RESEARCH PROPOSAL

What is writing? Children's perceptions of the writing process – what they do, and what they think they do when they are writing.

Submitted by:
Annie Hatton
HAT04013441

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Statement of Research Interest and Overview

Over a fourteen year period of teaching experience in a variety of Inner London primary schools I have both witnessed, and been subjected to, a range of policy and curriculum change in the teaching of English. One element I have observed as remain fairly steady however is the difficulties and struggles involved in trying to engage and continue the development of young writers. Through teaching writing I have developed my own knowledge of the writing process which in turn has led me to think about what it is that children themselves know and understand about this, and the impact this may have on their writing development. Subsequently this has channelled my interests into the field of writing further, and toward a focus on children's metacognition in relation to their writing activities.

Creswell (2007) identifies it as appropriate to conduct research of a qualitative nature when there is a problem or issue to explore. I aim to explore the nature of the issue I have highlighted above through conducting a qualitative study which will provide a range of rich data with regard to children's perceptions of the writing process, their knowledge and understanding of this, and what they think they are doing when they are developing and assessing their own writing. For data collection and analysis I will use elements of a grounded theory approach that was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to discover theory from data systematically obtained from social research. Data will be collected from a sample of 5 -6 children by carrying out semi-structured interviews and collecting of examples of work. I aim not to make judgements or summaries, but to make epistemological assumptions of an interpretative nature whilst ensuring that the empirical setting speaks for itself; both through the analysis of data and the emergence of theory. Using open coding, and

memos to aid the development of categories, I aim to provide an insight into what children do and think they are doing when they are writing. This qualitative analysis will stand as my theory of the writing strategies children have used, and in my dissertation I will seek to discuss the analysis in relation to theories of writing.

Literature Review

There is extensive literature and research available with regard to to English teaching and learning in schools, though an imbalance appears to exist between what is available on reading to that of writing. Wray (1994) highlights that studies of children's perceptions of writing are vastly outnumbered by studies of perceptions of reading - this being due to the scarcity of research on writing. Wray (1994) acknowledges however that 'recent' and 'serious' attention was beginning to surface from researchers. Consideration to this, and the 12 year gap between Wray's (1994) observation and current day, it would be safe to claim there has indeed been some gain in the attention given to research on writing development. Current research in this area contains much on motivating and engaging underachieving writers, and boy writers. This significantly outweighs research available on what children think they know about writing, actually know, and what they can do to improve this.

I will divide my literature review into two sections; firstly I will discuss 2 empirical studies focussed on children and the writing strategies they use. These will form brief critical reviews looking into the methodologies used, claims made, the basis for these claims and how this may relate to what I aim to do. Secondly I will discuss some theories and models of writing development and elements of metacognition in relation to writing. This reference to the theoretical field is both relevant and of importance as

it allows me to think about the conceptual structure my empirical setting is based upon. Dowling and Brown (2010) highlight how research should entail a dialogue between the theoretical and empirical fields, and though these are two distinct areas it is important to see them as explicitly related to one another. Due to the reference of both these fields, and the limited length available to me in this proposal, I will only refer to 2 pieces of empirical research. It is important to note that in my dissertation I intend to refer to additional core pieces of relevant empirical research.

The first piece of empirical research I will review is Ruttle's (2004) qualitative study which aims to explore the idea that in order to improve the way we teach children to write, we need to improve our understanding of children as writers. This is relevant to my research in that our aims our similar; to identify what children are thinking when they are writing, and analysing this to in relation to what they are actually doing. There is thought placed to describing the theoretical field, though this a little disorganised and vague. It is unclear how this stands with regard to the empirical field, making the dialogue that Dowling and Brown (2010) highlight should exist between the two, difficult to see. The empirical setting is clearly described however, and three case studies of lower attaining 8-9 year old boys are briefly presented. Extracts of work are included in the body of the text, and Ruttle (2004) provides a narrative describing the contact and discussions had with them. In the analysis some of the children's views on writing are referred to, but it is difficult to identify specific strategies they may have used themselves. The study does seek to make generalisations to writers of all abilities at the end however - even though the case studies are all based on lower ability writers. If generalisations from findings are to be made the researcher needs to use a sampling strategy that is representative of the

population they wish to generalise to. The sampling strategies used remain unidentified in the paper, but we do know that the sample consists entirely of lower attaining boys. This therefore makes the validity of Ruttle's (2004) conclusions questionable. By generalising findings the research is left a little weak - even though some of the findings with regard to the case studies are both interesting and insightful.

