

**SABBATICAL STUDY
2010**

**USING
AUTHENTIC AUTHORSHIP
TO
PROMOTE
CREATIVE WRITING**

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PURPOSE

To explore creative writing programmes for children with a particular focus on gifted and talented students.

This paper explores the following:

1. To investigate the core creative writing strategies that a published author employs to teach children, particularly those who are identified as Gifted and Talented.
2. To research programmes for students in the area of creative writing with a particular focus on authorship as a means of developing not only writing skills, but a lifelong passion for writing. My focus is on Gifted and Talented students, but my findings can be applied to all students to help develop a love of writing.

BACKGROUND

Over the past two years St Theresa's School has been involved in a whole school professional development programme to improve the teaching of writing. As a staff we have explored our beliefs, knowledge and practices about writing, used writing achievement data to inform the teaching of writing processes, investigated the role of professional discussion about students' writing to enhance teachers' knowledge about the writing processes and writing pedagogy, and constructed with students what they are learning and why in writing.

Over the same period of time, St Theresa's staff has been involved in professional development to identify and cater more effectively to our gifted and talented students.

A key focus of the NZ Curriculum is for children to become life-long learners, requiring schools to find ways to empower students to learn through authentic and meaningful experiences.

My research consisted of interviewing a published author and teacher who is currently running a creative writing programme for Gifted and Talented students, investigating the Annual Book Awards competition in St Mary's Primary School in Hastings and summarising the findings.

FINDINGS

STUDENTS AS AUTHORS – ANNUAL BOOK AWARDS

INTERVIEW WITH SCHOOL LIBRARIAN AND ORGANISER OF WRITERS' BOOK AWARDS

The St Mary's Book Awards started in 2008. There were a number of talented writers in the school who talked about what they were writing with the same enthusiasm and the school librarian who initiated this competition, wanted a vehicle for them to actually have a professional copy of their story, their own *Real Book*, which could go into the library and be read and enjoyed by more children than one published in a classroom.

The Book Awards are embedded into the culture of the school because they are successful. Children respond to it, parents love it, the Board loves it, (when the books are finished, a selection of them are displayed at the Board Meeting), the local newspaper *Hawkes Bay Today* has written about it, the books have been displayed at the City library, all of which motivate and inspire both the children and the community.

The person organising it takes responsibility for its promotion at Assembly, to individual classes in their library time if the teachers want, and **much** one to one talk to entrants and potential entrants about entering. Anyone can enter. The answer to any of the children's questions about entry is Yes. So yes, they can enter a non fiction or a comic or whatever and it will be fitted into a category. Flexibility is the key, to make it easy and possible for any students who wish to, to enter.

The Book Award competition is judged by the librarian and the principal. There are four finalists chosen in each category. Categories are junior fiction (that is, fiction aimed at young readers), general fiction and picture book. Each finalist team of author and illustrator meets with the librarian to discuss how the pictures will be drawn to enhance the story, and how the book will look. The authors are usually very clear about how they visualise their book and have no difficulty articulating this. The manuscript is then edited, typed up and made into the book. The cover is prepared (and for the picture books, the pictures) and colour copied, and the books are made up. The books are judged on the final published presentation. The one overall winner for each category is then announced at a special school assembly.

Talking to the children class by class to introduce and talk about the Book Awards competition is an effective way of promoting it. It attracts the attention of more children, and their many questions can be answered on the spot. However, the books themselves are the best advertisement, and the best prize.

In the past there was a category for “design a book cover” but because in the last 2 years no one has entered it, this has been dropped. Instead, the children and librarian work together on the cover of their book.

The whole process takes from March to November.

The cost of copying comes 50% from library and 50% from literacy budgets. The paper used is not the usual photocopy paper.

The pages of all books are 100gsm (photocopy is 80).

Fiction covers and picture book front covers are printed on 300gsm.

Back covers of picture books are on 1000 micron formacote.

Four copies of each book are produced, two for the school library, one for the author and one for the illustrator. Only one copy of the picture books is produced for library because of the cost.

In the past, extra copies were printed off free for parents who had requested, but last year \$10 per book was charged for anyone who asked, and in 2010 that cost will be \$15. This is not promoted because book production is labour intensive. It would not be a good fundraiser because the cost of each book is about \$12 per picture book and \$5 per fiction, without taking into account the labour involved.

Parents can support and encourage their child but cannot provide the ideas or do the writing for them. The entry form now asks specifically whether the entrant received help and to what degree, or if they got the idea from something they’d read or seen. This is acceptable (there are, for instance, many versions of Cinderella!) but students are expected to openly declare this.

