

The Hypalizafly likes to eat human,  
if it finds you it will lure you to the  
hippopotamus tree and into its  
lullaby cocoon, where it will kill you  
and drain all the colour out of your  
body. When it can't find a human to  
eat it flies around hunting for a  
rainbow then it settles on one and  
murders away happily. You can never  
see it on a rainbow for it is too well  
camouflaged for human eyes!

# Creativity and Writing

Developing voice and verve  
in the classroom

**Teresa Grainger**

**Kathy Goouch**

**Andrew Lambirth**



**Also available as a printed book  
see title verso for ISBN details**

# Creativity and Writing

## **What is the role of creativity in the teaching of writing?**

The authors are very close to the needs and aspirations of teachers, so that the tone of this book is accessible as well as stimulating. It will make an important, well-timed contribution to language and literacy in education.

Eve Bearne, University of Cambridge

This accessible yet authoritative book affirms the vital role of creativity in writing and considers and encourages flexible, innovative practice in the teaching of writing. Importantly, the book reflects upon teachers' imaginative and artistic involvement in the writing process as role models, collaborators, artists and writers themselves.

Arguing that children's creative use of language is key to the development of their language and literacy skills, this book focuses on the compositional process and children's own ideas. The authors examine the many voices that influence the inner and outer voice of the child, through reading, investigating, imagining, talking and taking part in a range of engaging and inspiring learning experiences.

Illustrated throughout with many examples of children's writing and drawing, and with suggestions for the classroom, this book is for any teacher wanting to deepen their understanding of theory and practice in the teaching of writing.

**Teresa Grainger, Kathy Gouch and Andrew Lambirth** all work at Christ Church University College, UK.



# Creativity and Writing

Developing voice and verve in the classroom

*Teresa Grainger, Kathy Goouch and Andrew Lambirth*



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# Foreword

## A delicate tension

If you were asked to name the teacher who inspired you most when you were at school, who would it be? Would it be the one who told you about cycling round 1930s Europe and witnessing the growth of fascism? The one whose hands and gestures fascinated you? The one who excelled at a sport you enjoyed? The one who made you feel that you mattered? The one who ‘did all the voices’ when reading aloud to the class? And when you try to analyse why these teachers are memorable, what can be distilled as the essence of inspiration? It’s tricky. It could be the stories they told, the spells of enchantment they wove, the inner energy of conviction. It might be that they fed the imagination or offered the sense that you could do what they did. It’s probably all of these. But I suspect there’s something more—something about trust and about respect. In telling stories about their own lives, exposing their efforts to the gaze of their pupils, being patient beyond the bounds of expectation, they were honouring their classes with trust, sketching out landscapes of possibility and offering a structure for potential futures. Such tributes from adults to children stay in the memory.

I wonder if the teachers whose work is described in this book have given any thought to the seeds of memory they have sown, the future possibilities they have offered? It’s intriguing to speculate that at some time in the future, someone will reminisce about an experience from the We’re Writers project, remembering a personal moment of realisation. Stories such as those deserve to be told. Harold Rosen points out that:

There is a huge reservoir of innovatory teaching experience which is never drawn on because it is never translated into stories.

(Rosen, 1988a:172)

*Creativity and Writing* does, in fact, tell the story of such teaching experience. Rosen continues to flesh out just what ‘innovatory’ might mean and provides detail which is spelt out in this book. The important point is not so much about stories, but about the ‘delicate tension between reproduction and invention’ (p. 171) which is the mark both of creative teaching and creativity in writing. In bringing together these two elements: *reproduction* which suggests something emerging from existing material and *invention* which indicates adding something new, Rosen highlights the balance which is explored in *Creativity and Writing*. However, he also points out that ‘teaching and learning never change without a special kind of imaginative act’ (p. 172). The project outlined in this book gave the opportunity for the teachers involved to engage in that special kind of action. Behind action, however, there is thought. *Creativity and Writing* offers a window into that thinking.

One of the great strengths of this book is that it brings together action and reflection, practice and theory, heart and mind, children and teachers. It offers an integrated view, supported by impressive and wide-ranging scholarship, of the dynamic relationship between teaching and learning. Whilst teaching will, it is hoped, result in learning, the learning itself then prompts further teaching. And, of course, this is not just a matter of first the one and then the other; teaching and learning exist in harmonic counter-point, mingling with each other in duet then separating to solo, reverting to duet again and again. And like any satisfying music, teaching and learning combine technique and performance, appealing both to emotion and thoughtful imagination. In this brief foreword I want to concentrate on that combination which results in professional creativity.

