

YOUNG WRITERS' CONSTRUCTION OF AGENCY

Abstract

This paper considers young learners construction of agency in the context of classroom writing lessons. It draws on data from the Esmée Fairbairn funded project: From Talk to Text, using talk to support writing which investigated the relationship between talk and writing in early years classrooms. The paper reports on results from in-depth interviews with pairs of children in six classrooms in the south of England. It is argued that, although human beings have the ability to shape and influence their lives, this capacity is circumscribed by the context within which their activity is located. In order to examine human agency it is necessary to explore the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of human ways of acting. Data presented here indicate a sense of agency in young writers' classroom choices but raise questions about the efficacy of these choices.

Introduction

How young children perform in literacy is an area of both political and educational importance as well as being clearly of concern to individual learners. However, while studies of literacy development and effective teaching abound, little is written about the child's perspective. It can be argued that however effective the teaching is and however much we know about how literacy performance develops in general, individual pathways vary. How this variation develops is an important object of study. Teaching and learning of literacy take place within a socio-cultural context and participants' understandings of how they can gain access to literacy practices impact on student performance and attitudes.

This paper considers the role of agency in children's development as writers: how do they understand their role as learners and writers? It draws on data from the Esmée Fairbairn funded project: *From Talk to Text, using talk to support writing* which investigated the relationship between talk and writing in early years classrooms. The paper reports on results from interviews with focus groups of children in six classrooms in the south of England.

Background

Within the cultural world of the classroom there are cultural and historical traditions and power relations which impact upon learners' actions and the object of their actions. Sociocultural perspectives on teaching and learning stress the importance of teachers as mediators of cultural practices. Their actions impact upon learners' responses to what is taught. Learners need to make choices about what they want to do and what they can do within the sociocultural context. The term agency is used here to reflect how participants respond to the possibilities that arise from cultural settings such as classrooms. The view of agency adopted here conceives agency as situated, relational and shaped by the tools adopted for use in the context.

Agency is described by Inden 1990 (in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 2001) as the capacity of people to act on their world – to act purposefully and reflectively. They may consider different courses of action as possible and desirable. People not only act as agents but can be instruments of other agents and, what Inden describes as 'patients' – the recipients of the acts of others. These courses of action arise from the cultural setting; here is not infinite possibility as some such as Valsiner (1998) seem to suggest. For him, agency is seen more as a personal attribute than a social one in which the 'child creates a unique personal world' (p87). Rather, Ratner (2000) sees agency as a potential; 'a social phenomenon depending on social relations' (p433).

Agency is situated: it is represented by the possibilities for acting within a setting. Holland et al, (ibid) refer to such contexts as 'figured worlds'. The concept of figured worlds draws on Leontiev's (1978) notion of activity in which figured worlds are historical phenomena which are entered or into which people are recruited and which themselves develop through the engagement of their participants. They are social settings in which participants' positions matter.

'They proceed and are socially instanced and located in times and places, not in the 'everywhere' that seems to encompass cultural worlds as they are usually conceived Figured worlds are socially organised and reproduced. They divide and relate participants (almost as roles), and they depend upon the interaction and intersubjectivity for perpetuation' (Holland et al, p41).

Within the figured world of the classroom, children learn how to be as pupils and as writers. Human beings are shaped by social and individual factors but also have the ability to influence their lives and their environment. Holland et al (ibid) argue, 'human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention' (p5). Thus, it is argued that, although human beings have the ability to shape and influence their lives, this capacity is circumscribed by the context within which their activity is located. In order to examine human agency it is

necessary to take account of the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of human ways of acting.

Agency involves engagement in ongoing practice and is therefore essentially relational. Society provides conditions for practice but the child's activity in the practice shapes the trajectory of development and allows us to take understanding of development forward (Hedegaard and Fler, 2008). The relationship between the actor and the context occurs on different levels: institutional, social and individual. Linehan & McCarthy (1999) argue that apprentices in classrooms are engaged in negotiating control and responsibility relations which constrain their possible ways of being within that setting. Children are learning in the setting and actively negotiating their position in the context. Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) discuss the importance of relational agency in learning. They see this as the capacity to engage with the disposition of others. The social settings in which learning takes place impact upon what is learned and how it is learned. They argue that learning is not just a matter of collaborative action on an object. It is the ability to recognise available resources, whether people or tools, as well as to actively seek and use such resources. Thus agency is mediated through the way people act to use the tools available to them in the historical and social setting.