Though the second piece of empirical research I will discuss is older; having been conducted in 1988, as with the previous research discussed - our aims are similar. Though our research designs and approach to analysis are different, the findings of the research result in some clear identifications of writing strategies that children felt good writing consisted of. As these do not necessarily change in nature over time they are of relevance to our shared empirical field of interest. Jones (1988) conducts a qualitative study that clearly identifies the problem he wishes to explore; that what children themselves think and feel about what they are doing is all too rarely known. Opportunistic sampling strategies, in that he recruits participants that are available to him – his class, are used to identify 21, 9 – 11 year olds to take part in a questionnaire designed by Jones (1988).   The questions included in his questionnaire ask similar things of the children as I intend to ask my participants during my semi-structured interviews. A summary of the responses children have given to each question is provided in narrative form, concluding that the 'appearance of writing' and 'spelling, punctuation and grammar' can be seen as two distinct categories that children believe 'good writing' to consist of. Jones (1988) effectively relates his research back to his original claim and possible implications to the practitioner field of teaching.

These research articles are a brief outline of the empirical field my research sits within, next I will seek to briefly outline the theoretical field in relation to this.

The writing process

As the processes involved in writing lie both beneath, and in direct focus of, the exploration this study aims to do, it is relevant to discuss some of the theory and models that already exist. There are many definitions and different viewpoints of what writing is and involves; Williams and Fisher (2002) define the writing process as the generation of ideas – composition, and how best to express these on paper – transcription. Smith and Elley (1998) similarly describe writing as a way of demonstrating to others that they have learned something - with the translation of thoughts into a form of language which is then expressed onto paper. Wray (1994) continues with the theme of communication in pinpointing the process of making thoughts external as constituting writing. Composition and transcription can be seen throughout these as two clear elements of the writing process. A further element is added by Beard (2000) in 're-reading', stating that writing is a combination of these three basic and interrelated processes which then draw upon key skills in order for written language to be produced effectively.

Cognitive models of writing also provide an insight into what processes are involved in writing. Some are more relevant to young writers than others, and I will refer to them in relation to metacognition where relevant. Though these are only very brief outlines, I intend to expand on these in my dissertation.

The first model worth highlighting is Berninger et al.'s (1995) model of writing development which is concerned with the beginning and developing writer. It considers how metacognitive knowledge influences writing processes by labelling the 'monitor' (which oversees processes such as planning, reviewing and revising) as metacognition. Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) model of the writing process is also relevant to highlight - in that it seeks to describe how children approach the writing process. It gives place to the underlying constraints they face and must cope with before they become fluent writers. Metacognition is again referred to, and seen as having an essential role in enabling developing writers to acquire higher levels of competence.

I have touched upon metacognitive elements of the above writing models as I am aiming to explore not only children's knowledge, understanding and perceptions of the writing process, but what they think they are doing as they are writing. The latter can be described as metacognition. Harris et al. (2009) describe this as the 'deliberate, conscious regulation and control of cognitive activity' – knowing what we know, and when and how to use particular strategies for learning or for problem solving. With direct relation to the writing process Wray (1994) identifies the processes of planning, translating and revision as metacognitive elements. Williams and Fisher (2002) support the inclusion of metacognition in writing by citing that a critical element in improving children's literacy levels is actually based in their metacognitive understanding of how they are learning to become writers. Essentially these models and theoretical stances claim that thinking about the writing process itself may in turn help children develop as writers.