### **Trust and possibility**

The dualities of teaching and learning depend on a delicate balance if they are to be productive, but the tensions inherent in everyday teaching experience may not always be healthy or creative. The OfSTED report on creativity in teaching *Expecting the Unexpected*, identifies some of these ‘barriers to creativity’ (OfSTED, 2003:18). There are those which are related to the teacher’s own sense of security, for example, ‘not recognising the “creative moment”’ or ‘not letting go’ (p. 18) but other constraints are more structural in terms of school or curriculum organisation. Most notable, and unsurprising, is the imperative on teachers to reconcile:

the demands of high test and examination results or the demands of public accountability for improving performance...with a creativity agenda.  
(OfSTED, 2003:19)

Certainly, it is not an easy balance and requires much trust on the part of teachers as they engage in creative teaching—trust in their pupils and trust in themselves. Much of the language of creativity implies trust, suggesting expansiveness and readiness to open oneself out to experience, for example, Craft’s ‘possibility thinking’ (Craft, 2000:1) and Robinson’s views of being ‘innovative and flexible’ (Robinson, 2001:1). What conditions might promote that kind of trustful and risky teaching? With the demands and sometimes unproductive judgements of current educational practice, teachers may be inclined to close up like sea anemones when they feel threatened. Trust, then, goes beyond the classroom walls to the public environment in which teachers are working.

To trust means being able to feel some security, yet it is clear that innovation thrives best in an atmosphere of risk and insecurity. There seems a paradox here. One of the underlying themes of this book is about the professional value of ambiguity and uncertainty. Whenever teachers embark on a curriculum development project like We’re Writers there is an inevitable sense of insecurity and sometimes an urge to hang on to established ‘certainties’. Some of these might be worth hanging on to, but the trick is in recognising what is worth keeping and what can be cast aside. The whimsical—and certainly inventive—artist and architect Antonio Gaudi recommends a return to ‘early solutions’ when making such decisions about innovative practice:

Originality consists of return to the origin. Thus originality means returning, through one's resources, to the simplicity of the early solutions.  
(van Hensbergen, 2001:54)

As advice towards creativity, this is intriguing. Just what might 'returning to the origin' mean? And what are 'the early solutions'? The key, it seems to me, lies in the central placing of the phrase 'through one's own resources'. Stripping away preconceptions and the accretions of unexamined habits can help in identifying just what matters, what is at the centre of beliefs about teaching, what has to go, what is worth keeping and how that core of personal resources can be energised.

These resources will not be the same for everyone. As Ken Robinson points out, 'we all have creative abilities and we use them differently' (Robinson, 2001:12). This is equally true of learners at whatever age—the teachers who put themselves in the position of learners in their own classrooms alongside their pupils. This diversity is also found in the 'many different areas of a person's experience and intelligence' (Robinson, 2001:12) and helps illuminate the sometimes difficult concept of 'risk-taking'. One of the problems associated with encouraging creative approaches to teaching can be the potential for misunderstanding 'risk'. It would be easy to assume that risky teaching depends on 'performance' or some element of the slippery term 'charisma'. But there are many teachers whose strengths are reflective and 'low key' or those who do not easily expose their feelings and ideas to others. What does 'risk-taking' mean for them? This book carefully and perceptively describes how all teachers can push at the boundaries of practice by realising—making real and coming to understand—their own varied strengths and resources. The dual meaning of 'realisation' which involves both action and understanding is very like Bruner's two landscapes: of action and consciousness (Bruner, 1986:14). These are essentially interwoven in making sense of experience, offering worlds made possible by knowing and feeling.

### **Structures for potential**

There can sometimes be resistance to talk of developing creativity and writing because of the association with the (probably mythical) flavour of permissiveness of the 'let it all hang out' creative writing movement of the 1960s. Current views of creativity, however, turn their back on *laissez faire* notions, offering a sturdy and robust vision of harnessing, not just releasing energies (Robinson, 2001). Another shift from earlier perceptions sees these energies not as springing solely from individual qualities but as part of the collaborative generation of ideas:

Creativity is not purely an individual performance. It arises out of our interactions with ideas and achievements of other people. It is a cultural process. Creativity prospers best under particular conditions, especially where there is a flow of ideas between people who have different sorts of

expertise. It requires an atmosphere where risk-taking and experimentation are encouraged rather than stifled...Creativity flourishes where there is a systemic strategy to promote it.

(Robinson, 2001:12)

Significantly, Robinson emphasises the need for structures to support creative endeavour. However, the notion of structures can suggest the possibility of confining ideas, highlighting another apparent paradox in creativity education. How can there be a free flow of ideas within systems? Bourdieu tackled this opposition as he outlined his theory of social practices as 'regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu, 1977:78). Just as play depends on 'rules' in order to liberate inventiveness, creative improvisation obeys certain kinds of regularities in making sense of experience. Such practical theory offers a sound basis for professional development.

