sound words. Then I build up the piece with my imagination. And the end must be dramatic’.

Stephen states that his ideas come from the books he has read, things he has heard about, places he has been and scenes he has seen under the ocean. He says that he does not change much when he has finished because he makes mental plans before writing: ‘I think out the sentence in my mind. Then I put it down’. He outlines the types of issues which his teacher corrects in his work: changing paragraphs, punctuation, neatness and grammar. But within this, she gives a clear strategy: ‘Think before you put to paper’ and points to individual concerns: ‘Begin in one tense. Stay in it.’ Stephen believes that his teacher helps him improve his work through her preparatory processes and discussions:

‘She has developed our ideas with the matters she talks about. She often writes comments in our copies.’
He believes that she likes to hear dramatic, colourful, detailed fiction, some letter writing and a bit of personal writing. Finally, Stephen outlines several reasons why he thinks that it is important to be good at writing:

...if someone close to you moves away, you would want to keep in contact. Or if you become a boss in your work, you would have to write instructions to the other workers. If you are a doctor or nurse, you would have to write medical instructions to the chemist or patient.

Were you to become a journalist, you would need to be able to describe events. Or if you are in need of a job, you would have to fill out the application forms. If you are a tax-officer, you would need to do your Barrier Exam. If you work for a shop, you would have to write orders for the suppliers. Or if you work for a company, you might have to write out invoices and reports.

A tour company would have to put good, fancy information about a holiday resort in their brochure to persuade tourists.

5.3.3 Nellie

Nellie is a member of the Travelling Community. In her first sample written in early October she describes her family life.

I live in Dublin. There are 13 in my family. There are nine girls and four boys. In summer we go down the country to Wexford for our holidays. I have two dogs and one horse. The horse is red and white. My dog is black and white. I am 10 years old. Most of my relations live in Wexford. There is four with liver conditions in my family. I go to school. I have lots of friends there. I have the nicest teacher in the whole world.

In the second piece of writing in late October Nellie attempts to write in a narrative style, but is suddenly conscious of her own creative efforts: ‘This story is from my mind’. She completes the text in an expository style, distancing herself from the events in the story.

Nellie’s Story

Once upon a time it was winter. It was snowing. It was very cold. We built a snowman. When we went in for our tea, the snowman came to life. It was a miracle. The snowman was crushing the town. The people were screaming for help. Suddenly the sun came out. The snowman was melted. The town was safe once again. This story is from my mind. Snowmen are built by children. They use snow hats, carrots, scarfs, and hats and coal.

Nellie’s second sample written in November illustrates her growing ability to write descriptively, using sounds, colour and tone to enhance the picture of her secret
garden. Her writing shows a greater sense of cohesion, while the inclusion of her feelings about the garden add a personal dimension.

*My Secret Garden*

> Once I went on my holidays. Me my Dad and my Mam and my family and my cousins. We went to Wexford. Me and my cousin Bridget found a secret garden. It was beautiful. It was near the beach Curracloe. You could hear the waves. You could see the boats. It was a beautiful garden. There was roses growing in the garden and lupins and daisies. There was a lovely smell of perfume. There was a lovely sunseat in the garden, hanging over seat. I saw the shadows of the levees on the tree. I like my secret garden in Curracloe.

In May Nellie explores the writing of argument, comparing life in the past, twenty years ago, with life in the present day.

*Did children have a better life 20 years ago.*

> Children had a bad life twenty years ago. Because they had no computers, good food. Community [community] life was better. There was less crying, less killing, computers were not invented. There were less trouble in the neighbourhood. Children cold walk around at 10 o clock at night and not be afraid. Those day it was safe. These days its not safe. Drunk men could be out and could kidnap you. It is so dangerous. Children would not have to be afraid. Because it would not be so dangerous 20 years ago. It is now. My teacher keeps on telling us to “stay safe”. And my brother who is 20, He had no stay safe.

Nellie’s unique insight into the challenges of Traveller life are expressed in this short piece of writing. Although the points she raises are undeveloped, her argument, hinging on personal safety is of direct relevance to her own situation while recognising the influences of the society in which she lives. She sums up in her case by identifying the ‘Stay Safe’ programme as an essential aspect of her education, and one which was not deemed necessary twenty years ago.

**Reflections**

At the end of May, Nellie composed a letter to this researcher in which she reflects on the writing process and on her growth as a writer. Her sense of maturity and objectivity is reflected in the manner in which she signs her name at the end, using her given name ‘Helen’, rather than her pet name, ‘Nellie’.

*Letter (extract)*
I loved writing stories. It was very interesting. I liked writing about my family. I learnt more about them. It made me realise about my sick brothers and sisters. I never wrote that stuff before.

I developed my mind. Every time I done a piece of writing I thought more about my old school. About my old friends. And about my old teacher. I found out I could get on in my new school. Writing helped me to find a lot. So I am happy I did this project. It helped my brain.

Sincerely

Helen O’Connor

As Nellie moved away at the end of the second year, her responses to the questionnaire were not available. Nevertheless, Nellie’s writing offers an excellent example of writer’s voice and of the development of style under the direction of her teacher. She has acquired many skills in writing over the course of her time in Mrs Begley’s class, but within that, her sense of self has been fostered and nurtured. She also recognises that she has learned through writing: ‘It helped my brain’.

5.3.4 Seán

Seán likes to write about travel and different countries. He describes his favourite kind of writing as ‘mystery and adventure and partly humour.’ His first piece, written in October, is written as a string of events, somewhat unremarkable.

A hike in the mountains (extract)
One morning I went for a hike. I was living quite near the mountains and it was sunny. My mother got my bag ready. I intended to have something to eat. I set out. Part of a forest was my way. After I walked out of the forest it was a bit steep. I got a strong and long stick to help me. When I got to the top I decided to explore before my lunch.

By November, Seán is beginning to write in a more descriptive style.

A wet morning
The day was wet. Heavy rain fell. Slush lay on the path. Blobs of rain sat on the window panes. The hills are in the mist. The reservoirs need rain. In Roundwood the old road and old stone bridge can be seen there has been so little for one hundred days.

The hills are so misty I can hardly see the forest and heather. The trees are clothed with gold, brown and russet leaves. As it comes up to 10 o’clock the mist fades from right to left. It looks like dust has surrounded the
mountains. I can see some fields and cottages. Up at Kippure, it is still misty and dark.

He uses techniques favoured by his teacher: colour (‘gold, brown, russet’), simile (‘it looks like dust has surrounded the mountains’) and distinctive atmosphere (‘Up at Kippure, it is still misty and dark’).

From Seán’s November sample it is possible to see his growing understanding of geographical and historical concepts, a sense of place and a sense of time.

(extract)

I like travelling to places, to places I have not been to. Some places in Ireland I’d like to go would be Kerry, Meath, Cork, Donegal, Mayo and Tralee. People from Ulster have a very Irish accent. Sometimes it is a bit English. If you spoke to one they might say “Are you from the Free State?” This is because the Republic of Ireland is not under British Rule and Northern Ireland is. I would go to the USA, Scotland, Switzerland and Italy. I’d love to go to Rome. I believe it is a beautiful city. There are beautiful fountains in Rome. There are nice buildings and great churches. I would look at the sculptures and paintings for hours. Someday I will go.

His interest in the architecture and art works in Rome is exceptional and his desire to ‘look at the sculptures and paintings for hours’ can perhaps be attributed to his teacher.

A mixture of humour and irony is evident in the writing that Seán produces in May, providing evidence of the breadth of his ability to write with competence and confidence in different genres.

My Funny Pet

My funny pet is called Bud-Not-So-Wiser-The Beer Drinking Buzzard. But I call him Bud for short. He can not go without beer for at least two hours. I think he is great fun. He is three years and ten months. His birthday is on Saturday the 9th July.

Once Bud was watching a cowboy film. He got a piece of paper and wrote: 12.00 high noon. Bud Buzzard v.s. Sean Fox! I was very surprised when he strapped a belt around his waist and sprayed me with soda-pop and beer! After that experience I had to get a shower! That is just one of the antics Bud gets up to.

The school he goes to is called The Buzzardium. He is in 2nd Class. Because in our years a beer drinking buzzard is 4 years younger than a human being. Anyway on one day he spilt beer all over the computer and got facts about
beer and games of beer. The computer even turned into a beer can! At last he wrote a poem about himself. I now read it to you.

Bud

Hi, My name is Bud, I like the suds, and the floods of beer.

It actually made Buzz Assembly. His teacher and Principal and all are from the Planet Buzz-and-Ard. The 10th planet yet to be found, this mad buzzard will be going to the Buzzardium College. His career will be on computer language for buzzards.

At the end of the second year, Seán writes about another expedition, this time in search of Atlantis.

I unpacked my belongings at the Irish camp. The guide and I were wished good luck by my team as we set off. Thanks to layers of clothing we were warm. It took three days in a white sculptured world but we sighted it.

Our mountain gear was in order and unpacked. We got ready to reach the summit. Some parts were very steep. Once or twice I slipped but the guide was very experienced and did not slip at all. The way up was very steep and slippery. I looked down from the track which we climbed. I told the guide to climb with care. Half way up I heard a rumbling. Then we saw lava! We climbed down as fast as we could but the lava was oozing rapidly towards us. Red and bubbling it was, but suddenly it touched me!

I figured it must be a hologram. The lava was all fake. I told the guide we were returning to base. Charts showed that no eruption occurred at that moment in that zone. I knew that someone or something was hiding there. Two days later I journeyed back to Erebus alone. This was a gripping trek.

While still using short sentences, his writing now shows a greater sense of energy and tension. His uses metaphor effectively (‘white sculptured world’) and indirect sentence structures (‘Thanks to layers of clothing we were warm; Red and bubbling it was, but suddenly it touched me!). His final sentence captures the thrust of the narrative: ‘This was a gripping trek’.

Responses and reflections from questionnaire

Seán’s response to the questionnaire was very detailed and enlightening. He devoted considerable care to each question. His last sample of work was called The Way I Write. It demonstrates Seán’s metacognitive knowledge (Tei and Stewart, 1985) of the writing process and is transcribed here in full.
The Way I Write

First my title should relate to my story. My first sentence must if my story is to be in a humorous, adventurous or a discovery tone. So long as my first paragraph is perfect, I move on.

The second paragraph is usually the most exciting. I write that I've discovered something or landed somewhere. To me writing is fun. It allows you to express yourself. It puts you in a world of your own.

The third paragraph is usually the one when I return or develop. My teacher says I work technically. Sometimes I'm given ideas, at other times I just write. I get ideas from school books, ‘Time Traveller’, ‘The Witches Broom’ and so on.

A good essay has great colour, perfect pictures, excellent style and a good bank of words from your head. So long as I know what I’m writing about my essay is as good as done. Quiet is especially need as I like to think.

When asked whether he shows his work to his friends, Seán says that he doesn't show his work, but that his friends hear it. He adds,

‘If it is humorous they laugh. If it is adventurous they imagine the picture. If it is a mystery they listen and think’.

Seán gives a comprehensive response to the questions, ‘How does your teacher correct your work and How does your teacher help you improve your work?’ He says that

‘She looks at it. She studies it. She crosses words out and puts better words in. She comments on it.’

‘She’d help us put sentences together. She’d talk about style. She’d have a conversation about our writing of dramatic words, beginnings and endings.’

He is acutely aware of the influence of his teacher on his work.

‘She can turn a bad essay into a brilliant one with just a few words. She says I write in a technical way.’

Finally, Seán lists several reasons why he thinks it is important to be good at writing.

‘If you are writing a profile about yourself for an important job and you can’t write, they would say “Oh he can’t write he has no education. Let’s not sign him up. We won’t see him.”

Secondly it is a way of communication with people. If you can’t write they would say that you are illiterate. You would not be able to write to friends and family. Kids can’t do homework and schoolwork.'
Thirdly if you can’t write you can’t use computer technology and you can’t transfer ideas onto paper. If you can’t write you can’t read. If that is the case you can’t read road signs and so on.
So that is why I think it is important to write.

5.3.5 Maxim (ESL student)
Maxim is a student of English as a Second Language (ESL), having moved to Dublin from Moscow two years previously. His first experiences of writing had been functional, involving completion exercises and written work from workbooks. In Mrs Begley’s class, he began his portfolio by writing about himself and his relations in his Russian homeland.

I told my class about my Grandmother. Her name is Baba Lizza. She [lives] in the country. I visit her there. She keeps animals. a cow, a horse and a pink pig are in her yard. They live in a paddock. She feeds them grass. She has a cock and some hens. The hens lay eggs. I like to eat a boiled egg. The hens are fed egg shells. The winter is often very cold. Rivers freeze over. So do lakes. I miss Baba Lizza and my country Russia. Baba Lizza lives outside Moskow. I lived in a flat in Moscow. Now I live in Orwell Road. It is a nice place.

Maxim’s January sample illustrates his ability to construct a coherent text using many descriptive words to create a particular mood.

January 1996
We set out together. We strolled across the fields. We were laughing and joking as we hid behind a tree and then we scampered through the woods. When we came to a pathway we saw a rusty old gate. That brown gate creaked loudly. Then we walked through the gate and an overgrown garden and then a tall dark building. It had broken windows and an open door. We entered in the building and were as quiet as mice. We saw a big hall with dust all over the floor. There were cobwebs everywhere. The big stairs were nearly all broken. We stepped softly so not to break it all. Then we heard something spooky. The moon was out. Branches shone and shook. They made funny shadows on the floor. It was all strange, all scary for us to be there.

Reflections
At the end of the first year of the project, Maxim returned to Russia and therefore he did not complete a questionnaire as the other students did. However, he wrote about his experience of writing at the end of the first year.

At first I did not want to do it, but after I wrote a few of them I felt interested and excited. The best I thought was writing about a pet. Even though I liked
one they were all very interesting. It also helped me with my English. Last year I was only able to write from my English Second Language book. I found it not hard to learn English, but I only started to write from my head at the end of last year. I thought it was a very interesting project. It helped me. I come from Russia, so now I know how to write in English.

It is clear that Maxim is proud of his achievements in writing at the end of the year. He recognises that learning to ‘write from his head’ became a significant point in his growth as a writer and as a student of English.

5.3.6 Assessing the portfolios
- Based on the assessment dimensions developed by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991): Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to work

Again, using the portfolios and writing samples of the pupils from a two-year period as a basis, together with their reflections on the writing process, their letters to this researcher and responses to the questionnaire, it is possible to assess the portfolios on several aspects of each dimension of portfolio assessment as outlined by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991).

Production
- Craftsmanship: While aspects of punctuation and spelling may not always be accurate, the pupils have a strong command of the communicative purposes of their writing.
- Pursuit: The pupils’ work has developed over time, showing evidence of their growth as writers and incorporating a techniques to greater effect each time.
- Invention: The pupils solve problems in a creative manner, experiment with the medium (e.g., My Funny Pet), take risks with the medium and set their own problems to solve (e.g., Would you rather be the youngest or the oldest in a family?
- Expression/Point of View: The student expresses an idea or feeling in the work in a powerful, moving way (e.g., ‘My sisters are jelles [jealous] of my dress. I love my dress.’ ‘I have to try and respect one side and not offend the other and vice-versa’; ‘Swimming over coral reefs, watching slithering eels going in and out of the pink hued tunnels’; ‘Two days later I journeyed back to Erebus alone’. The
pupils are deeply engaged in more than just technique: and their personal imprint is clearly visible in their work

Perception (‘Seeing’ in the domain)

- Capacity to make discriminations in works from a wide variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods: A wide range of writing samples is presented in the portfolios—personal writing, descriptive, non-fiction writing, argument, humour and adventure—although the pupils’ ability to discriminate among them cannot be assumed from the samples alone.

- Awareness of sensuous aspects of experience: The pupils show a heightened sensitivity to physical properties of the environment related to writing. They refer frequently to the colour, tone and texture and sounds in their work (e.g., ‘Up at Kippure, it is still misty and dark’; ‘Looking up at the sky to see a sheet of pure blue’; ‘It is a very delicate flower. We don’t touch it in case it breaks’; ‘Thunder rumbles and a hint of rain on the wind’; ‘I saw the shadows of the leaves on the trees’).

Reflection (Thinking about the domain)

- Ability and inclination to assess own work: There is evidence that the pupils can evaluate their own work, articulate and defend perceived strengths and weaknesses, and do so regularly. (‘Sometimes I do very small writing but it has got bigger and better’; ‘I have learned to write a lot better (compared to what I was writing before the essays). I can also do creative writing a bit better’; ‘At first I did not want to do it, but after I wrote a few I felt interested and excited’).

- Ability and inclination to take the role of critic: The pupils have developed the ability and tendency to evaluate the work of others in the class and appear to have a sense of the standards for quality work in the domain. (‘A good essay has great colour, perfect pictures, excellent style and a good bank of words in your head’; ‘If it is humorous they laugh. If it is adventurous they imagine the picture. If it is a mystery they listen and think’).

- Ability and inclination to use criticisms and suggestions: Student can consider critical comments about own his/her work, and can incorporate suggestions where appropriate. (‘She can turn a bad essay into a brilliant one with just a few words.”)
She says I write in a technical way'; 'She has developed our ideas with the matters she talks about').

- Ability to learn from other works of art within the domain: The pupils cite several sources for their writing, with stories and poetry featuring prominently. They also use music and paintings as a source of inspiration ('Sometimes I'm given ideas, at other times I just write. I get ideas from school books, 'Time Traveller', 'The Witches Broom' and so on'.)

- Ability to articulate artistic goals: The pupils appear to have a sense of themselves as artists, as evidenced by their ability to articulate goals for a particular work, or more general artistic goals ('I am going to be a writer when I grow up'; 'The texture of the warehouse appears to be a charcoal-like roughness. The colour makes me feel like I am actually there'; 'A good essay has great colour, perfect pictures, excellent style and a good bank of words from your head').

**Approach to work**

- Engagement: The interest of the pupils is most clearly evident in the writing of the students with learning difficulties who persevere with their tasks to create a finished product. Their interest is sustained and is reflected in the final reflections in many cases. While not all samples submitted are perfectly presented, the pupils have a sense of what is required and some use word processors to present their final drafts.

- Ability to work independently: Again, the pupils who encounter particular challenges in relation to writing have learned to work independently (e.g., the ESL student, the pupil with learning difficulties and the child from the travelling community) and can incorporate learning from their diverse life experiences.

- Ability to work collaboratively: Student can work collaboratively when appropriate. While the pupils do not appear to have engaged in collaborative writing, they are conscious of and value the feedback from their peers.

