

We read, we write: reconsidering reading–writing relationships in primary school children

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Abstract

The extent to which children's reading experiences influence their writing production is not well understood. It is imperative that the connections between these literacy practices are elucidated in order to inform the development of stimulating curricula and to support children's development. This paper presents new data and key findings from a project investigating relationships between children's free choice reading and volitional writing in Key Stage 2 (9–10 years). The data were collected in two primary schools in northern England, using mixed methods. Quantitative data were collected using an online reading survey taken by 170 children, and qualitative data were provided through independent writing journals maintained by 38 participants. Through analysis of the data using a multiliteracies approach, we demonstrate that the writing that children choose to do is influenced by the texts they encounter as readers in terms of content, text type and linguistic style. The child readers in this project encountered texts in different media and created texts in a range of genres. By examining a sample of children's written texts from the data set, we show that children's interactions and transactions with texts as readers and writers are complex and multiple. Children creatively work across media, and in doing so the boundaries of traditional text genres and styles are redeveloped and redesigned. These findings highlight the importance of providing children with opportunities to freely choose and create texts and recognising the wide variety of text experiences that children bring to their classroom learning.

Key words: free choice writing, free choice reading, primary school, multiliteracy, multimodal

Introduction

In the 21st century, the proliferation and availability of texts in multiple modes and media means that such texts are an integral part of children's literacy learning. It is important, therefore, that the relationships between reading and writing, in both traditional and new media, are explored in the contexts of children's current lived experiences with reading and writing. Reading for pleasure is well established in the field of literacy research and has become a significant part of school and national policy in the UK. However, there

is very little existing literature concerning writing for pleasure in childhood and its possible connections to reading experiences.

In 1983, the National Council of Teachers of English in the USA published a special edition of the *Language Arts* journal entitled *Reading and Writing* in which contemporary understanding of the relationship between reading and writing was explored. Contributors to the journal (Eckhoff, 1983; Stotsky, 1983) concluded that, based on a review of the available research evidence at the time, more research was needed to understand how reading and writing were related and that this knowledge would have important implications for teaching. In particular, they argued that the separation of reading and writing into distinct elements of the curriculum could be challenged by further research into the reciprocal nature of reading and writing. Despite the body of work conducted in the 1990s which concerned reading and writing (Martin and Leather, 1994; Meek, 1988, 1991; Meek et al., 1977), the issues raised by Stotsky and Eckhoff about the relationships between reading and writing have not yet been thoroughly investigated or resolved. Nearly 30 years later, Miller and McCardle (2010) argued that “foundational research is needed on writing [and] the relation of writing to reading” (p. 125). The research project discussed in this paper was designed to contribute to current understanding about reading–writing relationships. In particular, the questions that this study sought to answer are as follows:

Is there a relationship between texts that children encounter in their reading and those they produce in their free writing?

How does this relationship manifest itself in the language, forms and structures used by the children in their writing?

When Meek (1988) wrote “If we want to see what lessons have been learned from the texts children read, we have to look for them in what they write” (p. 38), she articulated a prevailing understanding of literacy development as holistic and reading and writing as reciprocal. Barrs (1992) argued that children ‘tune in’ to the shapes and structures of texts and are then able to write in the style, or tune, of the texts they have read. Similar conclusions were drawn by Bearne and Watson (2000), exploring children's responses to texts they encounter and Fox (1993) in her study of pre-

school children's oral story telling. Fox showed that children with language backgrounds that were rich in story-telling language used similar language in their own story telling. Wolf and Heath (1992) made a further contribution to knowledge about the potential relationships between reading and writing, by analysing the language of children during socio-dramatic play with a particular focus on the language of literary story telling. Barrs and Cork (2002) also showed, through a classroom intervention using children's literature, that the language and structures of literary texts can be used effectively as models for children's own writing in the classroom. Their description of "the reader in the writer", in the book of the same name, continues to be influential in current thinking about teaching writing (Cremin, 2015; Young and Ferguson, 2020). These studies, however, all took literary language as their focus; their interest was the extent to which encounters with literary texts had an impact on the subsequent language use of the children. Language of non-traditional, non-literary or popular culture texts has not been a focus of research into reading-writing relationships.

For teachers and researchers working with children today, a much broader conceptualisation of what constitutes reading and writing is necessary. Mackey (2016) provided a model for this which, unlike the previous studies reviewed, emphasised the potential significance of all encountered language for the developing child. Mackey argued that it is important to remember "just how intricate are the connections that feed our literate reactions" (p. 329) and to consider the varied and multiple sources of those connections. Reading does include not only the books a child may choose to read but any engagement with text. Children's reading choices, in fact, may not feature paper books at all, particularly in informal settings outside school. They may be reading comments under a popular YouTube video, instructions about how to achieve the next level in a video game or a blog about a favourite sportsperson or celebrity. When exploring the way children read for pleasure, it is important to consider all these choices. Burnett and Merchant (2018) argued that ideas about reading for pleasure need to be reconsidered in the light of children's emerging digital literacy practices and the complex way literacy is changing. To limit notions of what pleasure reading should be is to limit understanding of children's experiences of literacy. If literary language can be said to have an impact on the language use and writing style used by children, then other forms of engagement with non-literary texts and language styles must also be taken into account.

