

# CHILDREN AS WRITERS: DOES CHOICE IMPACT MOTIVATION IN YEAR 6 WRITING?

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## Introduction

How many times have you needed to write a diary from the perspective of an evacuee or a non-chronological report on the Vikings in your life? Most probably, never. However, how often do we need to write a letter to bring about change or engage in writing that explains a process or discusses difficult issues. This action research project aims to measure the impact of choice on writing motivation in Year 6.

### Background of the Problem

At Hartland, we felt we needed to remodel our writing curriculum to give the children a clear purpose for writing. Too often we were receiving 26 copies of the same narrative that has been 'innovated' from a model text. It lacked creativity and children were not motivated to write. Therefore, we began the journey to improve attitudes to writing through Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson's 'Writing for Pleasure' framework (Young and Ferguson, 2020). It has long been a challenge to engage children in writing at length in Year 6 and so liberating the element of choice was introduced to combat this. The Writing for Pleasure centre have created a framework for primary writing that puts children's choice at the heart of the curriculum. New to the role of English lead for the academic year 2024-25, it was a school-wide priority to give both students and teachers alike the opportunity to make changes to their attitudes towards writing.

## Literature Review

The National Literacy Trust: Children and young people's writing in 2024 (Clark et al 2024), reported on worrying statistics for the state of children's motivation for writing. In a survey of 76,131 children and young people, fewer than 3 in 10 children (28.7%) reported that they choose to write in their free time. Furthermore, 44.0% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 struggled with deciding what to write, and 1 in 3 (36.8%) admitted that they only wrote when they had to. This further highlights the need to consider curriculum choices when delivering writing lessons to pupils. As teachers, we have a duty to inspire children's writing ideas and provide support with this process when needed.

In the academic year 2023/24, 72% of children met the standard for writing in teacher assessments (Department for Education, 2025). This is a decline of 6% since before the pandemic in 2020. Additionally, students achieving greater depth remained at 13%. Another decrease, down from 20% before the pandemic. These statistics demonstrate the rapid decline in outcomes for writing in the United Kingdom. Curriculum design over the last decade has been catered towards 'cross-curricular learning'. Often, history and geography content is taught through English lessons and so writing instruction can be secondary to exploring texts that are didactic to the curriculum topics.

## Methodology

The action research approach to measure the impact of choice in writing was necessary as it is important to review practice regularly and make changes to achieve maximum impact. It is also important to reflect and review each action research cycle to understand what methods are not providing impact and so should be revised before the next cycle. In this research, this took the form of a new writing project every 6-8 weeks. At each milestone, outcomes for writing were assessed and where students had been successful, their writing choices were analysed to depict why this was. The study aimed to answer three questions: Does choice impact enjoyment for writing, does choice improve agency and therefore, does choice improve writer identity?

**Methodology**

The research began with a ‘Children As Writers’ survey (Young and Ferguson, 2021). All children completed the survey of 19 questions, each written to measure one of the affective domains of writing (see **Table 1**). This was then reviewed in May 2025 with a final measure of the affective domains (see **Table 2**). Student interviews were conducted in May 2025 to further understand a small percentage of the outcomes.

**Participants**

The sample included 22 students. 13 boys and 9 girls from a Year 6 class in an International, British Curriculum school in Dubai.

**Data Collection**

22 students completed a survey in September 2024 and then repeated the same survey in May 2025. 1 student interview was conducted in May 2025.

**Results**

In September 2024, children, as a collective, reported ‘mild low’ enjoyment, ‘mildly negative’ motivation and ‘mild low’ agency (see **Table 1**). This showed that children did not have a positive outlook on writing, were not motivated to write and felt that they did not have ownership over their writing. As Year 6 children, aged 10-11, attitudes towards writing are often challenging to change as they have spent six years at primary school and have the most experience with the subject. Therefore, the results of the survey were not surprising at this stage.