- Ability to use cultural resources: The pupils refer to their poetry file as their source of ideas, their use of a 'word bank', books from various subject areas as well as their teacher.
5.3.7 Discussion

**Instructional and assessment issues**

In terms of the writing process, preparation appears to be long and involved. The children are encouraged to consider many aspects in a topic through preliminary thought and discussion. The sources of ideas are wide: pictures, personal events, the environment, books, encyclopedia, other subject areas. There is little evidence of influence from popular television programmes, cartoons or films. The pupils are urged to bring the reader into the picture through the use of colour, texture, tone and sound. Related vocabulary is prepared along with technical phrases. In many instances, the writers make mental drafts before committing to paper. The use of colourful description in the children’s writing to convey the mood and atmosphere of work is achieved to good effect by most pupils, and enhances the quality of the writing by the lower achieving students. While they are open to changing texts afterwards, in most cases they do not make significant changes when they are finished. In summary, their process is one of an artist painting a picture. The writing in many cases is not presented as a ‘showcase’. This is may be due to Mrs Begley’s emphasis on the content rather than on the presentation. However, towards the end of the second year, many children used word processors to present their finished texts.

**Assessment**

The teacher appears to have a strong sense of each child’s progress—where he or she is at and the possibilities of how he or she could develop (Vygotsky, 1987). The writers’ sense of ownership is closely linked with their self-knowledge as writers, and to their ability to assess their own work. The writing from these portfolios can be described as honest and original, qualities that are difficult to measure but are considered characteristics of good writing (Fox, 1994). Writing about topics that are close to their own needs, preoccupations and experiences lends a unique quality to the writing that it evident in each child’s work. In addition, the writers appear at ease writing about topics that are personal, and they are willing to explore them in some depth.
5.4 Cross-case analysis

A number of common themes emerge in the study of each of these portfolio collections. First, in terms of the process of writing itself, it appears that preparation for writing begins outside of the writing period—pupils are engaged in discussion and reading which feeds into the process, directly and indirectly. In Mrs Begley’s class, the pupils are focused on particular stimuli but oral discussion is also a feature of the other two classes. There is little evidence of redrafting. Pupils incorporate ideas, suggestions and feedback into subsequent writings, rather than changing what they have already composed. This cycle of generating of ideas, focusing, drafting and evaluating reflects the model of White and Arndt (1991) and integrated stages in the writing process as described by the many ‘process’ authors in the field.

Second, each sample as a product represents a unique effort. There appear to be few similarities in any classes, and in the junior infant class in particular, this is quite remarkable. Starting points for writing are wide and varied. They include nature and environmental topics, personal events, television, books, films and artistic themes. While the proportion of these vary in the different classes, what is common among them is the diversity of stimuli. The writers appear confident and committed to their writing and undertake difficult and unusual topics with ease.

Third, the teacher is a critical factor in each case. Her interests, personal preferences, professional commitment and expectations for her students provide the vessel in which the pupils’ ideas and writing explorations can be shaped and nurtured.

Common themes and unique features that emerge from the portfolios is discussed further in Chapter Eight.
Chapter Six

Analysis of the pupils’ responses to questionnaires
CHAPTER SIX

ANALYSIS OF THE PUPILS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONNAIRES

6.1 Pupil Questionnaire: Ms Kelly's Class

An open-ended questionnaire was issued to the 5th class pupils in Ms Kelly's class in May 1997. All thirty-one pupils in the class completed the questionnaire. The questions sought information about three main aspects of writing in Ms Kelly’s class: (i) how the pupils approached writing and their understanding of the process; (ii) how they perceived their teacher taught them; (iii) how they perceived their teacher assessed them and finally, (iv) looking at the broader picture, how their parents responded to their work. The overall purpose of these questionnaires was to provide evidence of the approaches to instruction and assessment in each classroom as perceived by the pupils which could be used to validate the information extrapolated from the writing samples, and subsequently, the observations and teacher interviews. In each case, the responses provided by the students were coded and later grouped into categories. Not all information lent itself to coding, but for the purposes of this study, the most significant findings are presented.

Genre

Table 6.1a
Kinds of writing most favoured by the children Ms Kelly’s class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-fiction</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comedy</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horror</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adventure</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any kind</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>romance</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31
The kinds of writing most favoured by the pupils in Ms Kelly’s class were fiction (mentioned by 55% of pupils), adventure (32%) and comedy (23%).

**Process**

**Table 6.2a**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways in which the children indicated they went about writing</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>just start writing</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brainstorm for ideas</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make a written plan</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make an unwritten plan</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspired by the title</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from practising skills</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[n=31\]

In describing the ways in which they went about their writing, forty-two percent of the pupils in Ms Kelly’s class said they ‘just started writing’, with 19% of students claiming they were inspired by the title. Few pupils mentioned planning as being a feature of their preparation with 16% mentioning that they made a written plan and 13% stating that they made an unwritten plan.

**Table 6.3a**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources for writing ideas cited, as by the children</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>books</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own experiences</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own imaginations</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>title</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[n=31\]

Sources for writing ideas tended to be very similar in Ms Kelly’s class with almost half of the pupils (45%) stating that they got their ideas from television. Thirty two percent of pupils stated that their ideas came from books while the pupil’s own experiences and the environment provided equal amounts of inspiration being
mentioned by 29% of pupils. None of the pupils mentioned the teacher as a source for writing ideas.

Table 6.4a
Agreement with the question ‘Do you change anything you have written when you have finished?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

Seventy seven percent of pupils agreed with the question ‘Do you change anything you have written when you have finished?’ while only one pupil stated clearly that he did not change anything when he had finished.

Table 6.5a
Aspects of written work which are changed when finished

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>spellings and punctuation</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>handwriting</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbs, adjectives</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>similes and metaphors</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>title</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>additional characters</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

Sixty-eight percent of students stated that they added more adjectives or inserted more descriptive verbs when they had finished writing e.g., finding alternative words for ‘said’ or ‘got’. Spellings and punctuation was also cited by 29% of the students as an aspect of their work which they changed when they had finished.
Feedback

Table 6.6a
Agreement with the question ‘Do you show your work to your friends in the class?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

A substantial majority (87%) of the children in Ms Kelly’s class indicated that they showed their work to their friends.

Table 6.7a
Comments classmates make when they read another classmates’ writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive comments</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both positive and negative comments</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall opinion</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

The students in Ms Kelly’s class indicated that the responses they received from their classmates to their writing were largely positive. Sixty one percent stated that their classmates made positive comments, 26% made both positive and negative comments, 23% made suggestions for improvement while 10% offered an overall opinion.

Assessment

Table 6.8a
Ways in which the children indicated the teacher corrected their work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correction Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>makes alternative suggestions</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask/writes questions on the side</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writes a comment</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reads it to herself</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circles spelling and punctuation</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31
When asked to describe the types of comments which their teacher makes about their writing, 39% of the students in Ms Kelly’s class indicated that their teacher made positive comments. Other comments made were on the conventions of writing, techniques and specific comments for individual.

**Table 6.9a**

**Comments which the children perceived the teacher makes about their writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive comments</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes specific comments on work</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments on use of dialogue</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments on use of spelling</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments on use of adjectives</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gives an overall opinion</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asks questions</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>says or writes ‘see me’</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

**Table 6.10a**

**Response to the question as to whether the teacher gives you grades, like A, B C or D, or a mark out of 10, or a comment such as Excellent, Very good, Good or Fair?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Mark out of 10</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

In Ms Kelly’s class the students clearly indicated that they did not receive grades or marks out of ten for their work, with 100% of them stating that their teacher gave them comments as a marking system.
Instruction

Table 6.11a
Ways in which the children perceive the teacher helps them to improve your work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Way</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>suggests alternative ideas</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggests alternative vocabulary</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corrects grammar or spelling</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organises children in groups for specific lessons</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identifies areas of weakness</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holds a discussion or conference with individual pupils</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

The most favourable method adopted by Ms Kelly to help the children improve, according to her pupils, was the organisation of the children into groups for specific lessons (43%). Twenty six percent of students stated that the teacher held individual conferences to deal with specific aspects of work, while 19% stated that the teacher suggested alternative words and phrases which they could use in their writing.

Teacher judgement/bias

Table 6.12a
Kinds of writing which the children perceived as being most favoured by the teacher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Writing</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>neat, well presented</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interesting adventure</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good description</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>features, e.g., metaphor, simile</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good adjectives</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comedy</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serious</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all kinds</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

A substantial percentage of the students in Ms Kelly's class (65%) indicated that the type of writing most favoured by their teacher was adventure, with comedy (45%) falling as the second most favoured.
Home-school links

**Table 6.13a**
Kinds of comments which the children perceive their parents make about their writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>positive comments</th>
<th>negative comments</th>
<th>no comments</th>
<th>room for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>84%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

A substantial majority of students in Ms Kelly’s class (84%) indicated that their parents made positive comments about their work with only one child stating that the comments from his parents were negative.

Long-term views

**Table 6.14a**
Reasons the children believe it is important to be good at writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>good for examinations</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for jobs</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for life skills</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for specific jobs, e.g., journalist, writer</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for 3rd level</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=31

In Ms Kelly’s class, students believed that it was important to be good at writing for five main reasons. Chief among these was the requirement for jobs in later life (65%) and for examinations (26%), with the leaving certificate being mentioned by a small number of children. A further 16% mentioned that writing was important as a life skill while 16% also mentioned that writing was important for specific jobs, such as journalism or working as a professional writer.

**Summary**

In Ms Kelly’s class, the kinds of writing most favoured were fiction and adventure. The pupils state that they ‘just start writing’, often inspired by the title. The sources which they mainly use for ideas are television and books, as well as their own experiences and the environment. More than three-quarters of the pupils indicated that
they change what they have written when they have finished, although these changes are mainly to verbs, adjectives, spellings and punctuation rather than the plot, characters or endings. The pupils show their work to their friends in the class who make positive comments, or both positive and negative comments, and give suggestions for improvement. The pupils indicated that the main way in which their teacher corrected their work was by circling spelling and punctuation. When the teacher corrects their work she uses comments rather than grades and helps them improve by providing specific lessons to groups according to need. The pupils believe that the kind of writing most favoured by the teacher is adventure, with comedy as the second favourite. When they show their writing to their parents, the pupils indicated that they receive positive comments although a quarter of the pupils stated that their parents say that there is room for improvement. Overall, the reasons the pupils believe that it is important to be good at writing are because it is good for examinations (usually meaning terminal state examinations such as the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate) and good for helping them secure a job when they leave school.
6.2 Pupil Questionnaire: Ms Begley’s Class

The open-ended questionnaire was also issued to the 4th class pupils in Ms Begley’s class in May 1997. Twenty-eight of the thirty-one pupils in the class completed the questionnaire. The questions were identical to those issued to Ms Kelly’s class and sought information about three main aspects of writing: (i) how the pupils approached writing and what their understanding was of the process; (ii) how they perceived their teacher taught them; (iii) how they perceived their teacher assessed them and finally, (iv) looking at the broader picture, how their parents responded to their work.

Genre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds of writing most favoured by the children Ms Begley’s class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adventure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

The pupils in Ms Begley’s class listed a wide range of genres among their favourites. While mystery was listed by a majority of pupils (64%), forty three percent listed adventure among their favourites while a substantial minority of pupils cited poetry (25%) and descriptive writing (18%) as being the kind of writing which they most favoured.
A large proportion of the children (68%) indicated that their preparations for writing took the form of ‘thinking about words’ while 39% stated that they pictured, or imagined scenes in their heads. None of the children mentioned the drafting of a written plan, although 36% of the children stated that making an unwritten plan was among their approaches to writing. ‘Listening to a tape’ was also mentioned by 29% of students as a form of preparation for writing.
Table 6.3b
Sources for writing ideas cited by the children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>books</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>music tapes</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own experiences</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening to/holding conversations</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own imagination</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own previous writing sample</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom and school environment</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word bank/word searches</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internet</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

Again, the pupils in Ms Begley’s class listed a wide variety of sources for their writing. Books (82%) and poetry (43%) were very popular sources, while 61% of pupils stated that their teacher provided them with their ideas. Both the children’s own imaginations (32%) and the classroom and school environment (32%) also played significant parts. Less frequently cited sources of ideas included television (14%), friends (3%), previous writing samples (3%), word banks or word searches (18%) and the Internet (7%).

Table 6.4b
Agreement with the question ‘Do you change anything you have written when you have finished?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28
While a substantial majority of the students in Ms Begley’s class stated that they changed things when they had finished writing, many also tried to differentiate between changing at the end of the writing process and during the writing process.

**Table 6.5b**

Aspects of written work which are changed when finished

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ideas</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentences</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spellings</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>layout</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbs, adjectives</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>setting</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>characters</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

Although the conventions of writing featured strongly (64%) among the kinds of changes which the pupils in Ms Begley’s class stated they made, changes at the word and sentence level were also evident with 57% of students stating that they changed verbs, adjectives or other descriptive words or phrases.

Feedback

**Table 6.6b**

Agreement with the question ‘Do you show your work to your friends in the class?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

Many of the pupils’ answers to this question were somewhat ambiguous. Although 68% stated that they showed their work to their friends, in many cases this was not a deliberate gesture. It was apparent that for many of the children the teacher chose to display the work, to read it aloud or to ask individual children to read their work aloud.
to the class. In these cases, the other children commented, but it was not through the invitation of the writer.

Table 6.7b
Comments classmates make when they read another classmates’ writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>positive comments</th>
<th>both positive and negative comments</th>
<th>overall opinion</th>
<th>various comments</th>
<th>no comment recorded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>71%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

For 71% of the students in Ms Begley’s class, the comments that they received from their classmates about their work were mainly positive. Sixteen percent of students did not respond to this question.

Assessment

Table 6.8b
Ways in which the children indicated the teacher corrected their work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>various ways</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>makes alternative suggestions</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writes a comment about the content</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writes a comment about the layout</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ticks the work at the end</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>looks for good description</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>checks for spelling and punctuation</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calls children up to talk about work on a one-to-one basis</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28
Table 6.9b
Comments which the children perceived the teacher made about their writing

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive comments</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative comments</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both positive and negative</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specific comments about writing</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasises the importance of writing</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>says/writes ‘see me’</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

Fifty four percent of the students in Ms Begley’s class stated that the comments their teacher made about their writing were largely positive. A substantial minority (39%) described the comments as being both positive and negative, inferring that their teacher could be critical of their work as well as being constructive. However, the students appeared to feel that these comments were justified.

Table 6.10b
Response to the question as to whether the teacher gives you grades, like A, B C or D, or a mark out of 10, or a comment such as Excellent, Very good, Good or Fair?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Mark out of 10</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

In responding to the question ‘Does your teacher give you grades, like A, B C or D, or a mark out of 10, or a comment such as Excellent, Very good, Good or Fair?’ all the students in Ms Begley’s class stated that their teacher gave them comments for their work, but occasionally, a grade. In these instances, the grade referred to was an A or an A+. Several students emphasised that their teacher did not giving them marks out of ten, and gave strong reasons to support this position.
Responses to the question 'How does your teacher help you to improve your work?' varied considerably and were grouped into twelve categories. Of these, suggesting alternative or exemplary ideas (32%) and assisting pupils with their writing at the sentence level (32%) featured most strongly. While the correction of spelling and punctuation has traditionally been the preserve of the writing teacher, and it was mentioned by 29% of students, several other diverse approaches were also mentioned. These included: encouraging strategies for self-help (25%), suggesting alternative vocabulary (21%), assisting with style (21%), assigning specific tasks to individual children (21%) and showing how to use more colour or description in writing (14%).
Teacher judgement/bias

Table 6.12b
Kinds of writing which the children perceived as being most favoured by the teacher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of writing</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>neat, well presented</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter writing</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interesting adventure</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story writing</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good description ('picture' writing)</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fantasy</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mystery</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dramatic writing</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jokes</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

In terms of their perception of the kind of writing which was most favoured by their teacher, the pupils in Ms Begley’s class were quite divided with twelve major categories emerging. Of these, good description (or ‘picture’ writing) was regarded by 57% as being the favourite, while 32% mentioned mystery, 25% interesting adventure, 21% personal writing and 21% writing on a nature theme. Only one child stated that the writing which was most favoured by the teacher was neat, well presented writing. This child’s writing reflected his learning difficulties in the area.

Home-school links

Table 6.13b
Kinds of comments which the children perceive their parents make about their writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive comments</th>
<th>negative comments</th>
<th>no comments</th>
<th>room for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28
All the children in Ms Begley’s class stated that their families made positive comments about their work.

Long-term views

Table 6.14b
Reasons the children believe it is important to be good at writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>good for examinations</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for jobs</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for life skills</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for other subjects</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for learning</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good for education</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to get to college</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to communicate/stay in touch with family and friends</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be a writer/journalist</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to make one’s family proud</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to improve at reading</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoyment</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to express oneself/personal development</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

The reasons the children in Ms Begley’s class believed it was important to be good at writing were very diverse. ‘Life skills’, (which included ‘good for life’) was mentioned by three-quarters of the children while the importance of writing for future employment was mentioned by 61%. Communicating with family and friends elsewhere was seen as being an important reason for being good at writing by almost half of the students (46%), while the need to maintain or improve one’s reading was listed by 29%. It is interesting to note that although Ms Begley had taught at second level, the importance of writing for examination purposes such as the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate was only mentioned by 11% of students.

Discussion
In Mrs Begley’s class the kind of writing most favoured is mystery, with adventure and poetry being the second and third favourite kinds. A large portion of the pupils indicated that their preparation involved thinking—thinking about the words, images or planning their story. The pupils list 14 sources for their ideas, with books and the teacher being uppermost. Three-quarters of the pupils indicated that they change things when they have finished. Such changes are usually to verbs, adjectives and spellings. More than two-thirds of the pupils show their writing to their friends who usually make positive comments. The pupils in Mrs Begley’s class state that Mrs Begley corrects their work by commenting on the content, by commenting on the layout and by talking to the pupils individually. Her comments are usually positive and she also assigns grades to their finished work. According to the pupils, Mrs Begley helps them improve their work by using a number of strategies. The most frequently mentioned are the suggestion of alternative ideas, the correction of spelling and punctuation and encouraging self-help strategies in the pupils. In terms of identifying the kind of writing most favoured by their teacher, the pupils identified twelve genres with ‘good description’ or ‘picture writing’ featuring the most often. When they show their writing to their parents, all the pupils indicated that they receive positive comments. Finally, the reasons the pupils in Mrs Begley’s class believe it is important to be good at writing are diverse but are grouped into 13 categories: ‘Good for life skills’ was mentioned by three-quarters of the pupils, ‘good for jobs’ by sixty-one percent, while the importance of writing as a means of communicating with others was mentioned by almost half of the pupils.