Leontiev (1978) argued that object motives stem from outside individuals. They are objects of a material world and therefore culturally and historically derived. Children enter this world already part of a society that has expectations for behaviour in particular contexts. These expectations are 'ready meanings' (off the peg). These are not just chosen neutrally but relate to the power positions of those who offer them 'choice not between meanings but between colliding social positions that are expressed and recognised through these meanings.' (p. 94). These meanings are actualised in the transition from motive into the goal pursued by individuals. In the context of the classroom, participants bring expectations to the activity and make choices about their contribution from their previous experience and judgement of the context. Social meanings are reworked to make personal sense. Motives are prioritised by the child through participating in activities. The activity that a child prioritises within an activity setting is, in turn, part of a tradition for practice.

The sociocultural view of agency adopted here is one that emphasises the way that cultural tools shape how people think and their possibilities for action (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991). Classroom activities, mediated by the teacher and other external influences, act both to sustain teaching and learning but also to affect learner identity and agency. Agency is mediated by the interaction between the

individuals and the tools and structures of the setting. Pupil agency is part of a complex dynamic. Williams, Davis and Black (2007) liken agency to the 'space to choose'. With reference to a classroom of pupils engaged in learning, they pose the question 'what envisioned needs does the classroom activity mobilise in students, and with what consequences for their subjectivity?' (p3). Thus agency is reflected in the way an individual develops personal meanings from the social world. These meanings do not arise from nowhere but are rooted in cultural and historical practices within which the individual can negotiate a pathway. Agency is not free choice as choices are constrained by the cultural historical context including the power relations that are embedded within that context.

There have been many studies that consider children's agency as users and consumers of literacy out of school and several that report how home literacy practices can be capitalised upon within the school. There are, however, few studies that consider how the development of children's agency as learner and pupil is fostered or constrained in the school. More has been written in this context about agency in young people reading (for example Love and Hamston, 2003) but little has been written about agency in writing.

Writing is a complex process which is often portrayed as mainly psychological activity. Yet the teaching of writing involves interplay between teachers and pupils: between teachers' own experience of writing and their interpretation of the process, of the task and of the product and children's pre-existing literacy experiences, their developing understanding of the process of schooling and, crucially, their interpretation of the goal of the activity.

Bourne (2002) examined the construction of 8 and 9 year old writers' identities through analysis of their classroom discourse around writing. She found that children who did well were better able to interpret the teacher's signals about their writing. She argues that children in classrooms cannot be seen as simply writers nor only as learners positioned by 'the teacher in a discourse of academic achievement' (p243). They are people with other histories, other experiences who act within and upon classroom activity. She shows that despite whole class teaching sessions, certain children seemed restricted in their access to different identities as learners. She shows 'how children are active in taking up positions within the multiplicity of discourses they are given access to' (p252). Here, in the classroom, writing is shown to be far more a social than developmental process.

This perception is borne out in Merchant (2005) who illustrates how, for young writers, their 'acts of authorship are significant in the performance of identity and suggest a view

of digital literacy in which identity and agency are key interrelated elements as learners position themselves in the multiple social practices and discourses that surround them.' (p304). The younger writers, in particular, seemed concerned about how their writing performance might be seen by those who read it.

Classroom writing, far from being an individual endeavour, is essentially social. Since meanings, and consequently, identities are constructed socially, agency in young writers develops within the social context of the classroom. Furthermore how pupils choose to exercise their agency is likely to impact upon their success as writers and learners.

Talk to Text Project

The Talk to Text Project was a collaboration between researchers at Exeter University and five schools in the south of England that aimed to explore the relationship between talk and text in young writers. As part of this project, 18 dyads of children aged between 5 and 7 years from six classes were interviewed at the beginning and end of the year of the study. Each pairing consisted of a boy and a girl designated by their teacher as high achievers, average achievers or low achievers. Thus six children from each class were interviewed twice by one of two research fellows working on the project. The interviews followed a semi structured format and generally lasted for about 30 minutes. The interview schedule was trialled in four classes during the previous year.

