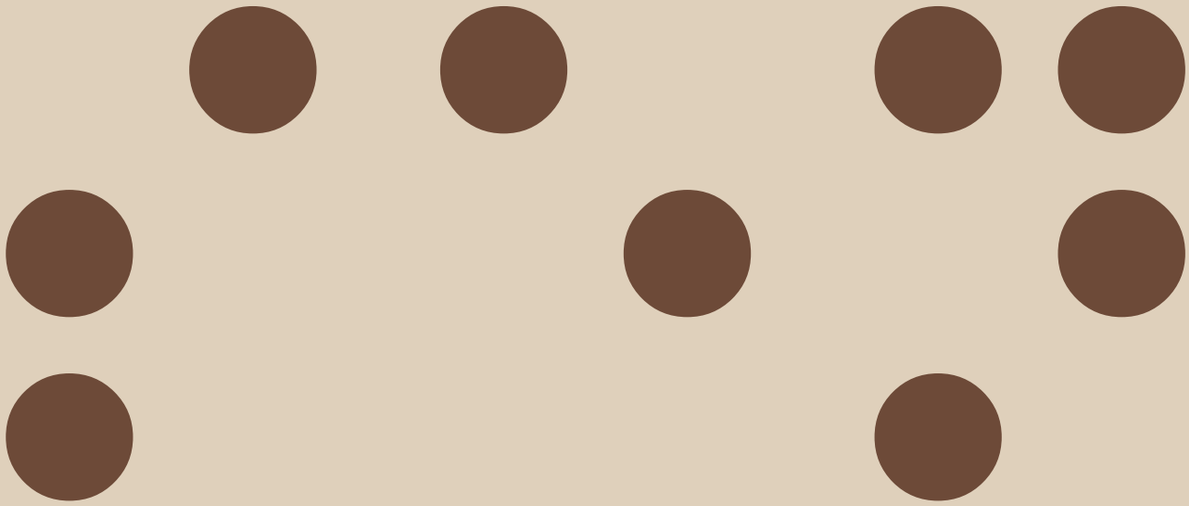

# "DON'T TELL ME I CAN'T WRITE!"

*(How teachers of pupils with a range of Special Educational Needs have adapted the Ros Wilson Big Writing approach.)*

*Tracey Sharkey & Ros Wilson*

Andrell Education Ltd
Raising Standards in Education

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# Foreword

## Ros Wilson - Creator of Big Writing

Working with Tracey on this publication has been a most rewarding experience. I felt that an impartial practitioner of Tracey's vast experience (former acting Head Teacher, National College and Independent Consultant and leadership coach) would be able to approach all settings with a fresh view that might be enlightening and exciting and I feel that this has been the case. As the projects came in we were greatly impressed by the thought and effort of the contributors, but we were equally moved by seeing the progress evident for pupils in the case studies. I would like to thank everyone for their dedication and hard work.

The level of daily written communication for the average adult is Level 3, mainly technically accurate but sometimes a little basic and 'boring' as most daily writing is purely to convey information. Through the hard work of the practitioners in this publication, pupils who might never have otherwise reached this level are now there.

**This is about enhancing the life opportunities for these pupils, not about tests!**

I would also like to thank the Senior Leaders of the five mainstream schools, who, at quite short notice, contributed short studies on how Big Writing works for the children with special needs in their schools.

Finally, I would like to thank Tracey for her high level of commitment and professional rigour in managing this project and in assembling the studies.

*Ros. Wilson , July 2012.*

# Our Aims in This Book

The key aim of this book is to offer teachers, in both special settings and mainstream schools, a range of practical activities, suggestions and ideas to help improve the writing skills of a wide range of pupils.

All the ideas have been designed and used by the teachers in this project.

Over a period of four years these talented teachers have adjusted, changed and 'tweaked' their practice to ensure the activities work with their pupils.

Nothing offered in this book will improve pupils' writing unless we too keep 'tweaking' practice to the individual needs of our pupils- such is the nature of the pupils in our study and in our classes.

As the writer observed teachers teaching, looked at their resources and displays, talked to them and to their pupils about their teaching and reviewed pupils' work, it has become obvious that this project is a natural extension to the approach developed by Ros Wilson (Ref 1).