Children's free writing is lively, varied and individual, rooted in the social context in which it occurs. Both reading and writing are situated social practices (Street, 1995; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012) which are learned and developed in a range of social and cultural settings including the school, the home and the wider community. Where technical aspects of reading and writing are commonly taught in formal classroom settings, other communicative and collaborative aspects

of literacy are experienced through relationships between children and adults, children and their peers and children, and the texts they encounter (Mackey, 2016; Dyson, 2003, 2010; Dyson and Dewayani, 2013). Through writing and reading, children cross boundaries between formal and informal contexts, between texts in different media and through different modes. As children become familiar with different systems of representation in different types of text, they are able to experiment in using and applying these systems themselves. Kress (1997, 2003, 2010) showed that texts are becoming increasingly multimodal, as are children's experiences of becoming literate in an age of multimodal representation. Children's multimodal writing is embedded in their play and provides spaces for exploration of identity and friendship (Dyson, 2019). For many children, these early and continuing playful engagements with text are digital and occur in online spaces which did not exist for previous generations of learners. The potential for such spaces and contexts is still being realised and explored (Dowdall, 2006; Marsh, 2010; Merchant, 2009, 2013), but children are now able to engage imaginatively and flexibly with a greater range of texts than previous generations. Across the range of mode and media, children may engage with the same stories in different forms. The popular children's book series *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997), for example, may be read, viewed as a film, played as a video game or in socio-dramatic play using costumes and props. Such experiences contribute to children's understanding of how stories work and, importantly, how a story is told, by whom and from whose point of view. The ways in which children use language to tell their own stories and to express point of view is as yet under-researched, especially when the writing is freely chosen and has not been set by a teacher to meet a particular purpose.

The National Curriculum for England (2013) provides a model of writing which emphasises a skills-based approach and one in which there are quite specific expectations for different types of writing at different stages of a child's education. The sense of a child as a holistic learner whose social experiences are key to their literacy development does not align well with the prevailing discourse in schools about the need to teach particular skills and functions. Literacy, it is implied in the curriculum, cannot be left to chance, and it is the role of the education system to ensure that every child is equally well equipped. Lambirth (2016) examined the discourses surrounding writing in primary school and identified an overwhelmingly functionalist approach, in which children felt that success was measured in correct spelling and punctuation, in good handwriting and in meeting the requirements of the teacher. Cremin and Myhill's (2012) research has established ways in which communities of writing and writers can be created in schools, which include developing teachers as writers and increasing understanding of the craft of writing (Cremin and Myhill, 2019). This research continues to interrogate beliefs about and attitudes to writing in schools

and disrupts the functionalist narrative. Nevertheless, writing in classrooms can be quite narrowly defined as being pen and paper based and consisting of prose fiction or non-fiction in set of specific genres. In the same way that reading is often positioned in media and education discourse as being from traditional paper books, writing of more informal texts such as social media messages, lists or notes is not seen to 'count' in the same way as more formal writing (Maybin, 2013). Cremin and Myhill found that children "appeared to view themselves somewhat passively as receivers and producers of written texts for school" (p. 83), which suggests that writing is experienced as a necessary part of the curriculum but not something that relates to children's own interests. It is not our intention to suggest that all primary classrooms have a narrow view of writing but to acknowledge the constraints that teachers may find within the curriculum and in prevailing discourses about writing. The collection of free choice writing data for this project was intended to find ways to access children's authentic writing and to learn more about the ways that their reading was influencing it.

Methodology

Design

The project used a mixed-methods interpretative design and was conducted sequentially over two phases. Two research tools were developed for the purposes of data collection. The first, used in phase 1, was an online survey designed to capture children's reading habits and preferences in which responses to closed and open questions were collected. The second, used in phase 2, was a journal writing activity which was used to collect children's free writing samples. To enrich the analysis of these samples, informal interviews were conducted in which participants reflected on their writing processes and journal entries.

Phase 1

Participants. A total of 170 children from Year 5 and Year 6 (age range 9–10 years) took part in phase 1. The children were recruited from two English primary schools in a West Yorkshire city. The schools were identified through professional contacts and were a one form entry 3–11 primary school and a two-form entry primary school within the same locality; 59 children from school A participated of whom 25 were boys and 34 were girls; 109 children from school B participated, of whom 58 were boys and 51 were girls; 83 of the participants were in Year 5 and 87 in Year 6. A consent statement at the start of the survey was completed by the children, and there were no exclusionary criteria for participation. The final sample includes all children from whom consent was obtained.