In order to orientate these young children to the topic, the first questions asked children to look at a picture of children writing in a classroom. The interviewer asked who the children thought were good writers in the picture and why. Thought bubbles were shown coming from the writers and children were asked to write or say what the child in the picture was thinking. This led on to a semi-structured interview focusing on three main elements of writing: quality, attitude and strategy. The children were asked whether they were good writers and how they knew. Similarly they were asked who in their class was a good writer and how they could tell. They were also asked whether they liked to write and which aspects of writing they found easy and which hard. In addition they were asked about what helps them to write, what they do if they get stuck and how they think people learn to write. Finally they were asked whether there was anything else that they would like to tell the interviewer.

Interviewers were instructed to ask an initial question from each section (quality, attitudes, strategies) and then prompt for answers related to the construct concerned. Interviewers encouraged children to speak at greater length by non-judgemental

responses such as 'right', 'oh yes'; by waiting and allowing children to fill the silence; or by repeating the question using a similar question while keeping the focus on the construct. Interviewers avoided summarising what children had said and asking leading questions.

In the first level of analysis, the interviews were coded in relation to each of the three constructs of quality, attitude and strategy. For the purposes of this paper, in order to examine children's sense of agency in relation to writing, the responses were further coded with particular focus on: what children said helps when they are writing; how they or other people learn to write; and, how they can tell whether they or someone else is a good writer and what they like and dislike about writing.

As a second level of analysis, the responses under each of these headings were then coded to indicate how these young writers were making personal sense from their participation in the activity of writing lessons. Some children gave more than one answer and topics were often referred to more than once. Therefore the number of responses to be coded exceeded the number of interviews (n=72). Clearly, how to judge agency from what children say is problematic. Kamler (1993) examined children's writing to determine whether there was evidence of how boys and girls constructed their own agency in the process of reconstructing their experiences. She counted children's use of first and third person pronouns in their recounts. In the study reported here, evidence of how these children constructed agency was deemed to have been signalled by what they said about how they used the mediational tools offered, who they regarded as influential and how they interpreted the possibilities available to them.

Findings

The overall impression gained was that of children actively making sense of their classroom experiences. They indicated their awareness of the practice traditions within their classroom context and showed that these traditions impacted differently on different children. It was interesting to note the reasons that children gave for liking or not liking writing. Some children said they did not like writing *because* it was hard but there were also children who said they liked it because it was hard, 'it makes your brain work' (AAG)¹. There was a distinction between those children who said they liked the creative opportunities offered by writing and those who felt constrained by the task based

¹ The initials HA, AA and LA are used to indicate the writing attainment level given by the teacher (high, average or low). B or G is used to indicate the gender of the child.

nature of their writing experience. For example, one high achieving girl said, 'I like writing when I have it all in my head and I write and it is fun. I just think it'. On the other hand there were children who felt the pressure of having to produce something at another's request, 'I wish there was not school so we could do it by ourselves' (AAG), and the high achieving boy who didn't like it 'when you think you've finished and the teacher is checking your book and she asks you to write and do more on it'.

Strategies – What helps me write?

In the strategies section of the interview schedule, the questions focused on the strategies that children used to help them in their writing. It is argued above that cultural tools shape the way people think and their possibilities for action. Agency within the classroom context happens as children make their own sense of these possibilities. It can be observed in the way the child appropriates a task and makes it their own. Children were asked questions such as 'What do you do when you are stuck' and 'What helps you when you are writing'. In order to explore how these children were constructing agency, the responses were coded according to the source of the strategies they chose: whether the response referred to themselves (e.g. I think), whether it referred to another person (e.g. the teacher) or whether it referred to a strategy provided within the classroom (e.g. a word book). It is judged that these choices shape the trajectory of development as children make sense of the activity within which they are engaged. Close examination of these responses indicates the complex nature of children's actions.

Children who referred to their own efforts as helping them with their writing made statements such as, 'Try and figure it out' (LAB) and 'Think. Say it over and over in my head' (LAB). There were also differences between whether children thought of 'getting stuck' or needing help as relating to secretarial aspects such as spelling or whether they related this to the content of the writing. Those who focused on spelling often mentioned that they sounded out the word or, as one said, 'saying words out and guess' (AAB). It was also apparent that some self help strategies were more helpful than others. The low achieving girl who said that you 'can draw a picture' has made a decision that allows her to continue to be involved in some sort of classroom activity but it will not necessarily help her in her development as a writer. On the other hand the girl who said, 'Think of other stories that you know' (AAG) has developed a strategy that may well help her make progress.