**Table 1: Outcomes of the ‘Children As Writers’ survey in September 2024.**

Affective Domains	Class Attitude
Enjoyment	Mild Low
Self-efficacy	Mild High
Agency	Mild Low
Motivation	Mildly Negative
Volition	Low
Self-regulation	High
Writer-identity	Negative
Reader-identity	Mildly Positive
Overall	Mildly Positive

The aim of the survey was to focus on enjoyment, motivation and writer-identity. These domains were chosen as the cognitive load of writing is immense and through improving enjoyment this helps to lighten the load. Attainment outcomes in writing for the class conclude at 79% meeting the standard and 71% achieving above the standard. Whilst this is significantly above outcomes reported in the United Kingdom, the assessment framework used was not the same criteria. The Knowledge and Human Development Association (KHDA) is the governing body for Dubai and the assessment framework used reflects the demands of the country. However, it is possible to compare the 79% meeting the standard as a reflection of the success of the writing curriculum as this is above the 72% meeting the standard in the United Kingdom. Although the aim of the study was not to measure attainment in writing, it is important to note the outcomes do not drop when giving children choice over their writing topic.

When the survey was replicated in May 2025, results showed a positive increase in all affective domains. Significantly, enjoyment and motivation. Whilst the domain of, writer-identity has increased from 'negative' it remains 'mildly negative' from student's final responses. When questioned about this, children reported 'real writers are published authors, not children'. Therefore, this will continue as a priority next academic year. Teachers should strive to work on children's opinion of themselves as writers and engage with 'real' authors to demonstrate that the writing process is the same for them as it is for the children.

**Table 2: Outcomes of the 'Children As Writers' survey in May 2025.**

Affective Domains	Class Attitude
Enjoyment	Mild Positive
Self-efficacy	Mild High
Agency	High
Motivation	Mildly Positive
Volition	Mildly Low
Self-regulation	High
Writer-identity	Mildly Negative
Reader-identity	Mildly Positive
Overall	Mildly Positive

On an individual basis, the survey also reported an overall attitude to writing based on a five level scale: negative, mild negative, mild positive, positive and very positive (see **Table 3**). In the initial survey, 1 student had a positive attitude towards writing. 10 were mildly positive and 11 were mildly negative. This culminated in a 50% negative outlook and 50% positive. After a year of using the 'Writing for Pleasure' framework and giving children choice in their writing lessons, 6 children reported a positive attitude (23% increase), 15 were mildly positive (23% increase) and 1 remained mildly negative (45% decrease).

**Table 3: Individual outcomes of the survey with difference shown.**

Date	Positive	Mildly Positive	Mildly Negative
September 2024	1	10	11
May 2025	6	15	1
Difference	+5	+5	-10

### Overall Results

Research question 1: Does choice improve motivation for writing?  
Yes, in the context of the children in the sample.

Research question 2: Does choice improve enjoyment of writing?  
Yes, in the context of the children in the sample.

Research question 3: Does choice improve writer-identity?  
Not to a positive level, yet.

## Discussion and Reflections

When comparing the findings of the study to the literature available, it can be said that giving children choice improves the motivation, enjoyment and agency of young writers. This is an issue that is being felt in the international school systems as well as in the United Kingdom. A simple change in teacher's practice should be to involve children in the ideas generation stage of a writing project. If children are being dictated to about the topic they should write about, we cannot hope for improved motivation for writing both in and outside of the classroom. Teachers should reflect on how weighted the English curriculum is towards other subjects being supplemented due to timetable pressures if they want to improve outcomes and attitudes in writing lessons.

On a personal level, my practice has improved as I have reflected on each writing cycle to continually take children's voices into account when planning a unit. The lessons in the ideas generation part of the sequence have improved in each iteration as I have had to reflect on the successful pieces of writing and ask children what could have been done differently. When planning lessons to support children with coming up with their own ideas, I started quite open and free as I thought this would be the best approach. However, when I was met with a sea of blank faces and a chorus of 'I don't know', I knew the planning of activities and support given to students could not be as 'free'. We developed the lessons from Young and Fergusons' framework to explore 'I am an expert in' (see **Appendix 1**) and 'Let's have an ideas party' (see **Appendix 2**). It was important to engage with the advice with the authors of the framework that stated, 'giving children choice doesn't mean you can't give advice or direction'. This statement is further support by additional advice for staff: 'teachers can be direct and tell children to choose something else – as long as they can explain to the child why'. This highlights the important role that the teacher has at this stage to ensure ideas are fully developed and beneficial to the child's progress. We must provide children with the confidence that their ideas matter and other people will be interested in reading their writing.