The view of creativity as a cultural process emphasises the importance of whole-school commitment in establishing the 'particular conditions' to foster innovative teaching approaches. I'd like to push the notion of culture and community further, however, to suggest an even more pressing imperative for initiatives like the We're Writers research and development project. Just as creativity is differently nuanced for different individuals, the creative arts as a whole act as a focus for celebrating diversity as well as commonality. In a speech given in March 2002 entitled *Beyond Boundaries*, Peter Hewitt, the Chief Executive of the Arts Council, argued for the value of art in society in a turbulent world:

Art helps us to understand what we have in common and where we differ, what we like and what offends us, what excites us and what leaves us cold. We come together around art without having to agree about it. Art helps to populate and energise an open public space for reflection, expression, empathy, dissent and disagreement.

(Hewitt, 2002:2)

Art and creativity are powerful. This book, with its emphasis on the significance of creative teaching for both teachers and children, recognises the value of an open public space where the energies and potentials of all the learners involved can be explored and expressed.

I haven't said much about the children involved in this work, partly because their voices in the pages which follow speak clearly, poignantly, thoughtfully and vigorously for themselves. However, it's worth considering how they found their voices. Their teachers planned for them, worked sensitively and reactively during sessions, offered them a classroom space which promoted risk but provided structured support. They listened to them, prompted them further, led them up to and beyond boundaries. The teachers themselves took some chances, not always knowing where the work might lead. Throughout the work they returned to writing in its many forms—as generating ideas, reflecting on them and communicating them to others. And it paid off. I'd like to return to that list and ask how many of those experiences the teachers themselves had during their work on this action research project. It is my sense that the authors of *Creativity and*

*Writing* offered the teachers just the same professional challenges, structures and opportunities for imaginative flight as the children experienced. They planned, listened, prompted, stepped into the unknown with them.

There's much in this book about ambiguity and 'not knowing'. There's also a lot of strong language like *passion*, *power*, *potential* and *principles*. And this is perhaps the final 'delicate balance'. Whilst it is essential to know with passion just what principles drive our professional actions—the inner conviction born of reflection and experience—it is equally important at other times *not* to know exactly what the outcomes might be. Writing can be like that. Sometimes it is important be sure of just what the written outcome will be; at other times it is absolutely crucial not to know and to allow writing and thought to work together creatively. So it is with teaching, as this book so thoughtfully explains. And it matters. The children whose work rings out of the pages of *Creativity and Writing* are the future. They deserve to know that some kinds of certainties are not creative and to have the inspiration and example of their teachers to give them the courage to trust themselves.

Eve Bearne  
University of Cambridge

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The We're Writers Research and Development project involved the following schools: St James C.E.J., St James C.E.I., St Matthew's C.E.P., Bishops Down Primary, Claremont Primary, St Mark's C.E.P. and St Luke's C.E.I.

# Introduction

## Looking back to travel forward

Children's voices ring and resonate in playgrounds and classrooms, in their homes and communities. Their conversations, quick-fire repartee, chants, jokes and even whispers reflect their energy and vitality, their strongly held views and concerns, their unusual ideas and intriguing insights. In their writing too, we sometimes feel their voices vibrate off the page with conviction, with surety and an engagement born of passion. Such writing is likely to have benefited from full involvement in imaginative contexts, from extended contemplation upon experience, from oral as well as written drafting. In their writing they demonstrate their knowledge about language as they seek to engage and interest others. For many young writers, and certainly for most professional authors, the compositional process encompasses significant gestation time, an extensive rehearsal period. This may involve observation and the gathering of ideas through participation and position taking, reading and reflection and the process of writing and redrafting. If children's writing is to demonstrate their creativity, individuality, voice and verve, then the seeds of their stories and other forms of writing need constant nurturing and support as well as time to evolve and reverberate.

In this book we argue that to help children find their voices, a better balance between knowledge about language and creative language use must be sought in the primary years. Teaching writing is a complex process and ideas can emerge from imaginative activity and the desire to communicate as well as from leaning on examples. Shape too can come from engaging with experience as well as from convenient blueprints. Much will depend on whether we are seeking to produce 'battery hens or free range chickens' (Abbot, 2001). Developing children's knowledge and skills also enhances their ability to write creatively, but balanced provision is the key and many teachers are rightly concerned about 'the apparently imbalanced emphasis on literacy skills at the seeming expense of purposes and creativity' (Dadds, 1999:16).

As a society, we rightly value both the first order skills of composition, and the second order skills of transcription, including grammatical conventions. However, we have generally taught the second strand, the transcription skills and conventions, more fully and explicitly than the other.

(Frater, 2004:81)

We too perceive an over-emphasis on the technicalities of writing, as one teacher colleague in our research expressed it, *I feel as if I've been teaching the full stop for too long*. So our book seeks to profile the significance of children's creative engagement in the compositional component of writing and also examines teachers' imaginative

involvement in the writing process as role models, collaborators, artists and writers themselves.

