# A reflexive approach to teaching writing: Enablements and constraints in primary school classrooms

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## Abstract

Writing requires a high level of nuanced decision-making related to language, purpose, audience and medium. Writing teachers thus need a deep understanding of language, process, pedagogy, and of the interface between them. This paper draws on reflexivity theory to interrogate the pedagogical priorities and perspectives of 19 writing teachers in primary classrooms across Australia. Data are comprised of teacher interview transcripts and nuanced time analyses of classroom observation videos. Findings show that teachers experience both enabling and constraining conditions that emerge in different ways in different contexts. Enablements include high motivations to teach writing and a reflective and collaborative approach to practice. However, constraints were evident in areas of time management, dominance of teacher talk, teachers' scope and confidence in their knowledge and practice, and a perceived lack of professional support for writing pedagogy. The paper concludes with recommendations for a reflexive approach to managing these emergences in the teaching of writing.

## Introduction

Writing is arguably the most important measure of success in literacy education. It dominates assessment practices across educational systems and is critical as a gauge of competency, and a tool for effective communication, in the workforce. Writing is a social and situated activity shaped by the social, cultural, political, institutional, and historical influences (Graham, 2018). It requires high cognitive load to mediate complex psychological, linguistic, physical, social and cultural elements (Fisher, 2012), including self-monitoring practices (Wischgoll, 2016) across diverse contexts, disciplinary domains, and in variable circumstances. While we know writing success depends on making effective choices about language and structure (Fisher, 2012; Myhill, Jones & Wilson, 2016) related to audience, purpose, subject matter and platform, we know less about the classroom conditions that intersect to enable effective decision-making throughout the writing process. Managing and negotiating classroom conditions (including those related to self, context and culture) is an important aspect of teachers' work. We argue that if teachers have an explicit understanding of these conditions, then they can make more effective pedagogical decisions when it comes to the teaching of writing.

Teachers must negotiate their work within highly visible and politically charged educational contexts alongside other complex demands such as an increasingly diverse student population, regulated curriculum, new professional requirements and evidence to be adopted regularly in the classroom (Ryan & Barton, 2019) and within the confines of their own content and pedagogical knowledge. This work intensification (Hardy, 2015) created through ongoing demands means that leaders and teachers often look for solutions that are "quick fixes" generated via deficit discourses

(Barton & McKay, 2016). In addition, sustained and iterative professional learning about the teaching of writing, that identifies and meets teachers' contextualised needs, is often not available. Teachers of writing need a deep understanding of language, of process, of pedagogy, and of the interface between them (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016) to teach writing effectively. Therefore, more research is needed about teacher knowledge and pedagogical decisions within specific contextual conditions.

This paper foregrounds the conditions that contribute to quality writing, then draws on a reflexive theoretical frame to interrogate the pedagogical priorities and perspectives of 19 writing teachers in primary classrooms across Australia. We ask what enablements and constraints are present for these teachers in their specific contexts and then offer recommendations for professional learning and practice that might mediate these conditions for improved outcomes.

## The Conditions for Quality Writing

Different approaches have been taken to explore pedagogical approaches in writing research. Psychological approaches to writing composition have been largely derived from Flower and Hayes' (1980) empirically-based model that described the sub-processes of composition. These cognitive processes, which compete for attention when writing, include generating (planning, goal-setting), translating (putting ideas into writing, manipulating the mechanics of language) and reviewing (evaluating, revising). This view focuses primarily on skilled writers, and therefore does not take into account factors like handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction that are fundamental to learning writing in early years. The not-so-simple view of writing (Berninger & Winn, 2006) expands the earlier approaches based on Hayes (1980) by highlighting executive function and self-regulatory processes (such as attention, goal setting, and reviewing) in addition to text generation and transcription skills. Sociocultural views of language, text and learning are also fundamental to the field of writing research. Halliday's (1978) foundational theory of systemic functional linguistics sees texts as products of social conditions, with language considered a socially meaningful sign system. His work foregrounds choice; that is, texts are produced by people in particular ways according to the social context, audience, subject matter, technologies and the identity of the writer (Kervin, Comber & Woods, 2017; Locke & Cremin, 2017).

Contemporary research in the UK (Myhill et al., 2016; Newman & Myhill, 2016) highlights the importance of bringing together these approaches to writing. Myhill and colleagues provided large-scale empirical evidence of a significant effect on students' understandings of making grammatical choices when teachers used knowledge about language to have metalinguistic conversations (metatalk) during writing lessons. Metatalk involves a deep cognitive engagement in the relationships between meaning, form and function in writing and should take place while writers are engaged in making meaning through language (Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013; Myhill & Newman, 2016; Swain, 1998). It is a pedagogical tool that can improve students' cognitive understandings of their writing choices, and also help teachers to understand what their students are learning and applying in their writing (Matre & Solheim, 2016). The interactions and feedback do not steer towards pre-determined right answers (Graham, Harris & Hebert, 2011; Sortkær, 2019) but towards consideration of authorial possibilities. Graham, Hebert and Harris (2015) showed in their meta-analysis that regular formative feedback enhanced writing quality, but that monitoring of writing over time (e.g., through test results) had no effect on writing quality. A

recent quantitative synthesis of the outcomes of writing programs (Slavin, Lake, Inns, Baye, Dachet & Haslam, 2019) also showed strong evidence for teaching writing conventions in context, along with strategy use and self-assessment. Process writing and allowing time for frequent writing have also been shown to be important in improving writing across school levels (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015; Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara & Harris, 2012). Other elements that have shown to produce good outcomes, according to Slavin and colleagues, are programs that balance reading and writing. For example, a meta analysis conducted by Graham and colleagues (2018) shows the impact of 1) reading interventions on writing; 2) creating motivating environments; and 3) having teachers who engage in professional learning that enables them to experience the writing strategies they will employ. It is interesting to note, however, that Cremin, Myhill, Eyres, Nash, Wilson and Oliver (2020) found that teachers' immersion in writing without direct links to content and pedagogical knowledge and transfer, is not sufficient to improve students' attainment of writing skills. In addition, McKeown, Brindle, Harris, Graham, Collins and Brown (2016) found variable results in practise-based professional development and coaching programs for writing instruction. The success of these interventions was highly dependent on contextual conditions (including time) and teachers' personal characteristics (including knowledge and motivation).

The knowledge and approach of the teacher is integral to improving writing outcomes and promoting quality writing experiences. A teacher's control of, and responsibility for, quality in strategies is critical to encourage and support students as writers (Fisher, 2010). What students are asked to write about matters. Writing experiences that are authentic and critically focused can provide important and powerful writing experiences (Silvers, Shorey & Crafton, 2010), and when writing lessons are conducted in instructional contexts that are inclusive (McCloskey, 2011) a community of practice is established. Students need time to write: time to plan, draft, and revisit their writing to review and clarify meanings as they demonstrate their understanding.