Materials. The online survey was designed to provide information about the respondents' feelings about reading, the frequency of their reading and their reading preferences. It was designed by the lead researcher specifically for this project (Taylor, 2019). Its content was informed by previous surveys used to collect data on children's reading. These included National Literacy Trust surveys (Clark, 2014; Clark and Foster, 2005), What Kids are Reading Report (Topping, 2015) and Scholastic (2015) *Kids and Family Reading Report*. Data were gathered about the genre of texts the participants preferred in different ways, including through selecting choices from a list of images of books. This innovative, multimodal design was intended to make the survey more accessible for participants and to align with the theoretical perspective that informed the project – that literacies are situated, multiple and multimodal (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Pahl and Rowsell, 2005; Street, 1995). For example, question 7 was presented as text and asked *What do you read for fun?* Children could select as many options as they wanted from the list "stories, picture books, information books, newspapers and magazines, comics, websites for information, puzzles and quizzes, books which tell you how to do or make something" Question 8 was presented as images and asked children "Which would you choose?" Children were presented with the images of six titles and asked to select three they would prefer (see Figure 1).

To collect data about the books that were being read most frequently by the participants, children were asked to select book titles they had read from lists of images of book covers. Finally, there were open questions in which participants were asked to recommend a text to a friend and to list the text they had read most recently. For the purposes of the research project, it was also important to collect information about children's preferred leisure activities, so that instances of reading and writing which occurred in informal contexts might also be accounted for. Children were asked about their preferred activities, with options including writing, drawing, making things, sport and playing computer games. The survey comprised 24 questions, and it was intended that it would take around 15–20 minutes to complete.

Procedure. The online survey was administered using onlinesurveys.ac.uk, and the link to the survey was shared via the class teacher. The survey was open for a period of 4 weeks and was completed during school time on school computers. Questions could be left unanswered if necessary. Each child taking the survey was given a unique code which identified their school by letters and the child participant by a number. The schools were identified separately so that each school could receive an individual report of the findings from the survey using their own data.

Descriptive analysis of the data was conducted using SPSS. To begin, each question was analysed separately using data from the whole sample to calculate



8. If you could choose three things to read for fun from the list above, which would they be?

Figure 1: A sample from the online survey.

percentages for each response. Then a unique identification code was used to disaggregate the data for individual participants. Descriptive analysis was then carried out using the data from only those children who took part in phase 2 of the study. This ensured it was possible to examine profiles of reading attitudes, habits and preferences at the level of individual child and to integrate this information with the qualitative analysis of their writing samples.

Phase 2

Participants. Thirty-eight Year 5 children (mean age 9 years) took part in phase 2. These children were selected from the larger sample who completed phase 1. In consultation with two Year 5 teachers, one from each participating school, all members of the class were given the opportunity to take part. In school A, 11 children took part of whom five were boys and six were girls. In school B, 27 children took part of whom 16 were boys and 11 were girls.

Of these, 10 participants took part in individual informal interviews conducted at the end of the project, lasting approximately 20 minutes. Individuals were selected to represent both genders and a cross section of attainment in writing based on teacher assessment. Written parental consent was gained, and pupils gave verbal consent at the start of the interview. There were five participants from each school of whom five were boys and five were girls. Both participating teachers were also interviewed.

Materials. Each child was given an A4 Notebook with lined and blank alternate pages and pen labelled with the project logo. An A4 notebook was chosen to distinguish it from the A5 exercise books used by the children for schoolwork. Lined and blank pages were provided so that children could create multimodal texts if they chose to do so.

Procedure. The notebooks contained a written invitation to use the journal to write freely at school or outside of school for a period of 6 weeks. Children were informed that the writing would not be marked or

assessed but would be read by the researcher and could be shared with friends. Teachers from the participating schools encouraged children's use of the journals but did not provide any input or make suggestions about their use. Teachers did not set aside time in the day when children were expected to write in their journals, but each allocated time when the journals could be chosen. For example, in school B, children could choose to write in their journals during free reading time after lunch. In school A, the journals were an option when tasks had been completed in lessons. Children could also choose to take the journals home. Each school was visited at regular intervals during the 6-week period. The participants brought their journals into school to share their writing during these visits. All of the texts the children created were photographed, and the children kept the original notebooks. Interviews were conducted in a spare classroom next to the children's own classroom in school A and in school B in a space in the school library. Interviews were informal and lasted approximately 10–20 minutes. The same unique identification code given to pupils participating in the survey was used for the writing journals so that their survey responses, writing journals and interview responses could be linked whilst maintaining anonymity. Interviews were coded using In-Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2015) to categorise the participants' responses for reading and for writing. In-Vivo coding is a method for coding qualitative data which uses verbatim language from the participants. It was used because the children's specific words and means of expression when talking about their reading and writing were important to the overall analysis and the aims of the study. Responses were used to inform analysis of the writing journals. The texts that children contributed to the writing journals were categorised according to genre as detailed in the following section.