The seeds of our argument were sown many years ago when we worked with teacher colleagues reflecting upon their creative practice in literacy learning. Their pleasure in engaging personally and imaginatively in their own learning was so marked that the transfer of principles to the classroom context was made with relative ease. At the close of the various courses, the teachers had shifted so much professional ground that many of them signed up for a Masters degree in their desire to understand this transformation and to explore the connections between practice and theory more fully. Such creatively fulfilling journeys were somewhat sidetracked however in the late 1990s by the increased pressure of assessment and the heavily monitored requirements laid out in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) *Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998). At this time our professional development work became oriented towards supporting teachers in flexibly interpreting and developing the NLS, but the professionals we worked with seemed reticent to grasp the challenge, they were concerned to ‘get it right’, and felt both pressured to conform and driven by tests and targets. As the millennium approached, we were invited to work with a consortia of primary schools, positioned in this accountability culture, whose head teachers expressed the view that their children’s writing was *competent yet uninspired*, and who were concerned about the increasingly negative attitudes towards writing expressed by their young learners. As one teacher noted at the time, *The children are simply playing the game called writing—like us I suppose—and the energy has gone out of their writing.*

The two-year research and development project ‘We’re Writers’ was consequently established (2001–3) to examine both teachers’ and children’s perceptions about writing and current practice and to ascertain some of the critical influences upon this. We also sought to explore how the children’s written voices might be enhanced by empowering teachers to use and develop their own and their children’s creative potential. Whilst the book draws upon more than the We’re Writers research project, most of the children’s work used to illuminate our argument is drawn from this work, so a brief outline of it is offered to contextualise this text.

### **We’re Writers: a research and development project**

The educational and political context in which this project was undertaken, was, as already noted, unusually full of tension, pressure and contradiction, which probably reflected the status quo in other parts of the country, as well as in this part of southern England. The NLS had been in operation for two years, and the tunnel vision experienced elsewhere was in evidence here also. The project was undertaken in three phases.

*Stage One*—the initial phase involved an audit to capture the current context in terms of attitudes and perceived practice: teachers questionnaires (n:65), children’s writing surveys (n:390), samples of children’s writing and teachers’ commentaries (n:130) and factual information about the schools.

*Stage Two*—the development phase involved the formation of a Project Focus Group (PFG); two teachers from each school worked as action researchers case studying three children in their classrooms. The PFG explored their understanding of creativity in

writing, developed their own creativity personally and professionally, and worked on various school-selected foci such as drama and writing or storytelling and story writing. The teachers kept professional logs, were regularly interviewed, and retained evidence of the case-study children's writing and their reflective commentaries upon it. Towards the end of the project, writing workshops for the PFG were also established and the group began to write alongside their children. The overall consortia focus moved from increasing autonomy and dialogue in writing in Year 1, to a focus in Year 2 on integrated units of work which encompassed more open-ended and creative practice within an extended process of composition. Consortia development days, staff meetings, interviews with the case-study children and meetings with head teachers were also held and a parent/governor leaflet was produced by the PFG to explain the innovative development work being undertaken by the schools.

*Stage Three*—the evaluation phase involved collecting similar data to that gathered in Stage One, and in addition, PFG members and their case-study children were interviewed. A final celebration conference was held by the consortia, which was run by the PFG members and other school staff who organised workshops and shared their practice and insights, demonstrating the children's not inconsiderable achievements. Video and audio recordings captured the children's voices in action and evidence of their written voice and verve was shared. A consortia anthology entitled *We're All Writers* was also published.

The research was a time of genuine enquiry as we sought to develop ways of reflecting upon creative engagement in writing, and considered creativity in writing, by both the children and their teachers. Frameworks for observation and commentaries on creativity in writing were developed and refined, as together we listened to the children and helped them shape a sense of themselves as writers with something to say and a voice to convey it. As researchers and university tutors we also needed to tune into the teachers' voices and understand their vehemently expressed sense of professional compromise and challenge.

### **Professional autonomy in teaching writing**

The powerful influence of high-stakes assessment, detailed literacy curricula and the marked reduction in teacher professionalism in the UK which characterised the beginning of the twenty-first century, has undoubtedly influenced the teaching of children's writing (Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003). Perhaps the most significant marker has been the increasing tendency for teachers to request permission to be autonomous as teachers of literacy; such has been the influence of accountability and prescription in this domain. The initial audit in the *We're Writers* project revealed that the teachers, concerned to cover the NLS requirements and to prepare their children for the official assessment tests, were tentative and lacked confidence as teachers of writing. They frequently asked *are we allowed?* and sought permission to employ their professional knowledge, experience and understanding. Around the same time, it was also argued that the professional self-confidence of teachers had been drained and their love of language and literature suppressed by the prescriptive culture, the degree of surveillance and the control exerted by the externally evaluated system (Frater, 2000; Anderson *et al.*, 2000). This may have

