

CHRISTOPHER FOX.
PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT. JULY 2017.

Talk for Writing (T4W) has evolved over several years (Corbett & Strong, 2011) and now forms the central core of teaching and learning approaches in many UK schools. Examining the Talk for Writing approach could potentially lead to constructing a reading and writing programme in NZ that supports teachers and pupils to reach their potential, address the discrepancy in achievement between boys and girls and ultimately raise writing attainment levels in schools.

*Research and
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Principal's Sabbatical Report 2017

Title: Research and analyse the impact of the 'Talk for Writing' programme with a view to raising writing achievement across the curriculum.

Author: Christopher Fox.
Principal.
Puketapu School (Hawkes Bay).

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Executive Summary

- Many UK schools have found that daily **Talk for Writing** can have a **dramatic influence on progress in language** acquisition and composition/writing.
- Data from schools in the UK provides strong evidence that the Talk for Writing approach **impacts upon raising writing achievement** for all children regardless of gender, ethnic background, first language preferences and ability.
- The Talk for Writing approach is **relevant to all subjects and age range of pupils**.
- In some schools where the Talk for Writing approach has been applied **boys have outperformed girls**
- By products of Talk for Writing reported by schools include, **renewed enthusiasm, improved staff morale and collaboration, a greater understanding of how children learn and improved links across the curriculum**.
- There are many common factors and processes between Talk for Writing and the curriculum/pedagogy that is practiced in NZ schools.
- **Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising student achievement**. Talk for Writing is able to demonstrate successful, positive methodology for engaging parents to support their children.
- The use of storytelling is at the forefront of the Talk for Writing approach. There is a **strong correlation between the methodology and the way that our Maori students learn**.
- It has become accepted in NZ that boys' success is brought about through treating them differently. Findings in this report suggest that this is not necessarily true.

Purpose

- Close the gap between reading and writing achievement across the school with particular emphasis on raising boys' achievement.
- Analyse the impact of the Talk for Writing programme in UK schools in relation to school improvement data.
- Observe Talk for Writing in action in the classroom environment (3 UK schools).
- Join an online professional development network focussed on school improvement with particular reference to reading and writing & attend a Talk for Writing conference.
- Research Talk for Writing case studies that are indicating improved reading and writing student achievement standards.
- Assess and compare the effective components of Talk for Writing with the existing Puketapu School writing programme.
- Develop and establish revised strategies using aspects of the Talk for Writing philosophy that will raise writing achievement across the school.

Rationale, Background & Research

School Data.

Writing data at Puketapu School over the past four year period has shown an average 8% difference between reading and writing achievement. (Reading 90%, writing 82%)

Girls' writing consistently out-performs boys' writing by 10-15%.

Maori student data shows 68% of Maori students achieving at or above the standard.

Too many primary school children are not attaining as highly or making as much progress in writing as in reading. This trend is echoed throughout other local schools, NZ, and also has many international examples.

School Teacher Knowledge, Pedagogy & Professional Development.

Knowing that reading influences writing and that reading achievement data is at 90%, the expectation for Puketapu School is that all students should be achieving writing levels at the same standard as their reading. The school has taken part in several forms of internal and external professional development with writing as one of the school targets over the past 3 years. We have moderated across schools and facilitate a vibrant Literacy Cluster Group.

Our focus has been on setting group and individual targets, conferencing students and celebrating success.

Despite a rigorous approach with writing at the forefront of our improvement agenda we have seen little reward for our efforts. Teachers have been pedalling harder yet achieving no more.

School Student Voice

Through student survey and student talk we have become aware of behavioural and attitudinal demeanours that indicate;

The students do not have a negative view of writing and recognise its importance in advancing their learning

They frequently see writing as a necessity rather than something that they may do for enjoyment

They do not like prescribed writing tasks and would prefer 'free' or 'authentic' writing tasks.

Wider Research

Underperformance in writing is a complex issue with many anecdotal & researched reasons for why it may occur.

