

## *What do Children Think about Writing?*

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**ABSTRACT** *This article reports on a study of junior school childrens' thoughts about the writing done in their classrooms. Four hundred and seventy five children, ranging from seven to eleven years old, were asked to write to a younger child explaining what he/she would have to do to do good writing in their class. The resulting pieces are analysed for their references to particular features of writing. At a simple level of analysis the pieces show a group of children who are extremely concerned with the technical skills of writing and not so concerned with compositional aspects. By looking at the differences in the concerns expressed at different ages, a more complex explanation is put forward for this apparent over concern. Some implications for theories of literacy development are suggested.*

Since the pioneering work of Jesse Reid (1966) and John Downing (1970) a great deal of research has been carried out into childrens' perceptions of reading and the reading process (see Johns, 1986 for a review). Building upon Downing's 1979 'cognitive clarity' theory, it has emerged that not only are children's perceptions of reading linked in some way with their abilities in the activity (i.e. good readers tend to think of reading as a rather different process than poor readers (Johns, 1974; Schneckner, 1976)), but there is also evidence that children's perceptions of the reading process are linked to the strategies they use to approach it (Medwell, 1990). Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, this research interest in children's perceptions of reading has not been matched by interest in their perceptions of writing. This is largely explained by the general paucity of research in the writing area, which has only recently begun to attract serious interest from the research community. There certainly appears to be a need for further investigations, both small and large scale, into the perceptions and attitudes which primary children have towards an activity which, after all, seems to take up the lion's share of their attention at school. Research in progress at the University of Exeter (Wray, 1990; Medwell, 1991) is beginning to suggest that the complete environment for writing which primary teachers try to provide for their pupils is filtered through these pupils' perceptions of what they are doing when they write. Thus to understand, and perhaps improve, the context of classroom writing, it is necessary to understand pupils' perceptions. This line of thought also follows from an application of the insight of Edwards & Mercer (1987) that context itself is a socially constructed, mentalistic notion.

This article will, after reviewing the small number of relevant studies already available in this area, outline in greater detail a study recently carried out in conjunction with a group of teacher education students at the University of Exeter,

which provided information about the perceptions of writing held by primary children of various ages.

### Perceptions of Writing: research evidence

The most substantial source of information about children's perceptions of writing is that provided during the course of the National Writing Project, and detailed in one of the several volumes finally published by this project (National Writing Project, 1990). Finding out what their pupils thought about writing emerged as a major concern for many of the teachers involved in the project and, to judge from the project's publications, especially its newsletter, the insights gained as a result of this concern were among the more influential in affecting the views about writing of these teachers. The evidence provided by the project is, however, problematic. Much of it is anecdotal and not gained under very controlled conditions, and, while this is not a difficulty when the investigations it comes from are perceived as largely awareness-enhancers for the teachers carrying them out, it does make it difficult to accept the evidence as fully indicative of a general picture.

This reservation notwithstanding, the surveys carried out under the auspices of the project did seem to reveal a fairly general picture of perceptions of writing. This is summarised in one of the project publications (NWP, 1990, p. 19) as a list of concerns identified by teachers:

- Children often judge the success of their writing by its neatness, spelling and punctuation rather than by the message it conveys.
- Children often have difficulty in talking about their own development as writers except in very broad terms.
- Children see writers as people who publish books (usually stories); writing is thus thought about in terms of end products.
- Writing is often seen as a school activity whose primary purpose is to show teachers what has been learned.
- Writing is seen as an individual activity; ideas for writing are rarely discussed and outcomes rarely shared with others.
- Writing, talking and reading are not always clearly associated with each other.

These children were therefore apparently much more concerned with writing as a product than as a process, and as such their attention seemed to concentrate upon the appearance of that product, i.e. its technical features such as spelling and punctuation. This attention to product is not terribly surprising, of course. It is only in the last decade or so that educational researchers, stimulated by the pioneering work of Emig (1971) and Graves (1973), have begun to investigate the writing process, and teachers similarly have traditionally given much more attention to writing products than to processes.

