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## **CREATIVITY, UNCERTAINTY AND DISCOMFORT:**

*Teachers as writers*

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**Abstract:** Teaching for creativity in writing requires not only knowledge, skills and understanding, but the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, take risks and engage artistically. This paper reflects upon one strand of a research project which is examining the relationship between teachers' development as writers at their own level and their efficacy as creative teachers of writing. It draws on the compositional experiences of sixteen English primary teachers, who wrote regularly in project sessions, in school and at home and documented the process. The multiple data sources include: questionnaires, writing histories, composing logs, interviews, observations and analyses of the writing produced. The teachers' lived experience of composing clustered around a number of themes, these included: constraints and intuitive insights, a sense of the personal and deep feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. This paper focuses on only one of these themes; it explores three teachers' uncomfortable encounters with ambiguity and risk and considers the diverse ways in which they responded to the emotional discomfort evoked. Pedagogical implications are also examined. It is argued that in order to support children's creative development as writers, teachers need extended opportunities to engage artistically and creatively as writers themselves.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In seeking to nurture children's creative development, it is argued that teachers should adopt an inclusive approach to pedagogy which fosters learner agency and autonomy (Jeffrey and Craft, 2004a/b). The ability of teachers to operate as co-participants and creative practitioners, apprenticing learners and modelling possibilities is, Craft (2005) suggests,

central to this approach. Her view, based on empirical data from primary classrooms mirrors the observation made by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999) that:

Young people's creative abilities are most likely to be developed in an atmosphere in which the teacher's creative abilities are properly engaged (p. 90).

In the context of teaching writing this implies that teachers also need to be writers, demonstrating the processes involved and providing expert knowledge and advice based on experience. The recent development of extended partnerships between schools and professional writers, seen in initiatives such as Writing Together (Coe and Sprackland, 2005) and Creative Partnerships (CP, 2004, 2006), may offer young authors just this kind of support. However they are frequently small scale and few include an explicit focus on encouraging teachers as writers. Inadvertently, such collaborations may orient the profession towards external expertise and underestimate the creative capacity of classroom teachers. Emerging models of teacher/artist partnerships indicate that the conception of teachers as artists also requires examination and support (Jeffery et al., 2005). This is particularly important in the primary phase where the teaching of writing is undertaken by generalists, who would arguably benefit from opportunities to stretch their own voices, as well as work alongside published authors.

If teachers are to teach for creativity in writing, then composing at their own level is probably a pre-requisite experience, or is at the very least a potentially valuable one. This paper draws on a research project in which sixteen primary teachers wrote regularly over a year and documented the process. It focuses on three teachers' qualitatively different experiences of the uncertainty, emotional discomfort and risk involved and argues that the artistry of teaching writing deserves increased attention. As Freire (1985) recognised:

Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without creativity—but with repetition. Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically. (p.79)

## **TEACHING WRITING: RECENT INFLUENCES**

Artistry and creativity have not been at the forefront of writing pedagogy in recent years. In responding to the dual pressures of prescription and accountability, it has been argued that primary professionals have adopted a somewhat technicist approach to teaching writing; emphasising structure and organisation at the relative expense of composition and content, meaning and purpose (Frater, 2000; Hilton, 2001; Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003). It is widely recognized that the premium placed on tests and targets in the primary phase and the high levels of prescription have created short-cuts and inflexible routines that have constrained teacher creativity and reduced professional autonomy and artistry (NACCCE, 1999; Sedgwick, 2001; Burgess et al., 2002; Grainger, 2004). This may have fostered a mindset characterised more by conformity and compliance than imagination and inventiveness. In addition, the defined pedagogies of shared and guided writing and the detailed teaching objectives in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) Framework (DfEE, 1998) have created secure boundaries for teachers for teachers to work within, reducing the time afforded to extended writing (Frater, 2000). Pressured to prove their efficacy in this tightly controlled system, some teachers' perceptions of their role in the process have been reshaped and oriented towards instruction, explication and coverage of the specified writing curriculum (Grainger et al., 2005).