"I have come to the understanding that it is not one problem, but several. The problem is caused by poverty, immaturity, inattention to tasks, less than robust expectations by parents and school staff coupled with a "let's give them the gift of time" attitude, and above all, the laissez-faire view that "boys will be boys," they will catch up when they mature—but they don't."
(Ken Page, Vermont Principals Association President, cited in Leadership Champlain, 2012, p. 5)

The existence of a persistent gender gap in literacy achievement, and particularly in writing, is not in dispute: boys trail girls in every assessment at school, national, and international levels. Its causes, consequences, and potential solutions remain hotly contested.

In New Zealand the gender gap is recognised as indicated by the emergence of TKI website – Success for Boys.

[Boys' Achievement: A Synthesis of Data](#) provides an overview of boys' educational achievement in New Zealand schools.

The report updates our knowledge of boys' participation, engagement, and achievement in schooling, in particular secondary schooling. It shows that while many boys are high achievers, boys are over-represented in statistics related to:

- early problems in reading
- disengagement from school
- lower achievement in reading and writing
- lower qualification attainment.

Key findings from TKI synthesis are;

Most boys are achieving well, and a number are advanced readers and writers. There are some differences in the participation, engagement, and achievement of boys and girls:

- Girls perform better in reading and writing at all school levels and across all ethnic groups and are improving at a greater rate than boys.
- From year 11, boys are leaving school at a faster rate than girls.
- Boys are less likely than girls to gain University Entrance, NCEA, or higher qualifications, or participate in and attain degree-level qualifications.
- Māori and Pasifika boys are less likely to leave school with University Entrance or higher qualifications than boys from other ethnic groups.

Suggestions on how School Boards, Leaders and teachers can improve outcomes abound. (<http://success-for-boys.tki.org.nz/Success-factors>). However there has been little impact on the data.

As one researcher suggests;

“Herein lies the problem: an inadequate (or worse, inaccurate) understanding of the context, causes, and realities of boys’ writing experiences and achievement can lead to proposed solutions that range from the ineffective to the potentially harmful, with unintended consequences for both boys and girls that may worsen the underlying conditions implicated in boys’ literacy underachievement. Many widely disseminated proposals for improving boys’ literacy achievement are grounded in a view of masculinity as a “natural,” essential quality of all boys. This view gives rise to generalizations and stereotypes which lump all boys into one group—one heteronormative version of masculinity, a construct which “essentialises male-female difference and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender category” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836), constructing all boys as a homogeneous, heterosexual group conforming to socially dictated norms of masculinity. This leads to proposals ranging from single-sex schools to classroom bookshelves divided according to gender.’

I examined our school beliefs and the staff concluded;

- All children can learn.
- Gender and ethnicity should not impact upon educational success.
- The process of writing is complex. It is built on prior knowledge (we write about what we know).
- Motivation to write will depend on individuals’ (student) interest, experience and goals.

Given the above statements and observed classroom practice there is a desire to examine other methodologies that may have improved impact.

I have long been interested in how boys’ and young men’s academic and personal writing experiences relate to their motivation and, ultimately, their achievement in writing.

I see many boys underachieving and I am looking for ways to bring fun and enjoyment back into writing.

I wish to provide clear strategies that are known to work so that schools can shape them to suit their needs.

Talk for Writing

T4W has evolved over several years (Corbett & Strong, 2011) and now forms the central core of teaching and learning approaches in the Primary Writing Project in the UK. This Project aims to raise standards of writing by motivating children and teachers, deepening their understanding of writing and refining their skills. The Project involves clusters of schools, with similar interests in writing, working collaboratively over time.

Examining the Talk for Writing approach could potentially lead to constructing a reading and writing programme that supports teachers and pupils to reach their potential, address the discrepancy in achievement between boys and girls and ultimately raise writing attainment levels in schools.

Methodology

The following methodology was used to collect data. This was based on cited research practices with the aim of providing accurate and relevant findings.

Student/Teacher Voice & Interviews

Qualitative approaches offer the best means to understand the dynamics and processes that are occurring in the classroom.

As thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions are involved, I needed to understand the deeper perspective that can be captured through face-to-face interactions and observation in the natural settings.

The importance of qualitative approaches to the study of writing has also been emphasized in a recent review of qualitative research on writing: Schultz (2006) noted that recent research interest in questions focusing on the social nature of writing are best addressed through qualitative approaches, which “allow researchers to document and analyze the writing processes of individuals and groups” (p. 358) as well as the social contexts which mediate those processes.