Research shows that teachers are not necessarily able to use productive metatalk with students to improve their decision-making for purpose and audience (Myhill & Newman, 2016). Interactions through teacher conferencing are often characterised by ineffective pedagogical moves (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016). Further, teachers activate different pedagogical practices where they control the sequence and pacing of content within the writing lesson, in relation to their own English content knowledge (Exley, Kervin & Mantei, 2016) and in response to broader contextual demands such as preparation for standardised testing (Ryan & Barton, 2019). Recent research on teachers' professional development (PD) shows that one-off PD does not lead to changes in practice (Bowe & Gore, 2016), but that iterative, classroom focused professional learning with a theory of action is most effective for enacting real change in classroom practice (Loughland & Ryan, 2020).

Research shows evidence of the impact of the macro-level policy context and the level of school context on teachers' attitudes and practices. For example, a study of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy across the United States (McCarthey, 2008) shows how teachers' writing instruction and their attitudes to writing are influenced by the policy and how they differ across different school contexts. The ways in which teachers manage and mediate their own knowledge and skills, alongside the contextual conditions in the classroom and school, are worthy of investigation so that teachers can access appropriate and relevant support based on research evidence. This paper uses a new conceptual framing of writing and pedagogy as reflexive pursuits

that change within emergent classroom conditions. This framing is useful to identify how and why teachers prioritise and select their practice under experienced conditions.

## A Reflexive Theoretical Frame

Margaret Archer's (2000; 2012) critical approach to realist social theory provides a useful lens to understand the ways in which teachers manage competing influences and deliberate about pedagogic action in the classroom (Ryan & Barton, 2019). She argues that the interplay between humans and society is constituted by the emergence of human properties and powers in relation to society's properties and powers (Archer, 2000). Archer specifically suggests three distinct, yet related, emergent properties that contribute to our being human in the world. The emergent properties are personal, structural and cultural. Personal emergent properties (PEPs) in teaching writing relate to personal identity: e.g., confidence as a writer, beliefs about writing, knowledge, skills, efficacy and capabilities in relation to linguistic, textual and authorial domains. Structural emergent properties (SEPs) are orders of society and context: e.g., systems, practices, resources and language, including writing curriculum and planning, and time allocated to writing. Cultural emergent properties (CEPs) are the prevailing beliefs, norms, ideologies and expectations of a societal group. For writing, these CEPs include the importance ascribed to writing, how the purpose of writing tasks is framed, relationships between teachers and between teachers and students when writing, and ideologies of chosen approaches to teaching writing. Each of these properties is always emerging in relation to the others and can be experienced as enabling or constraining as one moves through a reflexive cycle of decision-making.

Reflexivity involves deliberating about possible courses of action, deciding what might be feasible at this time in this situation and then choosing a way forward. In terms of applying Archer's theory to writing research, effective teachers are seen as active decision-makers who mediate their *personal concerns* (e.g., interests, emotions, beliefs, creativity, priorities, language and cultural resources and capabilities) and their particular *social and cultural circumstances* (e.g., curriculum and assessment requirements, school structures, political agendas, student relationships) to act in certain ways (Ryan, 2017). Archer suggests that we have "internal conversations" in which we reflect upon and weigh up (multiple) possible options, taking self and context into account.

Previous research has identified a range of personal, structural and cultural properties that influence elementary school literacy teachers and the classroom experience. These include teachers' language and textual knowledge, skills and ethical interpretations of test preparation (Bousfield & Ragusa, 2014; Exley et al., 2016; Hardy, 2015) (PEPs); accountable relationships with parents and a culture of competition or evidence mindsets (Gorur, 2016) (CEPs); and changing practices and reliance on commercial products for more focused test outcomes (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016; Ryan & Barton, 2014) (SEPs). In addition, classroom observation studies have a long history of looking at time allocation within a classroom and the ways it affects teachers' and learners' experiences (see for example Flanders, 1970; Galton, 1987). These properties can have both enabling and constraining effects on teacher's practice in relation to the teaching of writing.

# Project Background and Design

This research is part of a large, funded study in Australia (with ethical approval from three universities and two education sectors), spanning two states and involving eight primary schools ranging in their Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) band[1] from 950 to 1113 (1000 is average). The study was framed around investigating and supporting reflexivity in student and teacher decision-making in writing and writing pedagogy. It included classroom innovations working alongside teachers to achieve the goals they developed after engaging with the data we collected and shared from teachers, students and classroom observations. Data in the larger project included teacher interviews (please refer to the Appendix), student interviews, videorecorded classroom observations, survey data of students' reflexive decision-making styles, writing samples and classroom environment video tours from teachers and students. This paper draws on the initial teacher interviews and videorecorded classroom observations to enable focused analysis and discussion of reflexive pursuits within emergent classroom conditions. Nineteen teachers agreed to participate in the study.  We obtained consent from our participants prior to data collection. The selected sample (Table 1) involved a mix of: 1) teachers across different year levels, and 2) early career and more experienced teachers. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Teachers were interviewed prior to classroom observations (for up to 30 minutes) to talk about their approaches to writing and their teaching practices. Classroom observations (four in each classroom between 30 and 90 minutes) were videorecorded for the purpose of understanding teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning about writing.

Table 1

*Participant information*

| Pseudonym | Years of teaching experience | Current teaching |
|-----------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Dona      | 13                           | Year 5           |
| Casey     | 21                           | Year 6           |
| Ellen     | 30                           | Year 5           |
| Gen       | 4                            | Year 6           |
| Hannah    | 3                            | Year 5           |
| Briana    | 3                            | Year 5           |
| Bianca    | 15                           | Year 6           |
| Brad      | 8                            | Year 5/6         |
| Chelsea   | 4                            | Year 4           |

[1] In Australian schools, the variables that make up an ICSEA value use family background information provided to schools directly by families, including parental occupation, and the school education and non-school education levels they achieved.  The ICSEA variables also include three school characteristics: whether a school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area; the proportion of Indigenous students; and the proportion of students with language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). Schools below 1000 are considered to have a low socioeconomic value.

| Kate | 5 | Year 5 |
|---|---|---|
| Talia | 2 | Year 3 |
| Verity | 10 | Year 3/4 |
| Ashley | 12 | Year 6 |
| Ariana | 6 | Year 6 |
| Bridget | 14 | Year 5 |
| Freya | 30 | Teacher support role |
| Leah | 20 | Year 6 |
| Savanna | 7 | Year 5 |

The analytical approach taken in this project was guided by Archer's (2012) theoretical constructs. Emergent properties (personal (PEPs), cultural (CEPs), structural (SEPs)), guided a deductive analysis of teacher interview transcripts using the qualitative software package NVivo. The data analysis process was shared and discussed among the researchers at different intervals using Zoom (a password protected video conferencing and file sharing platform). Emerging findings from the interviews and implications were presented and reviewed at an international conference (Ryan, et al., 2019). Feedback received as part of this process facilitated the exploration of additional perspectives and interpretations of data at various stages of data analysis.