There have been instances in the past where parents have actually written the story or drawn the pictures which were then passed off as the student’s own work. Such transcripts were subsequently eliminated.

Parents are expected to allow their child the freedom to write their own story. They can of course provide encouragement and positive support, and can help with surface features, or by emailing the entry in (which makes editing and publishing easier).

Parents showed support for the Book Awards by attending the presentation awards ceremony en masse, which was very positive and unexpected.

CHILDREN’S VOICE

INTERVIEW WITH BOOK AWARDS ENTRANTS

Students described a variety of reasons for entering the Book Awards. Reasons included the challenge of writing a book, the competitive element and the excitement of not knowing who would win, and getting their own book published. Others were encouraged by parents and friends to enter. Some children acknowledged that they are good writers because they have a great imagination and wanted to share it with others, or are good with words (like similes, adjectives and vocabulary). One was inspired by his sister who had entered the previous year and wanted to rise to the challenge she had set.

The students felt that they had learnt from the experience of entering the competition. Comments made by student authors show that their self knowledge and knowledge about the craft of writing had grown through this experience.

I believe in my ability to write. I used to be ashamed of being a writer but now I'm not. I used to hate writing but now I don't.

I learnt that stories don't always get finished and that's OK.

You have to have patience and perseverance.

You need lots of personal experience to use in your writing.

You need lots of vocabulary.

You need to know how to show your emotions in writing.

You need to have knowledge (about your topic) and how to write about it.

You need to have a really good imagination.

They described their understanding of editing their work in the following ways -

Check punctuation and spelling – surface features.

Make sure it makes sense.

“Skinny it up” – you have to take out all the bits that don't help your story because they are not important.

Deeper features – you need to put in good adjectives or adverbs or similes.

When asked about who supported them as writers, all students said family and/or Mum and Dad, and several said friends and teachers.

When asked where they see their writing “taking” them as they grew up, the responses were varied-

Writing for a magazine and being a part time writer (because being a full time writer only happens later when you have made enough money to live on)

It will help at University to write assignments

It will help me pass spelling tests.

Writing stories

It will be a hobby when I get older.

It will help me do exams and at college.

Writing books.

I will be a bookseller and writer all over Australia and NZ

Help me write a good CV to get a job

TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

INTERVIEW WITH A PUBLISHED AUTHOR/TEACHER

The Creative Writing programme for Gifted Students at St Theresa's School in Plimmerton looks at what makes a good narrative. Depending on the length of the lesson/programme which should ideally be run twice a week.

SPECIFIC AREAS OF FOCUS

Within a writing lesson, the following areas need to be addressed in order for students to grasp the process of effective authorship:

- the structure of a narrative
- character development
- plot
- point of view;
- showing not telling
- thinking outside the box
- a twist in the tail
- filtering
- *'killing your darlings' * Admitting that your much loved idea/character etc does not now fit with the tone/plot etc and cutting it out of the story completely.
- editing

KEY ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE WRITING LESSON

For the success of a sound creative writing programme, the teacher needs to attend to the following key elements:

Students need to experience the **fun and enjoyment** that creating a good narrative can bring. A storyteller gets to create a whole new world and fill it with quirky characters, exciting adventures, suspenseful moments, unexpected complications and finish the story with an ending of their choice. This world, their creation, is not bound by a time line, nor by geography, nor fact.

Providing a **supportive atmosphere** where each student feels confident enough to share their work with others is important. The group is there to support and encourage.

Continually promote the idea that **no idea is a bad idea**. However a particular idea may work better in another story. (This is when 'killing your darlings' and audience awareness would be explained.)

Give children permission to tap into their own **originality** – don't write about wizards just because everyone else is writing about them. But, if you are passionate about writing about wizards then add a twist; make your wizard stand out from the others.

Praise and encourage a strength in a student's writing and also talk about what could make it even stronger. This could mean reworking the plot – getting rid of unnecessary dialogue, characters and situations etc.

Students need to see and hear the teacher's enthusiasm about their ability to create their own worlds (see above). This will encourage their self-belief and 'can do' attitude.

The environment needs to be one of 'no idea is a bad idea,' and one of mutual support of one another's work.

They need to understand that 'tweaking', pruning and editing make their story even more enjoyable for the reader.

SELECTING STUDENTS

Choosing children for a creative writing programme should be done on the basis of the children who enjoy **the art of storytelling** – not just writing and reading stories –

but listening and speaking. Some children, although weak at writing, have wonderful imaginations. They could have the chance to tell their stories either orally (audio/transcript) or through graphic novels etc. Imagine the ideas that could flow if a strong 'literate' writer and an 'oral' writer paired up! This is possible in a flexible and creative learning environment.