Findings. The data presented in this article are taken from the writing journals, and the focus of analysis is on the children's writing. Detailed analysis of the survey and interviews is not presented here, but it may be referred to in discussion of the writing samples.

One hundred seventy-eight pieces of writing were collected. Of these, 37 were narrative fiction, 43 were narrative non-fiction, 48 were comic strips and labelled illustrations and 50 were playful texts such as lists, puzzles and acrostics. The texts were coded by genre so that each child's writing choices could be considered alongside their stated reading preferences; 88% of the participants chose to write the kind of text they liked to read. Children who stated that they liked to read comics, for example, were likely to write comics; children who liked to read stories were likely to write stories, and children who said they enjoyed information books were likely to write information texts. Even where children wrote several different genres in their journals the connection remained, they were more likely to be types of text they had said that they liked to read.

Only 35% of children said that they liked to write for fun, but in contrast to this, the writing journals were well used, and a considerable amount of writing was produced overall. Furthermore, whilst 87% of survey respondents were able to recommend a favourite text to a friend, a much lower percentage (61%) said that they read for fun. These data suggest that children's perceptions of what counts as reading and writing may differ in formal and informal contexts and that school literacies may be experienced differently to those that are freely chosen. Their survey responses may have reflected a school-based view of reading and writing, rather than the broader range of practices they engaged in.

In the following sections, we present three vignettes to exemplify the types of writing created by the children. The analysis and interpretation of the writing are informed by a multiliteracies approach in which children's engagement with texts is perceived as socially situated practice, and literary stylistics through which language use and the contexts of that use can be described. Links are made between the children's reading choices and their writing, with some more general comments relating to the wider data set. The writing is not considered with reference to any National Curriculum criteria for writing at Key Stage 2 because this was not appropriate for the types of writing produced.

Narration – becoming the story teller

A common feature of the writing in this data set was that majority of children wrote in a way which directly addressed and engaged with the reader. Only two writing samples contained any description; there was much greater emphasis on events and narrator voice. Typically, the stories opened with an address from the writer in role as narrator of the story. Tina wrote "hey, my name is called Rose and for some reason I am a mermaid and I want legs" at the beginning of her story. Sunita similarly positioned herself as narrator by stating her intent to tell a story. She said "I will

write a story about The Man who Talked to Birds. The story began like this". Matthew wrote "Dear Diary, Today I went to my new school and it is not a normal school because you need a bike for this school". As well as acknowledging that he was taking on the role of a diary writer, he demonstrated knowledge of the form and style of diary writing. Elias wrote "If you had a really cute massive dog would you want him/her to leave after you've been best buds for ages? Exactly! No!" In doing so, he created an interrogative relationship with the reader, in which the reader is invited to respond personally and to imagine being in a conversation with the writer.

The fact that the children chose to narrate in this way, and often to address the reader, seems to echo Fludernik's claim that it is not plot that is important in a story but the voice of the teller and the way the story is told (Fludernik, 1996). Fludernik argued that "the presence of an anthropomorphic protagonist, through which actions and events are filtered" (Semino, 2011, p. 418) was essential for a reader to engage fully with the world of the text. However, it is also important to note that children's books which are written for this age group (middle grade) often have a charismatic narrator from whose perspective the story is told and with whom the reader is invited to identify. Contemporary examples include David Walliams, author of bestsellers such as *Billionaire Boy* (2010); Jeff Kinney, author of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007); and L. Pichon, author of the *Tom Gates* (2011) series. All of these authors featured in the top 10 most commonly read books in the survey data. In addition, popular digital cultures that children may engage with, such as YouTube and vlogging sites, are characterised by the personality of the teller and the way they narrate, inform and instruct viewers. The data indicate that the texts that the children were engaging with, either as books, films, videos or games, likely had an impact on the texts that they chose to write, and in particular, how they chose to narrate. To illustrate the narrative style prevalent in the writing samples, we present and discuss Vignette 1 by Viki.

Figure 2 depicts a page of a writing journal by Viki, who says:

'I like video games and my favourite one is minecraft and roblox. I have a pet named bop. I used to have two but Top died (I miss her). My favourite websites are Movie Star Planet and google feud. I have loads of besties like Mollie, Maisie, Rheyat, Emily, Macie and so many friends. This is me.'