It was mostly the teacher who was referred to as the person who helps them with their writing. As a high achieving girl explained, 'Put your hand up and the teacher comes

along.' Or, 'Put your hand up and she comes and fixes it' (AAG). Interestingly, in the interviews at the end of the project, which had made extensive use of writing partners, there was no noticeable increase in the number of those who referred to peers as helping them. Only five children mentioned asking a friend and then it was likely to be, 'Ask everyone on the table and then the teacher' (HAG).

The responses that related to using resources to be found in the classroom, almost exclusively referred to needing help with spelling. Each classroom had a resource such as a word wall, word wheel, alphabet line, have-a-go cards and so on. Children were familiar with the use of these for help with spelling and, if they referred to a classroom resource this is what they would refer to. Only two children mentioned getting help with ideas and they both suggested either copying from a book (HAG) or getting ideas from a book (AAG).

The distribution of responses can be examined in Tables One and Two. Overall 33% of responses referred to self, 42% to someone else and 25% to a strategy (Number of separate responses = 161).

	Self	Other	Strategy
Boys	41%	36%	23%
Girls	26%	49%	25%

Table One: What helps me write? Gender

	Self	Other	Strategy
High Achievers	25%	48%	27%
Average Achievers	37%	37%	26%
Low Achievers	38%	42%	20%

Table Two: What helps me write? Achievement

It can be seen that boys were more likely to say that they relied on themselves as opposed to girls who referred to someone else, usually the teacher. One high achieving girl, when asked what she did when she was stuck, replied, 'I just carry on and the teacher will tell you your mistakes'. Whereas some boys made responses such as, 'I just cross it out' (AAB) or 'I sound it out and think' (AAB).

Interestingly, the high achieving writers were less likely to rely on themselves than the other groups. The low achievers referred less frequently to classroom strategies such as

word banks or alphabet friezes as a way of helping them with their writing. A few children also complained that sometimes the teacher would not help.

The analysis reported here has not attempted to evaluate the efficacy of the resources adopted by these young learners. Although the appropriation of a strategy for independent writing might be a useful short term route to some independence as a writer, this may not continue to be the case. Many children referred to sounding out as an appropriate way of spelling a word when 'stuck'. A few others suggested the use of a dictionary. It is clear that one strategy will have more usefulness in the long run than the other. More importantly, it would seem that they were aware of the different possibilities and able to exercise preferences. Further work needs to be undertaken to explore the efficacy of different resources and how they are used.

Moreover, a simple count of coded responses conceals the nature of agency within individual responses. Although the extent to which these young writers relied on themselves or others in their writing is of interest, the quality of the strategy is also relevant. If we are to consider how children's construction of agency may shape the trajectory of classroom performance, we need to consider how helpful or not their chosen strategy may be. Some children gave replies such as, 'Someone telling me what letters to write' (LAB). On the other hand, others were developing more focused strategies, for example, 'well if we are writing an ... information piece of writing we can look in the information books that we've got out on display' (HAG).

A third stage of analysis involved coding the responses for those that were judged to indicate helpful strategies. These involved seeking some sort of solution from the affordances of the classroom – people and literacy resources such as word banks. For example, 'Look around the classroom and see if the word is written anywhere' (LAB). Unhelpful strategies were judged to be those where the child was passive, waiting for someone to give them the answer or copying the teacher's writing. Of the 111 responses to these questions, 33 were coded as being unhelpful in their passivity. Further investigation revealed that there was no difference between boys and girls in this respect and very little difference between achievement groups with the high achievers citing fewer unhelpful strategies (21% [HA] as opposed to 34% [LA] and 31% [AA]). Where a difference was identified, this was in the different teacher groupings. Here, there were evident differences with one class having a particularly high proportion of unhelpful responses (64% against 36%) whereas the distribution of responses per group in each of the other classes was more representative of the overall distribution (30% against 70%). Unfortunately the relatively small number of responses means that these findings cannot

be tested for significance. However, the difference in responses according to the teacher clearly demonstrates the way in which the social context impacts upon the child's response to activity within that context.