This primary attention to technical features is seen again in the results of a survey in West Cumbria primary schools reported in Martin, Waters & Bloom (1989). A group of 429 11-year-old children were asked, "What is the first thing your teacher looks for when you hand in a piece of writing, such as a story?" The replies were as follows:

Handwriting, neatness, presentation	42.2%
Spelling	25.4%

Punctuation and grammar	15.8%
Whether it makes sense and style	6.1%
Content	5.2%
Effort	0.9%
Length	0.6%
Planning	0.3%

The emphasis on writing as a product is very noticeable but what is even more remarkable is the extreme concern (over 80% of replies) with what are referred to in the National Curriculum documents as 'secretarial skills' (DES, 1989). It is true, however, that the phrasing of the initial question in this study is such that it naturally focuses attention upon an end-product. When teachers look at completed pieces of writing, it must be difficult for children to realise that they might bear in mind the process by which this writing was produced. Also, of course, this question, and hence this study, are explicitly enquiring into what children think their teachers think about writing. This may not coincide with what the children themselves think about it.

The small-scale survey reported by Tamburrini, Willig & Butler (1984) of the perceptions of writing of 10- and 11-year-old children presents a less one-sided picture. These children were asked why they wrote stories, poems and project work in class. The responses were varied. In the case of stories, over half the sample mentioned 'developing the imagination' as the reason for the writing while a similar proportion mentioned learning skills such as spelling and handwriting. For poetry a quarter mentioned learning skills as its purpose, while over half could think of no purpose at all. As for project work, over three-quarters gave learning facts as the purpose, which does suggest a greater realisation of writing functions.

American research into this area, however, tends to confirm the picture of children preoccupied with secretarial aspects and writing products. Hogan (1980) surveyed 13,000 children aged between 8 and 14 and found that children's interest in writing appeared to decline as they got older. A similar picture emerged in the report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1980) with the number of children who said they enjoyed writing dropping by half between the ages of 9 and 13. Shook, Marrion & Ollila (1989) suggest a possible explanation for this is that "Students may be sacrificing self-expression while being hopelessly tangled in mechanics, because educators have unwittingly trivialised writing" (p. 133).

Shook *et al.* (1989) surveyed the concepts of writing held by over 100 children aged between six and eight. The children were asked questions relating to three general categories: their perceptions of the general purpose for writing, their personal preferences about writing, and their self-concepts as writers. The results indicated that:

- the children understood the communicative nature of writing and perceived that it was an important activity in the world outside school;
- most children reported doing more writing at home than at school and getting more help with their writing from people at home than from their teachers;
- most saw themselves as needing more practice, better equipment or neater printing in order to become better writers, i.e. mechanical aspects;
- over three-quarters, when asked why they wrote at school, responded with reasons relating to mechanical aspects, such as to learn more words and letters, to practise, because teacher says so. Only a fifth said they wrote because it was fun.

The researchers conclude, among other things, that their survey suggests a difference between children's experiences of writing at home and at school in terms of ownership. At home the children set their own purposes for writing and sought help in meeting these purposes: purposes and help both relating to writing as a means of communicating meaning. At school children tended to write because their teachers told them to and were therefore in danger of losing a sense of ownership of their writing. Following from this they tended to become concerned about aspects other than communication and the mechanics of writing began to loom larger as objects for attention.

### **A Survey of Primary Children's Thoughts about Writing**

Because of the scarcity of hard evidence concerning primary children's views about writing a study was conducted with the assistance of a group of students engaged in a Postgraduate Certificate of Education course at the University of Exeter. Each student collected written comments about writing from up to 10 children, aged between 7 and 11 years. From a group of 58 students, writing from 475 children was collected, made up as follows: Group 1, aged 7/8, 112 pieces of which 90 were useful; Group 2, aged 8/9, 105 pieces (93); Group 3, aged 9/10, 141 pieces (140); and Group 4, aged 10/11, 117 pieces (117).

In carrying out the study the first important decision to be made concerned the exact nature of the task which would be given to the children. Simply to ask them "What do you think about writing in school?" did not seem adequate for a number of reasons. Firstly, this question is fairly abstract in nature and it would therefore be difficult for them to give meaningful responses. Secondly, because the people asking these children the questions were at the time involved in teaching them, there was a danger that children would tend to tailor their responses to fit what they believed these teachers wished to hear, a not uncommon problem in teacher research. Thirdly, it was felt that asking the question in an open-ended way as this may lead to a rather amorphous set of replies, whereas what was really needed was to tap into what these children considered the most important aspects of writing in their classes.