Through listening to the voices of the students and teachers during interviews, I sought to develop a sense of how these students were experiencing writing.

In addition, I was able to meet in person with the authors of the **Talk for Writing** publications and engage in conversations about the elements that bring about success for all children regardless of gender.

Site and Participant Selection

My sampling was dictated by issues of access and by the constraints of time and possible interview subjects. In seeking a range of student ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, goals, and experiences, I was able to locate schools that were classified as being in areas of ‘high

deprivation'. The schools' population reflected the wider multicultural community and all had low attainment on entry. In short, challenging schools with complex issues to overcome.

Documents

I invited my participants to share pieces of their writing and I analysed these pieces, looking for evidence of themes and ideas that might suggest new themes to advance writing experiences (including topic, genre, and style preferences) of my participants.

Mind set/Attitudes

Bandura (1977) emphasized the central importance of self-efficacy beliefs in relation to school achievement. Such beliefs, Bandura found, could originate through meeting personal goals, experiencing mastery, overcoming obstacles through perseverance and effort, observing models with whom the student can identify, and structured (scaffolded) experiences that support success with tasks. Efficacy beliefs in turn support greater effort and ultimately higher achievement.

The importance of confidence and self-efficacy beliefs is illustrated in the stories of many of my conversations.

Findings

Talk for Writing Process – What is it?

Talk for Writing (T4W) developed by Pie Corbett *and* supported by Julia Strong, is a powerful *teaching methodology* based on the principles of how children learn.

Talk for Writing is powerful because it enables children to imitate the language they need for a particular topic orally before reading and analysing it and then writing their own version. The basic principle of Talk for Writing builds on 3 key stages:

- Imitation. Knowing stories, rhymes and texts.
- Innovation. Creating new versions.
- Independent. Making up new story texts on their own.

It is supported with resources and teacher toolkits to enable a structured, thorough and effective way to support the teaching and learning of literacy skills.

Data – The Impact of Talk for Writing

The impact upon standards is significant as can be seen by the data from these schools:

St Mathew's C of E Primary School Birmingham (60% ESOL)	
2009 Prior T4W;	48% at or above (Level 4)
2013;	97% at or above
Knowle Park Primary School Bristol (50% free school meals)	
2008 Prior T4W;	50% at or above (Level 4)
2013/14/15;	90% level 4+

Student Voice - What did children think?

"I used to hate writing. It was boring listening to the teacher groan on and on because I would just sit there and do nothing. Also then it was hard. Now I love it because it is so much more easy and I produce more work. I think it's got easier because our teacher teaches us all the things and then we learn stories that include all the things. I also feel more confident..."

"It helped me to memorise it, and drawing the pictures was fun. Usually, I don't enjoy writing but with this we got to act out and learn in a fun way. Now I know what the writing should sound like and then I can write about anything."

"Yes I like writing more because I like the flow of writing – it feels good in a way. I'm concentrating and listening more and that has helped my writing."

"Story maps help me with my writing because I always have a bank of words to use"

What did Marko (male student Yr 6) think about his own learning?

- *"Innovating – when you innovate, you already have good story to start with, and you can add to it – when you've done this a bunch of times you can start magpieing from everywhere – the bits you like – and put them into your writing."*
- *"I like the sentence games – adding 'buts' and 'ands' and learning the conjunctions for complex sentences – building sentences up using chunks – it helps it all make sense!"*
- *"The part I enjoy the most is the drama – it's fun and you can be characters in the story, which helps you understand the story better."*

I asked if learning passages of text helped in any way.

- *"When I wrote the story of Grendel I used a whole chunk of Beowulf to get me started."*

I asked him if he felt his work had improved.

- *"I feel more confident with sentences... organising paragraphs and using words I haven't used before."*

Boys' Performance

My findings reveal the fallacy of generalizations such as "boys don't like to write about personal feelings," or "boys don't like poetry," or "boys prefer nonfiction". Boys were all fully engaged in the writing tasks, the class work supported the data that there was no gender difference in attainment and in some cohorts, boys outperformed girls.

Schools using Talk for Writing report no disparity in attainment across the genders. Teachers are careful in selecting texts that don't alienate one gender, the T4W methodology, facilitates hands-on, kinaesthetic learning which engages boys. The 'boxing up' planning process provides visual structures and the collaborative nature of the programme design suits all children, not only boys.