Strategies – How do you learn to write?

As well as asking these children what helps them with their writing they were asked about how they were learning to write. It was considered that an awareness of the way in which they learned would indicate how they shape their choices and indicate what actions they might choose within the array on offer in their context – particularly here the classroom contexts.

The children were asked about how they thought that they had learnt to write. They were also asked whether they could have learned to write without going to school. These responses were coded according to whether they felt that learning to write was something to do with their own efforts (e.g. practising), whether it was a result of someone else's intervention (e.g. going to school) or whether it was simply maturational (e.g. my brain got bigger). It should be noted that here the interest was not in how realistic the child's view of learning might be but the extent to which it indicated a sense of agency – an awareness of the choices open to them. The number of views expressed was counted here. One child might attribute their learning to both the teacher and getting older and this was recorded as one for each category. If a child referred several times to the importance of practice, this was just recorded as one.

Overall 39% of children's views attributed their development as writers to their own efforts, 45% to someone else and 16% to purely maturational affect. The distribution of these views can be seen in Tables Three and Four below. Again, the boys were more likely to attribute their learning to their own efforts than to someone else and girls to attribute it to another person. There appeared to be very little difference according to achievement group with the low achievers attributing their learning slightly less to themselves than had children in other groups.

	Self	Other	Maturational
Boys	43%	40%	17%
Girls	35%	50%	15%

Table Three: How do you learn to write? Gender

	Self	Other	Maturational
High Achievers	41%	44%	15%
Average Achievers	41%	44%	15%
Low Achievers	35%	48%	17%

Table Four: How do you learn to write? Achievement

Of those responses that referred to the learner's own efforts several responses referred to practice and hard work. As one child said of good writers, 'The more they do, the better they get (AAB). A few responses referred to strategies such as sounding words out and copying, 'I kept learning new words and found new words' (HAB). One or two showed a real sense of using one's own resources such as, 'You could spell it out and when you get home check it in a book' (HAB).

It was surprising how little the teacher figured in the other people who children said had helped them learn to write. Mothers and other family members were named as frequently as teachers. 'My sister helped me. Sometimes adults like the teacher can help' (HAG). 'Your parents teach you when you are a baby' (AAG). However, many children recognised the role of the teacher and gave responses such as, 'Teachers tell you how to do it and then you do it' (LAB) or 'You'd only learn easy words if you didn't go to school' (HAG).

Some children seemed to have little sense of their own or anyone else's involvement in their learning. Several of these children commented on the fact that people get better at writing because they grow bigger or their brains get bigger. Others expressed more of a sense that as you get older writing would get easier and you would need less help or the pencil would be easier to hold. Of the three types of response, this seems the least helpful as it illustrates no understanding of the active role that the learner can take in their own development.

Quality of writing – how can you tell?

These children are developing as pupils at the same time they are developing as writers. They act within the classroom setting according to a range of personal, social and societal influences. They have choices to make about how they will respond to the learning opportunities offered to them. They are also instruments of the agency of others. The interaction between their own understanding of the activity of writing and how they interpret the goals of the classroom is likely to influence how they engage with and within the writing activities provided. Thus, the way in which young writers exercise their

judgement about what it means to be a successful writer in the classroom is likely to be a key influence on how they develop as writers in and beyond the classroom.

There were three topics covered in the interviews that gave rise to relevant responses here. First, the pictures shown at the beginning of the interview showed three children writing. The researcher asked which of the three was a good writer and how could they tell. Later in the interview, children were asked whether they were good at writing and also who was a good writer in their class. For each of these questions, they were also asked how they knew.

All responses relating to how they can tell whether they or someone else is a good writer and how they knew were coded according to whether the response referred to evidence of the teacher's judgement, whether it referred to the physical appearance of the writing (e.g. it's neat), whether it referred the behaviour of the writer (e.g. she reads her writing through) or whether it referred to the behaviour of the pupil (she puts her hand up a lot).

Reference to the appearance of the writing seemed to indicate a sense that good performance is demonstrated by adherence to writing conventions (although clearly not understood by the child in these terms). Many children referred to good writing as small or straight or neat.

