

What do you know about your writers?

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As the year begins, what do you know about your young writers? Indeed, what do they know about you as a writer- anything?

Many teachers will want to add to information transferred from last year and assess their students' writing, offering a range of activities that seek to establish a baseline, and enable tailored targets to be set. Fair enough. Such knowledge is needed. But is it enough?

I worry that these early formative assessment activities will focus predominantly on the writing skills, as currently defined by national assessment rubrics, and may not include attention to the young writers themselves: their attitudes, everyday practices and sense of themselves as writers. Merely identifying that more work on aspects of SPaG is needed will tend to frame both the year's work *and* the children's perceptions of what writing involves.

Grammatical knowledge and understanding can of course be helpful, but the long lists of grammatical terms to be taught and tested can, and often does, skew practice, prompting teachers to foreground drilling and skilling at the expense of attending to the broader development of children as creative language users. It also diverts professional attention away from the development of children as writers – as explorers, meaning-makers and wordsmiths.

In order to plan, teachers surely need to understand children's perspectives and attitudes, their worries and concerns, pleasures, preferences and practices, degree of self-confidence and emerging identities as writers? Some of the teachers in the Arvon project Teachers as Writers sought to explore their young writers' attitudes to writing through surveys, questionnaires and small group discussions. Others also created 'Me as a Writer' diagrams/posters, inviting responses to questions/prompts such as:

- What comes into your head when your teacher says 'Now we're going to do some writing?'
- Do you write/draw in your own time of choice at home?
- Can you write in more than one language? If so, which?
- What kinds of writing do you enjoy most/least and why?
- What are your strengths as a writer/what are you good at?
- What are your weaknesses/what are you not so good at yet?
- Does anything worry you about writing? If so what?
- What three words describe a good writer? Circle any that apply to you
- What advice would you give someone younger than you to help them improve their writing?

Alternatively, young people and their teachers could create 'Writing Rivers' – collages which depict in words and pictures, their journeys as writers. Through discussion, the sharing of portfolios, and the prompting of conversations at home, young people can consider: their memories of learning to write, the people involved, the remembered challenges/pleasures; particular pieces of writing; favourite types in the past and now; the piece they enjoyed writing most last year. Or the class might simply be invited to write a letter to their teacher: 'Five Things you need to know about me as a Writer'. They'll be interested in their teacher's letter too.

Such activities will help to develop young people's metacognitive knowledge about writing, to nurture reciprocity in teacher-student writer relationships, and enrich teachers' knowledge about children's views of themselves as writers. Only then can responsive teaching begin.

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