FURTHER IDEAS FOR WHOLE CLASS TEACHING

Small groups work well. In a classroom situation another teacher/helper would be beneficial to encourage and advise with the storyline or help with editing and finishing.

If the children feel that they are in a supportive group then they feel safe to explore their creative ideas and to share it with the others. Reading out their work to the group is voluntary. A shy student may take a little longer but, after a couple of lessons they may be happy to share their stories.

Transferring small group teaching into whole class teaching could be done in the following ways;

Start the lesson with a quick fun activity to set the mood and get the 'creative juices flowing'. It can be 5 minutes of writing a dialogue using only questions, or writing a paragraph using only 1 syllable words, or a short story about apparently non related objects (for example a crocodile, a toothbrush and a space ship).

There are some days when creative writing is hard – feeling ill, argument with your best mate, lost a library book etc – so a **brainstorming activity** which is written up somewhere so that everyone can see them is a good idea. This way a student already has phrases/ideas etc in front of them. It means that no one has to sit and look at an empty page, which is counterproductive and leads to low morale.

Have a **no rubber** rule. Once an idea is rubbed off the page it is usually wiped from the mind too. It is preferable for the students to rule a line through the word/phrase/paragraph. This way, the idea can be saved for another page, chapter or story.

If the emphasis on editing and presentation is stressed too early on in the story writing process it could smother the writer's creativity.

Do not expect a child to produce 'finished work' at the end of each lesson. Writing a well crafted story to a satisfying conclusion can take longer than 45 minutes. The fun activity at the beginning of the lesson will be finished in each lesson. Once the child has written a story, help them see which parts can be 'tweaked' and pruned to produce a tighter more cohesive story. Emphasise the importance of good editing.

Imagine your story is a wonderful meal you have prepared. You have chosen the best ingredients and spent hours cutting, flavouring, cooking and watching over the dish until you think it is just right. Would you then slop it onto a chipped plate crusted with last night's dinner scraps? Who do you think would want to eat that? No one.

They will see the dirty plate and think, 'If the cook hasn't even taken the time to clean the dish what sort of stuff is in the food? I'm not going to waste my time with it.' It might be the best meal in the world but the diner is only going to see the dirty plate it's on. It's the same with your story. You have spent so much time creating the best characters and plot but if you don't edit it, all your work could be wasted. A reader will see the bad punctuation and spelling mistakes and think, 'If the writer couldn't even be bothered checking the sentences then the story will probably be boring and not finished. Why would I waste my time?'

SYNTHESIS AND SUMMARY

The annual St Mary's Book Awards are a vehicle for children who see themselves as authors to enter a competition to have their book published and ultimately, to win. It was organised by the school librarian for this purpose and is successful for all concerned.

Children who enter do so generally because they love to write and see themselves as authors. They almost all had strong family support to do so.

The greatest reward for these student authors is to see their book in print and to have it in the school library, knowing that it is being read by other children. Producing the finalist books is a vital motivating force for the students. Their book looks just like other library books, is treated just like other library books (in that they are able to be withdrawn and returned), and seeing their own story in its professional form is very satisfying to the authors and inspiring for other children. When considering entering, most students spoken to had reviewed past Book Award finalist books and appreciated the challenge of producing something of equally high quality.

The time and cost of producing quality books is balanced by the sense of satisfaction and pleasure derived from them and it is important to maintain this quality as it is a key motivation for most student authors.

Having a key liaison adult in the school is very important to the students. As they are supported through what can be a long and challenging process, they grow in their self belief as writers. They are able to ask, seek advice, discuss, plan and visualise their finished product with this person and do so on a regular basis. This keeps them motivated and focussed on the task.

Teaching the specific skills of creative writing and living through the challenge of writing their own book gives children a sense of being authentic authors.

The expectation for parents is that while they are encouraged to support their child, they will not be involved in the writing or ideas.

Children who show a gift in the art of storytelling and who show creativity in their imaginative thought, even if they may have poor writing skills, should not be overlooked as candidates for a creative writing programme. They can be teamed with a strongly literate student to produce quality work.

Learning the deeper features of writing is essential for writers. The ability to turn creative ideas into story, the use of language to bring thoughts to life and the ability to craft a story are vital for students to grow as writers.

The environment for a successful writing programme or competition needs to be positive, affirming and fun. If children see themselves as writers and are affirmed in this by significant adults whom they trust, they are much more likely to rise to the challenges that writing presents.

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