Viki's text presents her as a consumer of popular culture and someone who is familiar with the language of popular culture. She assumes shared understanding with the reader, the expectation is that they will be familiar with *Minecraft*, *Roblox* and *Movie Star Planet* and the cultural references associated with them. By referring to her friends as 'besties' and emphasising the fact that she has a lot of friends, Viki's narrator voice is

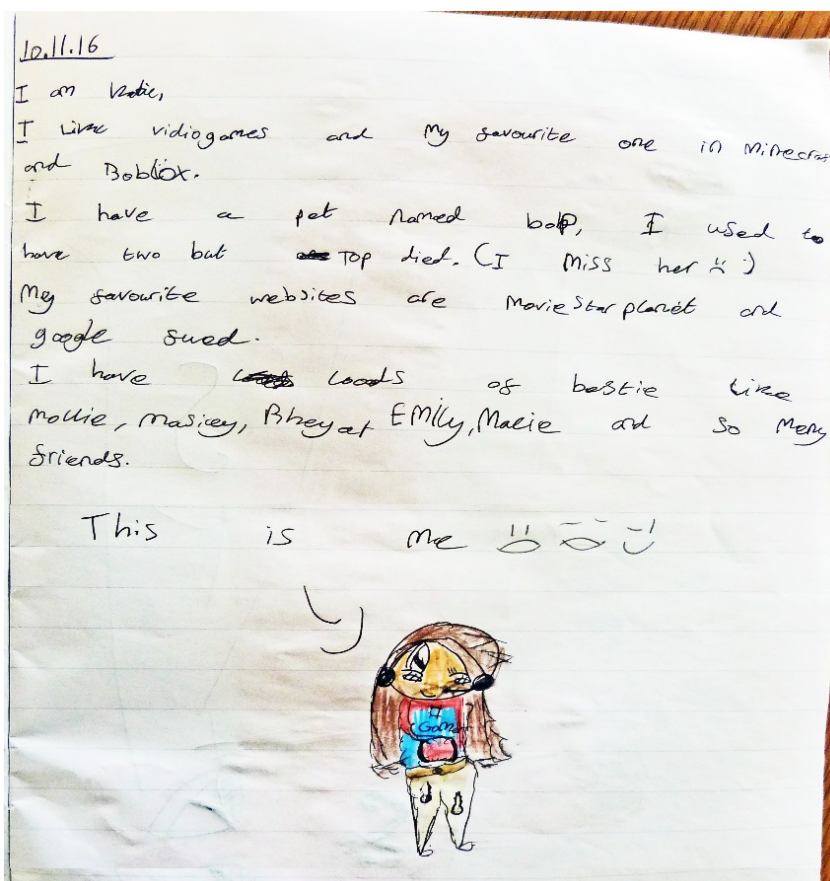


Figure 2: A writing journal entry by Viki.

aligned with cultural narratives of friendship and popularity associated with teen popular culture, YouTube stars and vloggers. Viki includes an illustration of herself, which further emphasises her identification with markers of physical and cultural status such as big eyes, long hair and headphones. Viki adds detail in her drawing that is not included in her text. She draws what, it seems reasonable to suppose, is an idealised version of herself and how she would like to be seen. In the survey, Viki responded she enjoyed *Girl Online* by Zoe Sugg (YouTube star Zoella), and her writing suggests that she aspires to the kind of identity Zoella presents. After 'This is me', Viki adds three emoji style symbols (two smiling faces and one winking face), and when she writes about the loss of her pet, she uses an emoji style symbol to emphasise the emotion. The use of the three semiotic systems of text, symbol and illustration relates to her encounters with text. For example, she stated that she played computer games (as did 66% of participants), regularly joined in with chat on games (as did 25% of participants) and enjoyed writing text messages (as did 18% participants).

Words and pictures – multimodal texts

Multimodal texts do not feature in the programmes of study for English in KS1 or 2; however, 60% of the

writing samples used text and image to create meaning. In addition, six of the top 10 books according to the survey data were multimodal, suggesting that children's reading preferences had an impact on the texts they chose to write. Pantaleo's studies of children creating multimodal texts (Pantaleo, 2010, 2012, 2015) demonstrate how skilfully children can work in multimodal ways and how they can utilise complex forms such as multi-diegetic story telling and disruption of narrative boundaries. However, it is important to note that these studies examined classroom interventions, in which a teacher worked with children and taught them about comics, graphic novels and the story-telling features of such texts. In the case of the data from this project, all the children who chose to write in comic strip form did so without direction. The class teachers had not worked with their pupils on multimodal texts, and indeed in the interviews, both participating teachers tended to position writing as a set of skills that needed to be taught. To exemplify the types of multimodal text present in the writing samples, we present and discuss Vignette 2, a comic strip, by Joe.