The NLS, influenced by the Australian genre movement (Cope and Kalantis, 1993) requires teachers to operate as expert writers and lead children through a specific instructional process. First modelling and demonstrating the linguistic features of each genre, then scribing the class' contributions (composing at a higher level than the children could alone), and finally engaging in a more fully joint composition prior to independent writing. The NLS suggests that such 'shared writing' is undertaken through the use of model texts, although the attention given to these has been criticised for being both static and prescriptive (Freedman and Medway, 1994). Comparatively little credence is given in the NLS to process approaches to teaching writing (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1994), in which the teacher attempts to teach writing 'from the inside out' (Kirby et al., 1988). This approach invites teachers to genuinely engage in and demonstrate the compositional process rather than act out a pre-determined model. Furthermore, the NLS emphasis on pace in whole class sessions, of which shared writing is one, obliges teachers to focus on the transmission of information (to ensure the prescribed objectives are covered) and fails to foster the full interactive engagement of teachers or children (Burns and Myhill, 2004). This is likely to further curtail teacher demonstrations of the

often slow, emergent and recursive nature of written composition, in which alternatives are generated, considered and thoughtfully evaluated over time.

A recent survey of teachers and student teachers reveals that real modelling, encompassing spontaneity and risk, is often avoided in class demonstrations. Instead, the piece of writing for modelling, such as an exemplar opening paragraph, a rich character description or a verse of poetry is planned and written in advance, often at home. In school, the teacher appears to be composing this piece in a genuine and authentic manner in front of the children, yet in reality the process of creating and revising the piece and the struggle which it may have involved are not experienced or reflected upon during the demonstration (Grainger, 2005). This practice is particularly marked in those who express low self-esteem as writers and who are concerned about their ability to model specific literary features to order in classroom contexts (Luce-Kapler et al., 2001). Such practice arguably reduces the value of the demonstration, and allows the modelling of textual and linguistic features, for example, issues of organization and structure and the use of adverbial clauses or metaphors, to take precedence over modelling the complex recursive nature of writing or the pleasure in making meaning (Grainger et al., 2005). Since the NLS prioritises knowledge and skills, and its model of teaching writing omits the critical stage of generating/capturing ideas (Bearne, 2003), it is perhaps not surprising that both teachers and student teachers feel the need to pre-write their exemplar texts. Moreover, such texts are often no more than extracts, isolated segments of writing, exemplifying form and feature, not coherent whole narratives or full discursive or persuasive arguments (Grainger, 2005). In summary, the writing pedagogy implied by the NLS is both teacher-directed and highly instructional; it is likely to have limited teachers' and children's experience of ambiguity, their artistic involvement and their understanding of the writing process.

## **TEACHERS AS WRITERS: WORKING ARTISTICALLY**

It has been argued that the recent bureaucratic framing of primary writing and the dominance of objectives has sidelined the experience and practice of the teacher as artist/writer. This deserves to be re-instated 'at the heart of the pedagogic activity' (Robinson and Ellis, 2000, p.75). If teachers engage as writers, taking part in the creative process of composing, they will arguably be in a stronger position to develop the creative voice of the child. Bailey (2002) perceives that:

Teachers will only teach writing effectively within the NLS if this is informed by, and orientated within, an understanding of the complexities of composition processes (p.26).

Such an understanding can be accessed at least in part through writing at their own level and experiencing first-hand the compositional complexity involved. Seminal research in the field of composition studies has shown that writers operate as problem solvers, constantly juggling constraints and responding to difficulties as they arise (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1981, 1984). This cognitive model of composition has parallels with conceptions of the creative thinking process (Wallas, 1926; Guilford, 1967, 1973; Craft, 2000). Both involve dynamic stages which may be experienced in a recursive fashion. Both involve identifying challenges, generating possibilities and moving between divergent and convergent thinking in search of solutions. Both inherently involve risk. Risk taking is a central component in creativity (Sternberg, 1997; Craft, 2000; Joubert, 2001), it implies taking a step outside boundaries into the unknown and carries with it potential for both loss and gain. Risk taking is also a common characteristic of successful literacy teachers, who, it is suggested, engage artistically, experiment with possibilities and remain open to ideas and strategies which may benefit learners (Wilson and Ball, 1997). Composition too involves a willingness to take risks, explore alternatives and accept a degree of doubt and disorder as words and meanings emerge and are selected, shaped and reviewed over time. As OFSTED (2003a) note:

Teachers who inspire creativity ...often model the creative process for the pupils with all the attendant risk-taking that this can involve (p.8).