Mind Set

From the students' comments it can be noted that the students' attitude to writing is positive (and hadn't necessarily always been that way). The pupils were confident in their

ability and felt supported by the process. Writing had become a fun activity and led to their success not only in literacy but across the curriculum.

Many more examples of the impact that T4W has on children's mind set can be read in; 'Talk for Writing Across the Curriculum' Corbett & Strong, 2017.

The Physical Environment.

All of the schools dripped with stories, language displays, book themes and both teachers' and pupils' writing. Classrooms had access to story-telling boxes, puppets, lights, music, play areas – anything that would support, enrich & encourage story making.

'Washing lines' were used in every classroom to display story maps in several developmental stages.

All classrooms had Word walls to enrich vocabulary and assist spelling. These Word walls included displays involving similes, metaphors and idioms, 'writing secrets' word banks and story starters.

As one relief teacher commented;

- *"I can go into any classroom and join in storytelling because the approach is consistent across the school. In each classroom the actions for the layered story making language are on display – using the children's photos of themselves demonstrating the action."*

Other points of significance

Involvement of parents. This was commented on by one of the head teachers; he spoke about the importance of parental involvement in storytelling and the impact that parental involvement had had on pupil attainment as well as community cohesion.

Research by Desforges indicates...

"If parents engage with their children's education the attainment of the child will increase by 15% no matter what the social background of the family".

Every Parent Matters. Desforges 2007

The model of internalising a text (learning off by heart) in order to develop an understanding of structure and language seems to be very successful at the junior level. As students become older and the texts become longer and more complex it becomes more difficult to do this. Teachers find ways to short cut this process.

Teachers and Leaders

Teachers reported that there was an increase in the number of children who said they enjoyed talking about writing.

They also indicated that there was an increase in the number of children who thought talking about writing helped them to write.

Leaders pointed to how the consistency across the school, with all classrooms following the same approach was significant in providing a clear pathway for improvement. It gave a clear pathway for pupils, helped teachers meet their goals, made assessment and evaluation easier, and focussed professional development.

They reported than an offshoot of this was increased collaboration amongst the staff.

Assessment

Extended talk and collaborative language around the genre of writing before children start writing, provides a rich resource for children to revisit and from which to draw during all stages of their writing. It supports a type of talk that is explicit and targeted, and it enables teachers to assess children's writing and intervene as the children's learning is taking place. It allows children to independently assess their own and others' writing and learn from one another.

Negatives

An internet search revealed a thread from parents questioning the restrictive nature of the T4W approach. This revolved around their children being capable writers who were spending too long at the imitation stage.

Implications

Implications for Teachers

- The Talk for Writing approach provides a firm structure to teach, develop and support writing.

Implication 1.

Teachers need to follow the process to the letter and not stray too far from the model and timing. Careful monitoring that pace is being maintained is a necessity.

- Children are immediately exposed to high quality text and because they are so used to retelling the story and have internalised patterns and rhythms, they then have the confidence to be creative in adapting their own writing using powerful sentence openers, interesting vocabulary etc. Their oral proficiency transfers automatically to their writing.
Story telling needs to be a daily routine.

Implication 2.

Teachers need to select text carefully. Schools need to develop a 'reading spine' of text that not only has a progression of plot structure and language complexity, but is also able to be adapted to allow internalisation at the older years.

- Visual story maps are used to support learning. They use pictorial cues as well as hinting at the appropriate sentence opener/connectives. These can be drawn on flipcharts to support the flow of the story until children have completely internalised the story. Children create their own as a skeleton writing frame. They have the bones and they can add the organs, muscle and skin as they develop the story.

Implication 3.

Teachers need to be well prepared and well-rehearsed in telling, acting out and drawing the story. The importance of modelling cannot be underestimated.

It is vital teachers model shared writing:- Shared writing and guided writing are the cornerstones to supporting individual success.

Another adult in the room would be beneficial. Pie Corbett writes about the importance of TAs. There is a potential staffing cost implication.

- It takes time for children to learn to retell a whole story but once they do, a teacher can move on quickly to INNOVATION. You can only innovate when text is in long-term working memory. You ‘hug’ the story making key changes along the way.