Emergent properties were indicated by talk related to personal identity: emotions, beliefs, worldviews, self-efficacy and individual capabilities (PEPs); talk related to systems, practices and resources (SEPs); and talk related to prevailing beliefs, norms, ideologies and expectations of the school, education system, parents, or community (CEPs). These indicators provided insights into reasoning, prioritising and justifying of decisions and actions as a reflexive process in teaching writing. The next step of transcript analysis was coding the emergent properties in terms of how they were experienced as enabling or constraining (as indicated by the teachers and supported by the research literature). The analysis enabled us to interrogate writing teachers' priorities and perspectives at a time when there are tensions between catering for diversity and being accountable for reductive tests that drive the curriculum (Kerkham & Comber 2016; Morrell, 2017).

The video analyses were guided by a frequently cited SEP by teachers: the concept of time. Video data of classroom observations were analysed using the ELAN software (Lausberg & Sloetjes, 2009) (Figure 1) which can be used to identify occurrences and length of teacher talk, student talk, silence, and writing time (see Figure 1). We developed a coding scheme with pre-defined categories to 1) identify dominant participants in interaction (teacher vs. students), 2) decide if the segment conveys writing talk or management talk, and 3) reveal which aspects of writing are attended to by participants (including audience, text structure, ideas, cohesion, character and setting, persuasive devices, vocabulary, paragraphing, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling). The unit of analysis was a segment of video with a common purpose or functionality along the identified aspects of interest. Video analyses enabled a nuanced understanding of the concept of time and how it is organised during lessons, the power differentials in terms of talk time and student focused time, and the prioritisation of particular types of talk as identified above.

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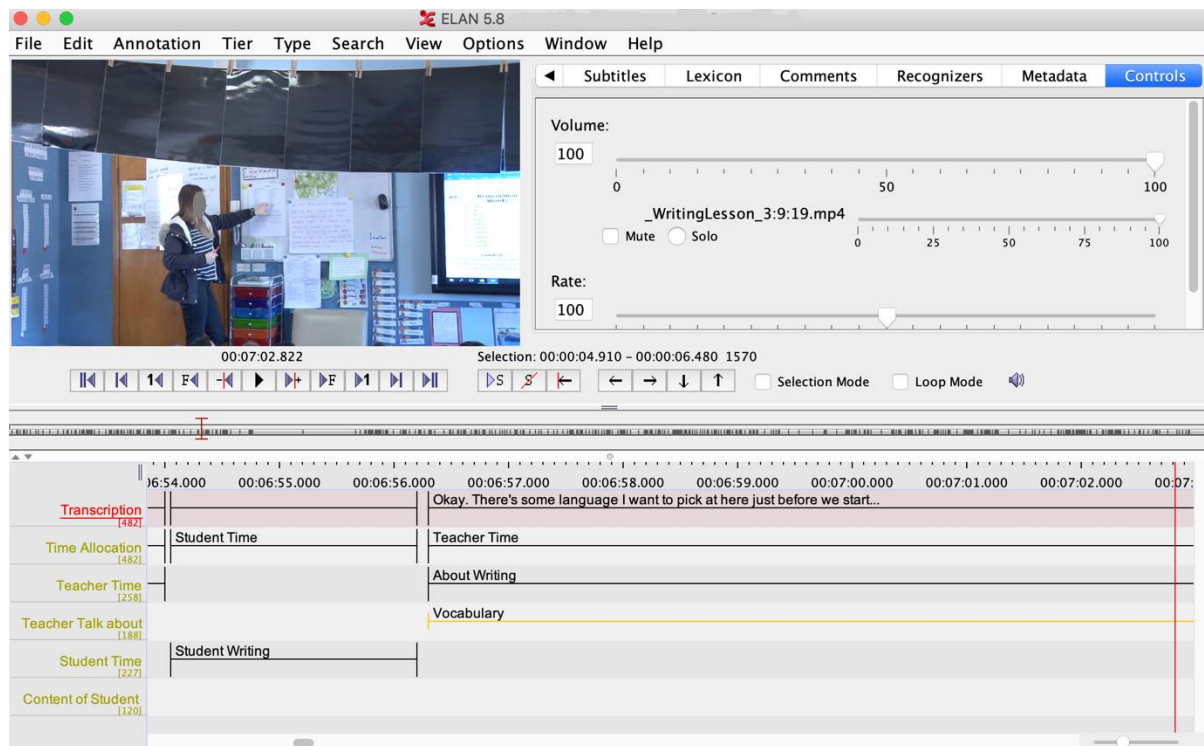https://doi.org/10.1177/07410883211005558

*Figure 1.* Video Analysis Sample File

We employed the following strategies to ensure inter-rater reliability, trustworthiness and credibility (Cope et al., 2014). The two analysts involved in this project had sound judgement of the components of writing process and were well versed in the coding scheme. The analysts kept notes of the decisions during analysis as they progressed and described how conclusions were established. While we did not conduct statistical analyses on inter-rater reliability in this qualitative study, full agreement was reached between the two coders through constant checking, and the coding scheme was found to be clear and easy to delineate. The notes were also reviewed by a third member of the research team for confirmability (Cope et al., 2014). Upon reaching an understanding of classroom dynamics, the initial findings were discussed with the research team for feedback. Additionally, we enhanced credibility by member checking (Cope et al., 2014) and asked our research participants to validate the legitimacy of our analytic interpretations in the analysis of videos. Through this process, we received feedback about our conclusions of the patterns of classroom interaction.

# Findings

First, we present the deductive analyses of the teacher interviews, using the personal, structural and cultural emergent properties from Archer (2012). Next, we outline the analyses of teacher talk from the classroom videos, with explanatory commentary on the consistencies and inconsistencies across these data sets.

## Personal Emergent Properties

There were a number of personal properties of enablement and constraint represented across these data: 1) teachers' interest and motivation (n= 14), 2) teachers' reflective approach to practice (n= 12), including teachers identifying their own learning needs, 3) teachers' scope and confidence in their knowledge and practice (n= 10), and 4) their reliance on commercial programs (n= 9). While enabling properties included a high motivation to teach writing and a reflective approach, constraining properties were evident in teachers' lack of confidence and their reliance on commercial programs to underpin their writing programs. Below, we look at some of the examples.