prompted the profession to stay within the safe boundaries of the known and officially supported pedagogical practices of the day and is likely to have reduced the use of creative and innovative teaching approaches. During this period, the teaching of writing arguably became more standardised, homogenised even, as test criteria were specified more closely and the writing curriculum became entwined with detailed objectives and particular pedagogic practices. Teachers in England, through extensive training and support, undoubtedly developed their knowledge of form and function, grammatical features and linguistic terminology and many adopted different classroom practices and raised the standards of writing, as measured by the national tests. The ongoing evaluations of the NLS by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Earl *et al.*, 2000, 2001) also indicate that there is much to celebrate. However, many of the significant challenges that existed in 2000 still remain and must be confronted if we are to take practice forward from the current apparently safe, but somewhat formulaic status quo. It is to these challenges which we now turn.

### **The influence of assessment and reification of knowledge**

When comprehensive curricula for literacy and the presence of prescribed objectives for the teaching of writing at text, sentence and word level combine, then the coverage of such objectives can come to dominate teachers' concerns. This is particularly likely in an accountability culture, with closely monitored and inspected teaching and the requirement to provide detailed plans and reach set targets. The teachers surveyed and interviewed in the We're Writers project, perceived that the coverage of curriculum content and the explicit teaching of knowledge about written language had become reified in a system which regularly checked and assessed such knowledge. They felt pressured to concentrate on the writing objectives at the expense of exploring the process by which children become writers. The first samples of writing, collected back in Spring 2001, revealed some interesting data in this regard. All the teachers collected the most creative work of two randomly selected children in their class at the end of a half term and added their own contextual notes. The analysis showed that these pieces of writing had arisen from writing practice activities, practice in response to a skill, or a recently introduced genre or practice for assessment purposes. Guidance, when given prior to this writing, focused on the key technical features of the particular genre, although frequently no support at all was given. Follow-up discussions suggested that these 'one time only' writing opportunities (Smith, 1982), were likely to be assessment preparation exercises or short-story writing practice for children to demonstrate their knowledge of a genre. These teachers, in manner similar to those observed by Frater (2000), seemed preoccupied with the prescribed content and appeared to perceive the NLS framework as a plan itself; they certainly followed it carefully and consciously. Frater found that those schools where such a literal interpretation of the NLS prevailed were those in which the children made least progress in writing. The We're Writers teachers appeared to believe that they should deliver the writing curriculum and teach in accordance with what was to be assessed, they did not feel their role involved developing the curriculum in interaction with their learners and creating autonomous young writers.

As Packwood and Messenheimer acknowledge ‘teachers expectations of children as writers are increasingly framed by educational knowledge determined by external agencies’ (Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003:144) and it seemed that in this consortia of seven schools, high-stakes assessment coupled with prescription and accountability had influenced both their expectations and their practice, fostering a rather surface approach to teaching writing. This profiled forms and features of texts at the expense of meaning and message, so from the children’s perspectives, naming and knowing appeared to be given precedence over understanding and applying language in meaningful contexts. As the teachers sought to enrich their children’s knowledge about language, the analysis of language as an abstract object had, they realised, come to dominate the agenda. Yet research evidence has shown that effective teachers of literacy place a high value on composition and prioritise text level work, embedding their teaching of linguistic features in whole-text activities which are meaningful and clearly explained to the learner (Medwell *et al.*, 1998). The teachers in the We’re Writers project acknowledged that they were somewhat dependent upon publishers’ materials and decontextualised text extracts, which they used to illuminate points of grammar or language knowledge, yet recognised that such a ‘sound bite’ approach to teaching literature denies fiction and poetry the opportunity to inspire, engage and challenge young writers (Messenheimer and Packwood, 2002). However, these professionals lacked both the confidence and permission to inhabit other creative spaces to develop their pupils’ written competence, voice and verve in writing. Evidence from national evaluations of the NLS also indicates that teachers may have become more competent in teaching sentence and word level work, but still find supporting children’s compositional development more challenging (Earl *et al.*, 2003).

### **Misunderstanding the nature and purpose of writing**

The public disclosure of test results, as already noted, inevitably leads to teachers teaching to the tests and taking from the test criteria what they need to ensure success for their children (Madaus, 1994; Dann, 2001; Messenheimer and Packwood, 2002). Classroom practice thus becomes shaped by assessment criteria which may lead to an instrumental approach to teaching writing and a focus on ‘construction and correctedness’ which, D’Arcy (1999) argues, the national tests profile at the expense of content and conviction. One of the consequences of this situation is that the perceived nature and purpose of writing can become skewed. For example, a nine-year-old in the We’re Writers project, in response to a test question, *Why did the author use the phrase ‘frozen with fear?’*, wrote *Because he wanted to get a level 4*. This sobering response serves to remind us that children construct their understandings from the opportunities, experiences and priorities created in their schools. Such a zeitgeist should warn us all.