6.3 Cross-case analysis
Similarities and unique features in the approaches to instruction and assessment in the two classes

Instruction
It is clear that the pupils in both classes enjoy writing adventure stories, although the pupils in Mrs Begley’s are inspired to write mystery stories and poetry, reflecting what they perceive as their teacher’s preferences for ‘picture writing’ and poetry. Both sets of pupils appear to be eager to write and their commitment is evident in their portfolios, as described in Chapter Five. However, the pupils in Ms Kelly’s class indicated that they ‘just start writing’ and are inspired by the title, while in Mrs Begley’s, their preparation involves a lot of concentrated thinking about the words
they will use, the images they will convey and the planning of their story. In Ms Kelly’s class, from among 6 sources of ideas, the pupils identify television and books as providing the main inspiration, while Mrs Begley’s class list up to 14 sources, with books and the teacher as uppermost, among a range that includes poetry, music, nature and the internet. When they have finished writing, the changes that the pupils in both classes make are largely to verbs, adjectives, spellings and punctuation. It appears that neither group therefore makes substantial changes to the drafts once a topic is started, apart from changes to surface features. The reasons the pupils believe it is important to be good at writing mostly likely reflect their teacher’s philosophy as to its purpose and function. Ms Kelly appears to teach writing so that as adults, the pupils will be skilled in their work and will be successful in examinations. Mrs Begley’s reasons for teaching writing appear to be somewhat broader in that she emphasises the importance of the social function of writing, as a life skill as well as its importance for employment, for communication with others, for education in the broadest sense, for improving one’s reading and for self-expression.

Assessment
In correcting and commenting on the pupils’ work, Ms Kelly appears to concentrate more on punctuation, grammar and spelling and the use of techniques such as metaphor and simile. Mrs Begley comments on the content and suggests different ideas. While these do not appear to be reflected in the draft the child may be working on, it would appear from the portfolios in Chapter Five, that the suggestions are taken on board when the child starts on a new topic. For both teachers, providing relevant feedback, ‘conferencing’ (Graves, 1983) with individual pupils and arranging children in small groups for particular lessons are important components of their teaching. This approach also provides an opportunity for formative assessment by feeding back into the teaching process. Both teachers encourage the pupils to respond to each other’s work, thus developing their skills in self- and peer- assessment and fostering a greater awareness of writing quality.
Chapter Seven

Teacher interviews
CHAPTER SEVEN
TEACHER INTERVIEWS

7.1 Mrs Hughes, teacher of junior infants

Observation vignette
The school where Mrs Hughes teaches lies several miles outside the city. I arrive in
the afternoon and see the children completing written work related to their reading.
The atmosphere is relaxed and joyful, and the children are involved and focused on
their work. Mrs Hughes draws the children's attention to labels in the room, their
collection of items on the nature table and the vocabulary relating to their recent trip
to a farm. One group of children is busy completing the painting of constructions in
cardboard. The artwork is individual, striking and confident. The children are
required to take their written work home to share it with their families and this is
greeted with enthusiasm. The day ends with all the children reciting a series of poems,
rhymes, songs and prayers. Home time is happy, but with a sense of anticipation of
the next day's learning and playing together.

7.1.1 Background
Mrs Hughes went to train in England in 1967 and qualified in 1970 as an infant-
trained teacher. For most of her teaching career she has worked with the infant
children as reception, middle infants and senior infants in England. Prior to coming
back to Ireland in 1984, she spent 5 years working in Bradford with multicultural
children aged 5-9 for whom English was a second language. A lot of her work with
these children was in the area of early language skills. Having returned to Ireland in
1984 she took a post in a rural school on the outskirts of Dublin and has worked since
then as a junior infants teacher here since arriving apart from 6 months doing the
remedial job when there was a teacher out on maternity leave. The pupils that Mrs
Hughes teaches generally come from a rural background, although increasingly she
finds families that are relocating from the city.

7.1.2 Mrs Hughes' approach to the teaching of writing
Mrs Hughes teaches writing as an integrated aspect of language arts and describes the
stages she works through with an infant class from the first day.

I tend to teach language skills to include reading, writing, speaking, listening,
all integrated together. And from day one when they come in I have their
name cards ready for them. Straightaway I launch into can they identify their
own name, look at their name card. I write my name and draw their attention to my name and write it on the board and point to it on the door and say your name has to be written and teacher writes it with pen or with a coloured marker and what colour is the marker. I wonder why is there a capital letter some of them are read and we count. You might ask some of them can they count how many letters are in their name. Some of them can spell their names before they come in, so we have a lot of discussion about their own names and my name for the first week when they come in.

Her approach mirrors the emergent literacy philosophy (see Chapter Two), where the child is immersed in a literate environment from the moment he/she begins school and is recognised as being a literate being, with prior knowledge.

Then the second week I would give them a large, blank sheet and I would write their names in large print and see how many of them could copy the writing underneath. And then from that I try to assess who are those with no motor skills or poor motor skills in that area, where I would need to draw the dots or where they would need to draw the dots for their names; use tracing paper for some. So I decide in the second week which are the ones that haven’t got any of the basic skills for holding the pencil and that would be the beginning of the process of writing.

She describes how she creates a literate environment in the classroom and develops oral language skills as an integral part of the reading-writing process.

I kind of launch into the reading early on by putting up captions. I might put up pictures. We might paint an autumn scene early in the first term and I’ll write a caption under it and draw their attention to it. They help me write a caption underneath it. I wonder which would suit best. We have a lot of discussion orally about what might suit to write under a large frieze and when we have decided on something I write it on the board and then I write the caption under it and daily we would read that caption. A lot of visual work with the words.

7.1.3 The importance of writing

Mrs Hughes considers writing an important part of the Infant programme and believes that it should be integrated across the curriculum for Infants.

We talk through the news items daily for the first term. Really we spend a lot of that time listening and speaking and people taking turns to come out and we call it ‘chatter time,’ and turn on the television, and we pretend that they are the news. They introduce themselves and speak about what is important in their lives at that moment and they talk about what they have brought in.
We all listen and we have a clap or a cheer for whatever. And occasionally if something very exciting has happened I might write it on the cláir dubh (blackboard) and I try to include a different child’s item of interest every week so we’re not being left out. If somebody’s rabbit had baby rabbits, or someone’s cat had kittens or the vet had been to their dog and they’ve all seemed excited about that and we’ve developed it a bit more we might write about it a little bit and they help me to write - mind you, not in the first month or two - to give them the confidence to speak their news.

There are times where they draw the picture and I write the caption underneath. I do that in the autumn term as well. We do that a lot and integrate it with their artwork when they are painting...usually free activities. I get them to talk through their artwork with me and what would you like teacher to write. I would normally write the caption in the autumn when they would talk through the picture with me.

Process
Mrs Hughes describes the stages in writing which she goes through as follows: the children write their name in the beginning, and she draws their attention to their names and to captions in the room. Those who need help are encouraged to trace over letters and dots. After this, the children progress to writing a short sentence that encapsulates the news of the day and by the end of the first term they are ready to write their own extended sentences. She encourages the children to be independent in their writing from the early stages, to use a variety of strategies, common words (Look-Say approach), high interest words, words from their readers and well as developing skills in phonemic awareness.

After Christmas I usually let them write their own sentences on whatever they would like to write. I give them a sheet of paper as normal and I encourage the use of the vocabulary that we have on the walls. I draw their attention to little words. Having spoken their news to me I would say ‘Oh you can find that word ...oh there’s a wall here and I know that if you look here you could find most of those words and if you look around teacher won’t have to help you. Oh that word is in a library book or in the reading book.’ I usually use my alphabet, the food one. We draw attention to the words early on that I encourage them to use their visual skills as much as possible. The days of the week if they are needing them or the alphabet ... and then words that they need that they don’t have I help them to spell it. I just would walk around and prompt them. And I would always ask them to listen to see would they hear any of the initial sounds.

7.1.4 Ownership and involvement
When asked whether it was possible to achieve the same outcomes in children’s writing by using a more prescribed approach Mrs Hughes did not disagree. However, she emphasised how important it was for children to feel personally involved with their writing as she has found this to be a highly motivating factor.

Well I have found through experience that the children are mostly motivated by their own experience. They don’t go out beyond me for quite a while. So what’s important to them as an individual is what they want to draw and write about. They are not that interested in the other people. So I have always found that if I personalise the writing early on and it’s something personal to them—even when I worked with the multicultural children—it was always what happened to them. I think it motivates them more than if I structured it and said ‘We’ll all write this’. That’s how my experience of working with them would be.

7.1.5 Genre
Mrs Hughes does not consider one aspect of writing more important than the other in the infant classroom, as she believes that in the infant classroom all forms of writing integrate naturally and are of equal importance.

7.1.6 A typical lesson
In terms of day-to-day instruction, Mrs Hughes recognises the integrity of the day for children in junior classes.

As they are writing and I’m walking around and talking to them about it; we usually deal with it that day. Because of the age group, tomorrow is like a month away for an infant so you have to deal with the subject matter there and then, so they are happy with it and you are happy with it. Sometimes we read out our sentences for everyone else to hear it and ‘clap everybody’ and ‘well done today’ and go on. The next day is a very new day and so I don’t really carry over. I deal with whatever reading and writing everything on the day. I think with infants, once they move out at two o’clock from you the day is gone and that’s it and the next day is a new day.

\[12\] Graves (1983); see Chapter Two
7.1.7 The mechanics of writing
While Mrs Hughes does not draw a distinction between different forms of writing at junior infants level, she describes clearly the manner in which she deals with the conventions of writing.

In junior infants I wouldn’t overemphasise the correct formation of the letters for children. Quite a lot of them have difficulty with some of the letters. I would tend to praise their attempts whilst pointing out that this is how you do it and we’ll have to practice that. I wouldn’t make a big issue of the letters not being formed properly because I found that can demotivate very early on and discourage children and it could give them a phobia about writing.

7.1.8 Individual differences
Mrs Hughes recognises that children learn at different rates and have different abilities, and she deals with these differences with a semi-structured approach.

Well for those who appear to have the skill to begin to write independently from day one I just set them off with the sheets of paper and that particular group I usually just try and find a corner where I put the more able children, or those who are more ready together.

Mrs Hughes describes how she varies her approach to grouping as the year progresses.

We do change about a lot. But I do tend to leave them together because they tend to be the ones who have the basic reading skills as well. I usually have a copy for those children and they begin to draw their pictures early on and attempt to write the caption. I set them off with their copies and each day they draw a picture with the caption. I usually write it in the beginning and they copy.

7.1.9 Monitoring progress
Mrs Hughes describes how she monitoring progress is an on-going activity for her; her day involves teaching and assessing as one continuous process.

Well I monitor the copies and I monitor the reading and I integrate a lot of the work I do so I don’t call the writing separate.

The integrated nature of the school day is a key factor in Mrs Hughes’ teaching which recurs often in her descriptions of her teaching.

Because I work an integrated day very much and I kind of monitor whatever task I’ve given that particular group to do; I monitor each task and I keep a record of what they are doing.
Mrs Hughes encourages the children to share their writing with others and to talk about it with others in the class. This allows her to monitor the pupils' work in the context of the whole class.

I often call someone to come out and read their writing. We praise and clap. The usual. Anyone who wants to come.

7.1.10 Linking home and school

Mrs Hughes encourages the children to take writing home and to share their work with their families.

Yes, they do take the writing copies home, maybe once a month. Or I may say, 'Does anybody want to take their book home today?' if they have something in particular they are very proud of. I would say, 'Would you like to take it home?' They are free to take them any time they want to but if there’s a while and they haven’t sent them home I would let them home once a month so they can have a look.

Mrs Hughes describes how this works in reverse also, i.e. where children bring their writing from home into school.

They would make you a card and bring it in and be proud of having written to the teacher 'I love you' or 'Love from...' or whatever.

7.1.11 Assessment

In Mrs Hughes room, assessment is very integrated with her teaching. She is very aware of the children’s levels of ability and progress and of moving them on intuitively in an integrated way.

Yes I work very much individually with them. I think children dictate the pace at this level and I think that’s how it should be and you can’t rush them on because you want to get them to the end of this book, or they should have this done by the end of junior infants. I certainly feel with young children you cannot do that. They do dictate the pace you can work at and you have to be very aware of that.

7.1.12 Pupil awareness of teacher’s criteria for assessing writing
Mrs Hughes does not make her assessment criteria explicit for her pupils. In fact she deliberately tries to be unspecific, using this as a means to encourage the children to achieve their best.

Well I would draw attention sometimes to that generally when I am walking around I would say, ‘Oh I see lovely writing here’, but I wouldn’t name the child so much. I would just say ‘I see lovely writing here’ and leave them all wondering who it is you are talking about and have them all trying really hard.

She states that she does this so that the children will feel confident to express themselves in whatever way they can. At this level, Mrs Hughes believes that she should not draw attention to any failures or weaknesses in formation. Gradually the children progress to writing neatly, to spacing letters and words evenly and to composing one or two sentences independently.

### 7.1.13 Working with colleagues

In Mrs Hughes’ school, the principal plays a key role in providing feedback and encouragement for the children.

> I would often send children to the principal with their little writing or their stories. They have to read it to him if it’s very interesting or very good. I regularly send them to the principal and he praises them and they get a lolly and whatever and he tells them how wonderful they are.

However, Mrs Hughes does not interact in a similar way with other teachers. When asked why she stated that time constraints within the day and differences in approaches were the main factors. However, she does pass on some notes and records to other teachers.

### 7.1.14 Record keeping

When asked about the kinds of records she keeps, Mrs Hughes’ response was that she has an assessment book which she keeps for her own individual records for reading and for language development generally. She writes in it from term to term, the improvements that I’ve noted in each child, or the lack of progress for each child. Generally, she keeps this for her own use and doesn’t pass it on.
Another set of notes is prepared at the end of the year to pass on to the next class teacher. She does a phonics check and provides a lot of information on books the children have read and the reading schemes we have used, cross widthways and upwards. She gives a detailed account of that work to the teacher and the writing skills and whatever she feels their own language development has been like. According to Mrs Hughes, the relevance of these notes to the succeeding teacher depends on the individual teacher taking the class on.

It depends on who is taking the class on. Some people wouldn’t have any interest they would just like to have the class new and make their own judgements on day one, and sometimes you feel it’s just a waste of time. But I’ve been lucky in the last few years that the few teachers who have worked alongside me at senior infants are excellent. They would be interested and they would want to know.

7.1.15 Reporting progress to parents

Mrs Hughes describes how she reports to parents: she prepares a folder of evidence which includes information on their reading and writing achievements.

We have a parents meeting twice yearly, October, and again in the spring term. And on those occasions we talk about their child’s progress. They have a folder for their reading material or their language material that I make for them in the beginning of the year. And in there they have their alphabet sheet and their reading words. I make a ‘train’ for them for their words and a reading copy and their reading book. And in the reading copy they decide on a sentence for the reading copy for that night. It’s one of their choice. It might be ‘I want to play with John’ or whatever, and I write it in and say ‘Try to read that tonight for Mammy as well’ and ‘Draw a picture beside it at home’. So that the folder is there for the parents each day when they go home to assess and see and form assessments, and then the report at the end of the year. We do a school report then.

7.1.16 School Report

In the end of year school report, Mrs Hughes identifies areas where progress is satisfactory and any areas that need addressing.

The report we have is a very general report on their language development and their maths skills and what they’ve acquired really in the year. I tend to have as many constructive sentences as possible. But it’s a very, very general report and there isn’t a lot.
Mrs Hughes believes that the school report card in its present format does not allow much room to fully describe a pupil’s attainments during the year and sees this as posing a problem.

Because I’ve often felt like saying a lot more but the space didn’t allow it. For certain children, for the more able and the less able you do need to address those in greater detail, more depth. Whereas the average child, where things are going nicely and there aren’t any great problems, you can deal with that in a short space. But I think the more able and the less able do need to have a more detailed. I feel that anyway.

However, she was not so sure that other teachers in the school would welcome a report card which allowed more space for writing comments.

7.1.17 Standardised Tests
While Mrs Hughes uses a standardised test occasionally to test some children who might be above average for their age, she does not use them in any systematic way nor does she use them for reporting purposes. Generally, these tests are used to inform and to confirm her own judgement, and not for any other formal diagnostic purposes.

You know when you have a very able child and you think I’d love to test that child and I’ve gone to the reading room and asked the teacher for a test, just for my own satisfaction when you feel they are just way ahead. Oh just for my own personal benefit, I get hold of the ‘Rain’ test.

7.1.18 School policy on the teaching of writing
In response to the question, ‘Does your school have a policy on the teaching of writing’ Mrs Hughes did not think there was one in place in the school.

We’re in the process of putting together a language policy, and a maths policy and a Gaeilge policy. We’re reviewing at this stage a lot of what has been done in the school and trying to start to have some continuity, we’re putting in more structure, that we’re following up that each teacher knows what the one before them has done, and that we are aware of what we are trying to achieve together. And that is in the early stages of being developed here at the moment. Because we have been reviewing the curriculum.
Occasionally, she meets with the other teachers responsible for early childhood, i.e., the teachers in senior infants and first class, to discuss policy issues.

Depending; last year the senior infant teacher and myself we met most days, but it depends on the senior infants teacher. This year she’s taking the choir from 2-3 so she’s never free. Outside of that, we don’t meet to discuss, not very often.

When asked whether she would like to meet the other teachers for planning purposes, Mrs Hughes said that she would, although she could not see this occurring very easily.

Well, it probably would be very useful. But I find within the structure of the Irish school day, most people are gone at three. So they don’t seem to have the time. It’s time.

7.1.19 Remedial programme

In Mrs Hughes’ school, the class teacher plays a critical role in identification of pupils with learning difficulties in the first two years of school. Since the remedial teacher is shared with another school, screening for placement in the remedial programme does not take place until first class.

The remedial teacher that we have assesses the children from first class onwards. If there are children in the junior or senior infant room who would appear to need a lot of remediation, they have to wait until they are in first class before they get any of the extra help. So we try and deal with the remediation or the extra help on an individual basis within the classroom, just doing an individual programme with one or two children. I had one this year and two last year and they really had to have an individual programme with you each day.