With these considerations in mind, it was decided to frame the task in a more concrete way. This was done by using a modified form of the task used in the International Study of Written Composition (Bauer & Purves, 1988) partly to assess the opinions about writing of students at or near the end of compulsory schooling in 14 different countries. The results of the British part of this study have been published (Gubb, Gorman & Price, 1987) and provide an interesting comparison with those from the present study, as will be discussed later. In the international study the task was phrased as follows: *Write a letter of advice to a student two years younger than you who is planning to attend your school and who has asked you to tell them how to write a composition that will be considered good by teachers in your school. Write a friendly letter and describe in it at least five specific hints as to what you think teachers in your school find important when they judge compositions.*

With somewhat younger children, the task in the present study was phrased as: *Someone in the class below yours has asked you what the writing will be like when he/she comes into your class. Write and tell him/her, and try to give him/her some useful advice about what he/she will have to do to do good writing in your class.*

All the children in the study were given the task in more or less these words, and their subsequent writing collected. In terms of producing extended statements from

these children the task seemed to work very well, with only 35 pieces, mainly from the younger two age groups, being too short to give any useful information.

### Results: a first look

The results of the study can be approached in either a quantitative or a qualitative way, with both giving useful information. A straight count of the features of writing mentioned by all the children in the study is given in Table I. Spelling, the most frequently mentioned feature, would usually be referred to by phrases such as, "Make sure you get your spellings right", or "Use a dictionary to spell words you don't know". Neatness would be referred to by things like, "Do your best handwriting" or "Make sure it is not messy". Many children stressed that the writing had to be "long enough", although a significant number warned not to make it too long "because Miss might get bored". Both types of comment are included under Length. Under Punctuation are included mentions of the need for full stops and capital letters, commas and speech marks. The feature Tools refers to the surprisingly frequent mention of the materials with which to write, such as "make sure your pencil is sharp", or "Mr Ellis gets cross if you do not use a ruler to underline the title", while under Layout are included references to the drawing of a margin or the placing of the date, etc. Some children referred to the importance of Words as, for example, in "Don't use the same word over and over again", while others referred to Ideas as in "Try to have some funny bits", or "Stories should be interesting and exciting". A few mentioned Structure, as, for example, in "A story needs a beginning, a middle and an end", a few Characters, as in "Write about interesting people", and even fewer Style, as in "In poems you can repeat words to make it sound good", or "Don't begin sentences with 'and'".

TABLE I. Total mentions (*n*) and % mentions of particular writing features

Feature	%	<i>n</i>
Spelling	19.88	(579)
Neatness	17.27	(503)
Length	12.77	(372)
Punctuation	10.71	(312)
Tools	5.49	(160)
Layout	1.58	( 46)
Words	7.31	(213)
Ideas	12.33	(359)
Structure	4.53	(132)
Characters	3.43	(100)
Style	2.06	( 60)
Secretarial	67.72	(1972)
Composition	29.67	(864)

The figures under the heading Secretarial in the table are derived from adding those under Spelling, Neatness, Length, Punctuation, Tools and Layout, while those under Composition from the adding of Words, Ideas, Structure, Characters and Style. These give an idea of the balance of these children's preoccupations in writing.

In interpreting this table, the first thing to state is the problematic nature of the

methods of enquiry. Although the task the children were asked to do is less abstract than the straight-forward question "What is writing?", it is still impossible to assume that the children's answers reflected entirely their real concepts about writing. The methodological problems involved in trying to tap children's concepts about such 'taken for granted' activities as writing are significant. It is quite possible that the children's statements reflect not what they really think about writing, but what they think their teacher wants them to think. Even at this level, however, the results may tell a good deal about what counts as important in writing in these children's classrooms, about which children are usually most perceptive.

These results, taken at face value, show an overwhelming preoccupation with the secretarial aspects of writing. Spelling is the most frequently mentioned feature followed quite closely by neatness. Features such as characters and style are barely mentioned at all. This seems like powerful confirmation of the trend noted in other research studies and suggests that, somehow or other, these children have gained the impression that what really matters in the writing they do in their classrooms are the technical aspects. This is confirmed by looking in detail at one or two of the pieces of writing produced.

The following two pieces were both produced by nine-year-olds, from different classrooms, and are reproduced in typed form (with original spellings and punctuation).

*Piece 1*

1. at the start of a sentence you have to put a capital letter.
2. if you are writing names you put a capital letter as well.
3. and in youre story book you do youre bets writing.
4. at the end of a sentence you put a full stop.
5. you have to write to tell storys and to tell people whate you have been doing
6. you can lern how to do joined-up writing like *abcdefghijklmnopqrstu-vwxyz*.

