

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH REPORT OF THE AUSTRALIAN WRITING SURVEY JULY 2018

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- Writing
- Standards
- Time



- Goal setting
- Data Literacy
- Teacher Education

Summary of the Main Research Report prepared for the New South Wales Education Standards Authority titled:

How is writing taught in NSW classrooms?

2018

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Our sincere gratitude goes to the teachers who participated in the Australian Writing Survey. We appreciate your time and insights into how you approach the teaching of writing in your classroom.

The New South Wales Education Standards Authority commissioned the Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education Australia to undertake this investigation into the teaching of writing in New South Wales schools. We appreciate the support and expertise provided throughout the study.

Summary Research Report

Introduction

Beginning in 2008, the corpus of data collected for the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) provides a rich resource for examining performance in literacy and numeracy both within a year level and over time at national and state levels. The data make it possible to track performance trends in ways not possible in earlier eras. This Summary Research Report draws on a study undertaken for the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) that commissioned the Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education (ILSTE) to undertake a survey study to examine how writing is taught across the phases of learning and in a wide range of curriculum areas. The focus of this investigation was the reported declines in performance in the writing test across stages of schooling (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020).

The body of research on writing has examined key elements such as the functional approach to literacy, teachers' understanding of grammar, and teacher confidence in understanding how language works in the context of writing (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Harper & Rennie, 2009; Jones & Chen, 2012; Love, Sandiford, Macken-Horarik, & Unsworth, 2014). Further, while writing has been studied for decades, the problem of how to assess writing appears to defy resolution, with the complexity of writing assessment increasing in an era of new technologies (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2014; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2013). While there is an abundance of commercial programs competing for teacher attention, many of these lack an evidence-base to show their impact on student learning outcomes, including in writing. This is compounded by the historic absence of a national evidence base to show how writing is being taught in phases of learning and in curriculum areas.

Survey design

The Australian Writing Survey (AWS)¹ was designed to address this significant gap in knowledge to inform policy, research and practice. The primary aim of the survey is to generate information about the practices teachers rely on in teaching writing across different curriculum areas and phases of learning, as well as teachers' self-reports of how well prepared they are to teach writing, based on their Initial Teacher Education. It gathers information about the types of Professional Development (PD) that teachers engage in with relation to the teaching of writing and also the classroom practices in assessment. The survey has eight main focus areas or themes that are presented in this report as follows:

¹ Australian Catholic University and the Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education 2018.

THEME 1 Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

THEME 2 Professional Learning and Development

THEME 3 Writing Strategies and Instruction

THEME 4 Text Types

THEME 5 Language in Use (focus on grammar)

THEME 6 Use of Digital Technologies

THEME 7 Assessment and Reporting

THEME 8 NAPLAN Writing

The survey was developed by the two lead authors of the man report titled *How is writing taught in NSW Classrooms?* It is informed by the Australian Curriculum Materials as they relate to the teaching of writing (ACARA, 2018a), New South Wales Department of Education Literacy Continuum (2017), the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) *Professional Standards for Teachers* (2016), and the *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers Report* (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). Collaboration with NESA occurred through formal meetings, by email and by phone for the purposes of ensuring item specificity, clarity and scope, and to confirm that the survey items and constructs addressed the terms of reference.

Sampling methodology

NESA specified the sampling method based on data that they had available to them. The teachers represented both accredited teachers (post 2004) and non-accredited teachers (pre-2004). NESA requested:

[a] conventional sampling approach using a simple random sample from a known population (approximately 93,000 teachers in NSW schools based on ABS figures). The convention is to specify a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$, i.e. if the survey finds that 61% of respondents do something, we can be confident that the 'real' population figure is between 56% and 66%. We also need to specify a desired level of confidence - the convention is to set it at 95%. This means that the 'real' result would fall within a specified range 95% of the time i.e. there is a 5% (1 in 20) chance that the 'real' figure is outside that range.

Using these parameters, the minimum sample sizes were to be as follows:

- Primary teachers: 375
- Secondary English teachers: 344
- Secondary science teachers: 322
- Secondary HSIE teachers: 357

As can be seen in the Table 1 below all sample size targets were achieved giving a desired level of confidence.

Table 1: Targeted and actual sample size

Sample	Target Sample Size	Sample	Actual Sample Size
Primary teachers	375	Primary	2073
Secondary English	344	Secondary English	802
Secondary Science	322	Secondary Science	333
Secondary HSIE	357	Secondary HSIE	415

Overview of survey respondents

A total of 4306 New South Wales teachers across the three sectors took part in the AWS©. The survey engaged Government, Independent and Catholic sectors and both Primary and Secondary schools. The largest sector to participate was the Government sector (57%), followed by the Independent (25%) and Catholic (17%) sectors. The percentage of Government schools in the final sample is comparable to that of the whole population, however the Independent and Catholic sectors appear to be slightly over-sampled, based on the considerable percentage of 'Unknown' (11.7%) from the reported whole population. This may impact the true percentages of Independent, Catholic and Government sectors (Table 2).