Apart from this, Mrs Hughes does not have any other contact with the remedial teacher.

7.1.20 Broader context

Influences on teaching

When asked about the factors that may have influenced her teaching - school policy, national policy, textbooks, pre-service or inservice training, or a combination of these, Mrs Hughes suggest that the combined influences have shaped her thinking as a teacher. However, she did emphasise both the quality of pre-service and inservice
training which she experienced when working in the UK, as well as the significance of working with other teaching professionals.

I would have to say my training and the experiences I gained from some excellent teachers that I saw in England many years ago, especially when I started out teaching at first, and the inservice training that we got then on the job was very good because they had more facilities of course and so it was ongoing thing, inservice, each afternoon or evening, PE, language, or some curriculum area, you were expected to. We were very lucky, especially in the late 70’s and early 80’s to have huge facilities from teacher centres and the advisory inspectors who came once a month to you in school. We had great back up and great support, and I would say my career and the way I work would be based on what I learned there more than anything else.

**Preservice education**

Mrs Hughes describes her training in Britain with great enthusiasm.

When I trained in Trinity All Saints in Leeds we were very fortunate because it was a young college, it had just opened up. We had a lot of very young lecturers. Quite a number of them came from America, and it was a very up and coming college at the time. It was innovative, and it was practical. It was three year training and we spent three months each year out in schools and you learned such an amount from working alongside teachers for three months, going from class to class, never on your own. We were not allowed be on our own, but they would let you read a story, but it was mostly observation, and just learning on the shop floor what the teachers who had gone before you had done.

Mrs Hughes found this experience to be of great benefit in her subsequent development as a teacher, even twenty years later.

I thought it was terrific. Because I do think that the young students coming out today, maybe I’m wrong here, they tend to be left to their own devices...

I’m nearly sure that the girl who came out here was sort of straight in, get on with it, whereas we had a lot of observation. And then we gave classes and the teacher of the class would write a ‘crit’ and that ‘crit’ went back with you in your file to your tutor each day. Even if you read a story, the class teacher sat and the principal of the school might come in as well and they would write a ‘crit’.

Mrs Hughes describes this extended process of theory, practice and review which she experienced on a daily basis during the three-month period of teaching practice.

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Everyday you reported back to your personal tutor in the college when you were on teaching practice with your file and you had a little discussion about how the day went and your criticisms were handed in every day.

The experience of external review and subsequent discussion with her tutor made for a very thorough and formative process.

**Inservice education**

When asked whether inservice education was an important aspect of professional development, Mrs Hughes was in full agreement:

> And talking to other teachers and recognising common areas or strengths and weaknesses and learning from each other, I think, because there is no one way of teaching reading, writing or whatever. There is no right or wrong way is there? It’s a combination of skills, isn’t it? And what worked for me with a group this year, may not work for me next year, so you’re constantly assessing, and changing, your approach needs to be flexible. That’s what I feel anyway.

**Autonomy in the classroom**

Mrs Hughes describes herself as having a good deal of autonomy in the classroom, believing that she is personally responsible for what happens there and for controlling the use of resources (including personnel) and equipment in the school.

A factor which she believes also enhances her work is the leadership shown by the principal.

> Well I think the fact that we have a principal who would allow us to do whatever we felt worked in our environment. He’s very flexible. He would be supportive and encouraging of what you are doing and so you are not restricted. You are not being told, ‘I don’t want you to do this’ and ‘I don’t want you to do that’. I feel that you’re left to do your job and if there are any great problems I’m sure the parents would soon come and say so. So you’re left to your own.

She believes that the culture of openness and flexibility in her school is very helpful and that it enhances her teaching, although she would favour greater support from the inspectorate.
We are inspected every 5 years and that’s it, which is a very long gap. So that you do feel alright that whatever you’re doing, whether it be good, bad or indifferent, there aren’t very many people assessing you. So you’re clapping yourself on your back, saying, I’m doing a very good job here, because once you come in your door there are very few other people who come in to assess or evaluate what you are doing... But I don’t know if we could have advisory people as inspectors, or inspectors for inspection. It would be nice to have the facility of an advisor where they are not threatening, where in a situation you could say, ‘Look, I have this problem, or that problem, where to go, what I could use here or there, if your pool of ideas has dried up.

**Changing instructional practices in Ireland**

At the end of the interview Mrs Hughes was asked if there was one thing she could change about the way reading and writing is taught in Ireland at the moment, what would that be. She identified a number of points in her response. These included teacher expectations, the development of oracy and over-reliance on textbooks.

I think there is problem - our expectations are high. We expect them to be reading and writing very early on. There is a need to encourage and develop the oracy a lot more, to express themselves and to use extended vocabulary. It is very limited what they can do in that area when they come in. That to me is probably our fault. It’s the system. What we tend to have is the book list, with these books in the bag and the children are dying to get them out and get started and the mammies saying, ‘Oh when are they getting a reading book?’

So you feel that the expectation of getting them going formally reading and writing is there very early on. So I think I would delay some of that and perhaps develop more of their oracy skills and expressive skills through drama and language, poetry and story telling. They would be more fluent speaking and they would have the ability to talk on a variety of subjects rather than just ‘me’. It’s very much ‘me’, Mammy, Daddy, brother, sister, baby, my dog, my cat, me, it’s their own environment. And it takes them, certainly it would be my experience here, that they are a long time moving out from that.

While Mrs Hughes recognises that this limited use of language can be partly accounted for by the age of the children, she believes that the English children whom she taught were more advanced in this area.

I found the English children were more willing to explore topics, for some reason or another. But they wouldn’t have the structured reading books as early in England as here, so they would tend to work from topics and themes early on, as soon as they came into school, we’re going to do a theme. When I talk about the family and everyone at home. We do a big topic about it, and it will be mainly art and language and integrating drawing, painting, speaking, talking and teacher writing. So that you had a lot of spoken language going on.
7.1.21 Summary of Mrs Hughes’ approach to instruction and assessment of writing

Instruction
From Mrs Hughes’ account of her teaching of writing, her can be described as based on the philosophy of emergent literacy (see Chapter Two) where the child is recognised as having knowledge about literacy from the time he or she begins formal schooling. Although the pupils’ earliest attempts at writing in October (described in Chapter Five) did not reflect formal knowledge in the area of writing before they started school, the teacher has drawn on, and developed, their oral language skills and reading skills simultaneously in order to advance their writing. Mrs Hughes has a sense of the child as a writer, of where he or she is at and of his or her potential. She holds high expectations for her pupils and encourages them to move beyond the set texts to other sources of writing within their environment, such as captions and labels on classroom displays, other books, as well as the resource of the teacher herself. Her approach mirrors the “scaffolding” of children’s learning (Vygotsky, 1987) while encouraging a sense of individuality and ownership (Graves, 1983) in the pupils’ work. These observations correlate with the interpretations of the pupils’ writing portfolios as described in Chapter Five.

Assessment
According to Mrs Hughes, she is acutely aware of each child’s progress and monitors it continually, reflecting the importance of formative assessment in her day-to-day work. She provides feedback to the pupils individually and collectively, using the opportunity to motivate all of the children in her care. Formal summative assessment in the form of standardised measure is not a feature of Mrs Hughes approaches, although she maintains her own, informal records of her pupils’ progress and passes these on at the end of the year. She explains her approach to the parents, provides a detailed record of the pupils’ progress at parent-teacher meetings and again at the end of the school year. She does not share her assessment criteria explicitly with her pupils, although she draws attention to good work in the classroom thereby informing the pupils indirectly of her expectations for them.
Other influences/factors
A number of factors appear to have been of significant influence on Mrs Hughes' teaching. She refers to the leadership role of the principal, who allows her the space to be creative in her teaching and who values the work she does. Equally significant is her pre-service training, which she describes with a mixture of gratefulness and affection, even after many years of teaching. It would appear that her experiences of teaching practice and continuous monitoring and evaluation during this period was important in her development as a teacher. Her subsequent teaching in Britain was also very influential and Mrs Hughes believes that she learned a lot from her colleagues there.
7.2 Ms Kelly: teacher of 5th class

Observation vignette
Ms Kelly is in full swing with her class when I arrive. They are about to embark on a writing task: completing the stories that they commenced at the beginning of the week. The atmosphere is ordered, business-like and focused. The children reach for their writing portfolios which are, in most cases, heavily filled ring-binders containing drafts, finished writing samples and written work from other areas of English. The children are seated in groups in a classroom that is well stocked with resources and equipment. Almost all available space on the walls is covered with material: the children's art work, charts illustrating items from different subject areas and a large section devoted to the writing process and published work. There is a low hum before the children commence their work. They are very focused and industrious and appear to be very aware of what is required of them.

7.2.1 Background
Ms Kelly is a classroom teacher in a 27 teacher senior school in the Greater Dublin Area. The school is located in a young but affluent suburb of the city and is co-educational. Ms Kelly teaches 5th class. She describes her present class as having several children with reading difficulties – more than usual. Over the course of her career she has spent 14 years teaching all classes from infants up to 6th class both in Ireland and in the United States. She spent a total of five years working in the United States over a seven year period. Her work in the American system included working as a reading specialist in a school. While working in the US she took her masters degree in learning difficulties.

7.2.2 The importance of writing
Ms Kelly believes that writing is a very important part of the primary curriculum, not just in terms of creative writing, but also in terms of how it influences other areas of the curriculum. She mentions that the work she does with the children in creative writing in the English has a knock-on effect on the other areas, for example, history, geography and nature. She believes that her students are better able to tackle projects in functional writing as a result of their work in the creative area and therefore, both creative and functional writing are very closely tied in together, with one aspect feeding off the other.
7.2.3 Ms Kelly’s approach to the teaching of writing

Ms Kelly uses a process approach to writing, modelled on the Donald Graves\textsuperscript{13} techniques. With this, the children have their own writing folders divided up into sections for a rough drafts and final copies. They also have sections that are devoted to the mechanics of writing, some of the conventions of the language, so that all areas of writing are addressed. The children write almost every day, they choose their own topics and working at their own pace.

**Selecting topics**

According to Ms Kelly, the students themselves devise or invent their own topics. None of the students appear to have any difficulty with this. Their ideas come from the movies, television programmes, soap operas, comedies and cartoons.

Nobody this year has yet come to me and said, ‘What will I write about?’ They get their ideas from the movies, TV drafts and scripts, like the Simpsons, Father Ted episodes, you name it—they’ll come up with it.

Despite their familiarity with these programmes, Ms Kelly believes that the students’ still write original work as they often invent story lines of their own and continue them in as mini-series. Within these genres, Ms Kelly works with the children to consider ways of improving their writing, for example by develop a different character to go into it the story or writing a different ending. At times, when children have written several stories on the same topic or television programme, Ms Kelly would encourage these children to choose a different topic on the next occasion.

7.2.4 Ownership

Ms Kelly believes that her students have a strong sense of ownership by virtue of the fact that they choose their own topics gives them a sense of ownership and because she does not dictate to them what they have to write.

Well, I think even just choosing their own topics gives them a sense of ownership because I’m not dictating to them what they have to write. And then when they get up and share their work, they have a sense of ownership that way, the children asking them questions about it and they’re giving feedback about it.

\textsuperscript{13} See Chapter Two
Much of their sharing is done on a whole class basis. At end of the writing session Ms Kelly invites the children to share what they had written - a paragraph or a description of a new character they had developed, or a sentence that they were proud of. Occasionally, every two or three weeks, Ms Kelly would encourage the children to read an entire story to the class, if they felt comfortable doing that.

7.2.5 Genre
In terms of emphasis on different genres in writing, Ms Kelly states that she tends to focus intensively on fiction at the beginning of the school year. Later she would concentrate on poetry. Towards the end of the school year she tries to focus in on non-fiction by doing project work with the students and encouraging them to put their ideas down on paper in a coherent fashion. Ms Kelly believes that the students enjoy writing fiction most of as they enjoy amusing their peers with their stories.

They like writing fiction. But maybe that is because of the emphasis I put on it. I don't know.

Ms Kelly’s aim for her students is for them to enjoy writing, to be motivated and to have fun with it. She believes that this is of particular importance for her current class as she perceives many of them as having reading and spelling difficulties. At the beginning of the year they were not very motivated to read or to write and therefore her desire is to make English as attractive and enjoyable as possible.

Creative vs Functional
Ms Kelly does not value one kind of writing - creative or functional - above the other, believing it important for the children to be able to handle both well.

The creative is important for them to get their imaginations going, to get their voice and their thoughts down on paper. But it's equally important to be able to put a report together and get a project going.

7.2.6 A typical lesson
In Ms Kelly’s class, a typical lesson always starts with silent reading, because she wishes them to be exposed to good literature before they actually start writing.
Well, I always start with silent reading, because I want them to be exposed to good literature before they actually start writing, so they are reading in the genre in which they are composing. So if they are writing fiction, they are all reading fiction.

**Linking reading and writing**

While the students have free choice in terms of their reading and their writing, Ms Kelly tries to ensure that children read around the genre they are writing in as much as possible.

Well, they have a free choice in their reading, but I tell them if you are going to be writing fiction, I want you to be reading fiction, so I do put that limit on it.

She believes that this helps the students' writing enormously as they then begin to take note of a particular style

Because then they are taking note of a particular style of an author and the kinds of words an author is using, and author techniques. They are being exposed to good quality literature in the room, then they are going to learn from that and hopefully transfer it into their writing.

An example of transfer which Ms Kelly cites is the book ‘The Great Gilly Hopkins’\(^\text{14}\). According to Ms Kelly, the author employs a lot of figurative language in her writing, such as similes and metaphors, and this has had quite an effect on the children as they have begun to try similar techniques in their own writing.

Ms Kelly believes that the approach to writing that she employs will have a more beneficial effect on the children than a more traditional approach because they see it as a process.

I think this approach is going to have a more beneficial effect on the children than a more traditional approach because they are seeing it as a process. I am seeing their work in progress, not as a finished product, and there's a lot of response going on back and forth and I think they begin to take the work more seriously; it's not just, 'write my essay for teacher this week'.

\(^{14}\) Author: Katherine Paterson
Looking back on her previous class, Ms Kelly finds that the teacher who has been teaching them subsequently is amazed by what the children are able to write on paper. They can tackle projects in history, geography or nature no problem. They can sit down and get themselves started and work it out in a reasonable form. So I think it does transfer if the time is put into it.

7.2.7 The mechanics of writing.
To deal with the mechanics of writing, Ms Kelly takes home the students’ writing every day and responds to. As she is reading the writing she takes note of particular errors that the children may be making, for example, errors in grammar, speech marks, or mixing up synonyms? ‘their, there and they’re’. She keeps note of who is having difficulty and then schedules a small group lesson during the writing period later in the week to deal specifically with the issue in question.

Handwriting
Ms Kelly believes that handwriting is very important not just for presentation, but also for spelling, because she sees the ability to perform the word in one movement as helping the children’s memory for spelling.

Handwriting is very important not just for presentation, but it falls into spelling as well, because being able to perform the word in one movement helps their memory for spelling so I think handwriting is important. But it’s very hard to change a child’s handwriting in fifth and sixth class, because they have had two or three years of forming the letters incorrectly and that way has become ingrained in their memory and it’s hard to get them to change their style of writing. So as long as it’s legible and neat, I don’t put too much emphasis on it.

Punctuation
When they are writing their rough drafts, Ms Kelly instructs them to write down whatever comes into their heads and to proofread their own work at the end of the writing session. Proofreading includes inserting capital letters and full stops and changing any sentences that do not make sense. Hence, the children are encouraged to proofread their work before they hand it in to their teacher. The teacher then corrects the work after school—errors which she describes as ones ‘that they are able to understand’ but she does not mark every single thing in their papers.
In the final analysis, Ms Kelly believes that it is of more importance for the students to be able to write freely and express themselves well on paper than to be too concerned with punctuation and grammar, as this can be gradually refined and improved.

**Grammar**
Ms Kelly states that she identifies the children’s difficulties in grammar as she reads through their writing in the evenings.

> Grammar I’m taking care of through reading their writing at night-time and taking notes on problems they are having with the grammar and then I do little groups based on the problems they are having with their writing. Or if a lot of the children in the class have a problem with it, then I’ll do a whole class lesson based on it.

**Organisation**
Ms Kelly varies her focus from the individual child, to the group to the whole class, depending on the particular needs of the children.

7.2.8 **Individual differences**
For children who have difficulties with expressing themselves in writing, Ms Kelly assigns a few minutes with an individual child talking to them about whatever topic they have chosen and helping them to jot down some ideas, or some key words or phrases. Basically she does a lot of questioning and probing and to elicit details from them. In many cases Ms Kelly believes that the children have the ideas in their heads but have difficulty transferring them onto the paper. For the more able children, Ms Kelly finds that these children are the ones who are reading widely as well. Their writing tends to be on a different level to the rest of the class. Their work would be more sophisticated and more developed and therefore Ms Kelly responds to their work in an equally sophisticated way.

7.2.9 **Monitoring progress**

*Teacher-pupil conferences*
Ms Kelly’s approach to teacher-pupil conferences varies according to the needs of the children. She responds to each child’s work on a daily basis by taking home their writing to read every night and by writing a comment about their writing. If she believes that a pupil’s writing requires a lot of work or attention, she will arrange an
individual teacher-pupil conference with that child the following day, but this occurs in response to need, rather than through formal scheduling of groups or individuals.

7.2.10 Linking home and school
Ms Kelly encourages the children to take home their writing as they wish.

Some of them do [take home their writing], particularly at the beginning of the year when I started up the writing programme. A couple of them went to the trouble of writing on their computers at home. One or two of them went to the trouble of making extra books at home. So in that way they did. And one of my best kids came to me last week and said, ‘Teacher, I really like this writing business. I love my folder because last year I had to shorten my stories to make them fit in my copy.’

7.2.11 Assessment
In assessing the children’s writing, Ms Kelly describes what she is looking for as a sense of the children themselves emerging from the writing.

I want a sense of themselves coming out of the writing. I want a sense of their own voice, what their ideas are and I want their imagination and expression on the paper so I’m looking for original ideas and a sense of their own voice coming through, their own style coming through, help them to develop their own style.

7.1.12 Pupils’ awareness of assessment criteria
When asked whether the children would be aware of the criteria which the teacher was applying, Ms Kelly was unsure. She believes that some of the children might have internalised this criteria, but most probably wouldn’t, as it is not something which Ms Kelly states overtly in the classroom.