*Piece 2*

frist you put your pence down and coppey a letter what someone put down like you are darwing  
 make your big letters go up to the line above.  
 put capitals letters at the bigan of centens and full stop at the end.  
 get on with your work. if you doing a story's don't let it cary on to long.  
 don't make to much smches and used rubbers to much  
 do your comers and speach mark's  
 do your marging  
 and *don't* wander about.

Here the children's major preoccupations are clearly with secretarial features. Composition barely figures at all. In Piece 2 it is almost possible to hear the voice of this child's teacher, which in many ways is the chief message from this study. Whatever these children 'really' think about writing, what they have expressed are their feelings about what counts as being successful at writing in their classrooms and this, of course, is largely defined by their teachers.

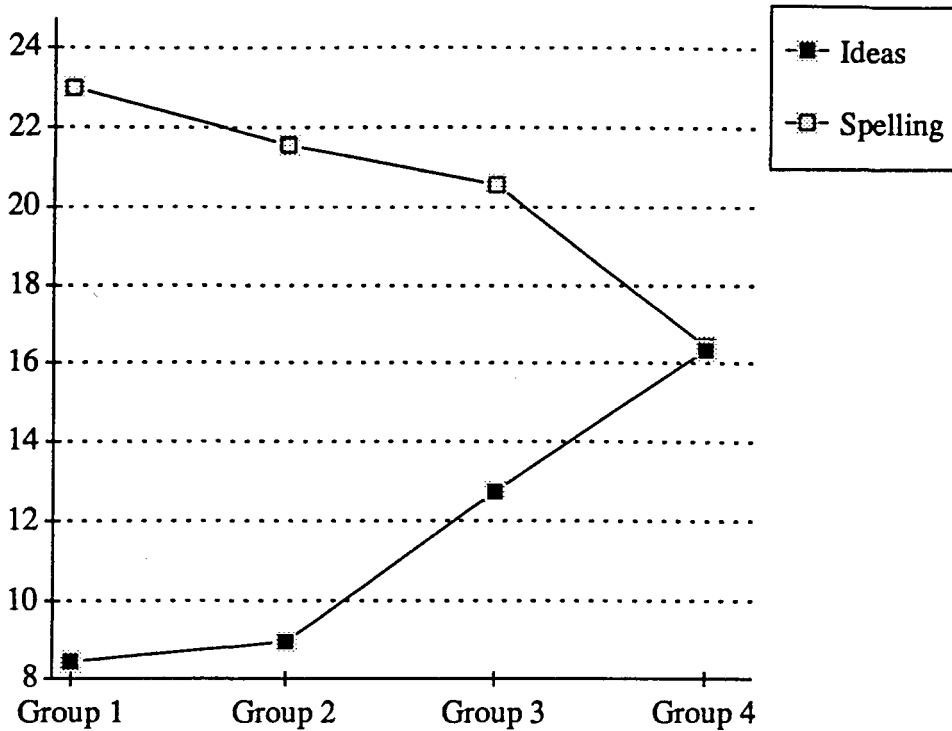


FIG. 1. Graph to show the % mentions of Ideas and Spelling of the four groups.

### Results: a more detailed look

These results seem rather an indictment of the approach to writing adopted in the classrooms from which these children were drawn. In a situation in which the assessment procedures for the National Curriculum in English place a 70% weighting on the compositional aspects of writing and only 30% on the secretarial, it seems ironic that these children's views are almost an exact reversal of these weightings. The results, however, repay a more careful look. Because the writing samples came from children in four distinct age groups, it is possible to break down the results by age. This breakdown is shown in Table II. The results now suggest a rather different picture. It seems that in Groups 1 and 2 (first and second year junior children) there was an overwhelming emphasis upon secretarial aspects, but that this imbalance lessened with the older children and Group 4 (top juniors) actually showed a balance of preoccupations. It is apparent that the concern with Spelling gradually lessened over the four groups, while that with Ideas gradually increased. Changes in prominence of these two features can be clearly seen in Fig 1.

To give detail to this shift of emphasis it is useful to compare the pieces of writing given earlier with the following piece which came from a 10-year-old girl and was, incidentally, the longest pieces of writing produced in the study.