Methodology/Research Design

Children's perception of the writing process, and metacognitive awareness in relation to their writing activities, will form the basis of my empirical field. I will narrow this down by exploring it through the empirical setting available to me; a creative writing club run within an inner London primary school setting. Harcourt and Conray (2011) cite that if we want to work 'with' children, rather than 'on' them, it is important to spend time that is dedicated to establishing a research relationship with them. This is an ethical consideration that my study will address as I will be spending time, once a week, with the children in the writing club – this will establish a relationship long before the research has even begun. This is an advantage of the empirical setting being one that is already known to me, and one in which I work. There are disadvantages of this however; involving children that know me, and are known to me, could create limitations in producing something Dowling and Brown (2010) identify as the Hawthorne Effect. This is the proposition that knowledge of their involvement - as subjects of research, may itself change their behaviour. It is important to acknowledge the potential of this during the process of my research.

I will employ opportunity sampling as the children who will participate in my research will be able to opt into the club. They will come from a range of ages between 8 and 10 years. Due to the possible length of the interviews (that I will discuss in greater detail later), amount of data made available from this, and the scale of my project, I will limit sample size to 5-6 children. Though Creswell (2007) identifies theoretical sampling as a strategy best suited to grounded theory, limitations of access, in terms of children opting into the writing club, require my research to employ an opportunistic strategy. My study is also claiming to follow only elements

of a grounded theory approach, it is pertinent to highlight that these will be applied to the data collected and the analysis - rather than sampling.

As my sample will consist of children under the age of 16, so I will need to gain permission from the parents or guardians in written form. I will also seek to gain permission from the children themselves, as Alderson and Morrow (2011) point out; ethical research involves informing and respecting everyone concerned. Due to the context of my empirical setting (a primary school that has large numbers of families who do not speak English, a wide range of different ethnicities and cultures, and high levels of socio-economic deprivation) I will have to ensure I consider these issues when designing the consent request. I shall also seek to gain permission in writing from the Head of the school.

I intend to use a range of methods to gather data from my empirical setting. Creswell (2007) cites multiple sources of data as a common characteristic of qualitative research. This will include the use of field notes– in situ. Dowling and Brown (2010) cite that these allow for empirical setting's structure to be identified progressively. Analysing these may possibly allow me to return to the setting with a more developed focus.

Due to the interpretative nature I wish to follow, the interviews conducted will be a combination of structured components and opportunities for more open interaction. Dowling and Brown (2010) highlight the need to consider several elements when conducting interviews. These include considering the restrictions on sample size due to the quantity of data interviews provide, the location of the interview, how the

interviewer presents themselves, and the relation between the interviewer and interviewees. This last point is supported by Creswell (2007) who recognises that recent discussions about qualitative interviewing highlight the importance of reflecting on the relationship that exists between the interviewer and interviewee. This is a consideration I have already reflected upon when discussing the place I already have in the empirical setting of my study and the relationship to the children I may have. Considering this will compel me to think carefully about the language I use and the way in which I ask questions. I must also ensure that I reflect upon this honestly when analysing data.

I aim to capture the composition process itself through the setting of a writing task - interviewing the children whilst they are completing the task using probes to get them to talk about what they are doing, and what they think they are doing. It is here that is important to note the difference between probes and prompts, as I aim only to use probes. Dowling and Brown (2010) differentiate between the two in that probes are questions that gain further information and clarity, prompts involve suggesting possible responses. I will follow this with continuing the interview by discussing if the strategies they have used are what they normally use, if they adopt different strategies for different types of writing, and ask them to identify what they think is good and weak about their writing. I will also enquire what strategies they may attempt to apply for developing what they thing is weak writing. This discourse will form the main body of data analysed. The completed tasks set (that are providing the springboard for the interviews) will also be used to help me make the decisions involved in the process of constant comparison and category identification. This I will describe in more detail next.