Reference to the behaviour of the writer seemed to indicate a sense that being good at writing is within the endeavour of the writer. This was the most frequent category that was mentioned with 38% of responses relating to the writer. Many children referred to things that the writer does such as 'using wow words' or 'he has lots of good ideas' or 'I think before I write'.

Others mentioned behaviour that related more to how pupils behave in class than about the activity of writing. Several children made comments like the girl who said that they could tell which child in the picture was a good writer because, 'she is still writing when the others have finished' (LAG). One girl commented, 'The good writer is yawning because she is tired from doing a lot of writing' (HAG). When asked who were the good writers in their class many children referred to those who put their hand up. One girl justified her choice of a child who is a good writer by saying, 'he puts his hand up to answer the teacher' (HAG). Others commented that the good writers looked like they were working hard. Those responses that referred to the behaviour of the child as a pupil, while showing a sense that being a good writer is within the efforts of the individual, seemed to imply a concern to please the teacher rather than become a writer. These

responses seemed more about being the 'ideal pupil' than about becoming a writer. This understanding will clearly affect the choices that these children make about how to act within the setting and, consequently, how they develop as pupils and as writers.

It is recognised that these codes may be over-simplistic. Although several children referred explicitly to knowing who is a good writer because the teacher said so, the teacher's voice is apparent in most responses. The boy who replied that he was a good writer because he does small writing and finger spaces is clearly drawing on his teacher's response to his work. However, here he has at least made a choice about which behaviour, of those mentioned by his teacher, matters.

Overall there were 122 different responses given. Of these, 19% referred to the teacher's judgement, 18% to the behaviour of the child as a pupil, 25% to the appearance of the writing and 38% to the behaviour of the writer. This was the only topic which showed any noticeable difference between views before and after the project. Not only were there twice as many responses but these had shifted considerably towards the writing itself perhaps indicating an increased understanding of what could and could not be achieved. The distribution of responses can be examined in Tables Five, Six and Seven.

	Teacher's judgement	Pupil behaviour	Appearance of writing	Writer's behaviour
Pre	24%	31%	12%	33%
Post	16%	11%	31%	42%

Table Five: How do you know? Pre and post

	Teacher's judgement	Pupil behaviour	Appearance of writing	Writer's behaviour
Boys	21%	12%	28%	39%
Girls	18%	23%	21%	38%

Table Six: How do you know? Gender

	Teacher's judgement	Pupil behaviour	Appearance of writing	Writer's behaviour
High Achievers	29%	22%	18%	31%
Average Achievers	20%	12.5%	27.5%	40%
Low Achievers	5%	19%	30%	50%

Table Seven: How do you know? Achievement

Some of the responses showed a developing sense of good writing behaviour, 'I check that I have got the right letters' (AAB) and 'I think before I write' (AAG). On the other hand, other children showed less awareness, 'The good writer is yawning because she is tired from doing a lot of writing'. The same girl said she knew she was a good writer 'because the teacher says' (HAG).

Discussion

Children's performance in literacy is a topic that commands considerable interest from educational, political and research communities. However, the focus of this interest has tended to arise from psychological perspectives with a focus on learners' performance or from an educational perspective on the teaching strategies. Little work has been undertaken to explore how the learners themselves engage with the task of learning to write. A socio-cultural understanding of learning conceives learners as actors in a social world in which what is learned and how it is learned arises from the cultural and social context. Yet this is no simple stimulus response mechanism. The concept of agency reflects the choices individuals make about how to act within the social and cultural setting. As discussed earlier, agency of individuals is firmly located in the socio-cultural context: it is situated, relational and closely shaped by the available cultural tools.

Agency is rooted within practice. Although human beings have the ability to shape and influence their lives, this capacity is circumscribed by the context within which the activity is located. The data reported here give clear evidence of children making their own interpretations of the context in which they find themselves. They are not passive recipients of writing lessons but young people exercising choices in how they respond to the demands made of them and the opportunities available to them. That these choices were circumscribed by the context was clear from the responses given. Although the answers reflected different responses from different children they were sufficiently similar to demonstrate the impact of the institutional context of the school and the social context of the classroom. Writing itself is not just a skill to be acquired in school for school purposes but a social practice, a way of expressing ideas and achieving goals in everyday life. Yet these children's responses were almost entirely focused on literacy as a secretarial skill. Few children referred to writing practice beyond school and these responses were clearly shaped in relation to school. For example, one high achieving girl said that she liked writing at home but did not like it at school as 'it is hard to do it neatly in the time'. When asked what helped them write, the voice of the teacher was evident in responses such as 'finger spaces', alphabet lines, 'have-a-go cards' and so on. These answers were clearly influenced by the institutional perspective on writing proffered by

the school rather than any evidence of writing as a social practice that could be part of life beyond the classroom.