## Background/Introduction

The writer was asked to carry out the project in the summer of 2008.

It came about when yet another teacher in a special setting, attending a Big Writing Conference, implored Ros and her team to suggest strategies for pupils with a range of special educational needs.

As a result the writer was asked by Ros Wilson to begin to explore how SEN settings were using and/or adapting BW strategies and approaches to improve writing for a wide range of pupils with varying special educational needs.

It was clear from the outset that the project would involve smaller numbers of pupils than had been the case with the development of the Big Writing approach.

Our case study schools include both primary and secondary but, as you will see, the suggestions made are absolutely cross phase.

## About The Writer

The writer comes from a mainstream primary background with a wide range of leadership experience. She is now a freelance education advisor, coach and Big Writing consultant.

Despite having experience of pupils with special educational needs within mainstream settings, the writer was initially anxious about having had no specific special school/setting experience but was finally convinced by Ros's arguments. She felt that this would actually be an advantage as no two special settings are the same and approaching each school with a completely open mind and no preformed ideas about what they did would actually be a real advantage.

With this reassurance, a generic questionnaire was devised and used in each school.

The questionnaire covered the following:

- School details and personnel
- Curriculum provision and organisation
- The school's approach to the teaching of English; reading, writing, speaking and listening
- Assessment and tracking of pupil progress
- How does the school ensure coverage of the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes?
- Which aspects of Ros Wilson's Big Writing (BW) approach are currently used?
- Would the school be willing to produce a case study to share with other colleagues?

(A copy can be seen in Appendix 1)

A range of schools were contacted that were either known to the writer or known to Andrell Education via conferences and we were ready to start.

*(Andrell Education is the company that supports and develops the work of Ros Wilson).*



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*"I like searching for good WOW! words best of all"* *Joshua*

Upon contacting the schools the writer was heartened by their enthusiasm and they were all happy to meet and complete the questionnaire.

Most of the schools involved were visited and they outlined their approaches to the teaching of writing.

Fourteen very different settings were visited during 2008/9. Those willing to contribute a case study were asked to conduct a baseline assessment at the beginning of their involvement in the project and to track pupils' progress throughout.

This book shares the ideas and case studies from eight schools and the writer's sincere thanks goes out to them.

For readers who know the Big Writing approach you will see similarities but realise that the approach has not been adopted in its entirety and this makes sense within the contexts of these settings.

*"The candle and music helps me to write better"* *Andrew*

We hope that you find the ideas and suggestions discussed helpful, realistic, practical and above all enjoyable for pupils.

When you read the case studies you will recognise pupils' initial negative attitudes towards writing. Sadly, for many of these pupils, their negativity often comes from years of inappropriate provision in mainstream settings.

*"I am better at punctuation. I like using ellipses"* *Caitlin*

If there is one strand that runs through all the case studies, it is the very positive, lively and fun approach used by these talented educators. You will see the teachers challenge, albeit in a very careful and structured manner, some of the seemingly cast iron arguments related to certain special educational needs. Clearly, if you are going to go against the tide and the opinion of others, you need to do so thoughtfully and with due diligence at all times.

Each case study is published in the style and structure individual to each school. The majority of photographs and images used throughout this publication have been provided by the Case Study Schools. Where necessary, additional images have been used, for which Andrell Education has obtained relevant permission.

# The Case Study Schools

## LALEHAM GAP SCHOOL

Laleham Gap School is a specialist provision for high functioning pupils aged 3-16 with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and/or Speech and Language disorders in Kent. All pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Needs and there is an expectation that many will achieve a full range of GCSEs at age 16. There are 173 pupils on roll.

Linda Telfer is Head of English and an Advanced Skills Teacher. She is a passionate and gifted teacher.

## Napton

Arc School Napton is a small specialist school based in rural South Warwickshire. It offers day schooling for boys and girls aged 7-11 in classes of no more than five, who hold statements that reflect socially disadvantaging behaviour and, frequently, associated learning difficulties. At the beginning of this study the number on roll was 10, with 3 Teachers and 3 Key Workers. At the time of writing this had increased to a full capacity of 20 children, with 4 Teachers and 3 Key Workers.

Jane Poole, a talented Key Stage 2 teacher, with the close support of inspirational Headteacher, Cathal Lynch, was the key driver in this case study.