The writing process is neither fixed nor predictable, and is perhaps best taught by teachers working as artists, composing in the classroom and voicing an insider's informed perspective. As artists/writers, teachers may be prompted to demonstrate to children the creative thinking involved, reflecting for example, on false starts or blank spots, the uncertainty of open exploration and their cognitive and emotional engagement. Through sharing their writing, modelling possible ways to express ideas, and reflecting upon their own intentions and choices, teachers can enhance the agency of young writers.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The two year research and development project ‘Creativity and Writing’ (2004-6) on which this paper is based, emerged from concerns expressed by head teachers in a South-East England consortium about a perceived lack of imaginative involvement in writing. As one commented, ‘I can’t persuade the staff to take risks in writing, to step away from the conventional toolbox approach’. The project, funded by the eight schools, was co-ordinated by researchers from Canterbury Christ Church University; it sought to enable teachers to develop their own and their pupils’ creativity in writing. It also sought to track the relationship between the teachers’ development as writers and their efficacy as professionals, creatively teaching writing. The project involved sixteen female Project Focus Group (PFG) members, who were selected by their head teachers, two per school; one was the literacy co-ordinator, the other a colleague from another Key Stage. The PFG worked as collaborative teacher-researchers, they undertook case studies of children as writers in their own classrooms and researched their own compositional processes. This paper focuses on three of the teachers’ experiences of composing short stories.

### The writing opportunities

The first term’s writing sessions involved the PFG in sharing personal stories, participating in process drama (O’Neill, 1995) and exploring unusual resources. The sessions were workshop like in nature, and in order to build relationships and an open environment based on trust (Elbaz-Luwish, 2001), they were participatory, dialogic and collaborative. Frequently the individually or jointly produced work remained uncompleted; it was neither revised nor necessarily shared or made public. It represented transient ‘one time only’ writing (Smith, 1982), which was spontaneously generated and committed to paper in a single session.

In contrast, during the following two terms, over a period of five months, the teachers developed ideas for their own short stories, and shaped and refined these prior to sharing and ‘publishing’ them with children and the rest of the PFG. During these terms they were immersed in this genre and again undertook related drama and storytelling activities. The constraints set by the negotiated task included: the text type, the audience and the stipulation that the tale should not be solely autobiographical. Time for composing was integrated into sessions; additionally, teachers wrote at home and school.

The university based researchers, in the role of participant observers (Schwandt, 1994), also composed stories and documented the experience for themselves as writers, writing in the sessions and elsewhere. Their stories were also shared with children and with the PFG. Working in pairs and in interchangeable roles over time, one of these researchers facilitated the writing session and made observational notes, whilst the other took a full part in the activities, the writing and the reflection.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research was set within an interpretative-constructivist tradition, in which the core tenet is to describe and interpret the phenomena under investigation. This strand of the project sought to engage teachers as writers, prompting them to reflect upon the experience of composing at their own level and examine the classroom consequences. In relation to the short story writing, Burnard and Younker's (2002) definition of the act of composing was selected as appropriate, namely 'the act of forming or constructing a revised piece created over time' (p.248). Whilst their research frame and this definition relates to musical composition, there is considerable alignment with the process of written composition, since the teachers' narratives were composed over a period of five months and were constructed and revised, shaped and refined during this time. The researchers sought to understand the nature of the teachers' different composing journeys and to comprehend their perceptions and representations of the experience. The multiple PFG data sources included:

- Questionnaires
- Writing histories
- Early-phase interviews
- Observations of the PFG composing
- Written work- unfinished pieces and the short story
- Commentaries on writing (first term)
- Composing logs reflecting on the process of composing the short story
- Drawn representations of the experience
- Reflective reports on sharing the stories with a child audience
- Late-phase interviews.

## **The process of analysis**

The first stage of the analysis was to draw up writing profiles for each PFG member as evidenced through the baseline data: the questionnaires, writing histories and early-phase interviews. These aimed to establish the teachers' sense of themselves as writers and to discover experiences which might have shaped their writing identities. The second stage of analysis involved an examination of the composing logs, observational notes, transcribed late-phase interviews and the stories. The composing logs, kept whilst working on the narrative, developed from the teachers' initial commentaries on writing. In the logs, ongoing thoughts and reflections were recorded and authorial decisions and difficulties were noted; in this way the teachers were able to capture 'the intuitive and emergent processes that inform artistic meaning-making' (Taylor, 1996, p.2). The logs were also used as the basis of the late-phase interviews, undertaken post 'publication'. Through close examination of the logs and the other data sources, the researchers sought to construct meaningful understandings by investigating the act of creation (Gruber, 1986).