The resources and activities offered in the setting shape how learners understand the possibilities for action within the context. These cultural tools, mediated by the teacher and other external influences, act to sustain teaching and learning as well as affecting learner identity and agency. These young writers' developing understanding of the resources available to them reflected the writing tasks required by the school and the resources available in the classroom. Every classroom, as most classrooms in UK, provided extensive evidence of the importance of spelling with word banks, word lists, alphabet friezes and so on. The salience of these resources both in their physical presence and as foregrounded by the teacher seemed to have given clear clues as to the importance afforded to this aspect of literacy.

Agency is also relational. Children negotiate their position within the social context and interpret the responsibility relations which constrain their possible ways of acting. They have to identify what and who matters within the context. In choosing whose voice to attend to they make judgements about power relations at play within the setting. The analysis of the responses given by these young children indicates clearly the important role of the teacher in these children's classroom life. When talking about how they knew whether they were good at writing or who was a good writer, the teacher was frequently mentioned. One fifth of the responses referred to the teacher's judgment but many others also reflected the voice of the teacher in children's naming of teacher mediated strategies such a good writer being seen as someone who uses finger spaces or the child who said he was a good writer as he could 'do a *duh* and *ahs* very good' (phonic name for the letters d and a). This highlights the complexity of these children's interpretation of the classroom context. The relational nature of agency is clear in their apparent acknowledgement of the power of the teacher within this context. However, when asked how they *learned* to write few children attributed their learning to the teacher. Although nearly half of the responses acknowledged that another person had been instrumental in their learning, as many children mentioned parents or siblings as mentioned their teacher. Even some of those who did mention the teacher, were grudging in this acknowledgement: 'You need a bit of help from teachers when you start off' (LAB) and 'listening to the teacher sometimes helps' (HAB). Hedegaard and Fler (2008) argue that 'conceptions of a 'good life' are anchored in the norms and values interwoven in different cultural traditions' in which the child is involved daily (p17). The data seem to indicate that these children's understanding of a 'good life' within the classroom setting relates

more to the teacher's power to *judge* what is valued than to the teacher's role in effecting progress in children's learning.

The data show agency as situated, shaped by the available cultural tools and relational. They also show that children's responses were different: children rework the social context for their personal use. Different children had responded differently although the institutional contexts of schools were largely similar. The analysis considered the extent to which the choices they made related to their own personal efforts, the teacher and other people or to inanimate resources. In their choices these children had to mediate among tools, structures and settings to negotiate pathways through their school experience of writing. At first glance it may seem that the ability to rely on oneself might give evidence of that child's development as an independent learner. However, it is arguable whether those children who suggested more independence in their strategies for writing were making the best use of the resources available to them. Conforming to the expectations of the teacher might ultimately prove more effective in negotiating one's position in the social world of school.

Relational agency again is important. As Holland et al (2001) remind us, power relations are implicit within figured worlds. Some worlds we can enter, some we keep others out, some we miss completely. Although there were surprisingly few differences between groups in the types of response given, a couple warrant further consideration. As can be seen from Table One, the girls in this study said that they relied less on themselves than did the boys. Half the responses given by girls referred to someone else (usually the teacher) as a source of support in writing. Similarly, Table Six shows that these girls were more likely to judge a writer's success by how they behaved as a pupil than were the boys. These responses may seem to imply a lack of independence but independence is not the same as agency. If learning is the ability to recognise available resources, whether people or tools, as well as to actively seek and use such resources (Edwards and D'Arcy, 2004), there must also be an element of evaluation of those resources. Those children whose responses implied that they sought help from the teacher and who judged success by teacher approval may be those whose chosen pathway through schooling will lead to success within the institution of school. Classrooms are sites of complex relationships. Many reasons have been put forward for girls' higher performance in school achievement but it may well be that one such reason is girls' ability to negotiate a position as successful pupils within the learning context.