Drawing from a grounded theory approach to analysis I will analyse the transcription of interviews using open coding – line-by-line analysis of the children's discourse (to conceptualise, and thereby move away from the terms that the children use to then formulate my own categories). Whilst using what Dowling and Brown (2010) identify as a key feature of Glaser's version of grounded theory; the constant comparison of emerging categories, I will use memos to clarify my understanding of these categories and attempt saturation. Creswell (2007) identifies this as the result of constant comparison, and where the data can no longer provide any further insight into a category.   In correspondence to Dowling and Brown's (2010) guidance on grounded theory analysis, I will ensure that the analysis of my data starts as soon as the first piece of data is collected – that this is not a sequential process, more rather one that informs and directs the other.

The qualitative analysis of this data will stand as my theory of the writing strategies children have used, which I will then aim to use in presenting an argument that establishes the validity of my interpretations and credibility of theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) identify 2 ways in which the researcher of a study adopting a grounded theory approach can ensure the credibility of their grounded theory. Firstly by ensuring their theoretical framework is clear and accessible, secondly by ensuring the data is described so clearly that the empirical setting is truly seen and heard– but always in relation to theory.

In my dissertation I will seek to discuss my emergent theory and findings in relation to some of the theories of writing that have been mentioned. As I am employing

elements of a grounded theory approach however, I will not seek to find evidence in support, or contradiction, of these theories, but to develop my own analysis that I will then discuss in relation to them.

Conclusion

Creswell (2007) notes that on one hand qualitative research should contain a literature review before the study starts, as it is important in providing the rationale for the problem and position the study takes within the ongoing literature. On the other however, it is highlighted that a grounded theory study challenges researchers because they must ensure they set aside these, and indeed their own, theoretical ideas and notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge. Having referred to existing theoretical frameworks in my literature review I am in sense agreeing with Creswell (2007), in that I see the value in doing so as to attempt to better understand where my research sits within the empirical field I wish to study. I also feel that the theoretical setting of my empirical field is of importance to the analysis process itself - if children's comments on what they are doing when they write are to be analysed, with regard to what the writing process entails, then the theory must be available first. In making this methodological decision I must ensure however that I also take heed of Crewell's (2007) advice - to leave aside any theoretical ideas and notions I may already have during analysis.

I will follow the 'Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (BERA, 2011) during the design and conduct of my research, and have included the ethical considerations and limitations of my study throughout the methodology - as they have

arisen, rather than grouping them together for discussion. Creswell (2007) identifies this identification of issues throughout all phases of research as ethics of a good study.

An ethical consideration not yet discussed however is that of participant feedback - in my study this is how the children taking part may gain from the study. Creswell (2007) cites this as an important ethical consideration as reciprocity is important. After my research study has taken place I would aim to carry on the writing club. In doing this not only do I aim to provide a forum for participant feedback, but to also provide an opportunity for the continuation of my own professional development. In exploring what children think, know and do when writing, I am in turn looking to improve own knowledge and understanding of the processes involved in writing, and therefore my teaching. I feel the potential significance of my research findings are negated if they are not then applied to address the issue originally identified.

Potential for developing the study and furthering interest could involve maintaining many of methodological and research design choices made here, but this time secure an empirical setting that allowed for theoretical sampling - rather than an opportunistic one. Creswell (2007) identifies that this allows the sample to be theoretically chosen - so as to help the researcher best form their theory. It would therefore be possible to select a sample that would enable a sharper focus on one aspect of the study's empirical field e.g. children with writing difficulties, English as an additional language, or able writers. It would be of interest not to necessarily compare the emerging theory, rather to see if there was any common ground between the different sampled groups.

Finally in my dissertation I shall include a summary of achievements I feel my research has demonstrated, and relate these to both the nature of my own setting and relevance to the empirical field it is set within. I will then attempt to evidence these in relation to the claims I make at the beginning – has my research developed a theory from which children's perceptions of the writing process are clearer? Does it provide any insights into what children really know about what they are doing and what they think they are doing when they are writing?

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