The ethnographic strategies of observation (12 one-hour-writing sessions over the year), interviewing (early/ late-phase), and the examination of artefacts (16 composing logs/short stories) produced data for analysis. The selection and segmentation of this data was undertaken through purposive sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and was analysed for thematic content using the iterative process of categorical analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). An independent referee, also a researcher, cross-checked the analysis for validity, raised queries about the categories and coding where appropriate and evaluated the researcher's interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The emerging themes and interpretations were also validated through discussion with the PFG, many of whom described parts of the process metaphorically, a technique recommended by Eisner (1991). These various 'member checks' (Patton, 1990), and the multiple data sources helped to build the trustworthiness of the findings.

## **Emergent themes and selection of focus**

The sixteen teachers' self-reported experiences of composing a short story were inevitably diverse. Nonetheless, their reflective journeys clustered around a number of themes, which included: an acute awareness of constraints, recognition of intuitive insights and a deep sense of the personal, as well as considerable uncertainty and unease in the process of writing. This

last theme was so marked, with the teachers expressing such a degree of discomfort, that their head teachers, unbeknown to them, requested the challenge be abandoned and the story writing cease. Indicative perhaps of the way in which these school leaders viewed risk taking, this may also reflect the organisational climates in which the teachers worked (Amabile, 1988). Following vigorous discussions about artistry, creativity and risk, the activity continued although the time frame was extended.

In recognition of the significance of risk taking in the context of creative endeavour (Craft, 2005; Sternberg, 1997, 1999), and in response to the volubly voiced unease and doubt expressed by the senior management and the teachers themselves, this paper focuses specifically upon the uncertainty and discomfort the PFG experienced. Their response to the creative challenge to write a short story varied, but all those involved encountered periods of intensely experienced insecurity and expressed considerable emotional discomfort and even distress during the compositional process.

To illuminate this focus, the paper draws specifically on the baseline data, the composing logs, observational notes, late-phase interviews and the published stories. Three teachers from the project's sample set of sixteen have been selected, on the basis of their markedly different initial profiles as writers: one expressed a positive sense of self as a writer, one a negative writing identity and the last a much less demarcated perspective. The three examples demonstrate their qualitatively different experiences of composing and reveal the emotional challenges involved as the teachers took risks as writers, finding individual ways to handle their discomfort. The teachers' names are all pseudonyms.

## **INTRODUCING THE TEACHERS**

This introduction to the three teachers' writing profiles is constructed specifically from the baseline data: the questionnaires, the writing histories, (which invited reflection upon past experiences considered significant) and the early-phase interviews.

**Kathy** recounted only positive experiences of writing, including creating both a picture book and a chapter book in school as a child and having her work read aloud. She described teaching for creativity in writing as 'helping children develop imaginative ideas so their stories are richer and more engaging' and perceived it involved both process and product. She reported reading voraciously at home, but commented on a lack of time to write for pleasure, although she had recently kept a vacation diary. She reported regularly demonstrating writing in school and occasionally writing alongside

children ‘to show them adults can be writers too’, but noted that she rarely completes such work. Kathy was enthusiastic about writing in the PFG: ‘it’ll be fun to stretch myself and see what I can do. I love inventing stories and that - it’s exciting’.

**Sally** described only negative memories of writing: of being slapped on the wrist with a ruler for incorrect copying, being in the lowest group, and being told she had ‘no imagination’. She reflected a continued sense of low self-esteem as a writer and perceived creativity was a competence which others possessed; ‘I’ve never been a creative person, I was always better at the sciences, not the arts, I’m just not gifted that way’. She observed that ‘You always get a few children each year who are really creative... in stories and poetry’. When teaching, Sally reported doing minimal modelling in school and described this as ‘showing them the structure and organisation of texts - the ideas and content have to come from them’. She clearly felt intimidated by the expectation to write as part of the project: ‘I bet my level hasn’t changed since I was at school, I simply won’t be able to be creative or write in front of the others’.

**Gill** found it hard to recall any significant writing experiences, although she believed she had once had a flair for writing stories, ascribing this to her mother reading to her. ‘I’ve lost the flair now though and am better at factual writing, that’s all I do- lists, notes, forms, emails, plans for school - you know the sort of thing’, she viewed such writing as ‘somehow less creative - less personal anyway’. Gill described teaching for creativity in writing with reference to children who ‘have a real voice on paper’ and reported modelling sections of text in class to demonstrate set objectives. She viewed writing in the PFG with both interest and trepidation, ‘I’m not sure how good I’ll be, I haven’t written anything like this for decades, but I’ll have a go - I’m kind of intrigued to see what happens. We won’t have to read our writing out loud will we?’