Vignette 2 – Joe. Joe's journal contained several different comic strips; Figure 3 presents one example entitled "Jeff the boy with a big head!" Joe narrates each strip individually from within the boundaries of the comic

strip but also as author of the whole journal, addresses the reader directly and gives guidance about how the journal should be approached. Joe uses the multimodal resources at his disposal – image and text – in highly effective ways. Neither mode would be sufficient to tell the story alone; he uses image and text together demonstrating subtle understanding of the comic strip form.

The visual images give information that is not available in the narrated text. In the second panel, the text reveals that Jeff is bullied for his big head, but it is the images which demonstrate the specific form the bullying takes – being pointed and laughed at (even by a passing bird). In the third panel, which shows Jeff going on holiday, there is a visual joke which is not alluded to in the written text. Jeff's head is shown taking up the whole of the aircraft window, unlike the heads of the other passengers. Similarly, in panels 4 and 5, Joe narrates a basic version of the story "He visits the Himalayas" and "He finds a strange house", whilst providing visual information in place of further description. In panel 4, the visual perspective allows the reader to see the mountains as Jeff sees them, looking at and beyond a back view of the character, at the same time being given an insight into his emotional response through the speech bubble text 'wow'. In panel 6, an additional comment appears outside of the narration panel asking, "Where are all these question marks coming from?" The comment is not given a speech

bubble or thought bubble but appears to refer directly to the reader, commenting upon the physical aspect of the text. It draws attention to the semiotic systems at work in the text, in which the question mark symbol is used in illustrations to indicate bafflement, lack of understanding and questioning. In the seventh panel, the wise monkey shrinks Jeff's head and Joe uses visual metaphor to demonstrate this. Several concentric circles represent the way that the head is becoming smaller, and the wavy lines show the power coming from the monkey's hands which cause the head to shrink. Joe has represented movement in a static visual image using repeated images, a common approach in comics and graphic novels. Hick (2012) described the complex symbol system used in comics which includes specific visual metaphors (such as seeing stars); Joe experiments with this system and applies visual metaphors effectively.

In the final panel, Jeff returns to school with a now average sized head, and the text "When Jeff gets back he's the coolest kid in school" is elaborated in the images. A female figure looks towards him with heart shaped eyes, and again the physical characteristics of the text contribute to the overall meaning. The choices Joe makes about how to tell his story demonstrates sophisticated control of the comic strip genre. Joe took an interest in reading and writing and had a love of comics and cartoons. His survey choices reflected his stated preferences for comics, cartoons and illustrated books

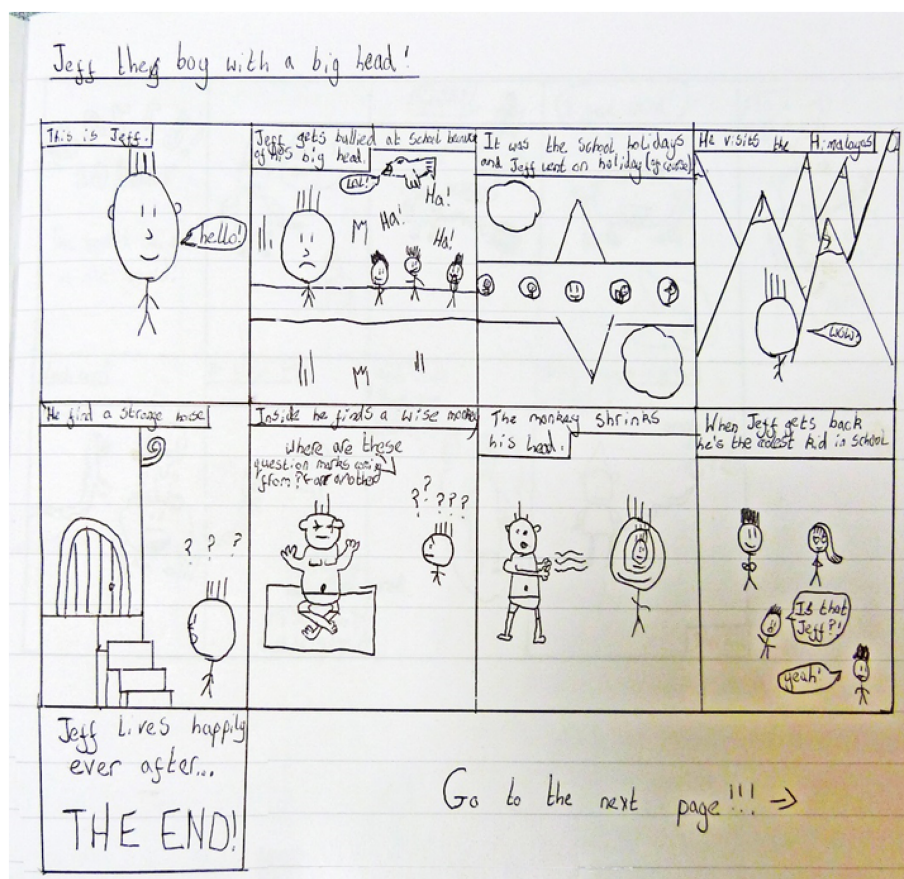


Figure 3: A writing journal entry by Joe.