Leah shares her high motivation to teach English and the importance of teachers engaging in reading and writing. Her approach is supported by research (Slavin et. al., 2019) that indicates a balance of reading and writing is important for developing writing skills, as is the creation of a motivating environment for positive learning:

> Probably one of my favourite subjects to teach, is English. I love literature in general and I love showing my love of books, whether it's from non-fiction to fiction and I read in the classroom and I'm always showing them that I'm reading. I think they need to see you as well as someone who is not only a teacher of writing, but you are a writer as well. (Leah)

Her repeated use of "love" collocated with "literature", "books" and "sharing knowledge of literature", indicates a predilection for using authentic texts to motivate students. Cremin and colleagues (2020) support this approach yet also caution that teachers' engagement in reading and writing is not sufficient for pedagogical transfer to classrooms. Another teacher, Verity, also indicates enabling expectations in her pedagogical approach but focuses on students as active designers of text, which has strong support from the research literature (see Kervin et. al., 2017). When asked about students' learning Verity notes:

> What do they need to be able to do? They're not waiting for the teacher to give them the ideas themselves. They're able to start thinking about their life experiences and thinking about other stories that they've read. They're able to connect ideas together from, yeah, a range of sources to create their own texts. When something doesn't make sense in their writing that they can recognise it and have strategies to fix it. (Verity)

She uses active terms or phrases such as "generate", "connect ideas", "recognise when something doesn't make sense" and "have strategies to fix it". Previous research supports this view of active design and has shown that pedagogies that support independence and authorial possibilities are much more effective than interactions and feedback that steer students towards pre-determined right answers (Graham, Harris & Hebert, 2011; Slavin et. al., 2019; Sortkær, 2019). Ellen, on the

other hand, is passionate about teaching writing (enablement), but seems a little overwhelmed by the challenge of providing what each student needs to reach their full potential (constraint) (see similar findings by Bousfield & Ragusa, 2014):

> I feel passionate about writing, however, I do feel that sometimes I'm not getting it across… to figure out how do I give each student what they need for them to return a piece of writing that they can do to their full potential, and that satisfies all the outcomes, and to the best of their ability. (Ellen)

She wants to "figure out" how to help students to "satisf(y) all the outcomes" and is reflective about not having all the answers stating that she "always want(s) to learn". A number of the teacher participants in this study indicated a desire for more extensive professional learning about the teaching of writing. They indicated constraints in their knowledge and practice, which undermined their confidence.

> I struggle a little bit in front of the Stage 3s [Years 5-6] with making sure that I've got everything that's correct as a model. Making sure I've got complex sentences and compound - and all of those devices that you need in there but I find that I have to refresh myself a lot before I do anything like that because I'm just always second guessing. (Chelsea)

Chelsea uses terms like "struggle", "have to refresh" and "always second-guessing" as she explains her lack of confidence about her own metalinguistic knowledge. She also talks about a "model" and "all of those devices you need in there" which suggests a reliance on a formulaic text type rather than active design of writing for audience, context and purpose. Some of the issues that arise with this lack of confidence and knowledge is the reliance on formulas and commercial programs (see Ryan and Barton, 2014), as well as ineffective pedagogical moves (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016). Jaclyn and Hannah for example, both indicate their use of commercial programs that use proformas and steps:

> You've got the On Writing, you've got other - the who, what, where, when, you can use all different sorts of proformas (Jaclyn)

> Even as a third-year teacher, I guess, expanding my knowledge and resources of what is out there because we do fall back to, okay, we've got our Seven Steps program and we use those kind of things. (Hannah)

Jaclyn lists the "different sorts of proformas" that are available and widely used by teachers who are time-poor and often unable to access high quality professional learning. Hannah recognises that she needs to expand "her knowledge and resources" as "we do fall back to" commercially produced programs. There is clear research evidence that emphasizes the importance of helping teachers to understand what their students are learning and applying in their writing so they can have metalinguistic conversations that move beyond form to function (see Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013; Matre & Solheim, 2016). Bridget acknowledges that she finds writing a challenge and relies on her own "research on things with teaching and writing" or support from colleagues. Ashley similarly relies on her own knowledge, her colleagues, or what she can find online:

> As a writer - I'm not an avid writer, reader or writer so writing is always a challenge for me as a teacher as well. But I just I suppose just stay in a positive mindset. But, yeah most of my support will come from my colleagues or my own research on things with teaching and writing. (Bridget)

> I would not say that I'm a leading teacher in this area. We're lucky in Year 6 to have a great team of teachers who are our first port of call when seeking support. We also tap into some online documents if required but I'm more of a people person, so we talk about things, yeah. (Ashley)

These teachers are clearly motivated to provide quality writing experiences for their students. However, given the research evidence that shows gaps in teachers metalinguistic knowledge can constrain teachers' capacity to lead purposeful learning talk about language choices (Myhill & Newman, 2016), positive attitudes and hard work are not entirely sufficient to lift student attainment in writing.

**Structural Emergent Properties**

Structural properties represented across these interview data included 1) a support at the school level, and a cohesive school-wide approach to improvement (n= 9), 2) teachers' talk about time (n= 15), 3) standardised tests (n= 6), and 4) professional support for writing pedagogy (n= 16). The enabling properties were experienced as a high level of support at the school and effective professional support mechanisms. However, the constraining properties were evident in the narrowing of curriculum to improve results in standardised tests, and a perceived lack of professional support. Savanna explains the systematic approach and high level of support at her school:

> So we constantly refer to the curriculum to help guide our learning intentions and success criteria - which are in my room for the term - they're always up so they can always go back and see where we're heading by lesson as well… Professional development here is well above and beyond any other school I've been in. (Savanna)

Visible Learning, developed by Hattie (2015), is an approach used in this and many other schools in Australia, whereby all teachers make it clear to students what the learning intentions are, and what success criteria look like. Criticisms of this approach suggest that teachers rather than students often direct the learning goals and this approach often highlights the deficiencies in teacher knowledge rather than supporting classroom practice. Crichton and McDaid (2016) found that while learning intentions and success criteria had the potential to effect student learning, they were not necessarily well understood by teachers and were often introduced in a tokenistic way such as by asking students to write them down.

