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CREATIVE COLLABORATION: TEACHERS AND WRITERS WORKING TOGETHER

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Keywords: creative writing; teachers as writers; professional writers

Introduction

What happens when writers and teachers work together in the writing classroom? And what happens when teachers are given opportunities to be writers themselves through workshops led by professional writers? These practices are often encouraged by arts organisations, such as the Arts Council, and by subject associations such as the United Kingdom Literacy Association. But there is an absence of rigorous research into the value of writers' engagement in the education context and impact on student outcomes has been undertaken on a small scale with mainly qualitative data; none are able to attribute causality and most are over-reliant upon self-reporting without observational evidence to triangulate the perspectives offered (Cremin and Oliver 2016). At the same time, the Arts Council report (2010), reviewing the work of writers in schools, argued that to '*be effective in helping young people develop their skills, writers need to articulate aspects of the writing process and the working lives of writers*' (Horner, 2010:34), and to understand teachers' contexts. In other words, professional writers need support in making their implicit knowledge, understanding and skills, explicit, as recent research evidence also shows (Cremin, Myhill, Lillis and Eyres, 2015).

This article draws on a research study, *Teachers as Writers*, funded by Arts Council England, and conducted through a collaboration of Arvon, a charitable organisation promoting creative writing, the Open University, and the University of Exeter. The project set out to explore creative collaboration between teachers and professional writers by investigating the impact on teachers of a creative writing residential at an Arvon writing centre, working with professional writers, and a subsequent co-mentoring experience in their own classrooms. In the Arvon residential, teachers participated in workshops and individual tutorials led by the writers, and had the opportunity to find time and space to be writers (Cremin, Myhill, Eyres, Wilson, Oliver and Nash, forthcoming). It was hoped that teachers would draw on their Arvon residential experience and use it in their own teaching of writing: for example, workshop approaches to writing, giving time and space for writing, using freewriting, and giving focused feedback. These approaches are informed by the guidance provided in the books written by professional writers for aspiring writers, including John Moat and John Fairfax (1998) who founded Arvon, but also Stephen King (2012), Ursula le Guin (2015) and Francine Prose (2012). These approaches also have some evidence in research into the teaching of writing: for example, Elbow's (1998) advocacy of freewriting, Calkins' (1983) and Graves' (1983) encouragement of workshop approaches and time and space for writing, and the more recent body of research flagging how important it is to support young writers in managing the writing process (Myhill 2012) Harris et al 2015 ; Graham et al 2016).

The study sought to understand the impact of a creative collaboration of teachers and professional writers on:

- teachers' identity and skills as writers;
- on their pedagogic practices in the teaching of writing;
- on their efficacy in supporting students to develop motivation, confidence and writing skills;
- and on student outcomes in writing.

Co-mentoring: a creative collaboration

The concept of *co-mentoring* was at the heart of the project. This term was chosen to underline that when teachers and professional writers work together in classrooms, there is potential for a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefit, acknowledging the different, but complementary expertise of both partners (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008) . Following the five-day residential, each teacher worked with one writer to develop and co-teach a writing unit with their classes, drawing on the learning from Arvon. This co-teaching was accompanied by shared reflective dialogue, learning together from the experience.

Methodology

The full study was a randomised controlled trial, with a complementary qualitative study, involving 32 teachers, randomly allocated to an intervention group and a comparison group, evenly split across primary and secondary schools. This article draws on interviews with teachers and writers after one of their co-teaching sessions, and a recorded reflective discussion between them after the second co-teaching lesson. The dataset comprises 15 teacher interviews (one interview was not conducted) and 16 reflective discussions. These interviews and reflections probed teacher and writer thinking about the learning context, pedagogy and professional practice, and the co-teaching and mentoring.

The data analysis process was principally shaped by the themes from the earlier analyses of professional writer interviews and lesson observations, so that we could compare teacher and writer perspectives. However, during the analysis a further new theme of *Teacher and Writer Discussion of Principles* was created to better represent the data. The final set of themes were:

- Integrating the Learning from Arvon into the Classroom
- Shared Planning and Goals
- Teacher and Writer Discussion of Principles
- Teacher-Writer Roles
- Pressures and Constraints
- Teachers' Learning
- Professional Writers' Learning

Teachers and writers learning alongside each other

All the teachers found the residential changed how they thought about writing, and all made efforts, to varying degrees, to ***integrate the learning from the Arvon experience into their classroom practice***. One teacher reflected that previously she had only '*learned out of a book or university how to teach writing, rather than how writers write*'. Several teachers wrote alongside children in class to offer '*a role model as a writer*', and began to talk explicitly about being a writer with their students. One teacher observed that '*until I've been doing this writing project, I never really spoke to the children very much about how it feels to be a writer*', whilst another shared with her children that '*it's really scary being a writer*'. One repeatedly-used strategy on the Arvon residential was freewriting – just writing whatever comes into your head without worrying about how good it was, as a starting-point for developing ideas for writing. This Arvon freewriting practice was adopted by many, giving children '*freedom to just write and explore*', as was the encouragement to write from personal experience.

The co-mentoring aspect of the study encouraged ***shared planning and goals*** between the teacher and the writer, particularly because goal-setting is known to be important (Locke and Latham 2006; Kleingold et al 2011). Teachers tended to lead on the practical aspects of planning, and writers varied in how much they engaged with this. Some writers were less interested, feeling that '*too many cooks spoil the broth*', and some teachers were reluctant to release their control of planning, with one teacher maintaining that '*it's quite difficult to plan with somebody*'. For one teacher-writer pair, a better way of working evolved for the second

co-teaching lesson: *'I think the difference here was that we really did plan this together and we changed our plans and we evolved our plans together'*. Although teachers were very aware of curriculum goals, there was a recurrent pattern of the writers being more able to articulate a precise writing goal for a lesson, highlighting the writers' deep knowledge of writing.