Table 2: Sector and gender breakdown of whole population

Sector and Gender	Whole Population			Final Sample	
	Count	%		Count	%
Government - DEC	94288	59.6%	Government	2470	57.4%
Female	72001	76.4%		1995	80.8%
Male	22287	23.6%		475	19.2%
Independent - Individual School	19876	12.6%	Independent	1088	25.3%
Female	13760	69.2%		829	67.2%
Male	6116	30.8%		259	23.8%
Independent - System School (Diocesan)	18955	12.0%	Catholic	748	17.4%
Female	14623	77.1%		619	82.8%
Male	4332	22.9%		129	17.2%
Early Childhood Sector	6662	4.2%	---	---	---
Female	6546	98.3%		---	---
Male	116	1.7%		---	---
Unknown	18555	11.7%	---	---	---
Female	13894	74.9%		---	---
Male	4661	25.1%		---	---
Grand Total	158336			4306	100.0%

Main Findings

Current teaching practices and recommended interventions to improve the teaching of writing

The study presented in the main report titled *How is writing taught in NSW classrooms?* breaks new ground in several ways: first, using the purpose-designed AWS©, the study has generated a large corpus of previously unavailable information about the teaching of writing in and across the phases of schooling and subject areas.

The research is not interested in inter-sector comparisons, nor is it interested in comparative analyses across schools. Readers should know that there was also no interest in connecting the practices that teachers report in their survey responses to NAPLAN results at the school level. Instead, the study has as its core the interest in learning from teachers about the practices and strategies they use to teach writing in subject areas.

The study also brings to light cross-subject perspectives. The similarities and differences between and across subject areas in how writing is taught and the time spent on teaching writing are highlighted, as is the time for students to do sustained writing. The study also provides an empirical evidence base showing teachers' perceptions about how well prepared they are on completion of their Initial Teacher Education. The timing of this study is therefore significant, occurring at the same time as the Federal Government and state governments are moving towards improving writing performance and implementing reform strategies in Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

Finding 1: Greater focus on the teaching of writing in ITE programs

Despite the concerted focus on literacy education in education policy, broadly speaking, teachers report that ITE is a weak intervention in preparing teachers for teaching writing in subject areas. Forty-nine percent of teachers identified being underprepared (not prepared and minimally prepared) for the task of 'Teaching writing' and over one half of teachers indicated that they were not prepared or minimally prepared to teach the text structures of 'imaginative, persuasive and informative text'. With approximately half of the teachers indicating they were not prepared in these fundamental areas of writing, a more systematic approach to teacher preparation in writing instruction across the stages of learning is urgently required.

Finding 2: Identifying the slump – changing patterns of practice

The AWS© results indicate distinct shifts in the priority given to teaching writing across stages of learning from K-12. The data indicate that the regularity of the explicit teaching of writing is emphasised in K-2 and peaks in Years 3-6, before dipping in Years 7-10. Following this decline, there is a marked increase in focus on explicitly teaching writing in Years 11-12. This could reflect the emphasis on writing during most subjects as teachers prepare students for the Higher School Certificate.

Finding 3: Sub-element of writing – handwriting, keyboarding and spelling

‘Handwriting’ and ‘Keyboarding’ were not emphasised in Initial Teacher Education completed by primary and secondary teachers in the study sample. Sixty-three percent of secondary teachers and 44% of primary teachers indicated that they were not prepared to teach ‘Keyboarding’ while primary teachers (39%) indicated that they had greater explicit instruction in ‘Handwriting’ compared to secondary teachers. In classroom writing practices, there is minimal engagement of teachers in Years 7-10 and 11-12 in explicitly teaching ‘Keyboarding’.

Finding 4: Greater attention is needed to contextualise the place of writing in Subjects Other Than English (SOTE)

Greater attention is needed to contextualise the place of writing in SOTE. Prioritising the teaching of writing in subject areas will go some way to valuing the critical building blocks of writing that feature so predominantly in the Senior syllabus, including in assessment requirements.

We call into question how well subject teachers have been served by the term literacy, and how they understand what it means for teaching the language and content knowledge demands of their respective subjects. Over half of Science (57%) and remaining secondary (58%) teachers indicated that they spent less than an hour or never explicitly teaching writing in the classroom. These findings offer a red light, taking account of the syllabus requirements for subjects such as Science.