The introduction of 'faction', a blend of facts and fiction, has been an important element to our lessons and curriculum. This teaches children that writing lessons are not about regurgitating facts and curriculum content but about teaching them the skills to become great writers. It does not matter if the facts in their writing are true. The beauty of 'Writing for Pleasure' is that children get to invent their own facts whilst focusing on the objectives of the writing curriculum and developing their authorial voice.

All teachers at Hartland have followed this approach for the academic year. This will continue indefinitely as we feel across the school, impact on children's motivation has greatly improved. Next year, teachers in all year groups will carry about the 'Children As Writers' survey with their class at the beginning and end of the year. In it's initial phase, this will give teachers and understanding of their classes' current attitude and give them clear next steps on which domains need to be addressed.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, choice has an impact on motivation and enjoyment of writing. Teachers should reflect on their current writing curriculum and aim to involve children in the process. Their ideas should be at the heart of their writing and teachers should focus on teaching writing skills rather than delivery content for other subjects. It must be carefully planned and choice does not mean lack of direction.



## References

Clark, C., Picton, I., Cole, A., & Bonafede, F. (2024). *Children and young people's writing in 2024*. National Literacy Trust.

Department for Education. (2025). *Key Stage 2 attainment: Academic year 2023/24*. Department for Education.

Young, R., & Ferguson, F. (2020a). *Real world writers: A handbook for teaching writing with 7–11 year olds*. Taylor & Francis.

## Appendix

## Appendix 1

I'm an expert in

*This is MY idea, I thought. No one knows it like I do. And it's okay if it's different, and weird, and maybe a little crazy... I cared for it. I fed it good food. I worked with it, I played with it. But most of all, I gave it my attention*

- Kobi Yamada in 'What To Do With An Idea'

Children love to teach each other things. There's nothing like the feeling of confidence and pride in yourself that comes with being able to tell others about something you feel you are an expert in, especially if they don't know much about the topic but would really like to learn something. You don't have to know everything about your subject, but you do need to know enough to write with a bit of authority and passion. Being an expert obviously helps with most types of non-fiction writing, including instructions, explanation, information and also discussion, where you need to be able to give some kind of factual evidence for and against different points of view.

*Having children write about their own funds of knowledge is one of my favourite things to do in the writing classroom. The idea that you are the class expert on something can bring a new sense of confidence to children who previously may have had little. Every child is an expert in something. You can give them these two headings to write in their notebook:*

1. Things I can do.
2. Things I know a lot about.

Start this mini-lesson with everyone writing a list of things they think they might be a bit of an expert in. It could include anything, from supercars or unicorns, to making friendship bracelets, collecting crisp packets or doing Taekwondo - anything goes as long as children's writing shares their expertise, shows their passion and rouses their reader's curiosity and interest. With the youngest of writers, you may want to do this as a whole-class on flipchart paper as an ideas party.

## Appendix 2

## Let's have an ideas party

*The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas*  
- Linus Pauling

Generating ideas is one of my favourite things about teaching young writers. Children have a wonderful ability to come up with unique and original ideas in a way that I can't. When you give small groups of children some flipchart paper, write 'things we can write about' at the top, and then invite them to come up with as many ideas for the class writing project as they can, it's like a creative bomb goes off. This is especially true with children who have had a long apprenticeship with the principles of contemporary writing workshop approach (Young & Ferguson 2020, 2021). The best thing about generating ideas in this social way with others is that often other people's ideas spark your own ideas off too. You can pin these *Idea Parties* up around the room so children can refer to them over many days if they want to.



I also like to give children a day to continue thinking about their writing ideas for the project. Some children like to continue coming up with ideas while they are at home. The next day, I can recommend taking a *Writing Register*. This is where you ask everyone for their final writing idea for the project and note it down. It's a good time to get a working titles off of each children. You can do this while they are working on their personal projects.