such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Tom Gates*. In interview, Joe said that he enjoyed reading *The Beano* and annuals with 'popular characters'. All of Joe's journal entries were comic strips; he had enjoyed making them and said in interview "I prefer doing comics ... you can just do what you want it's fun". It seems likely that Joe's strengths in writing in this form are drawn from his experiences with reading similar texts, but it is also important to note that he viewed the creation of these texts with pleasure, in both process and end product.

Digital transformations

In the survey, 66% of participants stated that playing computer games and social media was a leisure activity they would engage in for fun, and the same number chose watching films and television. In addition, a significant category of books chosen in the free text questions were those specifically related to digital and visual media. Texts written by or about popular YouTube stars, pop musicians, computer games or films were listed by 33 respondents. This further

emphasised the important role popular media plays in children's free choice reading and the ways in which children's culture influences their reading choices. For many of the children in the project, interaction with digital media, whether in the form of video games, websites, entertainment accessed through the internet, or social media platforms, was commonplace. The impact of digital technologies on children's developing literacies continues to be widely researched (Bailey, 2016; Kucirkova and Cremin, 2020; Marsh, 2005 2009, 2013; Potter, 2012), and the influence of digital practices was evident in some of the writing journals. As an illustration of how children incorporated their digital experiences into their written journal entries, we present and discuss Vignette 3 by Xavier.

Vignette 3 – Xavier. Xavier produced several comic strips relating to *Pokémon*. He makes an intertextual reference in the example shown in Figure 4 by writing about "Pokémon Hunger Games", imagining a hybrid between the popular book and film series (Collins, 2008; Ross and Lawrence, 2012-2015) and the *Pokémon* video games and films, representing them

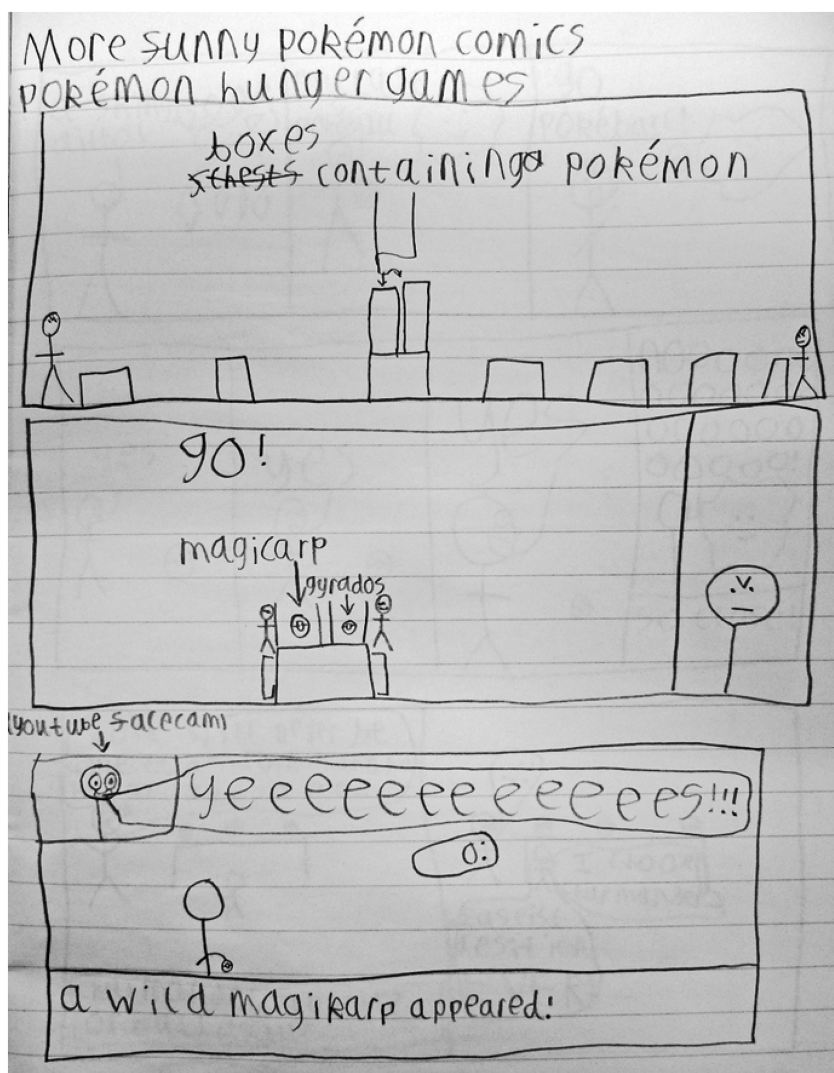


Figure 4: A writing journal entry by Xavier.