Finding 5: Student goal setting and appraisal of student writing to provide effective feedback

The setting of goals for student writing is not given sustained priority across subject areas and across the years of schooling. Forty-two percent of Years 7-10 secondary teachers and 37% of 11-12 teachers indicated that they never or rarely ‘Led students in setting goals for their writing’, while 47% of 3-6 primary and 51% of K-2 teachers reported that they initiated this practice regularly or during most lessons. This suggests that students could complete their schooling with limited opportunity to set goals and self-monitor progress against these. The potential of formative assessment, especially as it engages students in their own learning, is not being realised in many classrooms.

Finding 6: Teachers’ data literacy

The AWS© has brought to light the need for a more concerted focus on the teaching of writing during ITE. It has also suggested that PD could usefully focus on developing teachers’ understanding and use of standards, including to inform student goal setting and formative assessment feedback. Teachers would benefit from strengthening their knowledge of how to use writing data connected to the writing progressions as a cyclical approach, that weaves backwards and forwards from emergent writing to more competent and accomplished, informed by regular diagnostic engagement with student writing. A collation of targeted writing exemplars linked to clear standards of writing against the progressions are needed to demystify for teachers expected writing standards for students and specifically, in text types related to their disciplines.

Finding 7: Clear policy directions about expected standards

Overall, the teachers’ responses indicated that there are multiple standards competing for their attention. Teachers would benefit from a policy that establishes the standards they are to use. This would go some way to achieving consistency in both language and application across schools and sectors, and some consistency in expectations of quality within and across schools. Of further interest to NESAs might be the

exploration of how teachers are using the Australian Curriculum Standards as part of their judgement of student writing.

Another potential source of confusion for teachers may be the introduction of the recently released ACARA National Literacy and Numeracy Progressions (ACARA, 2018b). How teachers use the progressions to judge standards of writing in the context of their subject will need clear policy direction to help navigate the curriculum document maze, especially as it concerns standards and expectations about quality in writing.

Finding 8: Effort versus output – factors that influence student writing

In terms of explaining the amount of time teachers devote to teaching writing, the results indicated six core messages:

Gender matters. Compared to men, women were significantly more likely to put in high effort (21.5% versus 15.5%) into teaching writing. However, this gender difference was only significant at the secondary level when the Predicted Probability (PP) of high effort by women, 8.5%, was significantly greater than the corresponding PP, 6.3%, by men.

Status matters. Compared to full-time teachers, casual and part-time teachers were significantly less likely to put in high effort, with PP of 14.3%, 14.7%, and 23.3% for, respectively, casual, part-time, and full-time teachers. These results also held for primary and secondary teaching. There was, however, no significant difference between casual and part-time teachers in their PP of high effort.

Subject matters. Compared to teachers of secondary English, teachers of other secondary subjects were significantly less likely to put in high effort into teaching writing – respectively, PP of 14.6%, 4.9%, 3.3%, and 3.1% for English, HSIE, Science, and remaining secondary.

Level of schooling matters. Compared to teachers in the secondary years, teachers in the primary years were significantly more likely to put in high effort (33.1% versus 8.2%) into teaching writing.

Initial Teacher Education Training matters. Teachers who felt that they had been prepared for teaching writing by their ITE were significantly more likely to put in high effort into teaching writing to their students than teachers who felt that they had been unprepared for this by their ITE: 23.8% versus 16.8%.

Recommendations

The following recommendations draw on the preceding discussion of findings. They are offered as a suite of proposed actions in practice, policy and research, with the common focus on improving the teaching of writing. The recommendations span a range of stakeholders at the system, school and classroom levels including those responsible for curriculum and assessment policy; school leaders and teachers; and those responsible for ITE and assuring the readiness of graduates for NSW classrooms.

Recommendation 1: The teaching of writing in ITE training

We recommend a sharp focus on the teaching of writing in all ITE courses. This recommendation is consistent with the overall finding that the experience of ITE – induction into to how to teach writing - carries forward to the classroom. A related point is that the time that teachers spend in teaching writing and the time students spend in sustained writing in class are strongly and positively correlated. ITE programs should be reviewed systematically to identify the gaps in the preparation of teachers to teach writing. They should also be examined for the approaches taken to preparing preservice teachers for teaching writing in subject areas. The survey has also shown the need for examining teacher preparation in Standard 5 in general and Standard 5.4 in particular (AITSL, 2016). These relate directly to the teachers' data literacy and teacher preparation in using data and evidence to inform teaching and improve learning. We recommend a greater focus on data literacy in ITE.