In summary, the baseline data shows the influence of early writing experiences on current perceptions and indicates that little ‘recreational writing’ - writing undertaken for the personal satisfaction of the writer—was being undertaken (McClay, 1998). Sally appeared to perceive creativity and the arts as synonymous, the province of a few and all three appeared to associate creativity in writing with stories and poetry, perhaps reflecting the influence of the ‘creative writing’ movement. Sally and Gill, who both focused on the product, voiced concerns at this early stage about others’ value judgements, a common feature of artistic endeavour (Smith, 1982).

## ENCOUNTERING UNCERTAINTY AND DISCOMFORT: THE FINDINGS

Despite their different perceptions of writing, as the three teachers composed they all experienced difficulties and tensions which made them at times both insecure and anxious. This section, in sharing extracts from the teachers' compositional journeys, reveals some of their encounters with uncertainty and discomfort and explores possible reasons for the unease and self-doubt generated. The data sets from which the following extracts are drawn include the composing logs, observations, transcribed late-phase interviews and their stories.

### **Kathy: unpredictability evokes uncertainty**

Observational records show that initially Kathy settled quickly and enthusiastically, generating a mind map of options which she viewed positively. She was eager to begin. Yet three weeks later she was restless and becoming increasingly disheartened:

It's like fighting a maelstrom, I've too many ideas and don't know which to choose or where to take them- I feel confused and irritated. I didn't think it'd be like this. (Log,4)

It annoys me -I can't pin it down- I had quite a detailed plan, but when I began to write it all changed and I've lost all sense of direction (Log, 6)

I keep trying but nothing's working-I'm in a fog and rapidly losing faith in my ability to do this (Comment, session 2)

Kathy was obliged to temper her plans with the lived experience of composing and acknowledge the heuristic and unpredictable nature of creative endeavour. In drawing a parallel between beginning to write a story and fishing at night, Pullman (2003) observes 'There's a lot you can't predict ...the fears and delights of fishing at night have nothing to do with rationality'. The experience of navigating in the dark, of being alone and adrift at sea appeared to seriously undermine Kathy's confidence engendering frustration, disappointment and discomfort. In interview, she voiced the view that she felt 'guilty somehow' that her tale wasn't going according to plan, 'so I put myself under more pressure I suppose - I felt I was letting myself down'. Eventually though she found a way forward:

Those first weeks were a nightmare, I thought it'd be easy to get started, I read loads and made plans, but none of them worked - it was awful, I felt at a complete loss. My husband told me to forget it, do something else,

but I kept thinking about it, working at it and trying things out. Eventually one Sunday when I was gardening and not thinking about it, an idea just came out of the blue and intuitively I knew that was it- I'd found what I was after—I was going to write about a girl who couldn't write—it was such a relief. (Late-phase interview)

This intuitive moment probably emerged from her subconscious as an inspired feeling response to the creative challenge; such insights appeared to recur throughout the compositional process, gradually reducing her sense of uneasiness.

I was sitting in the sun, daydreaming I suppose and suddenly I knew how I could end it- I rushed in to get it down before it slipped away, it's that intuition thing again. (Log, 11)

If I let a problem seep into my mind, gave it time and didn't get too uptight, then something usually emerged. (Late-phase interview)

Through making time for relaxation and reverie, indwelling even and 'daring to wait' (Claxton, 1997, 1999), Kathy noticed she became more open to experiences and impulses. These seemed to support her as an artist/composer (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Koestler, 1964), giving her ideas and the assurance to employ them, as the following metaphorical extract from her tale indicates:

Lucy slowed down and seemed to lose her assertiveness. She wished she was back in her safe and predictable world and shifted uncomfortably from side to side, feeling unsure and insecure.

"Trust yourself Lucy. Feel your instincts. Relax, release your imagination."

"But I don't know what might happen" Lucy muttered.

"Exactly" nodded the boy with a knowing smile, "you'll have to wait and see - that's the exciting thing!" (Extract: The Blank Page)

Kathy's early confidence and desire to write was rapidly reduced by the unpredictability of the experience, this threatened her stability and triggered feelings of discomfort. Frustratingly, she found her ideas and plans could not be driven dependably onto paper and this left her feeling vulnerable and in a vacuum. In quiet more open spaces however, when she was more relaxed, Kathy encountered intuitive insights and feasible

ways forward. It appeared that as she began to allow herself the time and space to incubate and percolate her ideas, her disquiet and discomfort reduced and over time she learnt to trust herself and tolerate the uncertainty involved in written composition.