The process of planning and teaching together drew out **teacher and writer discussion of principles** about writing and teaching writing. These discussions illuminate their shared and distinctive thinking about writing, and demonstrate the teachers grappling with new ideas and new ways of thinking. One principle was that of needing time and space for writing, with teachers arguing that what is important is *'time for children to do extended writing, to play around with it and have that time to explore'*. Another principle discussed was writing from personal experience, and drawing on emotional resources, so children *'trust their own ideas.'* Co-mentoring discussions also considered the appropriate balance between the freedom and constraint: *'It's really difficult to get the fine line between giving enough prompts for them to get going, and going their own direction'*. The writing process was frequently debated, particularly the messiness of the process, and drafting, revising and editing.

Working together also prompted reflections on the **teacher-writer roles** played out in the classroom, and whether each was adopting the role of a teacher or a writer, regardless of their primary expertise. Whilst teachers naturally assumed a pedagogic role, *'coming at it from a more teacherly point of view'*, some felt this prevented them adopting a writer role: *'I'm teaching all the time, I'm not writing.'* Other teachers felt that the Arvon residential had encouraged them to adopt a teacher-in-writer role, being visible as writers in the classroom and as one teacher explained, *'when they're doing their freewriting, I'm writing, and I've read them some of my stuff'*. Some of the writers had previously been teachers, and they comfortably adopted a writer-in-teacher role position, whereas other writers carefully avoided the pedagogic role. A tendency, however, was for teachers to position the writer in the writer role, deferring to their experience.

Inevitably, perhaps, the co-mentoring discussions brought to the fore some of the **pressures and constraints** faced by teachers, which militated against full implementation of the Arvon learning. Foremost of these was limited time, linked to *'school expectations'*, *'the inflexible and packed timetable'* and interruptions to teaching sequences. Some felt that *'one of the aspects that has been lost with subsequent curriculums, is actually time for children to do extended writing, to play around with it and have that time to explore'*. Another significant constraint was posed by the expectations of the curriculum and assessment. One teacher observed that her post-Arvon teaching was *'so different to what we teach most of the time, which 'almost doesn't allow for any sort of creative original response'*. Another teacher also believed the current writing curriculum offered no *'breathing space for the kids to be creative as we go along'*. Predictably, as these comments reflect the specific constraints and barriers faced by teachers, the teachers here were acknowledging those challenges, but it should be noted that some of the teachers found creative ways to embed the Arvon learning in spite of these challenges.

It was evident from the interviews and reflective discussions that both teachers and writers had built new learning from their respective experiences on the project. The **teachers' learning** drew most heavily on the Arvon residential experience. This had prompted teachers *'think differently'* about writing, and to observe *'I'm thinking more like a writer and a teacher than just a teacher having to teach writing'*. For one teacher, the shift was to thinking more about writing itself than the technical aspects, because *'if you've got the language and the ideas and the flow of the writing, and you're thinking about the reader, those are whole massive other different things aren't they? And the other stuff will come'*. Some teachers spoke of an increased awareness of the children as writers, and changed expectations of what young people could do. Other teachers had developed confidence in teaching poetry specifically, and welcomed the new ideas they had witnessed.

The **writers' learning** related strongly to changes in how they saw their roles in school, and particularly how working alongside a teacher was very different from their usual school visit practice. Some writers reflected that shared teaching was rewarding because they were not positioned as leading and performing. In previous school experiences, being *'in charge for an hour'* in school, often without any accompanying teacher presence, did not sit well with some of the writers, some of whom found this unsettling. Instead, working with the teacher had *'taken the kind of panic of it out'*. The writers also learned more about children's learning, particularly the importance of knowing students' starting points and differentiating to meet individual needs, in contrast to *'parachuting into a class you don't know as well as you want to'*. The writers also gained understanding of the pressures teachers are under, and of the curriculum, both its possibilities and its constraints.

Discussion

The data show that the teachers reported integrating key aspects of the experience of Arvon into their classroom practice based on new understandings about writing and being a writer. Just to reiterate, the Arvon residentials were characterised by: workshop approaches to writing, giving time and space for writing, using freewriting, and giving focused feedback. The teachers spoke of newly employing freewriting in the classroom, which they viewed as affording space for students to 'Just write' without specific learning objectives or success criteria. Several described writing alongside their classes rather than always overseeing and claimed that this prompted novel conversations about being a writer, the iterative nature of writing, and the social and emotional demands involved, particularly with regard to sharing writing. A few also noted revisiting, redrafting and editing, and drawing on personal experience as changed practices.

For most teachers and professional writers involved, the opportunities to plan, teach and learn together were characterised by comfortable collaborative co-mentoring relationships, based on mutual respect. Teacher learning through co-mentoring interlinked with the insights gained from Arvon: with some believing they taught writing differently as a result of these dual experiences and gave students more ownership of and responsibility for their own writing. The professional writers learned about everyday classroom practices and curriculum challenges, but they also developed new understanding of children's learning needs in the light of a tendency for previous school visits to be more of a performance, than a learning experience.

The project is important in beginning to look closely at creative collaboration between teachers and professional writers, based on a recognition of each other's particular expertise. Further research could usefully explore in more depth how to build effective co-mentoring relationships between teachers and professional writers, and how writers share their particular 'writerly' knowledge with teachers. The study highlights the rich potentialities of re-thinking how writers and teachers engage together to apprentice developing writers into the craft of writing.

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For more information about the project, including the full project report, please visit:

<https://www.arvon.org/learning/teachers-as-writers/>