A constraint cited by every teacher in this study related to time. Writing is well acknowledged as a task that requires high cognitive load and takes significant time to produce in polished form. The teaching of writing also takes time: time to plan, time to experience writing, time to teach, time to provide regular formative feedback, and time to access professional learning. Leah bemoans her

lack of time (or allocation of time) to write herself, while Donna suggests that students need more time to write creatively and that she needs more time to support them through the creative process:

> I wish I had time – I shouldn't say I wish I had time because I do have time. I think we need to make time to be writers, because I read, I do a lot of reading, but I think at the same time we need to be able to pick up a notebook, pick up a pen and go through that writing process. (Leah)

> I think time. Kids need time to be able to be creative. They need stimulus and they need to be engaged. They need to be motivated in their writing. We need to connect to their worlds. (Donna)

Many of the teachers from our study indicate that when they want to provide authentic and engaging writing opportunities, they feel constrained by time. It is understandable that they fall back on formulas or commercially produced programs to prepare students for the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which requires either a narrative or a persuasive text. It has been noted that teachers tend not to take risks or spend more time on rich dialogues in the classroom due to these pressures (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). Bridget and Casey use of language such as "obviously", "purely because of" and "guided a lot" suggests NAPLAN is what drives their curriculum:

> Particularly in Year 5 because we have NAPLAN, so it's obviously for NAPLAN it is going to be the writing a narrative to entertain or writing a persuasion. We focus on narratives in term 1 and we focus on persuasives in term 2. That is purely because of NAPLAN. (Bridget)

> So all of Year 6 does the same thing and we do - tend to do one to two text types a term at this school. So we [currently] do narrative first term and then persuasive this term. (Casey)

Briana and Bianca also allude to a narrowing of curriculum to focus on technical skills and structures as they prepare for NAPLAN. In the time-restricted NAPLAN test students are not given a choice of topic but rather a stimulus, nor do they have an authentic audience, nor time to move through processes of planning and drafting and editing and revising. While marks are allocated for ideas and fitness for audience, the majority of marks are scored for specific evidence of grammar, syntax and structure (Ryan & Barton, 2014). Indeed, complex sentences attract higher marks than simple sentences, even when a simple sentence might be more effective for a particular style, impact or audience:

> We do a lot; we've done a lot of sentence structure because they can't structure their sentences. They use so many simple sentences and compound sentences, but we want them to be moving into that more complex sentences. (Briana)

> We still use the language, we still model some of the techniques, but we've gone back to a much more structured approach where we're going to look at text structure, we're going to look at paragraphs, we're going to look at the different elements of the NAPLAN marking criteria. (Bianca)

When time is limited and professional support is not always available, as indicated by Brad, these skill-building strategies provide more "value" in demonstrating improvement (as measured by test scores).

> I would say in terms of being a Stage 3 teacher of writing I don't think I've had a lot of professional support. I guess the support I have received would kind of be from, I don't know, just using, just looking at resources. But not a lot of actual, not a lot of professional support around writing though. (Brad)

Brad elaborates a strong theme across these data: that teachers want and need professional learning to build their knowledge, pedagogical practice repertoire and confidence in teaching writing and writing in general.

**Cultural Emergent Properties**

Cultural emergent properties represented across these data include the culture of 1) accountability (n= 9), 2) data driven practice (n= 10), 3), teacher team work and collaboration (n= 14), 4) students' risk taking (n= 4), and 5) the importance of teacher expertise and the expectation of writing programs (n= 17) which have shown to improve writing (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015). Casey explains her experiences:

> Well, we had a team teacher program where I've come from, so there were two teachers for an hour a day and that was brilliant; and we had such good results for writing and reading because we alternated it. So I did writing, she did reading and we worked in groups and we drew based on need. That was brilliant. I don't - it's expensive and not always possible but it worked really well. (Casey)

Casey articulates a common theme across these data, that is, her ideals in relation to sharing teacher expertise. She specifically links this strategy to "good results for writing". While Casey does not explicitly mention peer review, there is strong evidence that quality professional learning draws on teacher expertise in situ; however it needs to be informed by research evidence. Bowe and Gore (2016) found that when teachers systematically review and provide feedback on each other's teaching according to validated protocols, there is a long-term effect on pedagogy. Donna illustrates another enabling CEP evident across these data: ideals of a rich, authentic writing program, shown by Graham, Harris and Santangelo (2015) as important for quality writing:

> We need to involve the literacy that they're involved in, so the multimodal text. We need to involve their gaming. We need to involve movie trailers. We need to involve iPads; soundtracks; GarageBand. We need to involve things like them creating raps. Advertisements that are for products that they create or that they're interested in. We need to tap into their worlds to engage them. (Donna)

Despite a strong theme of constraining systems and expectations around writing, many of these participants held to the ideal of more authentic and motivating, yet time-consuming, approaches to connect to students' worlds. The following quote from Kate, however, illustrates the constraints around compliance and accountability:

> I think they just need more of that rote learning, I suppose. They're still even learning the expectations from the teachers in the classrooms. I think last year the Stage 3 classes were very rocky. Now they've come in and disciplined and expectations in the classroom is really there. (Kate)

Kate indicates a strong expectation of compliance from students, including terms such as "rote learning", "expectations" and "disciplined". The climate of accountability appears to engender a desire for control from many of these teachers, particularly those from schools that are performing below benchmarked expectations. Ginsberg and Kingston (2014) argue that when accountability drivers such as test scores are used in punitive ways, teachers tend to maintain order, control and prescription.

Visible Learning (Hattie, 2015) is a strong ideology evident in these data. As reported earlier, learning intentions and success criteria can have the potential to make a difference to student learning, however not when they are implemented without an understanding of the underpinning ideals:

> The learning progressions… we're constantly referring to them and showing the students in class where we're taking it from, the achievement standard and highlighting it so it's very clear to them the purpose and why we're doing it… I think the learning intentions and success criteria so it's very clear why we're doing it. Where we're going. I constantly refer to that. (Ariana)

> We definitely go from their outcomes and the kids are very aware of their learning intentions for a writing lesson. That's made explicit to them at the beginning of the lesson. They will use things like feedback crosses and stuff to see whether they've achieved it in their reflection at the end. (Donna)

Ariana and Donna make it clear that students are accountable for achieving goals. A strong ideal evident throughout these data, however, is that the teacher sets the learning goals, rather than the students. Language such as "it's very clear to them", "where we're taking it from", "made explicit to them" indicate teacher control rather than student self-regulation, a strategy shown to lift attainment in writing (Slavin et al., 2019):

> I've really caught on with Visible Learning. So I'm the one that makes our little charts on the walls that you'll see and I send it to the rest of them and it's just basically like a Bump It Up wall, with their goals. Where they're at. So when you walk to my classroom, you 'll see it all up. (Gen)

Gen explains an increased level of accountability with the use of data walls to visualise and compare student progress. While these approaches can mean that teachers are more informed about data and assessment (see Gorur, 2016), there is very little evidence of the utility of data walls to improve teaching and learning (Koyama, 2013). Despite the focus on large scale comparative student test data, no research has yet to show that such data has been used to design instructional practices to improve achievement (Amrein-Beardsley, Collins, Polasky & Sloat, 2013). Indeed, as

indicated earlier, Graham, Hebert and Harris (2015) showed that monitoring writing over time had no effect on writing quality.