both in a paper-based text. Interestingly, Xavier's comic strip is a representation of his real-world experiences of playing *Pokémon*, rather than a narrative told in comic form based on the game. For example, in the top left-hand corner of the final panel, a small box contains the face of a character shouting 'Yeeesss!!!' in celebration when "a wild magicarp appeared!" The character is labelled as a 'You-tube face-cam'. This is a very clear example of the way Xavier moves between modes, by showing features of digital texts he redefines the boundaries of the type of text he is creating. In a comic strip, even one which is multi-diegetic and has more than one narrator, story and mode of communication, it is unusual to see a real-world figure presented as a participant. The panel appears to represent Xavier's experiences of either playing or watching someone else playing the game online. YouTube videos, in which presenters play video games, are extremely popular with children in this age group. For many, it seems that the pleasure of watching a more experienced person play outweighs the pleasure of playing the game (Marsh, 2010; Merchant, 2013).

Xavier's narrative approach had much in common with children's prose writing. He regularly added comments 'aside' directed towards the reader, such as "Just so you know" when a picture needed some more explanation and "I couldn't fit it in!" when some writing over-spilt a panel boundary. In interview, Xavier said that to improve it he would "have a character, aka me, that would just guide you through the entire book". This indicated that he deliberately positioned himself within his texts as narrator. Xavier's reading preferences included *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Tom Gates* and *Timmy Failure*. He commented that "pictures I think are very good in books" and was reading a book version of a *Pokémon* film whilst writing his journal. In the survey, Xavier indicated that he did not like reading or writing but given the prolific nature of his contributions to the writing journal, this raises questions about how he perceived reading and writing. It is possible that reading and writing have narrower definitions in his mind and that he did not associate the kinds of texts he was producing with these notions.

Conclusions

The data from this research project demonstrate that there are important connections between children's free choice reading and their free choice writing. This is a very important finding because it provides evidence that encountered texts do indeed have an impact on created texts; children whose repertoire of reading is broad are likely to have a broad range of approaches to writing. The findings suggest that not only do children feel a desire to write the kinds of texts they have enjoyed reading but that they feel competent and able to work in that style. Given that many of the types of text written by the children, in particular the

multimodal texts, do not commonly feature in classroom teaching, this key finding also generates further questions about how children are developing confidence and competence in written genres they have not been taught.

The participants in this project were limited, to some extent, by the traditional form of the writing journal. Nevertheless, the medium provided opportunities for the children to make their own choices about what and how to write and to make connections with texts encountered in a range of media. In fact, it was notable that the children did not appear to be constrained by the traditional pen and paper tools for creating texts. Children's free choice writing which occurs in other contexts and media, such as emergent digital writing (Chamberlain, 2018; Parry and Taylor, 2021, In press, forthcoming), will be of interest for further research in this area.

The examples given in this paper from the wider data set make it clear that children skilfully replicate stylistic and linguistic features of their preferred text types. Children choose to write the kinds of texts that they like to read and experience of reading particular types of text makes them competent writers in the genre. This is true whether or not the language and style of the encountered texts is literary, and whether the reading has occurred in traditional or newer forms. Children's engagement with texts as readers and as writers is holistic (Parry and Taylor, 2018) in the sense that their reading choices inform their writing in a range of different ways, including form, content, style and language. Children's responses to encountered texts are reflected in their creation of texts, and they make use of their experience with texts to redesign and explore the boundaries of texts in imaginative ways.

Children's free choice writing shows that they are imaginative and creative in their use of language and that they can use a variety of text types with confidence and skill. In the data set, there is evidence of fruitful interactions between schooled and informal literacy practices, and of transformational work with different texts that have been encountered in a range of media. Popular cultural and digital texts, alongside fiction and non-fiction books and comics, provide a rich resource through which children learn to write in different ways. Children are skilled story tellers and can present different points of view through narration; they can use different semiotic systems to write multimodally and can create texts which engage with those they have encountered. It is important, therefore, that teachers find spaces to allow children to write freely and have the opportunity to understand more about the texts children are encountering outside of school. The school curriculum needs to be more responsive to the experiences of children so that literacy skills developed across multiple modes and media are celebrated and recognised. Further research into the ways that such skills and experiences can be incorporated into existing curriculum frameworks is essential. Attention also needs to be paid to how future curricula

can respond to children's lived experiences. If children are positioned as 'reader-writers' in which reading and writing are not separate skills but part of the same set of processes (Oatley, 2003), then there will be benefits for reading and writing in the classroom and for children as individuals.

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