The pre-eminence of test criteria also appeared to influence the teachers’ understandings of the nature of writing. Initially, the teachers in the consortia described quality writing merely in terms of the national test criteria with which they were evidently very well acquainted (Grainger *et al.*, 2002). No mention was made of the engagement of the reader, the content or meaning of their writing, the writer’s style, their ability to take risks, their authorial voice or commitment to the writing. Writing seemed

to have been redefined for these teachers and merely encompassed easily observable and testable features such as: a clear structure, a range of adverbs and adjectives, good punctuation, dialogue, a range of connectives and the use towards prescribed levels and perceived that in the teaching of writing of complex sentences. These experienced professionals were working they tended to foreground the demonstration and practice of text, sentence and word level features of different genres, in line with what they believed was required of them. Through discussion, they acknowledged that audience and purpose were largely ignored. As Bearne (2002) has observed, the profiling of textual elements and the absence of ideational and interpersonal elements of writing in the NLS framework, has shaped not only perceptions of writing but practice also. Using Halliday's (1978) functional model of language, Bearne shows how the NLS short-changes the ideational element, the significant role of the writer's ideas and intentions and ignores the interpersonal component, the sense of audience/ reader (Bearne, 2002:13). Yet these elements play a significant role in the process of finding a voice and becoming a writer.

The model of writing reflected in the practice of these hardworking professionals was one of a toolkit, suggesting that once the children had a command of a range of specific tools, then their competence as a writer was assured. Through observation in project classrooms, it became clear that some of the teaching of writing at this time was atomistic and disembodied, as writing objectives were focused upon in a discrete and rather detached manner and then practised repeatedly. The consequences of this practice were evident in the children's views recorded in the surveys and follow-up interviews. They put their voices on the line and expressed their perspectives with a marked degree of coherence and real strength of feeling. In essence, the younger learners, aged 5–7 years, were more enthusiastic about writing than the older pupils and had more positive views of themselves as writers. The children aged 7–9 years expressed predominantly negative attitudes to writing, typically describing it as boring, whilst a small, but worrying proportion of those aged 9–11 reflected an indifferent, somewhat detached disposition. *More writing? Who cares? What difference does it make what I think? We have to do it—it's part of school.* Had they become schooled writers, products of the conventional game called writing played out in school? The teachers were concerned to realise that these pupils seemed to see themselves as passive recipients, disengaged from the process of becoming writers and with little sense of their own agency or empowerment. They perceived that the contrasting attitudes and less positive self-perceptions expressed by the 7–9-year-olds may have been linked to the fact that in the NLS (DfEE, 1998a) there are 43 more objectives listed for 7–8-year-olds than for 6–7-year-olds. Since 89 per cent of these transitional increases relate to word and sentence level objectives, it is possible that teaching in these years may become disproportionately focused on transcription skills and short-change the importance of meaningful composition.

Research into the influence of literature on the writing of 7–11-year-olds has focused on the development of an ear for written language and on the role of quality literature in the interaction between reading and writing (Barrs and Cork, 2001). In the We're Writers project, we planned to build on this work and focus on the creative engagement of the children and the role of talk in the extended process of composition. Children write more powerfully when they are fully involved in the compositional experience and are not outside the frame, handling the tools of written communication in a distant or apparently academic manner. There is a pressing need to attend to children's ideas, their generation,

incubation and contemplation, since without these they have nothing to say, even if they do have appropriate linguistic knowledge and editorial skills. Without the desire to use this knowledge and communicate with others for their own purposes: to persuade, cajole, tempt, castigate, inform, annoy, amuse or whatever, they may merely be playing the game called writing.

Writing involves us in communicating, conveying meaning to ourselves and others and the act of writing itself can help us refine our thinking and reshape our views, since it allows us to hold our ideas in our hands and consider them as they unfold. Just as a woodcarver discovers their subject in the wood, in its knots, lines, shades and patina, so too writers begin to discover what they want to say through an extended process of composition which is just as central to the final writing as knowledge of the conventions and structures of the form. Writers shape and rehearse their texts through reading, investigating, talking and taking part and through playing with possible tunes, themes and issues. As this process unfolds their confidence grows and their capacity to sharpen their communication increases. The tenor and tune of this book has also emerged through an extensive rehearsal process which has challenged us to stand in the footsteps of the teachers in the project and see the world through their eyes. We were privileged to work with them as they travelled and reflected on the process of teaching writing, as they overcame some of the barriers to their own creative engagement and as they took risks, gradually exerting the right to choose their own pedagogies and teach writing creatively according to their own beliefs and principles.