**Sally: self- judgement generates discomfort**

Despite the growing trust in the group, the challenge of creating a story daunted Sally. From the outset her lack of confidence, influenced by negative early experiences, meant that she remained fearful of being judged.

Sally appears uncomfortable, her body posture is tight and tense, reminiscent of last September's first writing session. (Obs,1)

This is too much too soon, a mountain to climb, my mind's gone blank- I can't do it. Everyone else has begun, while I'm sitting here writing about not being able to write. There's no point having a voice unless you've something to say worth saying. (Log,1)

Sally avoided writing for months, making only occasional entries most of which highlighted a very negative evaluative stance. The internal critic inside her head, acting as a kind of silent sparring partner, probably increased her self-doubt, compounding the emotional and cognitive risks involved of putting pen to paper.

I've been thinking about ideas but none of them are good enough, some children feel like this I suppose. I could extend one of the pieces we started last term, but they weren't really clever or anything. Mine will never be good enough to share. (Log,3)

Well at least I tried and in the holidays! I did a brainstorm of characters, settings and problems etc, the trouble is they don't amount to much really, so I'm no further forward. (Log,4)

Often during writing time, Sally literally distanced herself from the group and read, she appeared uncomfortable about this, but declined all offers to discuss the situation. However, a few weeks before the planned 'publication' session, she found a way to resolve her problem; she invited a friend to compose with her. Later in interview, Sally reflected upon the distressing nature of the experience:

I felt under pressure to create a decent story but couldn't get started, I did feel guilty not writing, but the longer it went on the harder it became. I did a plan, but it was embarrassingly basic and wasn't worth writing. I began to think about just not doing it, refusing, but everyone was talking

about their work, drawing the journey and that and I knew I'd got to do something. Then a friend at school asked me how it was going, she'd had my class last year and I thought why don't I risk it and ask her to do it with me. She agreed and we focused on the kids and did it together. I read it to them this morning and they really listened and clapped and clapped. They even asked us to write a sequel! It was amazing. (Late-phase interview)

Whilst negative emotions are a recognised part of the creative process (Shaw, 1994), there is no doubt that the considerable degree of discomfort, embarrassment and angst that Sally experienced hindered her capacity to cope. It is possible that she separated herself from being 'in relationship' with others because she viewed creativity and writing as individually oriented cognitive processes, and that this very separation and isolation further increased her anxiety and heightened the emotional challenge. Exerting personal agency however, she eventually risked taking a different route to her colleagues through the process of co-authorship, and as a consequence tentatively began to see herself as a more competent writer. As this extract demonstrates, their final tale perceptively connected to their 10-11 year old child audience:

“A Year Six child who cannot spell!”

Terry sat down quickly, a little embarrassed but trying not to show it.

“You!” his finger pointed straight at Julie. He had never asked one of the younger children before. Julie stood up nervously.

“I-n-f-o-r-m-a-t-i-o-n” she said quietly.

“Very impressive!” smiled Mr Lovett, but Julie wasn't smiling. She could feel the other children's eyes burning into her.

“You should've got it wrong even if you knew it” whispered Sophie as they went back to class. “You're such a goodie goodie! No one wants a friend like you.”

Julie thought about how true that was. The one thing she wanted was a friend but she never seemed to do anything right when it came to the other children. (Extract: *With a Smile*)

It is possible that the negative self-talk Sally had employed from the outset had prevented this apprehensive writer from appraising her work

appropriately (Madigan et al., 1996), yet through conversation and collaboration with her colleague she was able to recognise value in their evolving tale. In documenting the partnership process, Sally noted that as a pair they spent some considerable time drawing, this may have helped them visualise their ideas, prompting joint thinking and enabling the decision making to be shared (John-Steiner, 2000). Despite her uncomfortable journey, Sally expressed considerable surprise and pride in the completed narrative; their creative collaboration certainly appeared to alleviate some of her insecurities and ease the burden of her harsh self-evaluative stance.