However, Ms Kelly believes that the children get a sense of what she is looking for from the way she responds to them. For instance, she may say to a student ‘I like the way that character really came to life’; ‘I really like the way you described that character’; or ‘That’s a great simile or metaphor you used.’ So when she starts to praise certain elements of a story the children get a sense of what she thinks is a good story and they start striving to use those elements in their own writing.
Techniques versus the children’s own ideas
In the first few months of the year Ms Kelly focuses on the content and the language and then draws attention to these aspects in the literature that they are reading. She identifies these techniques in literature and tells the children that this is the way good authors write. She then tries to encourage the children to utilise some of these techniques in their own writing. In this way, the balance between learning new techniques and maintaining a sense of ownership is maintained in an integrated way.

Responding to the children’s writing
In responding to the children’s writing, Ms Kelly uses positive feedback:

I’d say something like, ‘I liked your opening sentence. That really grabbed my attention. Usually I focus first on the language. I try to praise something on the language end of it. And then I would say, ‘See me for a talk about there/their/they’re... or the punctuation. So those are the kinds of comments I would write on the paper.

7.2.13 Working with colleagues
Generally Ms Kelly does not collaborate with her colleagues in responding to a pupils’ writing. She does however have informal discussions with the teacher who is currently teaching her previous class. However, she believes that it would be beneficial to have discussions with other teachers and would like to see such collaboration and consultation occurring on a school-wide basis. Without such procedures, getting a new class and teaching them writing would be like starting from scratch every year.

7.2.14 Recording pupils’ progress
Ms Kelly employs both formal and informal approaches to record keeping. In her teacher’s portfolio she maintains notes on each pupil. In this she records informally how the students’ writing is developing and any problems which they encounter.

In whatever novel they were reading, if I had focused on similes and metaphors, if I saw that appearing in their writing I would jot it down on their page: ‘has started to use figurative language in their writing’, that kind of thing.

For end of year reporting, Ms Kelly records more formally.
I always keep a sample, a baseline sample, I always keep the very first month of the year and I would compare that with what they could do now and see what kind of development there was and grade it accordingly.

**Grades or comments from other sources**
She also takes note of what the children have achieved in their English copy, if we had done a lot of work on comprehension questions or vocabulary, how they are able to structure an answer to a question.

### 7.2.15 Reporting progress to parents
In reporting at parent-teacher meetings, Ms Kelly uses the children’s portfolios a starting point. First she explains to the parents how it is used and shows them how it is organised. Next, she selects individual samples of writing and identifies development between them. Finally, she presents the children’s English copies and explains to the parent how the child is responding to more functional writing. Ms Kelly finds that the parents are generally very positively disposed towards this kind of detailed information about their children’s progress in writing.

**School-wide approach to parent-teacher meetings**
While Ms Kelly believes that few of her colleagues at the school employ a process approach to writing, she believes that many display children’s copies at parent-teacher meetings and talk about the children’s progress. However, in the absence of a process approach, the interchange of information would be somewhat more limited. Ms Kelly does not perceive any potential conflict among parents on approaches to the teaching of writing. In fact she believes that none of them would question her approach nor even be aware of the differences of what’s going on in the room. She does not think that this is important as long as the students are focused and enjoying what they are doing.

**Children’s attitudes to their writing portfolios**
Ms Kelly believes that by having the portfolio in the first instance is a motivating factor for the children. She believes that they are excited about it and know that their teacher cares about what they to say and about their writing. This encourages them to take their writing home and/or to talk about it. She realises that many of the children take home their rough drafts and typing them up on computers. This helps the parents
to be more aware of their child’s work and to become involved, especially if the child needs help in typing up a long story. As the children are in 5th class, they do not tend to visit the school very often and therefore the writing portfolios provide an ideal link between school and home.

7.2.16 School report card
Ms Kelly described the school report card as having four sections: spelling, creative writing, functional writing and oral language. However, she describes the space on the report card as being limited to one or two lines in total for reporting in English. While recognising the inadequacy of this for end of year reporting, Ms Kelly equally recognised how a more comprehensive or spacious card could be unacceptable to other teachers.

7.2.17 Standardised tests
In Ms Kelly’s school it is school policy to use the *Micra-T* test in all classes. In cases where a discrepancy arises between the pupil’s performance on a standardised test and his/her classwork, parents are contacted and made aware of the issues surrounding the child’s progress. In reporting on the school report card however, comments are more neutral and standardised scores are never reported. In that sense the standardised score does not unduly influence the report card.

> We don’t report [the standardised score] to parents at all. They never get the standardised score unless they specifically say, ‘What is my child’s score?’ It’s generally not given.

The standardised score is used more for selection into the remedial programme and for determining their level of reading comprehension.

7.2.18 Remedial programme
In general, the students’ performance in writing is not taken into consideration when selecting students for the remedial programme in Ms Kelly’s school. She observes the students’ performances in areas such as spelling and in things that might show up more in individualised writing rather than in a spelling test in functional writing.
If I saw a lot of bizarre spellings I might refer the child to the remedial teacher to do an *Aston Index* to see if there was a particular problem.

However, she notices that the students who have difficulties in reading tend to experience difficulties in writing also. In the remedial programme the children do more ‘guided’ than ‘free’ writing, for instance, they might write in response to a picture, create a story from some key words beside a picture, or build a story on based on a sequence of pictures.

Ms Kelly does not discuss her approach to writing with the remedial teacher or indeed with other teachers in the school. She does not perceive many difficulties between the differences in approaches between the class teacher and the remedial teacher, accepting that there are differences and communicates this to the children in a business-like way. Ms Kelly does not believe in confronting other teachers with her approach to writing believing simply that the other teachers don’t know enough about the approach, may not have had enough exposure to it and some teachers might think that it’s a lot of extra work.

I tend to have my own programme going, because as I said earlier, there aren’t too many teachers on staff who are very interested in the process approach or who are using it fully, so I tend to work on my own.

7.1.19 School policy on the assessment of writing
Ms Kelly could not recall whether there was a school policy on assessing writing, although she acknowledged that the school had a *Plean Scoile*.

**Main emphases in the school**
Ms Kelly believes that emphasis is placed mainly on reading in the school, especially on reading children’s literature and on using sets of novels in the classroom. Writing, on the other hand, tends to be taught in a more traditional manner, i.e. by giving students topics to write on and brainstorming words and phrases that are useful and that sound good in essays. Overall, Ms Kelly believes that the objective is that the children can read and write well. The school also has a policy on essay writing. This policy is influenced by the principal who demands that the pupils write two essays per month. However, Ms Kelly sought permission to use portfolios only for writing purposes and therefore is not compromised or limited in any way. From a staff of 27,
Ms Kelly was the only teacher who was exempt from this requirement. Having spoken to some of her colleagues though, Ms Kelly felt that there were others on staff who would try her approach the following year.

7.2.20 Broader context
Ms Kelly identified several factors which influence her teaching in the broader context. These include the responses from the pupils, the experience of working abroad and the experience of working closely with other dedicated colleagues.

I think what has made me do this method more than any other method is the response from the children. They seem really excited about language and about putting their ideas down on paper and publishing their own work. So the kind of feedback and motivation I’m getting from the children is my major influence.

Ms Kelly describes the experience of teaching abroad as having had a major influence on her teaching.

My trip abroad would have been my major influence. Having worked in Ohio from 1987 to 1990; a lot of teachers were using the process approach there in the particular school that I worked in. And then the school that I worked in New York was total literature, whole language and writing process.

Of particular significance was encountering other dedicated professionals in the US.

I worked with a core group of teachers, I was teaching 2nd grade and there were 3 teachers who were teaching second grade who were very involved with literature and writing and I went along to a lot of conferences and workshops with them and we worked together as a team and that helped.

Ms Kelly describes these teachers as

...very professional, very interested in doing the best that they could for their children, trying to keep up to date with new ideas and methods that were coming on line, spent a lot of time after school trying to make their classrooms look well, planning work for the children. A very serious approach to teaching.

Finally, when asked if there was something she could change about the way writing is currently taught in Ireland, Ms Kelly envisages
Inservice for everybody and exposing them to what can be done with the process approach to writing.

7.2.21 Summary of Ms Kelly's approach to instruction and assessment of writing

Instruction
Ms Kelly considers writing to be a very important part of the curriculum, both for functional as well as for creative purposes. Her approach to instruction is modelled on the work of Graves (1983, 1994) as described in Chapter Two, and it reflects the approach to writing that is found in the new curriculum in English (Government of Ireland, 1999). She encourages the pupils to select their own topics, using the television, books or other sources and believes that the pupils have a strong sense of ownership of their work. Because she believes that several children in the class have difficulties with reading, she emphasises the enjoyment of writing in her teaching and tries to make the subject as attractive as possible for her pupils. Lessons typically begin with a silent reading period and the writing that follows is based on the genre that the pupils have been reading. Ms Kelly devotes a lot of attention to the mechanics of writing in the pupils' work, marking errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation and handwriting on a daily basis and providing special lessons for groups of children as necessary. She believes that having a high standard in the mechanics of writing can contribute to the child's overall standard and effectiveness in writing. For children with learning difficulties, she provides help for them in various ways with: their initial ideas, key words and phrases and focused questions to enable them to get started. For more advanced writers, she responds to their needs in a more sophisticated manner. She devotes particular attention to the work of well-established authors and encourages the children to adopt their techniques and aim for similar standards in their own writing.

When the pupils writing portfolios are considered, it is possible to see a strong link between what Ms Kelly aspires for her students and the standard that they achieve. Both teacher and pupils share the same interest in writing and the pupils are clear as to what Ms Kelly requires of them. Their achievements in the assessment dimensions of Winner (1991) are in accord with what the teacher seeks to attain.
Assessment
According to Ms Kelly, she takes home copies on a daily basis and marks the pupils’ work. If she believes a child needs extra attention with a particular area, she provides a tailor made lesson the following day, reflecting the approach to formative assessment espoused by Black and Wiliam (1998). The provision of ‘frequent assessment feedback’ (p4) has been identified by the authors as being of particular help to low attaining students and students with learning disabilities. Although she marks errors in the pupils’ work, she says that what she is looking for is a ‘sense of their own voice’, ‘their imagination and expression on paper’, ‘original ideas’, ‘own style’—characteristics of good writing as identified by Fox (1990) and Murphy and Shiel (1996) among others. Ms Kelly does not make her assessment criteria explicit to her pupils, but she responds positively and overtly to desirable features when she notices them in a pupil’s work. She also encourages self-assessment strategies and equips the pupils in skills of proofreading their own work. Ms Kelly maintains formal and informal records of her pupils’ work and uses the pupils’ portfolios as a basis for her discussions with parents. In particular, she uses the portfolios to illustrate the child’s growth and development in writing to the parents. Between formal meetings, she believes that the portfolios provide an ideal link between home and school. Ms Kelly does not use standardised test scores as a basis for her reporting of pupil progress, but they are usually used as a basis for selection into the remedial programme.

Other influences/factors

School policy
While Ms Kelly states that she has an exemption from the school requirement of producing two essays a month, it could be assumed that the emphasis on essay writing across the school influences the quality and quantity of the output from Ms Kelly’s class. Writing is valued within the school, although, according to Ms Kelly, the approach that she uses is not practiced in other classes.

Experiences acquired elsewhere
Ms Kelly finds the response from the children to her approach to be highly motivating, but she attributes the main influence on her teaching to the experience of working in the United States with other ‘dedicated professionals’ with a ‘serious approach to
teaching'. The experience of working as a team with her colleagues in other primary schools there, as well as the conferences and workshops that she attended on the process approach to writing had a direct and significant influence on her teaching.
7.3 Mrs Begley, teacher of 4th class

I heard of Mrs Begley's interest in the teaching of writing through a colleague and she responded enthusiastically to the request to participate in the Drumcondra Writing Project. Throughout the first year of the study, her commitment was evident through the care she took in submitting the samples: each one was clearly labelled, drafts were included and often, other samples of writing which the children have completed during the period of request. She was concerned that we would understand the context in which the writing was generated – the individual pupils, their backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses and concerns, the particular environment of the school and the strategies she uses to invoke writing from them. She usually telephoned to ensure that we had received the samples and that we understood the context.

Observation vignette
The project is underway for several months before I meet Mrs Begley in her school. She arranges a time for us to talk, early in the morning, before the pupils arrive, but she is also anxious that I meet the pupils later and get to know them for myself. After we have conducted the interview I accompany her to the school yard when the bell rings. Immediately I am taken by the rapport between her and the children. She is in caring, interested but in command, and they talk to her on the way in, like they would with a close relative, an aunt perhaps. Once inside and I am introduced, they want to show me items of interest in the classroom that have prompted their writing at different times. They are serious in their intent, but relaxed in their manner. The room is ordered, with a few select items on display: the children's art work, some published stories, posters of geographical interest, Irish language charts. It is neither scant nor cluttered, but gives the appearance of 'work in progress'. I am shown the hornet's nest that has been the source of much curiosity, several pictures that have been used for descriptive writing, and a selection of music cassettes, one of the most treasured stimuli. Mrs Begley is keen for me to notice the environment: the expanse of playing fields outside the classroom, the ever changing hues of the Dublin mountains and the closeness to nature, even in this built-up area of the city. It is clear that Mrs Begley brings an active artistic eye to her work – she speaks of her own love of painting as a hobby, her personal interest in writing, the enjoyment she derives from listening to music and later, the importance of poetry. She digresses many times in our conversations to tell me small, but relevant details concerning the lives and learning of her pupils.

7.3.1 Background

Mrs Begley has been teaching for thirty years, twenty five of which she has spent teaching English. Her classes included students from 5th class to Intermediate
Certificate level. Mrs Begley went on career break for three years and taught in the United States. On her return she was given a second class. She describes her interest in writing as stemming from the time when she taught classes across several levels:

so I was moving during the day from say a 5th class to a relatively senior class. So at that point I suppose I got an idea as to where creative writing should be heading for and I think that helped me when I took on this class, having those in 2nd class would have been one of the most junior classes I ever taught. And I started creative writing with them literally the first day I got them.

7.3.2 The importance of writing

Mrs Begley believes very strongly in the importance of the written word, and in the ability to organise thoughts on paper, to relate the written work to reading and vice versa.

Well I have such a thing about language anyhow and I have such a thing that the children should be fluent, should be able to put their thoughts on paper, that unless they can use their books as tools by 5th class, they are disabled in the educational system. I say that to them here and they understand it - that they have to be fluent by summer. And they say things like, will you test my RA again, and I say, I can’t do that. You’ll know yourself if you are becoming fluent. So they’ll have a very great awareness here of the importance of language.

Well I have quite an interest in writing myself. I do a little writing as a hobby and there was a strong emphasis on the acquisition of English in the previous school I worked in, which was the a convent girls school which actually was renowned for the standard of English - so perhaps those two things together made me put a particular emphasis on creative writing. And I think of course if a person can’t express themselves on paper, they are basically illiterate.

Mrs Begley describes her experience of moving from a senior class i.e., intermediate certificate students, to a junior class, i.e., second class and what her expectations were for the younger students as she encountered them.

I would have had high expectations and would have been rather taken aback at the limited offerings I was given in this second class. What I did initially was I might write four sentences for a little model story for them and suggest to them to finish it. Sometimes I might get one sentence, sometimes I might get none, but we worked like that for a little while and then I stopped and I discovered that was not the best way. We verbalised. We did a lot of oral work.
In addition to valuing writing, and to having a keen interest in it, she also has high expectations for her students.

7.3.3 Mrs Begley’s approach to the teaching of writing

Mrs Begley considers oral work to be still a strong part of the way she currently approaches creative writing.

I would think open discussion and the ability of the children to express themselves is basic for their ability to put thought and ordered structure on paper.

While Mrs Begley sees the oral preparation as an important preface to the writing process, there are also times when the writing comes first, when she uses the writing to inform the oral. She believes that this occurs mainly when the children are engaging in personal writing; the more ‘private’ aspect of writing posing a different challenge than ‘public’ writing.

Yes I would see that happening. I think that could happen when say a child is trying to do personal writing which to my experience they find most difficult when they are trying to express a feeling and in that case they might be very hesitant to verbalise something in front of a whole class, whereas they might be more inclined to write it when they know that you are their reader and it might be sort of private to you.

Mrs Begley uses ‘innumerable ways’ to teaching writing and describes her approach uses to as being ‘a mishmash of ways’, one which is informed by the backgrounds and needs of the children in the class. She considers that the students for whom English is a second language provide an opportunity for teaching and learning about grammar and syntax. In this way they make a unique and positive contribution to writing lessons.

The fact that I have children who speak other languages in the class has helped this class enormously, because without knowing it, they learned what syntax was in 2nd class, because one day the Russian boy who doesn’t learn Irish happened to say spontaneously: ‘That’s how you say that sentence in Russian’. The sentence was ‘Ní raibh a fhios sin aige’ and I explained that it was na idiom and he immediately said this and so we invited him to write on the board how he would write it in Russian. Because he was reasonably fluent in English, we asked him how he would write it in English and he brought down
arrows to match the words. And then a boy whose first language is Greek also offered to write it in Greek. He takes Irish as so he actually did the arrows three ways. So that actually led to a very informal discussion on syntax. So on that day they discovered syntax and it’s a very important aspect of their creative writing since. They were in second class at the time and that happened spontaneously. And we go back from time to time on that and I would say ‘How do you say that?’

7.3.4 Process

**Drafting and revising**

Mrs Begley does not place much emphasis on the process of drafting, redrafting and revising written work, preferring to see the improvements in the students’ work incorporated into the next day’s writing.

I would put emphasis on the conventions like paragraphing and that, but not that much on continuous rewrites or many rewrites. Even though there might be quite a lot of errors and there would be - I have some dyslexic children, I would be inclined to let them offer it and correct it and leave it at that, rather than having let them plough through it again.

Or I’d ask for maybe a small amount of improvement on specific targeted errors, like past tense or failure to put in full stops or failure to make capital letters or failure to paragraph.

7.3.5 Genre

Mrs Begley describes the types of writing that the children engage in most frequently as descriptive writing. In terms of non-fiction writing, Mrs Begley tends towards personal writing, rather than expository writing. For her, the intention, the audience, the purpose of writing are very closely related, and non-fiction connotes a real and personal experience, rather than a factual sequence of events, description or arrangement of information. She describes in vivid detail the context in which the children engaged in the process of letter writing.