### **Emerging voices**

This book focuses on the development of voice and verve in children's writing and considers the contribution that flexible, playful, dialogic and imaginative practices can make to children's creative capacity, linguistic potential and growth as writers. We hope it will enable both teachers and children to harness the power of creativity and become rejuvenated in the process. As they explore form and freedom, structure and innovation in teaching and learning about writing, we trust they will exercise their own voices and discuss the implications and ideas with others. Initially we introduce some of the theoretical background with regard to creativity, talk and writing and explore contemporary understandings of creativity, its role in writing and the interdependence of the language modes. We go on to examine the myriad of voices which influence the inner and outer voice of the child and the cultural practices of today's young writers, and consider the role of talk in the social process of writing as a tool for generating ideas, for rehearsing the tunes created and for reflecting upon and evaluating their written texts. We then move on to consider literacy practices which imaginatively develop voice and verve in the writing classroom. The need for genuine autonomy is initially profiled through a discussion of the relationship between choice and voice and the importance of open-ended practices, such as writing journals. We also show how children can extend their voices, both spoken and written, through full social and emotional engagement in a range of playful and investigative responses to text activities, such as discussion, drama, storytelling and poetic performance. A range of engaged artistic children's voices are included and the multimodal nature and social context of their writing is described to

illuminate its development. Much of the children's writing collected in the We're Writers project was fictional but where possible non-fiction pieces have also been included.

Our text then turns to reflect upon the role of teachers as fellow artists, personally and professionally involved as role models, engaged collaborators and genuine writers in the classroom. We consider the importance of teachers' emotional and artistic engagement in the extended process of composition and examine the implications for classroom practice, arguing that teachers can extend their own and the children's creative potential by making more extensive use of the language arts. In our last chapter we seek to highlight the principles and practice of creative teachers of writing and suggest that if we want creativity, voice, verve and passion on the page then we must model such writing from inside texts, and voice our collective view that such writing takes time to develop and is supported by imaginatively involving contexts and powerfully engaging texts, explored in an environment of possibility, creativity and challenge.

# Chapter 1

## The potential of creativity

Teaching is an art form, an imaginatively engaging and creative endeavour, which relies upon the creative capacity, autonomy and intuitive knowledge base of the profession. Yet in recent years pressure on the curriculum has arguably resulted in a narrowing of learning experiences, so that emotional engagement, full participation, experiential and inquiry based learning, as well as spontaneity and creativity have been pushed to the margins of learning (Sedgwick, 2001; Craft, 2000; Puttnam, 1998) As the Design Council (1999:83) state, 'the more prescriptive the curriculum, the greater the need to be explicit about creativity and not leave it to chance'. If teachers are to find innovative ways forward in teaching writing, they need to recognise that the currently directive discourse and imposed assessment structure demands an imaginative and enterprising response. Teachers need to be encouraged to take part in professional dialogue, to seize opportunities to assert their knowledge and understanding and to develop new insights in order to plan more holistically and creatively. Professional aspirations to increase creativity and raise test results are not irreconcilable, but we need to be convinced of this in order to find effective and inspiring ways forward.

To increase their flexibility, teachers need more than knowledge of curriculum requirements; they need pedagogical knowledge and subject knowledge, encompassing an understanding of both principles and concepts in teaching English. More significantly perhaps, they need to recognise the potential of creativity and be able to develop it in young learners, as OfSTED observe in *Expecting the Unexpected*, a recent report on creativity in schools.

Teachers who inspire creativity have a clear understanding of what it means to be creative...even though they are not always able to put this into words.

(OfSTED, 2003:8)

Greater creative assurance will place teachers in a stronger position to offer scaffolds and spaces for growth in writing. In this chapter we focus on the nature of creativity and its importance in developing young writers, especially their ability to write with voice and verve. In arguing for a better balance between developing children's knowledge about written language and their creative language use, we highlight the importance of the imaginative involvement and motivation of young writers. We explore the creative act of writing, and the importance of purpose, relevance, control and innovation, and outline creative and playful approaches, arguing for recognition of the extended process of composition. These issues are all developed further in later chapters, as is the emergence of voice through children's cognitive and affective involvement in artistic learning encounters.