Implication 4.

It takes time to internalise a text and work through the process from imitation to innovation. There is little room for flexibility. Schools need to deliver 5 sessions of literacy per week x 90 minutes. This time factor can be a hurdle for some teachers and pupils. Pace is important.

- There is recognition from T4W practitioners that basic writing skills need to become effortless, there is therefore a strong emphasis on the importance of developing fluent handwriting as early as possible.

Implication 5.

Younger writers must typically devote considerable attention to acquiring and polishing handwriting skills.

Implications for Assessment

- Talk for Writing bookends units with formative assessment – a ‘cold task’ at the beginning of a unit and a ‘hot task’ at the end. Comparison between the two tasks can be made to show progress.

Implication 1.

Teachers need to adapt their planning based on the ‘cold task’ to help children build the skills they need to make progress. This includes key targets for the whole class, groups and individuals.

- Children need carefully scaffolded learning experiences so that they can assimilate practices and understanding of formative assessment and see for themselves how it benefits progress in their writing.

Implication 2.

Children need to be involved far more in discussing what worked and why so that it builds their ‘inner judge’. Using these discussions, both teacher and pupil can co-construct key learning points rather than providing a global list of success criteria.

Implications for Leaders

- Talk for Writing is a collaborative social activity, it is one all educators can foster.

Implication 1.

It is important to foster conditions and attitudes to encourage the personally meaningful and rewarding literacies that students engage in. Positive Mindsets (Dwek) and focussed student behaviour are pre requisites.

- *“Research is unequivocal that the expectations and involvement of parents makes a significant difference to children’s educational achievement. The role of parents and whanau is critical in children’s learning and development.” Inquiry into engaging parents in their children’s education. NZ Kindergartens submission Dec 2013.*

Involving parents in the storytelling process enables positive relationship building as well as pupils being supported at home. Once a learning culture becomes a home culture it is much easier for children to learn.

Implication 2.

Leaders need to find strategies that will involve parents in their child’s literacy development.

- Talk for Writing (T4W) receives a minority of negative comments based on it being ‘restrictive or ‘holding children back’

Implication 3.

Leaders need to be aware of potential difficulties and address them with teachers as early as possible. Leaders need to listen to the teachers’ feedback and monitor student progress to ensure that everyone’s potential is being achieved.

Implication for Boys (closing the gender gap)

- The more learning that is project-driven and kinaesthetic, the more boys' bodies will be engaged in learning—causing more information to be retained, remembered, and displayed on tests and assignments.
T4W methodology facilitates hands-on, kinaesthetic learning which engages boys.
The multi-sensory approach helps build confidence and aligns to boys learning.

Implication 1

Teachers still need to provide competitive learning opportunities, even while holding to cooperative learning frameworks. Competitive learning includes classroom debates, content-related games, and goal-oriented activities; these are often essential for boy-learning and highly useful for the life success of girls, too.

Implication 2

By adopting the Talk for Writing approach there is great potential for teachers and schools to support all students in a creative, fulfilling process of shaping their own writing selves and dissolving those boundaries that boys learn over many years.

Conclusions

Talk for Writing (T4W) represents a new synthesis of teaching practices, focused on the extensive use of classroom talk to help children become familiar with a range of text genres. For each genre, this familiarisation is extended through ‘talking the text’, shared and guided teaching and pupils’ independent writing of the same type of text.

It is powerful because it is based on the principles of how children learn. It provides a framework that builds confidence for both teacher and student.

There is a clear enthusiasm by schools and staff who use the programme. This enthusiasm by staff was mirrored by changes in the pupils’ writing over time.

Talk for Writing is underpinned by a wealth of practical activities, ideas and resources that support teachers.

Children make very good progress in writing attainment.

Most children in each year group made progress in writing attainment of at least 4 sub levels.

Boys and girls made similar progress in their writing attainment.

Children for whom English is an additional language and children who received free school meals made similar progress in their writing attainment to other children.

Children's progress in their writing attainment was not affected by whether they began the year at, below or above age-related expectation.

Involving parents enhances the learning and helps build the school community.

If genuine progress is to be made time and focus is essential. Expectations must be clear. Routines, understandings and approaches, developed collaboratively over time, become non-negotiable.

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