As shown earlier it was possible to evaluate children's responses as to whether they involved some active and apparently helpful strategy on the part of the learner or

whether the child seemed to adopt a passive stance. One third of responses were seen to be passive in nature and it is considered likely that a child, whose predominant response to the activity of writing was negative in this way, would be unlikely to develop as successful a trajectory of development as one whose choices involved positive action which, consequently, was more within the control of the individual.

To illustrate this, two children can be identified as ones whose responses imply that they follow either a predominantly passive or predominantly engaged involvement in their encounters with writing in school. One lower achieving boy's contributions exemplify the type of unhelpful responses where a passive reliance on himself seems unlikely to support him in his development. Chris (pseudonym) appeared a confident writer who said that he enjoyed writing. Despite being identified by the teacher as one of the low achievers in writing, he said that he considers himself a good writer because he writes fast and very small. The importance of very small writing was a theme through both his interview sessions. He identified a child in the pictures of children writing used at the start of the interview as being good at writing because he, 'listens to the teacher and never talks'. When asked how he learned to write, he responded, 'as you get bigger you can write better' and 'when you are so young you just do scribbles and as you get bigger you can write better'. In response to the query about what he found helpful he replied, 'what helps me is if someone's telling me what letters I have to do and then I can just write it'. In the second set of interviews he said, 'I quite like it when people [teachers] say that they are not going to leave anything up [on the whiteboard] but they just forget it so that I can copy it'. When stuck he said, 'I basically just try and read it' and even when given other suggestions as to what he might do he replied, 'not really'.

Megan also seemed a confident writer who said she knew that she wrote well because, 'I wrote a story and the teacher said it was excellent and she give me a sticker'. However she also said that she thought she was better at Maths. She showed an interesting insight into her attitude to school when asked what the children writing in the picture were thinking, she said that the girl in the picture was thinking about, 'what she's going to do after school and who is she going to play with in the playground'. Megan chose the child in the picture as being a good writer 'because she looks like she is looking down at her piece of paper and she knows what she is doing'. When asked how she learned to write, she responded, 'by going to school' and, 'think about it really hard and before you write it in neat write it with your finger'. (The magic finger is a strategy developed as part of the project in which children 'shadow write' a sentence first with their finger as a form of oral rehearsal) In response to the query about what she finds helpful in writing she said, 'we've got these little 'have-a-go' cards, you have a go and see if it looks like the proper

word..... and [they have] capitals and short words that you use quite often.' And when stuck she told the researcher 'before we ask the teacher we ask everybody on our table but if they don't know then we ask the teacher.'

Conclusion

All these children can be seen to exercise agency in the way they have made personal sense from their classroom situation. They have made choices about their use of available tools and about who matters in the setting. However, it is likely that those choices will impact differentially on how these children succeed in this context as illustrated by the two vignettes above. Chris' choices in what he judged to have made him a good writer, how he says he has developed as a writer and what he said helped in his writing are largely left to time and to chance. His apparent reliance on himself to get bigger and become a better writer as well as finding ways of producing the correct response by being told or copying reveal a passivity in approach. Megan, on the other hand, seems to have negotiated a potentially more successful route. The teacher and the teacher's strategies figure large in her responses about writing. Nevertheless she gives some indication that she is no more engaged with the process of learning to write than is Chris. Her supposition that the good writer in the picture is thinking about playtime and who she will play with may well give some insight into her own thoughts during writing lessons.

There are no clear answers as to why Chris has chosen a seemingly unhelpful, passive route through his classroom writing experience nor why Megan's choices are more positive. The analysis looked for differences in response according to gender and achievement as identified by the teacher. There was no difference identified. The only indication of difference was in the one classroom where many more children gave these type of passive responses. The ideas in this paper can only provide some tentative indications of how children develop a sense of agency as writers. The analysis was inductive and codes came from an initial interpretation of the ideas expressed by the children interviewed. There has been no attempt to validate these interpretations through other sources of data. In order to explore these ideas further it will be necessary to refer to the evidence from children's writing samples and classroom observations. It will also be interesting to consider children's responses alongside teacher discourse.

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