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Do children have agency as authors?

Over the last three months the *Craft of Writing* team, (Debra Myhill and I, Becky Swain, Becky Coles and Sara Venner) have been recruiting schools to this new project. Funded by EEF and the RSA, it's a partnership study between the OU, the University of Exeter and Arvon and a rare opportunity for deep, sustained CPD in the teaching of writing. The project, which involves residencies at Lumb Bank (Ted Hughes' old home) focuses on both writing standards *and* children's motivation and engagement as creative and effective writers.

Whilst the recruitment process has been hard work and we're not there yet, it's this rich combination of outcomes *and* engagement that seems to have been the key to the 91 primary schools who've signed up so far (we need 100- all are welcome!) I've spent many early mornings listening to head teachers' concerns about their young people's disaffected attitudes towards writing. The way in which they 'assiduously go through the motions but don't really engage' as one head described it, or in the words of another 'follow the steps to success but don't really succeed because their heart's not in it – so they'll never achieve greater depth'. This week one senior leader characterised several writers in his upper Key Stage Two as the 'I don't care - it's nothing to do with me brigade'. This disinterest chimes with some recent primary phase research by Dobson and Stephenson (published in the UKLA Journal *Literacy*) and not only represent a clear cause for concern, it calls for action.

Young people can feel distanced from the act of writing, particularly if teachers retain too strong a grasp on the curriculum reins and construct writing as a technical exercise in compliance at the expense of developing children's desire and agency as authors. I've drawn parallels before with the reading for pleasure agenda, and they are worth revisiting here since those who read for pleasure choose to do so; it's a volitional act, one which is undertaken in anticipation of some satisfaction gained through the experience and/or in interaction. Likewise in writing, whilst writing 'for pleasure' may not be an accurate description for many, children and adults can find the experience of expressing one's views, exploring one's identity, and deploying one's craft knowledge and skills to achieve authorial intentions very satisfying. Much will depend on issues of ownership and control. Are children positioned as authors - writers with rights? Or are they positioned as pupils, obliged to play the 'school game called writing' in the current ideological context.

It seems a shift in the locus of control is urgently needed in order to foster an enhanced sense of

autonomy and authorship in the young. Space, time and more choice need to be made available to help young people exercise their right to write about what is meaningful to them, at least some of the time. If they are personally committed to a self-chosen subject, this will help them persist and tolerate the emotional and cognitive demands involved. In addition they need to exercise their authorial agency as writers, deciding not only

- what they want to write about?(*content*), but also:
- what their writing is seeking to achieve? (*purpose*)
- who will read their writing? (*audience*)
- what form might be appropriate? (*form*)

As teachers we cannot offer free choice all the time, but it is possible to negotiate options, enable the children themselves to generate possibilities and make their own authorial decisions as increasingly independent young writers. Through enhancing the real world relevance of writing, offering more space to Just Write and more choice, we can increase both children's intrinsic motivation to write and their agency as text creators (whether working alone and in collaboration). This will surely help them recognise that writing *is* something to do with them. Their identities as writers, their rights as writers and their authorial intentions should count.