A strange thing happened last year whereby we came to letter writing. And this just evolved. I was away on a seminar and a colleague of mine who was on career break came in and did substitute with them. She told them her brother was dying, he was in London and they kept asking me afterwards how was he and he died within a short period of time. And then one of the girls suggested that they should write to her and say they were sorry. So I saw this as an idea opportunity of writing a letter of sympathy, which is difficult. They did know how to write the address, how to start a letter and how to end a letter. So then we had a very long
verbal discussion on how to express sympathy, how to put yourself in the feelings of another person as the grown-ups were - almost ashamed of doing that and hence we bought sympathy cards. So again, we had discussions as to the virtues of a letter versus a sympathy card and they all wrote the most wonderful sympathy letters. They were quite different. Now they did come to me for spellings of words, and they related it to losses of their own. So that was their first venture into what I would consider personal writing.

This experience of letter writing occurred in a real context for the children.

The main way in which it was based - one or two children related it to the loss of their grandfather, which had been relatively recent, so they worked on that. A few children related it to the loss of their pet, but they kept the analogy very solid throughout and there would be quite a few children in the class who come from broken homes and who are what I would call 'custody children' and they also would have suffered grief and trauma. They definitely wrote from the heart that they had been there. But they were very extraordinary letters. Actually she sent them to the widow in London who was very pleased to get them. I didn't keep copies, because I felt they were so personal I felt I shouldn't do that.

**Non-fiction, report writing**
Mrs Begley describes how she approaches the teaching of other aspects of non-fictional writing, for instance, report writing. That, too, serves an artistic or creative purpose, rather than a functional or factual one.

I try to get them to be very tight in their report writing, like if we are doing history and geography questions or science, even verbally, I say, "Well that's a fuzzy sentence, you have to tell me that more clearly. I need to see that exactly as it is. And we might do a little mime to evolve that. Or sometimes we might play the tape - the one about the creek - when the creek is filling up, you can hear the sound of some huge container almost full and then the creek empties at tide, at least the Colorado River, and we try to speak about that in scientific terms within their own vocabulary limits to try to get them to be very specific in their use of language. That's difficult, but that's what I was doing today with those verbs on the board...to try to get them to zone in on specific use of words and because I think a lot of the problems students have, at least from my experience is the inability to hit the nail on the head with the right word in the right place.

Mrs Begley regards writing as a holistic concept, with different forms impacting on each other in interrelated ways.

In my own viewpoint, I don't think you can quite separate those. There are people of course who are very closed in themselves and who are very hesitant of expressing feelings and hesitant of putting their feelings on paper. And that's a particular category of people who are shy, withdrawn or introverted.
and they would find it very difficult to express feelings, but that apart, I think if children or any person is taught to write specifically, there’s a fair chance that they may record exact feelings.

I would have to say that I would not see it as one versus the other, but would try to move both along. I have in mind somebody I know who is a very good scientist, a very able scientist, but he also writes excellent reports. And he can also write very good managerial stuff, a lot of personal comments in it about interpersonal relationships so I think if you can manage one skill it will flow over into the other, depending on your inhibitions.

7.3.6 A typical lesson

Mrs Begley describes how she teaches a typical lesson:

I start off by trying to get them to do - I know this is against the trend - descriptive writing which this class appears to find easy. If I was asked, I would think that they find narrative, in this class, most difficult, because they are very sensitive children and they are very aware of feelings and surroundings and colour. That’s what they want to go into and you almost have to drag them away from it to make them write a story.

In terms of structuring stories, Mrs Begley provides help for the students in the following manner:

Yes, I would say to them that they need to build the story and it needs to have naturally, a beginning, a middle and an end, and that as they are moving on now towards the end of 4th, they need to pull that out like elastic and I would demand more, demand 5 paragraphs from he better writers. I need to see a clear story, a dramatic beginning and a dramatic ending and we would discuss the reasons for dramatic beginning and ending.

Use of story structure cause and effect

Yes, and I would say if they had a character, I would say ‘I need to see this person. I need to see what he/she is doing. I need to see what he/she is feeling.’ Generally I would say, I need to know the setting. I need to know first of all where the story is taking place. Secondly, I’d say I need to know the season. You have to give me a feeling of the weather, the day, the season. Thirdly, I would say, ‘I need some sounds, I need some pen pictures. If you want me to be there as your reader you’re going to have to work to put me there in those situations.’ And they would understand that.
7.3.7 Individual differences

When asked to what extent do the ESL students make a unique contribution and to what extent are they integrated Mrs Begley described them as achieving both:

Oh well you do both. First, the boy who joined us just prior to 2nd class became fluent in just 9 months. He’s one of the best writers. The Greek boy has an Irish mother, so he basically was bi-lingual and he’s also very linguistically able and then I got a little girl who had no English at all and joined us in 3rd class. That was very interesting, because she had to come in from scratch to a reasonably advanced class and pick up words because I hadn’t time to teach her by herself. She can now write an essay, maybe and odd verb problem, but it meant that if they came up with an unusual structure, as they do, I would read it out to the class and we would have a discussion on that and how different it would sound. For instance, one day the boy wrote ‘Many birds were flying’ and we talked about that and how they viewed it differently and how he said it differently - that was the Russian boy. And another day he used a phrase: ‘Hardly had I got there’ and again we had a little discussion on that so it has made the class more aware of how you can structure sentences to make them read better and actually we do exercises on that. I might give the class 8 words on the blackboard and give them 5 minutes in which to come up with the most felicitous sounding sentence. And then we would read out what I would consider the best six.

Some revision is conducted with groups of children, according to need. However, Mrs Begley does not operate a group approach on a formal, overt basis, rather she maintains a mental picture of groupings in her head.

They don’t know themselves, of course, that they are being grouped. The groupings depend on a number of things. Generally I give 4 topics to write about and they offer the topics. And you would have maybe one third of the class who would just take off and write. The second third will be slow to write and may need a word bank and the last third may need to have individual discussion or group discussions around my desk.

They don’t sit in groups. They come to me, or I invite them to come to me or I ask them to come to me if they want a wordbank, or will I give them a communal one and they decide.

7.3.8 Monitoring progress

Conferencing

Mrs Begley states that she generally does not hold conferences with the students.

I confer -not much - with the more able one who (I have to keep saying it, it’s nothing to do with me - they just happen to be very intelligent, high reading ages)
and I would confer very little with them or they might come up and ask you quite a sophisticated sentence, ‘Which word would you think is better there, or which adjective?’ ‘Can I end this with some questions?’ so they would ask you something quite sophisticated and I would confer with them. Then somebody might come up and say ‘I’m stuck, I can’t get past that and we’d have a very open discussion and try and relate it to a personal experience.’

**Monitoring**

Again, Mrs Begley’s approach to monitoring and providing feedback is very individualised and the solutions are customised for the child in question. Moreover, in highlighting the nature of the problem to the child’s parents or guardians, Mrs Begley ensures that the language she uses is jargon-free and at a level which is readily understood by them.

I would have an assessment every 6 months and I have several copies to say somebody is weak on past tenses, unable to move forward in a narrative. I send them home, not always couched in the same language, depending on the ability of the parent, or the level of education of the parent; like this little girl here - her mother has got two pages this weekend. She has fallen back into writing all her narrative in present tense and her writing is beginning to disintegrate so there’s a problem, somewhere, and I’ve written to her mother to ask her to come and see me and also for her mother to study back her essay copy. I’ve given her a book of drills she’s going to do every weekend to see if she will improve on this.

When questioned further as to the nature of the problem with the child in question – whether her difficulties applied to other subject areas or whether it was an issue in writing, Mrs Begley explained that the child’s particular problem was confined to writing.

It’s mainly evident in her writing, which tells me something about her, that she’s not adapting in some way. And then I have 2 dyslexic boys, so I give them particular help.

**Use of a mentoring system**

Mrs Begley describes how she organises a mentoring system in the classroom, which involves pairing children together. While it usually operates in the form of one child assisting another in cognitive areas, there are social and emotional aspects that also accrue for the mentor. The success of this scheme appears to rest in the fact that Mrs
Begley understands the children’s abilities and personalities at a very deep level, and therefore knows how to motivate and manage them very effectively.

That operates wonderfully, because we have children coming in from the special classes. It’s necessary to have a mentor for those children, because generally they can’t cope with the structure of a big class without help. I would ask somebody to mentor who would be good at it, but not necessarily. I might ask somebody who is having domestic trauma to give them self worth, self esteem, to take their mind off their own troubles, and that works well and those children can get quite close. And I might move around the mentor from time to time because sometimes there might be clashes of personality. Now the child whom I’ve spoken to you about is difficult to mentor, because she is so much taller than everyone else and so much older and she’s a bit cosseted. Naturally, and not everybody can deal with her. There’s one child that does.

7.3.9 Linking home and school
Mrs Begley describes how she tailors her communications with parents to match the needs of the child and of the parent.

The boy whose mother cannot read has a boyfriend in Wicklow. I communicate with him. He’s a biker - he and I communicate in little notes - and he has been working on the chap and improving him; he has improved under his care, but he’s very, very far behind.

7.3.10 Assessment
Mrs Begley considers the assessment of achievement in reading to be of greater importance in the initial stages than the assessment and recording of achievement in writing. At the beginning of the school year, she ensures that remedial programmes are put in place, where necessary. This involves consultations with parents outlining the nature of the reading problem and instituting a paired reading programme. She also explains the nature of reading deficit to parents in terms of the children’s score below the average for the class.

Well in the first month of having a class, I would always record whether I think if there was a reading problem and if they have a reading problem. I think that that’s the first thing that has to be fixed, because if they can’t use their book as a tool, they certainly aren’t equipped enough to write in a meaningful manner. So I would first of all deal with remediation in reading in paired reading. A lot of children here, their parents worked through 18 months of paired reading with them.
and I think that was very beneficial because the parents could see how far back they were. But what I would do, would be to tell the parent the mean reading age in the class, rather than any child’s RA. Then they would know how far their child is on the graph and then they know this is how far the child has to come up to if he/she is to fully integrate with the class.

So nobody in the class goes to remedial reading and they can all read quite fluently. I think the lowest would be the child who is deaf, on a sten of 5. There would be nobody else on a sten of 5, so they are capable readers.

And then I think you move on from that to the verbal word to expressing themselves in whole sentences. I never allow one word answers. I make them go back and formulate a sentence. And then to progressing to writing

7.3.11 Pupils’ awareness of assessment criteria
When asked whether the children would be aware of the criteria which the teacher was employing to assess their writing, Mrs Begley believes that the children are very aware that she is their reader and would consciously take this into consideration when writing.

I think that plays quite a big part. One of the girls who’s writing there about how she got about writing said (I actually called her up to ask her what she meant) and she said, “Of course I have to put my teacher in it”. And she explained directly to me that I was the reader and that I had to see it and I write comments on their essay copies and they scramble for those to see what I’ve said.

Mrs Begley is very clear about the types of comments she uses when reponding to or marking students’ work.

I would say “that is excellent” or “this is outstanding; very good”. I would never give anything below good, unless the thing had all the signs of indolence on it. I would say, “I’m really disappointed with it. Please do it again.” And that would be the ultimate censure on it. And that person would know exactly.

In terms of more specific criteria, she describes this in the following manner:

Well, they know I’d have certain little fixations, like, that I think all sentences shouldn’t start with ‘the’ or ‘I’ and they would know that I would wish them to put a nice strong image at the beginning of their sentence, preferably with a sort of glorified adjective in front of it and unusual usage of words. Two weeks before Easter we did that. And we started off... I wrote “A distant dog barked “ and they said, “Oh that’s wrong! And then we worked towards 15 of those and that sort of format that’s with us today - how you took a noun and coined an adjective from it and enriched your sentence. Now I can see how
some of them are starting to do that. So we do those kinds of things, and sometimes, as I said we snake together about 10 words and we say who’s going to give me a really dramatic sentence or 2, I mean really something else and then they might say to me if I’m describing water, “Are 3 words too much?” And they would be talking about the sound of the water, so they know the thing I’m looking for.

7.3.12 Working with colleagues

Mrs Begley does not discuss her approach to writing with her colleagues and stated that many would not be aware of the work she does in this area in her classroom. The only exceptions which she cited were the teacher in special education, who shares common interests and who likes to keep abreast of mainstream teaching; and the remedial teacher, who is very aware of stages of development and who would be keen to see the children’s writing. However, prior to the amalgamation of the school, Mrs Begley felt that she had been involved in a much more greater shared vision/interchange of ideas with her colleagues.

But there wouldn’t be as much interchange of ideas or work as there was in the other school I was in where that was very common...where the best written work from one class would be displayed one month and the best from another class, another month. I know ‘the best’ is no longer what is considered good.

At this point in her career, she does not believe she should engage in inservice or sharing of ideas on a professional level unless invited to do so, although she had done this type of work in her previous school. Now, with the amalgamation, she felt that there was a different ethos in the school and that the teachers worked more on their own as individuals.

7.3.13 Record keeping

Mrs Begley states that she keeps very stringent records.

I would start on ability to form past tense, punctuation, paragraph making, bring forward a narrative, imaginative ability, spelling - I don’t push it very hard - I hope it comes, though they do have a test every Friday and I’d be able to look at that. Now, again I would have 12-13 whom I needn’t look at that at all, they’re just accomplished and then you’d have 13 more who are average, good and coming on. And then you’d have some ones with problems. The problem children I would have regarding their writing are the 2 boys who are dyslexic, the girl who is deaf in both ears and who was only mainstreamed this year. Another boy who has a severe stammer and whose mother is illiterate; he needs a lot of support, but all of those children would be mentored by a very able child and they would assist them in their creative writing.
7.3.14 Parent teacher meetings

Mrs Begley provides very detailed information for parents when she meets them for parent-teacher meetings.

I would always speak to the parents bout their child’s ability to read, give the parent the child’s Reading Age, how forward they were or how behind. I would have analysed the child’s reading test, the Micra-T test, and I would have a handout for each parent as to what the analysis contained. The fluent readers again - 17 of the children in this class took the 6th class test, - it speaks for itself. Their parents were told they were fluent readers, just keep them stimulated. Then the parents come back and some of them would request a one-to-one with me, if they didn’t understand what I meant by, for example, “attack”.

7.3.15 School report card

Mrs Begley states that she records a lot of detail about her students and that she writes lengthy reports. The details she records include notes on parent-teacher meetings, a class profile, child profile and special needs profiles as well as an analysis of their abilities.

However, when she took the class on from second class, she did not receive any records on them other than verbal records. Their previous teacher made the comment that they were the best class that she had ever taught and from this she induced that the standard was quite high in the class, which it was.

she handed them [the class] over to me and she said “You will see”. And that was quite a good indication. The ESL children joined the class later in the year.

7.3.16 School policy

Mrs Begley states that the policy on writing in the school is ongoing and in need of completion.

There is a policy about recording what you’ve done and how much of it you’ve done. We had an English one but we’re in the process of doing another one. And when that’s finished it will be very detailed.

School Leadership
Mrs Begley now believes that the ethos of the school has been transformed and that the emphasis in the subject areas has also changed. Subjects had diversified to include areas such as information technology, sports, arts and crafts, although she conceded that it was holistic as well. But in this environment, Mrs Begley did not feel that she could discuss a pupil’s writing with ease.

I would never say to anybody on the staff - apart from 2 people in the other staff, I know they would be interested - ‘I would like you to read what such-and-such wrote from my class and could I read what such-and-such wrote from your class’ - whereas that was the norm on the other school. And I don’t think there’s enough of that.

*Interchange of ideas between teachers*

Mrs Begley believes that it is very important for teachers to interchange/exchange ideas and to support/share each other’s teaching, but that this was not so easy when there were classes with striking differences between them in terms of ability and achievement. Mrs Begley believes that this interchange of ideas and teaching strengths would greatly enhance learning and be a valuable exercise for the children as well as for the children.

I keep talking about the other school but in the other school if you had a strength you were allowed to teach to it. And there were people who taught nothing but English. And if you were a good mathematics teacher you could take a few mathematics classes. And I think that that is a really useful thing. It does happen here in art, it does happen in games, but it doesn’t happen in the 3 Rs...

In teaching the 3Rs, there tends to be an assumption that all teachers teach these well, but that is not necessarily the case, according to Mrs Begley.

Well I think that people naturally have strengths, that other people wouldn’t have. I recognise that there are some teachers in the school who are absolutely incredible at information technology and I really would like them to take my children for IT, because I’m just about hanging in and I might be able to do a bit of English with them on that basis of exchange.

In an ironic kind of way, even the core subjects can become ‘Cinderella’ subjects as one can assume that they are being taught well.

7.3.17 *Broader context*
For Mrs Begley, a critical emphasis on her approach to the teaching of writing had been her previous experience as a second level teacher.

Well I think if you were teaching at second level as I was, you’d see the importance of an analytical ability in language and you’d see the importance of a person or a student equipping themselves with a critical facility. And would I think that has influenced me because I try to make the children even at this level do that even in a very informal way. Avila wrote an essay there lately and she ended it with three questions and I read out just the ending for the class and I asked them what they thought of this and why and I got very interested answers. So they were able to do it within their own limitations. So what they were actually doing was a critical analysis of her last paragraph without knowing it.

Her specialist knowledge has a bearing on how she presents material to her students.

Yes I think so I actually read them a piece off newspaper that offered them a junior cert ordinary level poem. And I read them the poem twice and I asked them some questions as in the paper and most of them made some stab at answering them. They did ask for the poem on tape though, which does mean that their aural skills are enhanced. They wanted to hear it on tape, rather than reading it. They asked me if I could put it on tape and then play it and let them think. So they were prepared to listen.

The approaches she uses are diverse and provide a “scaffold” for the learning. She draws from a range of written material, including poetry, and goes to great lengths to ensure that individual needs are catered for. For instance, she prepares specific materials for the child in her class who is hearing impaired:

Yes, reading poems, and for the child who is deaf, I read her whole reader into two tapes and she puts on her head phones at Irish time and she listens and sometimes she objects too if she’s tired, so you have to humour her a bit.

**Changing approaches to the teaching of writing in Ireland**

In describing what she would change in the teaching of writing in Ireland, Mrs Begley indicated that she favoured a more skills-based approach.

I think there should be more emphasis put on structure. By structure I mean well defined sentences. (1) I detest slang words. I have hobby horses. I don’t think children at 4th class level should be allowed indulge too much in direct speech and dialogue, so I think they get carried away. I don’t think they are quite sophisticated enough for that. Limit what they are allowed to use in dialogue. I know some disagree.