#### *Piece 3*

In the junior class when writing it is better to express your words such as, instead of saying I saw a pretty flower, put, I saw a beautiful flower that blew from side to side in the wind. In the juniors we normally write

TABLE II. Mentions of particular writing features by each age group (%)

Features	Group 1 %	Group 2 %	Group 3 %	Group 4 %
Spelling	22.99	21.56	20.56	16.43
Neatness	18.58	21.89	17.87	13.00
Length	14.56	11.44	15.89	9.77
Punctuation	13.22	10.45	9.46	10.63
Tools	7.47	12.77	5.14	
Layout	3.07	2.82	1.17	0.32
Words	6.90	4.64	6.78	9.77
Ideas	8.43	8.96	12.73	16.33
Structure	1.15	1.99	4.79	7.84
Characters		1.49	2.34	7.63
Style			0.82	5.69
Secretarial	79.89	80.93	70.09	50.16
Composition	16.48	17.08	27.45	47.26

adventure or fantasy stories about witches and wizards. When you get old enough you will be able to use big words, instead of little, very small, instead of big, enormous. And it is a good idea before you get too old to try and write neatly joined up, it is good for letters when you are older, and may come in handy if you want to be a secretary. Example: the wind blew -> *The wind blew strongly*. When you are around 2nd or 3rd year it is old enough for you to start looking in the dictionary for to express your words, as I said at the beginning. It is old enough for you to stop going to the teacher and asking for words. And a few hints for people who are just starting the juniors: If you are stuck on a word, carry on writing, write what you think instead of getting up 30 times when writing a story, let the teacher correct them when you have finished, and if stuck on a word when reading, sound the letters out one by one. It is fun writing in the juniors.

This piece is characterised by the very balanced views about writing which it expresses. It certainly mentions secretarial features but these are set firmly into an overall impression of the primacy of composition. It begins by mentioning ideas and expression but goes on to give excellent advice about spelling which some teachers of lower juniors would be very grateful if their children heeded.

The results from the British (NFER) part of the international study of writing mentioned earlier (Gubb *et al.*, 1987) provide an interesting extra piece of evidence for the developmental trend which seems to have emerged from the present study. In asking 15-year-olds to write some advice about writing for younger children, the NFER study found that 40% of the responses (mentions) concerned Presentation and 58% concerned aspects of composition, including Organisation, Content, Process, Style and Tone and Audience. The balance between Composition and Secretarial aspects for the NFER study and each of the four groups in the present study is shown in the graph in Fig. 2. The developmental trend seems clear.



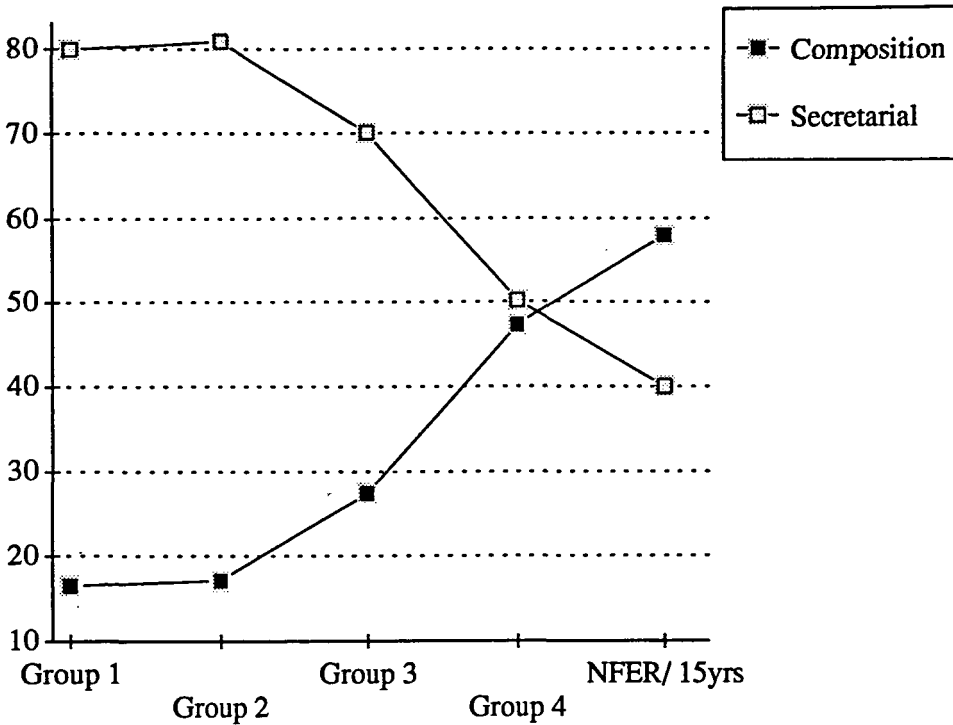


FIG. 2. Graph to show the % mentions of secretarial and compositional features of writing of Groups 1 to 4 in the present study and the 15-year-olds in the NFER study.