Given a major constraint highlighted by many of our teachers was "time" we share in the next section a detailed analysis of classroom observation data to understand how time was typically used by these teachers during writing lessons.

**Classroom Video Analyses**

Time's apportioning and its allocation to different aspects of teaching and learning provide a complementary lens to understand the classroom practices and priorities of teachers (see also Rietdijk, van den Bergh, van Weijen, Janssen, and Rijlaarsdam, 2018). We searched for patterns of classroom interaction across the data by initiating a content analysis in ELAN (https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan) related to classroom management talk and talk about different aspects of writing. We identified three different patterns of classroom interaction:
1. Teacher dominant talk focused on classroom management (n =3)
2. Teacher dominant talk focused on writing (n= 7)
3. Student dominant talk focused on writing (n= 9)

***Category 1: Teacher Dominant Talk Focused on Classroom Management***

In this type of classroom interaction, the time allocated to teacher talk was significantly more than the time allocated to students (Table 2). The observed pattern in this category is in line with the early findings of classroom interaction studies. Flanders (1970) systematic observations of classrooms in the USA showed that about two-thirds of classroom time was devoted to talking and about two-thirds of this time the person talking was the teacher. Rietdijk and colleagues (2018) also found that 27% of time in writing classrooms was taken up with teacher management talk.

We further observed that the practice of writing accounted for only 6 percent of the classroom time on average. There is strong evidence that allowing time for frequent writing improves writing (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015). The content of the lessons in this category was mainly focused on improving vocabulary, and only a little attention was given to the other aspects including ideas and audience. Table 2 summarises more details about this category including the average duration, percentage of talk, and latency. The percentage of talk is defined as the total duration of the selected parts of the video, relative to the total duration of the lesson. Latency indicates the time interval between the beginning of the observation period and the first occurrence of an annotation.

Table 2

*Average Time Allocation in Category 1*

| Time Allocation | Average Duration in Minutes | Average Percentage | Average Latency |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Silence | 2.60 | %10 | 7.08 |
| Student Time | 8.41 | %26 | 6.40 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher Time | 20.97 | %63 | 0.00 |
| **Overall Teacher Talk** | | | |
| About Writing | 8.57 | %24 | 6.43 |
| Classroom Management | 12.30 | %39 | 0.16 |
| **Types of Teacher Talk about Writing** | | | |
| Audience | 0.40 | %1 | 12.86 |
| Ideas | 3.30 | %12 | 6.95 |
| Vocabulary | 4.72 | %10 | 11.33 |
| **Overall Student Time** | | | |
| Student Talk | 5.75 | %21 | 6.40 |
| Student Writing | 2.63 | %6 | 23.63 |
| **Types of Student Talk about Writing** | | | |
| Audience | 0.15 | %0.3 | 0.02 |
| Ideas | 2.06 | %7 | 6.59 |
| Vocabulary | 4.54 | %10 | 15.04 |

The asymmetrical interaction between teachers and students (Galton, 1987) suggests that teachers often spend a majority of the classroom time talking to students, meaning students have limited opportunities to interact with their peers and the teacher nor to practice writing on their own (in Table 2, writing time does not begin, on average, until almost 24 minutes into the lesson). When we look at these findings in relation to the interview data, it is not surprising that some teachers control the lesson time when they are so concerned about time (SEP), particularly in relation to accountability requirements related to standardised test results (CEP). In addition, their lack of confidence about their knowledge and skills in teaching writing (PEP) may lead them to use more management talk than writing talk. The evidence suggests that there is a need for a better balance in the use of time by teachers to improve students' social interaction and their engagement in co-construction processes of knowledge in the classroom and to provide regular feedback on writing (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015; Slavin et al., 2019).

### *Category 2: Teacher Dominant Talk Focused on Writing*

Similarly, the second type of classroom interaction was teacher dominant with the majority of classroom time devoted to teacher talk (Table 3). In this category, we observed a relatively stronger focus on writing with an average of 18 percent of the observation period. The content of the talk was diverse with the majority of teacher talk about ideas and text structure. Interestingly, in both Table 2 and Table 3, the student talk reflected the teacher talk. Despite the teacher's focussed talk on writing, students were not given extended opportunities to practice writing in the class.

Table 3

*Average Time Allocation in Category 2*

| Time Allocation | Average Duration in Minutes | Average Percentage | Average Latency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Silence | 1.52 | %3 | 1.27 |
| Student Time | 14.92 | %34 | 1.92 |
| Teacher Time | 24.01 | %55 | 0.06 |
| **Teacher Talk** | | | |
| About Writing | 21.86 | %50 | 0.52 |
| Classroom Management | 6.22 | %14 | 3.12 |
| **Teacher Talk about Writing** | | | |
| Audience | 0.89 | %2 | 5.72 |
| Character and Setting | 1.23 | %3 | 11.04 |
| Cohesion | 0.44 | %1 | 10.50 |
| Ideas | 7.64 | %18 | 1.64 |
| Paragraphing | 0.02 | %0.03 | 25.15 |
| Persuasive Devices | 2.87 | %7 | 3.72 |
| Punctuation | 0.30 | %0.7 | 10.83 |
| Sentence Structure | 1.47 | %3 | 23.71 |
| Spelling | 0.28 | %0.6 | 25.09 |
| Text Structure | 4.79 | %11 | 4.57 |
| Vocabulary | 1.95 | %4 | 6.98 |
| **Student Time** | | | |
| Student Talk | 7.01 | %16 | 1.92 |
| Student Writing | 7.89 | %18 | 19.92 |
| **Content of Student Talk** | | | |
| Audience | 0.18 | %0.4 | 5.93 |
| Character and Setting | 0.48 | %1 | 13.05 |
| Cohesion | 0.11 | %0.3 | 11.31 |
| Ideas | 3.90 | %9 | 3.92 |
| Paragraphing | 0.01 | %0.02 | 25.12 |
| Persuasive Devices | 1.04 | %2 | 7.49 |
| Punctuation | 0.11 | %0.3 | 6.02 |
| Sentence Structure | 0.20 | %0.5 | 24.65 |
| Spelling | 0.06 | %0.1 | 13.69 |
| Text Structure | 2.20 | %5 | 7.83 |
| Vocabulary | 0.82 | %2 | 9.13 |

Teacher dominance in talk and the lack of attention to audience and textual forms, suggests the absence of metatalk in both categories 1 and 2 and again relates to teachers' knowledge and skills

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in writing (PEP). Metatalk is at the core of dialogic teaching to help with the improvement of students' metalinguistic understanding of writing (Myhill, Jones & Wilson, 2016). This strategy requires more frequent turn-taking in talk and therefore better allocation of time (SEP) to students to contribute to the classroom interaction. A pedagogical strategy that emphasizes the relationship between linguistic choices and their effects on the *audience* improves metalinguistic understanding (Myhill et al., 2016). Given that standardised tests do not have a 'real' audience, less focus on this aspect is consistent with teachers' constraints around accountability (CEP).