**Gill: multiple possibilities provokes insecurity**

Gill's log revealed that she wished to revisit a friend's fatal accident in her story. This primary generator, as Sharples (1999) describes such key ideas, framed the conceptual space for her and stimulated her composition. However, in allowing the fabric of her feelings to surface, she risked renewing a deep sense of loss and evoking a degree of disquiet:

Even though I believe in what I'm writing and really want to do it, it's taking more courage than I realised. I can't just tell it as it was and I keep coming up against myself- my feelings are getting in the way - I need to distance myself but don't know how. (Log,2)

I'm not going to give up, but every time I write I get upset. Influenced by Morpurgo's 'Cool' I'm trying to fictionalise it, so she survives and everyone learns. The trouble is we didn't and it feels like lying. (Log,3)

Her affective engagement with the content appeared to disturb her equilibrium, and although she remained resolute in her commitment to this idea, she was clearly doubtful that she could retain sufficient emotional distance to re-tell the tale effectively. Her desire to respectfully record her friend's unexpected demise, prompted her to engage in a process of imaginative possibilisation (Cremin, 2003) in which she tried out various narrators. She described this as follows:

It was like doing drama but in my head. I chose different people who knew her well and began to retell it from their perspective, either years later or at the time of the accident. It was kind of like being in their heads and seeing through their eyes. Some voices just didn't work, but when I told it from a classmate's point of view, mine, not mine if you know what I mean, it all came together. (Late-phase interview)

Gill's emotional relief at finding a way to resolve her dilemma was palpable and she reported writing the first paragraph immediately in order to capture this elusive narrator's perspective. Intriguingly the rest of the tale was drafted and re-drafted, honed and polished over time, but this paragraph was evidently never altered. It encapsulated much of the narrative to come.

It was just two days after the funeral that Cassie visited me for the first time- even now years later I'm not sure if she was really there—in my room beside me- or whether I dreamt her presence- heard her voice- imagined her words. It doesn't really matter now. It didn't really then. When your best friend asks you to help, you don't turn her down do you? Even if she's dead. (Extract: *Standing Tall*)

Whilst her imaginative response resolved the initial difficulty of finding a way to handle the painful content, Gill continued to experience uncertainty and discomfort as a writer. She found the process of constantly generating possibilities and asking herself compositional questions undermined her sense of security and made her hesitant and unsure.

Even now I keep coming up against my own indecisiveness, it's like being in a room full of doors and I have to push myself over the threshold each time and just live with the consequences. (Log,7)

Less than a month to go, my head's still full of questions and new possibilities... it won't work unless I can show how she's changed - I don't want to let her down and am beginning to feel unsure about it all again. (Log,10)

Gill appeared to find the ideational and imaginative complexity of composing disconcerting; as she considered ways forward the multiple options available to her triggered both doubt and discomfort. At such times she was obliged to make choices and take risks as a writer. In a manner not dissimilar to Kathy, Gill had to accept the unpredictable and emergent nature of this extended narrative composition, she had to learn to tolerate the uncertainty involved and cope with the emotional disquiet which the process engendered.

## DISCUSSION

For the teachers in this study, whose composing logs, comments in interview and narrative writing have been examined, composing a story for publication represented a considerable creative challenge. It involved taking

risks as writers. None of them had completed a written narrative since their own school days and Sally and Gill had mixed memories of such activities and were concerned about their competence and the judgments of others. All three found the process of composing was at times uncertain and unsettling, compounded perhaps by their role-shift from apparently expert primary teachers to relatively novice artists/writers. Each of the teachers encountered different compositional problems, which appeared to generate tension and an accompanying sense of emotional disturbance and apprehension. Kathy initially experienced a form of writer's block and struggled to cope with the evolutionary uncertainty of narrative composition. Gill's content created difficulties and discomfort, and she also found that the multiple options and possibilities she generated left her feeling hesitant and insecure. Sally's negative self-evaluation of her skills as a writer inhibited her and for a long while, with evident unease, she separated herself from the challenge.

In tune with Runco (1999) it is argued that this tension and affective discomfort appeared to mobilize a kind of creative energy; a response that often generated resolutions to their immediate dilemmas, albeit temporarily until another writing problem emerged. The 'resolutions' involved the teachers in taking risks as writers in various ways, in finding alternative ways forward, in trialling unconventional options and in exploring different routes and possibilities. Over time, these teachers, like their PFG colleagues, became more conscious of their own creative responses. Through this process the teachers demonstrated many of the same creative attributes that they seek to foster in children, as learners and as writers:

Patience, perseverance, resilience in the face of adversity and the belief that there is more than one way of doing things (Joubert, 2001, p32).