### Towards an Explanation

Breaking down the results in this way highlights a possible developmental trend in children's views about writing. It also suggests that the simple explanation advanced earlier for the results, that is that these children have learnt what their teachers have taught them about writing and what has been taught them is a preoccupation with the technical skills, may be over harsh and over simple.

An alternative explanation might be that these children, in their advice about writing, mentioned more readily the aspects which were particularly bothering them at the time. As an aspect became less bothersome, that is, they felt they could *do it*, they mentioned it less. There is plenty of support in the results of this study for this explanation. In, for example, the dimensions of Neatness and Tools, there is a significant peaking in terms of the proportion of mentions in Group 2 (second year juniors). From personal experience it is at this age that children often get asked to change from using pencil to using pens to write with, and also are taught to produce cursive (joined up) handwriting. Concern with these aspects virtually fades in Group 4 (fourth year juniors) by which age most children have mastered both the new writing tools and the new writing style.

In the dimension of Characters there is a sudden peaking of mention in Group 4. This coincides with the argument of Fox (1990) that it is around the age of 10 years that children begin to be able to get beyond the stereotypical 'goody' and 'baddy' type characters who are described more in terms of action than in terms of inner thoughts and feelings. Similarly in the dimensions of Structure and Style there is

quite a peak of attention in Group 4. This would fit with Perera's assertion (1984) that children around 10 years old begin to be able to differentiate more clearly writing from speech in terms of structure and style. The pattern of mentions in these dimensions supports a suggestion that children focus upon certain elements in their descriptions of writing because they are at that time actively engaging with these elements in their doing of writing.

If this explanation is accepted it may also help to shed light upon an issue which has occasioned fierce debate in the literature on literacy development. The cognitive clarity/confusion theory of Downing, mentioned at the beginning of this article has been seriously challenged by researchers working from an emergent literacy perspective (Hall, 1987; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984) who have argued that young children, brought up into a literate society, were not at all confused about the functions of literacy within this society. Yet studies of children at school have consistently shown, both in the reading and writing areas, that these children tend to have very particular, and limited, views about the processes of literacy. In reading this emerges as an over-concern with decoding and in writing, as described earlier, as a concentration on the secretarial skills. The results of this present study suggest that these views might gain prominence in children's descriptions of literacy processes because, at a particular stage of development, these are the areas which seem difficult to the children. It may be that children before the age of about five or six do not include in their descriptions of literacy references to the technical aspects (letters and sounds in reading; spelling and handwriting in writing) because they are not aware that these are problematic. When they *do* become aware that these things are difficult, they come to the forefront of children's attention and hence get mentioned most in their descriptions of the processes. Later, when the technical aspects become mastered and therefore less of a problem, mention of them fades in these descriptions.

## Conclusion

This article, in reporting what was initially conceived as a rather simple study to try to produce a little more evidence about an under-researched phenomenon, has suggested that the issues uncovered in the study are anything but simple. In putting forward a possible alternative explanation for the seeming prevalence of rather limited concepts about writing in junior school children it has suggested a need to question the 'obvious' explanation, that is, that children simply respond to their teachers' over-emphasis upon the technical aspects of writing. This is not to deny, of course, that this might partially explain what children think about writing. But teachers may only be drawing attention to what would be foremost in children's minds anyway. If this is true, it suggests a real challenge to teachers of junior children.

These teachers clearly do have to ensure that children master the technical aspects of writing and, therefore, must give these some attention in their teaching. The challenge is to make sure that this attention does not lead to the children in their care thinking that these aspects are *all* they have to think about in writing. When children, because of the nature of their path towards learning to be writers, are focusing themselves upon the technical aspects, it could be vital for teachers to help them bear in mind the other, arguably more important, dimensions to the writing process.

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