### Category 3: Student Dominant Talk: Oscillation Between Classroom Management and Writing

We observed a higher time ratio of students' contribution to the classroom interaction within this category (see Table 4). In one of the cases, teacher talk was predominantly about writing. However, the remaining cases had a significant proportion of the teacher talk devoted to classroom management. The content of the talk was diverse across different lessons but showed a lack of attention to cohesion, audience or how textual forms can be manipulated for particular meanings (Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013), potentially because of teachers' lack of confidence in their writing knowledge (PEP). This category is interesting in that student talk does not necessarily reflect teacher talk, with the highest percentage of students' talk about character and setting. Even though this category showed more time (SEP) being spent by students practising writing in the classroom, which is crucial to the improvement of writing (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015), there was no strong evidence of regular feedback (particularly about developing areas of student interest such as character and setting), which has been shown to enhance writing quality (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015; Slavin et al., 2019).

Table 4

*Average Time Allocation in Category 3*

| Time Allocation | Average Duration in Minutes | Average Percentage | Average Latency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Silence | 0.32 | %0.7 | 3.08 |
| Student Time | 28.38 | %65 | 1.59 |
| Teacher Time | 15.56 | %35 | 0.005 |
| **Teacher Talk** | | | |
| About Writing | 13.54 | %30 | 0.68 |
| Classroom Management | 4.53 | %10 | 0.18 |
| **Teacher Talk about Writing** | | | |
| Audience | 0.23 | %1 | 12.13 |
| Character and Setting | 1.87 | %4 | 2.82 |
| Cohesion | NA | NA | NA |
| Ideas | 3.76 | %8 | 4.92 |
| Paragraphing | 0.90 | %2 | 9.61 |
| Persuasive Devices | 1.28 | %3 | 3.83 |
| Punctuation | 0.24 | %1 | 11.16 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sentence Structure | 0.27 | %1 | 12.37 |
| Spelling | 0.63 | %1 | 15.38 |
| Text Structure | 2.81 | %6 | 3.30 |
| Vocabulary | 1.51 | %3 | 8.26 |
| **Student Time** | | | |
| Student Talk | 4.43 | %10 | 1.62 |
| Student Writing | 24.05 | %55 | 16.72 |
| **Content of Student Talk** | | | |
| Audience | 0.02 | %0.05 | 9 |
| Character and Setting | 6.17 | %14 | 4.70 |
| Cohesion | NA | NA | NA |
| Ideas | 5.01 | %11 | 4.31 |
| Paragraphing | 1.90 | %4 | 15.84 |
| Persuasive Devices | 1.12 | %3 | 6.01 |
| Punctuation | 0.06 | %0.1 | 8.86 |
| Sentence Structure | 0.01 | %0.01 | 18.88 |
| Spelling | 0.07 | %0.2 | 11.56 |
| Text Structure | 10.85 | %25 | 9.61 |
| Vocabulary | 0.63 | %1 | 7.05 |

Turning to the individual teachers, Figure 2 presents the entire spectrum of different types of classroom interactions within each category.
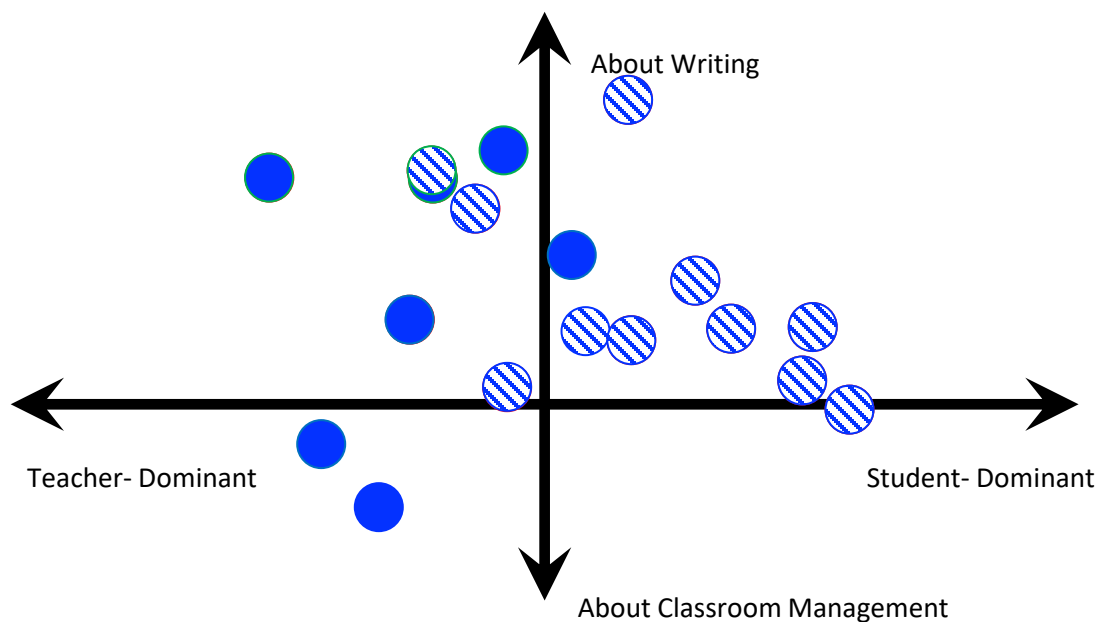
*Figure 2*: Patterns of Interaction within the Three Categories. Circles represent writing lessons and dash lines indicate students opportunity to practice writing in the class.

Cases located on the top side of the horizontal axis in Figure 2 illustrate classroom talk that is more about writing. Similarly, cases illustrated on the right side of the vertical axis are examples of student dominant classroom interactions. We observed that students had more time to practice writing when the interaction was student dominant or when it was almost balanced with students and teachers having nearly equal opportunities to contribute to talk.