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15 See Vygotsky, *Zone of Proximal Development*, Chapter One
(2) I think children’s verbal vocabulary and I mean strictly verbs should be enriched; that they should be taught that there are more ways of saying things, unlike today: ‘I walked’
You have a whole host of words that you can use instead of ‘I walked’. That’s very important to expand and enrich the vocabulary. Also, too, I think there should be an awareness of the use of the specific word in the specific place and an ability to describe things, and basically enhancing word power. I think that’s very important.

7.3.18 Summary of Mrs Begley’s approach to instruction and assessment of writing

Instruction
According to Mrs Begley, she holds high expectations for her pupils, stemming from her belief in the importance of possessing an analytic ability in language and being equipped with a critical facility. Her viewpoint is also influenced by the fact that has taught English to Intermediate Certificate Level. In this sense, Mrs Begley appear to have a keen sense of the standards she wishes her pupils to attain—she also is aware of how the pupils’ learning can be “scaffolded” to reach these standards (Vygotsky, 1987). She pursues many creative interests, including writing and this commitment is reflected in her pupils’ responses. Mrs Begley uses ‘innumerable ways’ to teach writing. Among these are active listening skills, as well as oral language skills. She is also informed by the backgrounds and needs of the children. She takes advantage of incidental experiences to enrich her teaching – syntax difficulties for the ESL student, the weather, personal experiences. Mrs Begley does not place a great deal of emphasis on the process of drafting and redrafting texts and usually requires only a small amount of improvement on specific targeted errors, rather than complete redrafts. She engages most frequently with descriptive writing, both fictional and non-fictional, with a personal perspective. The artistic dimension of her teaching is a potent element, in that she employs sounds, music and images as stimuli for writing and encourages the pupils to incorporate sensory images and experiences into the finished work. Even when engaged in non-fictional writing, Mrs Begley encourages the children to write artistically, evoking images, sensations and sounds in the work. Mrs Begley is aware of the differing needs of her students and adapts her teaching accordingly, while still aiming for high standards for each of them.

Assessment
Mrs Begley monitors the pupils' work closely and is deeply aware of the context in which their work is created. She maintains close communication with the parents and families of the children. Her feedback is customised for each child, challenging and provoking when necessary. She reports progress in detail and uses standardised measures as an objective yardstick, but not to inspire her daily teaching. Her emphasis in assessment therefore is on the formative function, and this assists her in raising the standards in her pupils' work (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Her pupils are aware of the criteria she seeks when assessing their work. This does not appear to be superficial – rather at a higher level of technique, both at word, sentence and structural levels. She encourages the pupils to be self-critical while not diminishing their self-worth. Peer assessment is also a feature of her approach as she encourages the sharing of writing aloud with the class and the expression of responses. Mrs Begley also operates a mentoring system within the class to enable the pupils' to benefit from each other's strengths. To operate this successfully, she observes her students closely and is acutely aware of their needs, and stages of learning.

Other influences/factors
Mrs Begley believes in the importance of school leadership and supportive colleagues but does not experiences such supports in her current situation for various reasons. A factor that has significantly influenced her teaching appears to have been her previous experiences of preparing students at secondary level for state examinations.
Chapter Eight

Discussion and findings
8.1 Discussion
This study sought to establish the validity of a portfolio approach to instruction and assessment in writing through looking at the work of three different portfolio models in three classes in the greater Dublin area. The study began with reviewing the literature on assessment. It established, in the first instance, the importance of assessment in the teaching and learning process (Madaus and Kellaghan, 1992; Government of Ireland, 1999). It noted the paradigm shift during the past thirty years from psychometric, objective, standardised, mechanically-scored assessment tools to more subjective, naturalistic, authentic approaches, to the assessment of processes as well as products, and to the involvement of students in the assessment process (Gipps, 1996). Corresponding changes in learning were also noted, from views of it as narrow, atomised, mechanistic, recall of facts to broad, related to other learning, meaningful and applied (Resnick and Resnick, 1992). This view is reflected in theories of learning such as metacognition (Tei and Stewart, 1985), constructivism (APA, 1997), zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1985).
In Irish primary education, there is evidence of some changes taking place in educational policies on teaching, learning and assessment (Government of Ireland, 1999) although the role of standardised tests as a dominant mode of assessment remains unclear. The need for development of alternative modes of assessment that embrace authentic approaches to assessment (Archbald and Newman, 1988) and encourages current views on learning thus emerges from this context. Among these modes lies the realm of portfolios, which represent a useful mechanism for documenting students’ work in a way that concurs with current views on assessment and learning (Valencia, 1990). A key feature of portfolios is the importance of student reflection on their work and on developing self-assessing, autonomous learners (Winner, 1991). Within this framework, therefore, the cycle of teaching, learning and assessment can be seen as one continuous educational movement with each aspect inextricably linked with the others. Two other changes in emphasis were also noted. In terms of criteria for defining quality in educational assessment, it was noted that there
has been a shift in emphasis from reliability to validity (Gipps, 1991). This period has also seen a shift from summative assessment to formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998), an issue that was revisited in Chapter Two.

The concept of writing as a recursive process was examined in Chapter Two. These views of writing are found in the ‘writing process’ model espoused by many authors in the field (e.g., Britton, 1978; Calkins, 1994; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; 1994; White and Arndt, 1991) and are reflected in the approach to writing underpinning the revised primary curriculum in English (Government of Ireland, 1999). Formative assessment is identified as being critical in the writing process. The most effective assessment therefore is that which takes place through close observation of the student at work and through the provision of valuable feedback at the time of writing (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The identification of assessment criteria and the sharing of this with the student is also considered to make the process of assessment more effective and transparent (Fox, 1990). It is believed that this can enable the student to make significant progress, and to be aware of his or her writing strategies, strengths and weaknesses (Diez and Moon, 1992). Hence, the role of the teacher as facilitator and mentor is considered vital in the development of the child as a writer.

The writing portfolio can provide the most valid data for evaluating a pupil’s writing abilities and development across time (Freedman, 1994). As a tool for teaching and assessing writing, portfolios provide an ideal mechanism, promoting and reflecting the students’ growth over time. As an assessment concept, portfolios may be effectively evaluated along the dimensions devised by the Project Zero team: Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to Work (Winner, 1991). While assessment methods invariably have as their aim the desire to raise standards in education, the degree to which they succeed in realising this intention is not always assured. A learning environment that encourages high standards, provides stimulating ideas and allows time to write, is as important as an approach to instruction, yet it can also provide opportunities for formative assessment that is effective in raising standards. Again, this raises the issue of the use of feedback in the teaching-learning process which is considered critical to improved performance (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The gathering of multiple samples of students’ work in order to track the process itself, the
range of work and the student’s actual progress in writing are therefore necessary features of writing assessment.

8.2 Addressing the research questions
This study then examined what was considered to be portfolio work that was above average – on the surface – longer, more involved, more varied, of more interest. It commenced from the point of identification and sought to examine the portfolios thoroughly to find out (a) what went into them (b) how it went in from the pupils (c) how the teachers kept track of what went in (d) whether what went in was really worth looking at (e) whether the final assumptions and opinions were valid. Information was gathered through looking at the pupils’ portfolios themselves – processes and products that were gathered in natural settings, and not laboratory or testing situations, over time, in ways that were possible to track the pupils growth and development. The pupils’ responses and reflections were considered, again in the context of their schoolwork, in some cases through naturalist letters to the researcher, as well as in open-ended responses to a questionnaire. The pupils were observed at work in their classroom and in-depth interviews were conducted with each teacher. This study did not set out to measure the quality of writing in a quantitative way, nor did it seek to make comparisons between the classes studied. Rather, it sought to look at the quality of the work itself over time, through a portfolio lens, confirming the interpretations through triangulating the information gleaned from in-depth interviews with the teachers, pupil questionnaires and reflections and observations within each of the classrooms themselves.

Q. 1 What are the approaches to instruction in writing employed by the three teachers in the study?

Common features
A number of characteristic features in their approaches to the teaching of writing can be found in each of the three cases studied.

- First, each teacher places a strong emphasis on developing skills in oral language and reading as an integral part of development in writing skills. Both of these aspects of English are seen as having an important contribution to development in writing.
Second, in the process of writing, the pupils spend a lot of time preparing and planning their work—not always as formal written drafts—sometimes orally, sometimes mentally, but preparation is a key element. They revise and edit their work, but do not undertake complete redrafts from the beginning.

Third, the pupils have a strong sense of ownership of their work and personal involvement. Individual interests are nurtured and allowed to develop.

Fourth, high standards of punctuation, spelling and grammar are demanded, but not at a cost to the expression of ideas. The writers are aware of the balance of each of these functions.

Fifth, each teacher devotes time to the teaching of techniques to improve writing—at word level, sentence level and at a structural level. Skills and strategies are carefully orchestrated and development is not left to chance.

Sixth, the teaching of writing is integrated with other subject areas in a very fluid way. The teachers see the teaching of the creative aspects of writing as important as the functional aspects. Subject matter from different areas is drawn in to enhance the written work and to enable the children to learn through the process of organising and their learning themselves and constructing new knowledge.

Seventh, high standards are expected of the children in their work. Ms Kelly seeks work that is well presented, neatly written, logical, of high interest, with a strong beginning and a good ending. Mrs Hughes sees her students as emergent authors and strives for writers who are at ease with the concept of writing, despite their apparent lack of writing skills and motor control. Mrs Begley aims for the standard of writing she expects to find in the world beyond the current class she is teaching, and in life beyond the school, recognising the value of writing both for its utilitarian function as well as the value of writing as a form of personal development.

Eighth, each teacher recognises and cherishes the individual differences in their classes, nurturing them and using their unique situations as learning opportunities for the other children and adding to the richness of their teaching strategies.

Ninth, formative assessment is an integral part of the teachers' assessment practices. The teachers provide feedback to their students during the teaching time as well as in the immediate aftermath, and understand their learning needs.
• Tenth, the teachers keep detailed records of each child’s progress. Although these are not required by the school as part of the school plan for assessment, recording and reporting, nor are they passed on to the successive teacher, the teachers consider that they play a critical role in their daily teaching.

• Eleventh, the pupils are aware of their teachers’ assessment criteria. While this is not stated explicitly, there is a unison between what the teacher seeks and what the pupils strive to achieve. At each point, the teacher acknowledges the child’s achievements within her assessment framework, yet succeeds in keeping the children challenged by striving for a greater sense of imagery, structure, feeling or imagination each time. The pupils’ reflections on the writing process point to their understanding of what is required of them and they are acutely aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

• Twelfth, the teachers communicate regularly, effectively and often with the parents, ensuring that they understand the particular approach they are taking with the students. The sense of interdependence is a feature of how these teachers teach their students.

Unique features
In terms of how they teach, there are striking differences between the teachers also.
• Ms Kelly models the writing process on what the children read, and draws from familiar characters and story structures from television and film. Her emphasis is clearly lies on the creation of a well-constructed story containing elements of humour and adventure. She monitors progress very carefully, taking home the pupils’ work every evening. Ms Kelly also seeks a high standard of handwriting and the pupils’ output of work is voluminous and competent.

• Mrs Hughes has a strong belief in what young children can achieve, drawing them to standards that might traditionally be considered beyond their reach. Her “scaffolding” of the pupils’ learning enables them to mirror the behaviour of mature writers, without undue pressure.

• Mrs Begley places a strong emphasis on the aesthetic dimension in her teaching, both as a stimulus for writing as well as a desirable quality in the pupils’ work. She draws on the particular strengths of the children in a unique way through the implementation of a mentoring system within the classroom. She uses the environment as an integral part of her teaching.
What is the pupil's experience of the process of writing?
The process of writing evolves naturally, but through extended preparation. A good deal of emphasis is placed on the mechanics, but not to the detriment of the flow of ideas, personal expression or involvement in the writing.

What kinds of learning are taking place for the pupils?
Learning reflects current theories on learning and as outlined in the *Primary School Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999). It can be described as broad and holistic (Gardner, 1982), it involves metacognitive thinking (Tei and Stewart 1985), the construction of new knowledge based on previous knowledge (constructivism, APA, 1997) and the scaffolding of pupils' learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Assessment is also an integral part of the learning process.

To what extent does the teacher's influence impact on the pupils' work?
The teacher's personal interests, strengths and beliefs play a hugely significant role in the pupils' work. The pupils write about topics which their teacher requires of them, they write in the style preferred by their teacher, they utilise the skills and strategies she has presented to them previously and they to fulfil desired assessment criteria which is clearly understood by themselves and their teacher. Their progress is monitored carefully, and the degree to which they fulfill the criteria is constantly tracked.

Are the teachers' approaches in line with current theories on learning and with the new curriculum in English?
The approaches are in line with current thinking in the new curriculum in English in that oral language plays an integral part, the concept of emergent literacy is recognised and a process approach to writing is promoted. In addition, the kinds of learning around which writing takes places are commensurate with the principles of learning outlined in the *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (Government of Ireland, 1999) and current theories of learning as identified in the literature.

Q2. What kind of assessment methods do the teachers employ in order to enhance their students' learning?
The teachers employ mainly formative methods of assessment (TGAT, 1988) monitoring their students’ progress at the time of writing on a daily basis, identifying their learning needs and building on them for the future — usually the next day’s lesson.

Is there any evidence of feedback?
Feedback is a critical part of their teaching (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Tunstall and Gipps, 1996). For the younger students, feedback is positive and general. For the older pupils, feedback is also largely positive but the teachers are very specific in their comments. The feedback relates to the task that the child has just completed, and is very pertinent to him or her. Where challenging comments can be incorporated into the child’s work, these are provided.

Is the feedback effective in guiding further learning?
The teachers also provide “public feedback” (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996) involving the whole class (Mrs Hughes, with the junior infants, Mrs Begley with the fourth class) or small groups (Ms Kelly with fifth class), thus providing some of the most extensive learning opportunities (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996). The type of feedback employed is effective in guiding further learning. In Mrs Begley’s class the students integrate the feedback into subsequent writing tasks. In Ms Kelly’s, the feedback is acted on in a more immediate way. In Mrs Hughes class, the students progress in a holistic

What is the balance between formative, summative and diagnostic assessment?
All of these forms of assessment are used. Formative is used most often, but the teachers draw on the results of diagnostic assessments when they need to — usually for placement purposes and at the end of the year. This is used as a guide, or benchmark, but not as a teaching strategy. Summative assessment in the form of end of year standardised tests is treated as one method of assessing student’s work, but the teachers’ place more importance on their own summative records in their reporting of progress to parents, both orally and in written forms.

How important is record keeping and reporting of pupils’ progress in the teaching-learning-assessment cycle?
The teachers rely very much on their own record keeping for their day to day teaching. In each of the schools studied however, the passing on of detailed records to the
successive teacher is not deemed necessary and the teachers are aware that much of the information gathered during the year is lost.

Q.3 Does assessment through portfolios of writing in the primary school provide a valid means of assessment?
Portfolios of children’s provide a rich tapestry of student achievement. A vital aspect is the inclusion of the pupils’ own reflections on their growth as writers. This fosters metacognitive thinking which in turn feeds back into the learning and assessment cycle.

Is there evidence that accrues from portfolios that may not be available with other assessment tools?
Stake (1998) describes the limitations of standardised tests when he states that

…the marks do little more than rank the students from high to low. They don’t tell how educated the children are becoming…they don’t tell what they’ve been taught, how much they’ve been taught and how well they’ve been taught16.

In contrast, through examining portfolios of pupils’ work and their accompanying reflections, it is possible to assess the breadth or range of the students’ learning in a subject area. It is possible to infer ‘what they have been taught’, the aspects that are emphasised, honed and nurtured. The aspects that a student develops and improves upon is also clear from the portfolios, and the stages of their growth is apparent especially in the infant classrooms. In addition, the teacher’s approach to teaching - a sense of ‘how well the teacher is teaching’ becomes evident in a portfolio approach.

What are the lessons to be learned from various portfolio models?
In examining the portfolio models (Forster, 1996), each model offers a unique perspective on student learning. The showcase model exemplifies the best features of a student’s work. Viewed at a particular time of the year, it can portray the classwork in a standardised way, even if the work itself is not standardised. It has the potential to illustrate the range of achievement within a class and coupled with student reflection, can show the depth of a student’s understanding at a given point in time. The documentary portfolio portrays the child’s development and growth, clearly

illustrating the stages that he or she has passed through and identifying the gaps or weaknesses in his or her development. The working portfolio provides the most comprehensive picture of student learning, and contributes most usefully to formative assessment. As an example of 'work in progress' it points to the patterns in a students’ learning, identifying aspects that are working successfully and those that need closer attention.

*Are these applicable or transferable to other areas of the curriculum?*
In all models, student reflection plays a critical role and provides the key to deciphering the path of a student’s learning. Whether a child provides readymade, neat answers to given questions or problems, or performs a task obediently as requested, it is only through interviewing the child about the process and encouraging his or her reflection on it that it can be of most use. To the extent that this process encourages higher-order thinking and metacognitive skills, the use of portfolios is transferable across all curriculum areas. In addition, the close, personal involvement of the pupil in the learning process creates a context for meaningful formative assessment in the form of feedback which can further enhance the teaching and learning cycle.

8.3 Validity issues
This section deals with two aspects of validity (a) the validity of a portfolio approach to instruction and assessment in writing, and (b) the validity of the findings of this research.

*The validity of a portfolio approach to instruction and assessment in writing*
As outlined in Chapter One, validity in assessment has come to include an evaluation of the adequacy and appropriateness of the uses that are made of assessment results. This expanded view of validity leads to a focus on the consequences of particular uses of assessment results (Linn and Gronlund, 2000).

Reflecting on the earlier writings of Linn and Dunbar (1991) relating to issues of validity, it is clear that the portfolio approach addresses each of these in a manner that is both transparent and convincing. First, the intended and unintended consequences for teachers and students appear to be positive and fruitful in that the teaching is closely aligned to assessment, the students’ work is focused and continuous, and

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learning needs are clearly identified and acted on at each stage. Second, the approach to assessment is completely fair for all children, irrespective of their age, gender, class level, learning abilities or previous experiences of writing in English. Third, the assessment allows for the inclusion of tasks and processes that are complex in nature and involve problem-solving strategies. Fourth, the problems presented are meaningful for both the students and the teacher. Fifth, the assessment allows for comprehensive coverage of the content and finally, since the cost is virtually nil, the assessment procedure can be clearly justified in terms of the cost. The degree to which the assessment task transfers to other domains of achievement is not considered in this instance, since other subject areas did not feature in the current study.