### **Redressing an imbalance in the teaching of writing**

In recent years the dual pressures of prescription and accountability have tended to lead teachers towards a more standardised approach to teaching writing, at least in England, where the main pedagogies of shared, guided and independent writing have become institutionalised in the context of the literacy hour. The NLS Framework (DfEE, 1998a) has profiled the teaching of different genres of writing, both fiction and non-fiction and introduced the profession to writing frames developed from the work of Wray and Lewis (1997). The features of each genre have been explicated in publishers' materials, assessed in national tests and assiduously taught to young writers, creating a somewhat formulaic approach to teaching writing (Frater, 2000), since 'under the guise of developing writer's linguistic awareness', as Myhill (2001:19) observes, 'it is all too easy to reduce writing to a set of formulae taught through a series of exercises'. A better balance needs to be struck between teaching the important skills of form, grammar and spelling for example, and providing opportunities for children to undertake purposeful writing which satisfies their need to communicate and harnesses their individuality and creativity. As Boden has argued, knowledge is a necessary precondition for creativity, but, she warns, it can be taught in such a way that it ends up 'killing the creativity' (Boden, 2001:102). Helping children find a voice involves supporting them in developing their ideas, opinions and possibilities and being concerned with what they are saying, not merely with how they are communicating. As the original National Curriculum for England and Wales, back in 1989, stated:

The best writing is vigorous, committed, honest and interesting. We have not included these qualities in our statements of attainment because they cannot be mapped onto levels. Even so all good classroom practice will be geared to encouraging and fostering these vital qualities.

(DES, 1989:17.31)

There are at least three paradigms of teaching writing which are evident to differing degrees in current practice, including the genre paradigm, the skills paradigm and the process writing paradigm, developed by Britton *et al.* (1975) and Graves (1983). The first sees literacy as social practice and highlights the importance of teaching certain forms as a way of empowering children, the second focuses on a range of discrete language skills which populist perspectives view as common sense, and the third 'positions the writer as an individual author and theorises writing as a recursive, cognitive process' (Robinson and Ellis, 2000:73). The genre movement and the skills based approach are clearly enshrined in the NLS, but, as Robinson and Ellis observe, the process writing approach is short-changed and an emphasis on form and feature dominates. We believe that teachers need to work towards a more appropriate balance between teaching knowledge about the linguistic features of different forms and exploring and supporting the content and meaning of children's writing. It is more than possible to teach such knowledge in a manner that encourages flexibility, judgement and imagination and simultaneously fosters the development of voice and verve, since it is not only what we teach that counts, but how we teach it that shapes the abilities and attitudes of our young learners. In adopting a sociocultural perspective, we focus on context and text and highlight

meaningful communication, thus linking writing closely with speech, with reading and practical open-ended activities of all kinds. There is no formula for developing voice in writing, but when we exploit the potential of creativity and enhance children's knowledge about language in engaging collaborative contexts, providing opportunities for them to communicate purposefully about topics that have salience for them, their voices emerge with an energy, vitality and authenticity which reflect their creative engagement. As creative professionals we too are part of this inspiring and involving journey.

### **Creativity**

The place and purpose of creativity in the broader curriculum needs to be understood against the background of competing conceptions of schooling and literacy. Bell (2001) describes functional literacy as the mastering of basic skills and contrasts this with cultural or critical literacy. He suggests this goes beyond the basic competences and includes visual, aural and tactile skills which 'liberate and enable individuals to transform their modes of thinking, acting and expressing themselves in ways that would otherwise be impoverished and limit their lives' (Bell, 2001:87). Others have also argued that there is more to intelligence than academic ability and suggest that in order to develop lifelong learners, who can cope with the uncertainty and speed of technological and economic change, we need to turn our attention to the potential of creativity (Robinson, 2001; Gardener, 1999). Yet there is a danger, as OfSTED (2003) acknowledge, that the development of creativity is not seen as an essential element in education, but is viewed merely as a modish concept or yet another thing to add to schools' lists of priorities.

The concept of creativity is widely recognised as challenging and complex and is a term so variously employed that it is often used and abused by the media, politicians and policy makers (Prentice, 2000). As the government's committee on creative and cultural education made clear, misconceptions about creativity abound; these include: the misguided perception that creativity is the province of the few, the view that it is associated with particular people, and the perception that it is synonymous with the arts (NACCCE, 1999). In addition, a further misunderstanding aligns creativity with childlike play that is intuitive and undisciplined, a quality of childhood that must not be intruded upon. Yet research evidence suggests that creativity is possible 'whenever human intelligence is engaged' (Robinson, 2001:7) and that it is a human capacity which can be both developed and enriched in each individual. Furthermore, creative play is unusually serious, thoughtful and demanding, arising out of our interactions with others, with ideas and with experience. Bronowski (1978) sees the creative mind as one which looks for unexpected likenesses and connections between disparate domains and highlights creativity as a way of thinking. If children erroneously perceive writing as the domain of a lucky few, a gift possessed by others, and experience real difficulty or failure, they are likely to be less confident which will influence their attitude to writing. This was the case in the We're Writers' project, in which many of the KS2 children perceived themselves to be weak writers and some of them showed the early stages of a potentially long-term negative disposition towards writing (Grainger *et al.*, 2003).

Developing creativity in writing is not a fanciful extra in learning to write, but is central to children's growth as writers and to their self-esteem. To develop their creativity