In many ways, these analyses of the classroom videos illustrative the emergent relationships (as outlined in their interviews) between teachers' personal knowledge, skills and confidence (PEPs); the structures that they work within (e.g., NAPLAN, data walls, different levels of professional support) (SEPs); and the expectations and accountabilities permeating our education systems (CEPs). Teacher knowledge about writing and about high quality and impactful feedback is a crucial lynchpin here. Time to write is essential for improving writing (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015), but when coupled with explicit teaching about textual forms and functions, along with regular, metalinguistic feedback, writing can be greatly enhanced (Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013; Slavin et al., 2019). Teachers who receive support for improving their knowledge about language, text and effective pedagogical strategies in writing, will be better equipped to take pedagogical risks, to relinquish more control to their students and to use their time more efficiently for improved student outcomes. We argue that if personal emergent properties such as deep knowledge and confidence to teach writing are well-developed, then teachers are more equipped to manage the structural and cultural conditions that emerge and change.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper we have used Archer's (2000, 2012) social realist theory of reflexivity, to argue that three key types of emergent properties - personal, structural and cultural – are important for understanding how teachers of writing explain and prioritise their practice. In our research design and implementation, we moved beyond reflective practice, to reflexive conceptions of the mediation of self and context in order to plan and implement transformative action. The study is significant in that it provided, through this lens of reflexivity, a nuanced account of how these primary teachers experienced and understood writing practice and pedagogy as both enabling and constraining. These data provided the stimulus for teachers to reflexively set their own goals for professional learning.

The participants in this study experienced enabling conditions related to their high motivation to teach writing and their reflexive approach in identifying their own needs (PEPs). For some, a high level of support at the school level, and a cohesive school-wide approach to improvement was evident (SEPs). In addition, clear ideologies about the importance of teacher expertise and the expectation of rich, authentic writing programs (CEPs) were identified. Constraining properties were evident in teachers' scope and confidence in their knowledge and practice and their reliance on commercial programs to underpin their writing programs (PEPs). In addition, teachers' concerns about and management of time, the narrowing of curriculum to improve results in standardised tests, and a perceived lack of professional support for writing pedagogy (SEPs); and the pressure around norms and expectations of compliance and accountability CEPs) were

common across these data. The themes from the interviews were also evident in the video analyses of time allocation to teachers' vs students' activities; percentage of talk about classroom management and writing; and time allocated for students to write. For example, teachers' writing knowledge and skills affect the time they allocate to different aspects of teaching writing (Exley, Kervin & Mantei, 2016; Rietdijk, et al., 2018), the planning and pacing of the lesson (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016), and the type and quality of feedback they provide (Newman & Myhill, 2016). The pressure they feel around accountability and value-added models of achievement (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2013) also contributes to the level of control they maintain in their classrooms (Crichton & McDaid, 2016; Ginsberg & Kingston, 2014).

These findings have important implications for teachers' professional learning and the ways in which schools approach their writing programs. First, research tells us that monitoring writing over time will not improve students' writing (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015). This means that data walls, and the use of standardised tests to drive curriculum and pedagogy which cause undue stress (Rice, Dulfer, Polesel & O'Hanlon, 2016), will be unlikely to improve students' achievement, and will take time away from the strategies (discussed earlier) that show evidence of contributing to writing improvement.

Secondly, teachers need access to ongoing, contextually relevant professional learning about writing and writing pedagogy. McKeown and colleagues (2016) indicated that more research is needed that explores the contextual conditions and personal knowledge and motivation of teachers in relation to their engagement in professional learning. For example, allowing teachers to select professional development leads to sustained higher fidelity and quality of implementation in their classroom.   Teachers can reflexively interrogate their own knowledge and skills, and the needs of their students, so they can seek timely and relevant professional support. Teachers who write will have a passion for motivating students to write; however, unless they also have metalinguistic knowledge (Newman & Myhill, 2016) and link this to pedagogical knowledge and transfer, they will not necessarily improve students' attainment (Cremin, Myhill, Eyres, Nash, Wilson & Oliver, 2020). If teachers have strong and durable PEPs they can more easily manage the contextual conditions that emerge.

Finally, teachers can start to account for the ways in which they use time. These teachers all cited time as a constraint; however, some small adjustments in their allocation and prioritisation of time have the potential to make a big difference in improving students' writing. Enabling more time to write (Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015); more time to talk about writing form and function with their students (Myhill, Jones & Wilson, 2016); and short, explicit mini-lessons on relevant key concepts (rather than using formulaic programs) (Graham et al., 2012); will provide much more value in a shorter time period.

The teachers in this study experienced these emergent writing conditions in varying degrees and combinations across their contexts. They were highly motivated to provide the right support for their students. Of course, implementing evidence-based writing instruction is challenging as there is no guarantee that evidence of success in multiple research studies will lead to success in every emergent context (McKeown et al., 2016). A deep and reflexive understanding of how their own language, processes and pedagogies can interact in their writing classrooms is an important step to ensure that their students engage in writing and improve this important skill.

We acknowledge the limitations of the study in that our analyses in this paper were based on only the initial interviews with teachers and on a small selection of lesson observations for each teacher. However, the findings provided rich insights for us to use in dialogue with these teachers in the subsequent phase of the project. Future research from this project will document the outcomes of a sustained classroom innovation strategy in which the researchers worked alongside teachers to implement the goals that the teachers set in response to the data collected from students, teachers and classroom observations.

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Appendix

*Semi structured interviews with teachers*

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| Initial interviews explored teachers' approaches to writing, and their pedagogy:<br>• Demographic Info: Name/ School/ Yr level/ Degrees/ Years of Teaching experience/ Years of teaching in that year level<br>• What is your approach to writing at your school? Do you have a writing program?<br>• How do you break up the curriculum (e.g. What text types do you cover at each year level)<br>• How do you introduce a new text type?<br>• What teaching strategies do you use when teaching writing?<br>• What support documents do you use to guide your teaching (How does the curriculum, syllabus, learning progressions inform what you do?)<br>• How do you see yourself as a teacher of writing? (Where do you get support for professional development?)<br>• How do you see yourself as a writer outside of a classroom?<br>• What kind of knowledge and skills do your students need in order to engage successfully with writing practices? (How do you respond to those needs in your day to day writing pedagogy) |

Ryan, M., Khosronejad, M., Barton, G., Kervin, L. & Myhill, D. (2021). A reflexive approach to teaching writing: Enablements and constraints in primary school classrooms. *Written Communication.* https://doi.org/10.1177/07410883211005558

- What do you think are the optimum classroom conditions to support quality writing?