The three teachers' published stories were genuinely valued by the children and the PFG, and retrospectively their compositional journeys were seen to be both personally and artistically satisfying. The uncertainty and ambiguity and risk taking experienced became the focus of considerable discussion, particularly in relation to the children. classroom

## **Pedagogical consequences**

Following publication of their stories, the teachers whose experiences have been profiled in this paper and their colleagues in the rest of the Project Focus Group, discussed risk taking in composition. In relation to developing as a writer it was recognized that brief, objective-led writing opportunities

fail to foster children's willingness to experiment and operate under uncertainty. More extended opportunities and real audiences need to be offered, so the children's investment in the writing is strong. Several voiced the view that the creative experience had 'transformed' their teaching of writing and prompted them to change their pedagogic practice, reframing current configurations of time and space and offering 'more sensitive and empathetic support' to young writers. The nature of this support varied according to context but commonly included: providing more opportunity for extended composition and collaboration, increasing choice, celebrating diverse approaches and outcomes and building environments of possibility. In perceiving themselves more as fellow artists in the writing classroom, some teachers began to genuinely model writing, whilst others composed alongside children. Discussing the difficulties of composing became common practice in many classrooms as writers, both the teacher and children, reflected together on the emotionally demanding experience of creating a published text. The teachers sought to create secure environments in which the young people could share their apprehension and uncertainty and reflect upon possible ways forward. The extent to which young children's experience of composition resonates with that of adults is unclear, nonetheless as part of the next phase of the research, children are being encouraged to reflect upon and make sense of their own compositional experiences. It is hoped that they too will develop a shared understanding, a meta-language to describe creativity and writing.

### **Supporting risk taking in writing**

Although this small scale study does not seek to generalise, the evident discomfiture experienced by all the teachers in the PFG raises important issues. The challenge that involvement in composing written narratives for publication represents for teachers or for children should not be underestimated. Nor the influence of individuals' attitudes/ experience, their conceptions of both creativity and writing and the social/ cultural settings in which they work. The degree of risk taking involved in teaching for creativity in writing may mean that some professionals remain reluctant to embrace the potential of creativity, particularly in areas such as literacy where prescription and apparent pedagogical certainty are perceived to exist. In addition, if the current creativity agenda is to achieve its aspirations (Robinson, 2001; Craft, 2005), more attention may need to be given to the interface between emotional literacy and literacy development and support may be needed to cultivate a culture of risk taking in literacy education, on the part of both teachers and learners. Sternberg (1997) argues that for the

most part schools discourage risk taking, but arguably if teachers experience a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (Boler, 1999) in creative endeavour, (as these teachers did through their extended compositions), they will be better placed to help children handle uncertainty, reduce stasis and take risks as writers.

### **Artistic professional development**

It is suggested that the learning entitlement of teachers, both pre and post-initial training, should encompass sustained opportunities to take part in extended literacy activities. This could enable such teachers to make sense of their artistic potential in different aspects of the domain and to connect this vitally to their work in schools (Craft, 1997 ;Loveless et al.,2006). In the process, teachers may develop an awareness of the roles of resilience and reflection, resourcefulness and relationships in creative endeavour (Claxton, 1999) and find a common conceptual language to describe creativity in the context of written composition. In England, calls for more creative approaches to the curriculum (DfES, 2003) have been supported by both materials (QCA, 2003, 2005) and reports (OFSTED, 2003a, 2003b), but exemplars are inadequate without opportunities for genuine professional growth through engagement and reflection. In literacy, development work that nurtures teachers' artistic capacity, invites their involvement and helps them handle ambiguity and diversity will be in direct contrast to much NLS 'training'. Such work has the potential to re-vitalise practice and enhance teachers' development as writers and to critically influence their efficacy as creative teachers of writing.

As they composed, the teachers in this study journeyed into new and unknown territory. At times they travelled down blind alleys, explored side roads, made 'U' turns and walked around in circles, experiencing a disconcerting sense of being lost, confused and uncertain. Their plans and maps offered little support. Responding to the emotional discomfort created they were obliged to take risks in the darkness. Some chose to wait, intuitively believing the fog would clear, others sought help from colleagues, whilst still others resolved to keep walking, accepting where the road led. Each reached their destination with significant stories to tell. For researchers, writers and educators there is much we can learn from their narratives about developing the emotional capacity to be creative, to take risks and operate as teacher-artists in the writing classroom.

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