Recommendation 2: Middle school focus

We recommend recognition of the importance of time for sustained writing in the classroom and across subject areas in the middle years. This has particular salience in learning in the phase where the foundations in subject knowledge and control of language in use are to be built on the foundations of the early years. The analysis also revealed that there was a significant fall in the degree of confidence to teach a number of aspects relating to grammar between 3-6 and 7-10, and a further fall between 7-10 and 11-12 (see Finding 2). The data indicate a regression with respect to teachers' confidence in their ability to teach aspects of grammar relating to language in use: teachers' confidence shrinks as the level of education increases.

Recommendation 3: Greater clarity around standards of writing to address teacher confusion about the standards they are to use

We recommend that a systematic audit of policy, curriculum and assessment documents be undertaken with a focus on standards and expectations of quality writing in particular. The focus should be on what teachers are expected to use to inform their teaching and assessment practices, including their use of standards.

Recommendation 4: Targeted Professional Development focusing on the teaching of writing

We recommend that the findings of the AWS© be used to plan differentiated programs of PD. The overarching framework would be the teaching, learning and assessment cycle, with priority areas identified within this cycle where needed, as evident in the data analysis. However, at a deeper level, the analyses have shown that gender, age and employment status do influence practices. The approach to PD should take account of these influences and identify what would be common across PD opportunities and what would be prioritised, say, in relation to years of teaching experience.

Recommendation 5: Greater engagement with digital technologies as part of the writing process

We recommend a targeted approach to PD for all teachers, specifically those new to teaching and all secondary subject area teachers. We also recommend, in order to prepare students for 21st Century learning, that a greater focus on digital technologies is required as part of the writing focus in teacher PD. Compared to secondary teachers, primary school teachers utilised digital devices with less frequency when it came to engaging with the writing process. Schools and teachers need to connect with digital devices as part of exercises, in collaboration to plan, draft, revise and edit a piece of writing. Engaging with digital devices presents opportunities for engagement and discussions relating to writing and prospective deliberations connecting to how writing looks and plays out in a digital world.

Recommendation 6: Greater utilisation of writing data to inform next-steps teaching

We recommend PD for teachers in how to use data to inform decision-making for next-step teaching. The primary focus of this would be on how to teach to close the gap between students' current and desired levels of performance at the whole class and individual levels. Specifically, the PD should build capability in how to infer meaning from a range of evidence types including standardised measures and evidence collected routinely by the teacher.

Recommendation 7: All subject area teachers need to take responsibility for the teaching of writing as integral to the teaching of curriculum knowledge

We recommend that system authorities endorse the principle that all teachers have responsibility for the development of student writing as it pertains to their subject specialisations. This needs to be read in the context of Recommendation 4, with clear direction provided in policy, curriculum and assessment documents to inform teaching and assessment practice.

Greater attention is needed to contextualise the place of writing in SOTE. Prioritising the teaching of writing in all subject areas will go some way to valuing the critical building blocks of writing that feature so predominantly in the senior syllabus, including in HSC assessment requirements.

Recommendation 8: Handwriting, keyboarding and spelling

We recommend a review of the research on the place of keyboarding instruction, handwriting and spelling. This is timely given the newly released ACARA Literacy and Numeracy Progressions (ACARA, 2018b) that prioritise the sub-element of 'Handwriting' and 'Keyboarding' as a critical skill for the 21st Century. A focus of this investigation would be on the benefits and limitations of traditional and new technologies in supporting students in learning to write and in effective teaching of writing strategies. Of special import is how writing tools (old technologies: pens; new technologies using multimodalities) impact the

composing process and the assessment of writing. To date, the assessment of students' writing online, including the criteria that teachers could use to assess writing, is in its infancy (Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2013).

Recommendation 9: More time needs to be allocated to the teaching of writing *Effort=Time=Output*

The evidence from the AWS© clearly indicated that the time teachers spend teaching writing and the time students spend on sustained writing in class are strongly and positively correlated. This finding suggests that greater opportunity for sustained writing time in the classroom is needed.

Recommendation 10: Increasing the complexity of writing instruction – building the capability of students and teachers

This recommendation builds on Finding 2 and Recommendation 2 introducing a model showing the need for systematic building of *Knowledge and Skills* in the teaching of writing as it connects with curriculum knowledge over the years of schooling. Through this model, we recommend a greater focus on the middle years through the intersection of *Knowledge and Skills*, *Student Attributes and Capabilities*; and *Teaching Dispositions* (from Novice to Expert).

Greater emphasis on attributes and teaching dispositions of 'Expert Writing Teachers' would provide clarity to the profession as to what are the aspirational writing practices that impact student learning. Aligning 'Expert Writing Teacher Dispositions' to accreditation for Proficiency, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher attributes (AITSL, 2016) would prioritise for the profession the expectation that the teaching of writing is a cross-curricular, progressive across stages of learning and a priority for the profession.

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