In the later work of Linn (1994), emphasis is placed on the issue of validity as a unitary concept with construct validity as the unifying force. Linn believes that it is the consequences and uses of assessment results that are validated rather than the assessment itself and this point is reiterated in the most recent work by Linn and Gronlund (2000). In each of the cases presented in this research, because of the immediate, formative and individualistic nature of the portfolio assessment practices, the consequences of the assessment can be summarised as leading to (a) more effective teaching strategies by the teacher; (b) a greater understanding of the assessment criteria among the students; and (c) a finer quality of output from the students that challenges their potential at each stage. In addition, the assessment of the portfolios based on the criteria devised by the Project Zero team (Winner, 1991): Production, Perception, Reflection and Approach to Work allows for a very transparent, fair and therefore valid, examination and representation of pupils’ progress, level of understanding, degree of commitment and overall achievement in ways that are of benefit both to the student and to the teacher.

A further aspect of validity is the concept of ‘pedagogical validity’ proposed by Khattri and Sweet (1996), that is, the degree to which an assessment is connected to the curriculum and the extent to which it identifies information for instructional purposes is deeply imbedded in the portfolio approach assessment. The fact that the portfolio approach can allow for learning and assessment to be interlinked makes it a very fair piece in the assessment puzzle (Khattri and Sweet, 1996).
The validity of the research findings
The validity of the research concerns the interpretation of observations: whether what has been observed and measured by the researcher is correctly identified (Silverman, 1997). In his publication *The Art of Case Study Research*, Stake (1995) underscores the importance of validity in qualitative research. In the case studies described in this research the validity of the data is evident in the triangulation of information (Stake, 1995), that is, the convergence of the different sources of information—writing portfolios, pupil reflections, teacher interviews and classroom observations. The 'assertions' made are confirmed through examining the various data sources presented. The inclusion of a large proportion of 'raw data' ensures transparency and adds to the validity of the assertions and interpretations (Stake, 1995). The validity of the research findings has been further validated through member checking (Stake, 1995) when the initial drafts of the text were submitted to the participants for verification.

8.4 Additional observations
A number of additional assertions (Stake, 1995) may be extrapolated from the data. These are not related directly to the focus of the study, but present as areas of interest in themselves. These are curriculum leadership within the school, the role of preservice and inservice education and the current needs of teachers in the system in Ireland.

Curriculum leadership
First, each teacher emphasised the importance of the leadership role of the principal in supporting and encouraging (or discouraging) the approach to writing both within the individual classes and across the school. This leadership role has been widely recognised as a critical factor in the effective running of schools (e.g., Mortimore *et al.*, 1988; Mortimore, 1991; Kavanagh, 1993; Reynolds, 1996) followed closely by a shared vision amongst staff of educational goals (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Stoll and Fink, 1994). In Mrs Hughes' class, she felt that her efforts were rewarded by the affirmation and support she received from her principal and by the positive feedback that her pupils received when they presented their work to him. The context for writing in Ms Kelly's school was somewhat different. The fact that the principal attached a great deal of importance to the area of writing would appear to have had a
significant influence on the quality and quantity of the output in her classroom. The principal demanded that the pupils complete an English essay each week. Although Ms Kelly’s class was exempt from this, it appears that, due to her commitment to the teaching of writing, it was her desire to produce work that was at least as good as the standard produced in other classes. This created an expectation for the teacher and for her students. For Mrs Begley, the absence of clear leadership and support in the area of writing appeared to be a source of some frustration. However, Mrs Begley was also at liberty to use an approach that she believed in, and was not constrained in any way by demands from either above or below. Such autonomy in her teaching would appear to have enabled Mrs Begley to refine her teaching skills and strategies in an individual way that had direct benefit for her pupils. However, the absence of clear policy statements on the teaching of writing, a fundamental aspect of the curriculum, in each school is a cause for concern. The fact that in each case, the teachers with obvious expertise in and commitment to the teaching of writing, did not feel empowered or facilitated to share their skills with colleagues within the school is perturbing.

Preservice and inservice education
In each of the three cases studied, the teachers cited aspects of either inservice and preservice education which has informed their current approach to the teaching of writing and which differ greatly from the typical pattern of teacher training in Ireland. The quality of the preservice education in Britain for Mrs Hughes appeared to play a significant part in her subsequent teaching. In particular, she identifies the weekly observations of teachers in practice and the constant evaluation of her own work as having an important influence. For Ms Kelly, the experience of working with expert colleagues in the United States was a very important factor. This expectation to attend inservice courses along with her colleagues and to learn with and from them proved to be a very formative experience. In Mrs Begley’s case, she trained as a secondary school teacher in the first instance and also taught in the United States. While she does not refer to her teaching experiences abroad directly, her pathway to primary teaching is again atypical. Taken together, the particular influences on teacher education point to factors outside the system and raise questions about possible deficits in models of teacher training in Ireland.
Perceived needs in the system
Each teacher was asked at the end of the interviews (see Chapter Seven) to identify aspects in the teaching of writing in Ireland which should be changed. From the perspective of teaching junior classes, Mrs Hughes emphasised the importance of developing oracy, of having a less formal approach to the teaching of reading in the early stages and of diminishing the reliance on textbooks. Ms Kelly identified the issue of inservice for all teachers and the importance of modelling both good practice and raising awareness of what can be achieved by children given a process approach. Finally, Mrs Begley emphasised the importance of focusing teaching writing skills on the word and sentence level. While the teachers’ opinions do not converge, and while each teacher drew attention to aspects which feature strongly in their personal approaches to the teaching of writing, the issues which they raise point to the complexity of teaching writing. These issues also suggest the need for teacher education programmes, both at preservice and at inservice level, to be broad and comprehensive and which thoroughly reflect the complexity of writing.

8.5 Limitations of the study
This study contains a number of limitations which are as follows: first, the number of cases studied is limited. While this is an issue of manageability, generalisations which may be made as a result of the study rest on the basis of a very small sample. Second, the number of writing samples from each class and the number of pupils studied within each class was also limited for manageability reasons and caution must be exercised in any interpretations draw from these. Third, while the reflections from the students were very detailed and comprehensive, greater insight may have been found through additional interviews with these students. Furthermore, an attempt to interview the very young children in junior infants could also have been made, despite the reliability of their perceptions. Fourth, classroom observations of the teacher at work with the class over an extended period could also further validate the findings. Fifth, while the writing samples were not intended to be graded, and their analysis was for the purpose of examining the underlying processes in the teaching and assessment of writing, nevertheless, it would have been useful to involve independent raters and critics of the writing itself, and to correlate their findings with this researcher. Finally, an analysis of the approaches to the teaching of writing employed by the other
teachers in the original Phase 1 of the Drumcondra Writing Project could have been undertaken in order to ascertain qualitative differences in pedagogy between less effective teachers of writing and those selected for this study.

8.6 Recommendations for further study
This study focused on the teaching and assessment of writing in three classes in primary schools in the Greater Dublin Area. Future projects, building on the current study, could focus on the following:

- A qualitative study of teaching and learning in writing, involving a more extensive range of classrooms (i.e., rural, urban, girls, boys, disadvantage, non-disadvantage, Gaelscoil etc. and different class levels) which would include more detailed observations of the pupil-teacher interaction than was possible in the current study.

- The use of portfolios for instructional and assessment purposes should also be investigated in other subject areas of the primary school curriculum, especially those for which assessment (standardised or non-standardised), recording and reporting procedures are either unavailable or not usually evident in current practice, for example, music, physical education, visual arts education, drama and social, personal and health education (SPHE), or aspects within these subjects. A focus on the development and assessment of creative processes and artistic products could well be served by such studies.

- Currently in Ireland there is a need to develop a collegial discourse community for assessment. The use of scoring guides to describe measurement criteria need to be produced and the interchange of sample portfolios at different score levels to illustrate the scoring guide needs to become common practice. Qualitative and quantitative studies encompassing the involvement of several teachers in matching class levels in the identification of criteria for measuring performance in one or more subject areas at primary level in portfolio contexts, for setting standards, and moderation of assessment outcomes could be usefully investigated in order to establish such a community.
• The potential for assessment of the artistic processes in the context of the Revised Primary Curriculum (1999) is possible through the use of the portfolio assessment criteria developed by Winner (1991). In particular, studies which involve the emergence and development of students’ knowledge and skills in the dimension of ‘Reflection’ could be observed and recorded over time: the student’s ability to assess his/her own work, to adopt the role of critic, to use criticism, to learn from other art works and the ability to articulate his/her own goals in the domain. Additional criteria could also be considered.

• An oblique question which also arises as a result of the findings of this research is the extent to which preservice education, both theory and practice, impacts on subsequent approaches to instruction and assessment in writing and other subject areas. An investigation into the effects of different models or experiences of preservice education in specific subject areas impacts on subsequent teaching.

• Finally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects on students’ metacognitive skills as a result of a portfolio approach that developed student production, perception, reflection and approach to work.

8.7 Conclusions

This study has sought to unravel some of the complexities involved in the teaching and assessment of writing through looking at portfolios of children’s work developed over time. Specifically, the study involved an examination of the validity of a portfolio approach to the instruction and assessment of writing in three primary school classrooms. It concludes that

On portfolios as an approach to instruction

• As a form of authentic assessment, portfolios provide valid and useful information on the teaching and assessment of writing in the primary classroom contexts at different class levels. This information differs substantially from the type of information which can be gleaned from standardised tests in that it demonstrates
what a student has learned, how he or she has learned, his or her attitudes towards what has been learned, and the depth of his or her understanding.

- Different portfolio models illustrate different forms of learning – ‘documentary’ and ‘working’ portfolios (Forster and Masters, 1996) illustrate learning in different stages and have particular uses in junior classes, tracing the emergence of the child as author in particular. The ‘showcase’ model can provide a useful means of illustrating what has been achieved in a more senior class. All models provide opportunities for formative assessment.

- The use of portfolios allows for the employment of a process approach (Graves, 1983; 1994) to writing and provides the means for different stages of the process to be taught and experienced as one seamless action.

- A portfolio approach to instruction can complement current theories on learning; in the current study, those most in evidence were the constructivism and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development.

- Portfolio approaches allow for individuality of teaching styles. In the cases studied, while the teachers employed a process approach to the teaching of writing, they did not follow one particular model – each teacher adapted the process according to her own teaching styles. The use of constant redrafting did not feature, nor did it appear to be a missing component. Rather, pupils tended to incorporate changes and recommendations into subsequent drafts.

- Portfolio approaches allow for the adaptation of instruction to suit the needs of particular children while maintaining high but realistic expectations for students through tracking their performance and growth.

On portfolios as an approach to assessment

- Portfolio assessment can demonstrate student growth as a learner, strengths, weaknesses, individual interests, interpretations and perspectives. In short,
portfolios can fulfil demands for a live, ongoing and comprehensive assessment picture.

- In the assessment of writing, portfolios allow for, and generate, the use of formative assessment techniques and the incorporation of feedback that is relevant for individual children and groups of children.

- The development of assessment criteria is an essential aspect of portfolio work and operates most usefully when it is developed by the students in collaboration with the teacher. Such transparency and honesty maximises the level of student commitment to the task. At the same time, the teacher can constantly revisit such criteria, moving it upwards and forwards, setting new targets for pupils, individually and collectively within a clearly understood framework.

- Pupil reflections are an essential component of the portfolio approach as they encourage the development of self-assessment skills and metacognitive thinking skills.

- Standardised tests can complement the work of portfolios in providing summative or benchmark information for teachers, parents and pupils. On their own, they appear to provide little guidance as to what kind of learning should take place for the students and teachers tend not to refer to them in their day to day teaching. This seemed to be the case in particular for high achieving students.

- As an aspect of authentic assessment, portfolios allow a greater focus of attention on a broader curriculum and on the assessment of a wider and more sophisticated range of skills in a way that reflects learning processes. In this way, it improves the quality of teaching and learning and presents a fairer measure of pupil achievement.

- Pupil progress is transparent for parents, other professionals and evaluators.

Other issues
- For the child, the teacher plays a key role in how he or she is taught and assessed. Whatever assessment measure is used, the teacher is the ‘major asset’ (Stake, 1998, p2), the key agent in the learning for the child: his or her beliefs, passions,
strengths, interests and previous experiences all impact on the quality of instruction for the child. Good teaching is like an artist wholly absorbed in his or her work, drawing on his or her innermost resources and techniques to effect the quality of the outcome.

- The teacher's preservice training can be crucial. Where gaps exist in preservice education, a radical departure from the routine teaching can provide a significant agent for change. This can involve close co-operation with colleagues within the primary teaching profession, working with colleagues at second level or take the form of support from experienced professionals from outside the state.

- Quality is difficult to measure, its discernment so fleeting, yet it exists. Assessment strives to achieve accountability, transparency and the raising of standards, yet, these cannot be forced. What is needed is a desire for good practice, a carefully orchestrated plan to achieve it, and clear evidence on the processes and products involved in reaching the desired goals. Such an approach can be facilitated through the employment of portfolios.

- The use of portfolios across the primary curriculum can provide opportunities to get inside the cogwheels of classrooms, in ways not previously observable or accessible. They can enable teachers and students to reflect on their growth in teaching and learning, provide transparent information for evaluators, and therefore improve the quality of education in Irish primary schools as a whole.
Appendix
Appendix A

Interview schedule used with teachers in the portfolio project

The following questions served as prompts for discussion rather than straight questions to be answered in a given order. For the purpose of clarity for the researcher, questions were arranged into three main topics: writing instruction, assessment and policy issues.

Preamble
The purpose of this interview is to talk about the teaching and assessing of writing in your classroom. To begin, can you tell me some background information about yourself, how long you have been teaching and general information about the class you are teaching this year.

Importance of writing
Firstly, do you consider writing to be an important component of the curriculum? About how much time per day/per week do you devote to the teaching of writing?

Writing instruction
Process
The writing samples which you submitted to the ERC last year seemed to be very worthwhile, can you describe you enabled the children to reach that stage?

To what extent do you employ process approaches to writing instruction?
What emphasis do you place on drafting? sharing? revising? Publishing?
Where do your pupils' writing prompts originate from: mainly from you, mainly from classwork, from the pupils themselves or a combination of sources?
Do you consider the concept of ownership to be important for the child?
To what extent do you employ the conference approach in reviewing a child's writing?

Can you describe what might a typical lesson in writing be like in your class?

Genres
What is the most important aspect of writing that should be taught?

What sorts of genres/range of purposes for writing do you teach? How do you select these?
What emphasis do you place on writing poetry, stories, personal writing, personal response?
How do you approach writing non-fiction?
Do you consider 'functional writing' (as found in many workbooks)to be important?
Mechanics
What emphasis do you place on the teaching of mechanics/conventions of writing?
- spelling, punctuation, grammar
  How important do you consider handwriting to be?

Organisation
How do you organise or arrange the children for writing?
  Do you use a whole class approach, groups or an individual approach?
  To what extent do you cater for individual differences? How often and for how long?
  What strategies do you use with a child who is having difficulties with writing?
  How do you cope with the range of writing abilities in the class?
  How do the children keep track of what they have written?
  Do you encourage your pupils to take their writing home?
  To what extent do you encourage writing outside the classroom?
  Do you think there are benefits which your pupils accrue from writing as a direct, or an indirect, result of your approach to the teaching of it?

Assessment/Recording/Reporting
What do you look for in your pupils’ writing?
  What criteria do you use to establish the level of achievement reached by the child?

Are your pupils aware of this criteria?

What do you actually do when responding to children’s writing?
  - correct spelling, insert punctuation, make a positive comment, help the child to clarify an idea?

Do you encourage your pupils to share and evaluate their own work and the work of others?

Do you ever work with a colleague in responding to your pupils’ writing?

Record keeping
Do you keep records of the pupils’ progress in writing?
  If so, what format do these take: anecdotal notes, scores, grades?
  Do you encourage your pupils to keep track of their own progress?
  Do you keep notes of writing conferences?

Reporting progress
What evidence do you refer to in assessing your pupils’ writing or in reporting on progress in a report card?
  Who sees these notes or reports which you record?
Are reports from previous teachers made available to you when you assume a class?
What information is contained in these reports?
Do you consider this information useful?

**Reporting progress to parents**

*How do you report to parents?*

- Do you think the grades or comments which you may record for a child at the end of the year reflect what might have been learned during the course of the whole year?
- Do you think that the parents of the children whom you teach recognise or understand what you have achieved with your pupils in terms of their writing development?
- To what extent would a result on a standardised test of reading achievement influence your reporting on a child's progress in writing?

**School policy**

*Is there a (written/unwritten) policy on writing and assessment in your school?*

- Do you meet with any of your colleagues in school to discuss approaches to the teaching and assessing of writing? How often?

What aspects of these discussion do you find useful?

**Remedial Teacher**

*On the basis of what criteria are pupils selected for remedial instruction?*

- To what extent does your writing programme influence that selection?

Do the children receive instruction in writing with the remedial teacher?
- Does your remedial teacher share your views on the teaching of writing?
- How often do you exchange progress reports, either formally or informally?
- Is it important that you share the same views?

**The teacher within the broader context**

*What factors influence your teaching?*

- School policy
- National policy i.e. Curáclam na Bunscoile
- Available textbooks
- Own philosophy
- Inservice course/person
- Book or article

To what extent do you feel you have control over your teaching and thinking?

- What impedes your practice/enhances it?
- What aspect of teaching writing do you most enjoy/least enjoy/good at/not good at?

If there was something you could change about the way in which writing is currently taught in Ireland, what would that be?
Appendix B

Open-ended questionnaire administered to pupils in the portfolio project

Name: ___________________________ Date: _______________________

School: ________________________ Class: _______________________

What is your favourite kind of writing?

________________________________________________________________________

How do you go about writing it?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Where do you get your ideas from?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Do you change anything when you have finished?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

If so, what do you change?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Do you show your work to your friends in the class?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What kind of things do your friends say when they read your writing?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
How does your teacher correct your work?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Does your teacher say anything to you about your writing?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Does your teacher give you grades, like A, B, C or D, or a mark out of 10, or a comment such as Excellent, Very good, Good or Fair?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

How does your teacher help you improve your work?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What sort of writing does the teacher like to read best?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

When you take your writing home, what does your family say about it?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Do you think it is important to be good at writing? Why?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
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