## St Clares School

CLEAR THOUGHTS - BRIGHT IDEAS - INFORMED CHOICES - FAIR PLAY

St. Clare's is a school for students aged 11-16 whose educational needs cannot adequately be met in mainstream schools.

Situated in the south western part of the City of Derby, the school caters for approximately 90 students all of whom have a Statement of Special Educational Need. The majority of the students have moderate learning difficulties, some have associated emotional and behavioural needs and others have hearing impairment.



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The key driver in the production of this case study, Head of English, Rob Griffiths, received close support of headteacher Carmel McKenna. Both were intrumental in enthusing colleagues and pupils throughout.

Merefield School

Working together to provide an exciting place to learn, where every child can achieve success!

Merefield School is a small school (60 on roll) for pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties and/or disabilities in Southport. About a third of pupils also have additional needs relating to autistic spectrum conditions. Several of these pupils display unpredictable and challenging behaviours. All pupils have some difficulties with verbal communication and over half have no verbal or expressive language. Each pupil has a statement of special educational needs.

Key Stage 3 teacher, Nicola Houghton, Deputy Head Jenny Williams and Headteacher, Karen Lynskey, were all dynamic, key drivers in producing the case study.

## Mainstream Schools

### The Acorns Primary and Nursery School

The Acorns Primary School is a school for 3-11 year olds located near the centre of Ellesmere Port. There are 335 pupils on role. The school is currently situated across 2 sites. The Acorns is situated in an area of social need and deprivation and receives additional funding from a variety of sources.

The school has an excellent reputation for its expertise in Special Educational Needs. Historically the school had additional resources to meet the needs of pupils with speech and language difficulties, this provision has now been extended to include complex learning difficulties.

Lorna Sheridan is a talented HLTA who teaches in the Enhanced Resource unit with groups of up to 12 pupils with increasingly complex needs.

### FEATHERBY JUNIOR SCHOOL

This is a larger-than-average junior school in Gillingham, Kent, that takes most of its pupils from the local community. The proportion of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average. Most, but not all, of these pupils have moderate learning difficulties. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is below average. The large majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds.

Ormsgill Nursery & Primary School

Today's Education for Tomorrow's World

This average sized primary school serves an area in which there is considerable social disadvantage in Barrow in Furness, Cumbria. It makes provision for children at the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). About half of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, a high proportion compared with most schools. Almost all the pupils are from White British backgrounds and none are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is high. A significant minority of pupils move to the school at times other than the normal points of admission.

Cuckoo Hall ACADEMY

Cuckoo Hall is a very large primary school and is expanding to accommodate an increasing demand for places.

Throughout the school there is significant diversity represented by a wide range of minority ethnic groups. In addition to the majority who are from White British, Black African, Caribbean or Turkish backgrounds, other groups include pupils of Asian or Eastern European heritage. Compared with other schools, a much higher proportion of pupils are in the early stages of learning English and most of these are in the Early Years Foundation Stage or in Years 1 and 2.

The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average. The main areas of need are in speech and language, or pupils have specific learning difficulties such as autism or emotional and social difficulties.

*Tracey Sharkey 2012*



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# Laleham Gap School

## Margate

## School Context

Laleham Gap School is the Kent County's specialist provision for high functioning pupils aged 3-16 with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or Speech and Language Disorders. All pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Needs and there is an expectation that most will achieve a full range of GCSEs at age 16. The school is on two sites: secondary, based in Margate, and primary, based in Broadstairs. I am Head of English at the secondary site.

Once a school for children with Dyslexia/SpLD, it was re-designated to the current range in 2007. Traditionally it was wholly residential, but now only 20% of pupils are boarders. Boys outnumber girls approximately 7:1. On the secondary site there are up to 30 pupils in each year group, with a three-form entry. There is a wide range of ability from above average to well below and National Curriculum (NC) Levels in English are extremely low on entry. Class sizes are small, up to ten pupils.

## Subject Context

The school follows the National Curriculum with a carefully tailored Scheme of Work. At Key Stage 3 (KS3) the classes are grouped by social and relationship needs. They are academically grouped from Year 10, where the majority of pupils study English Language GCSE (AQA course) with Entry Level an option for those unable to access a more difficult course. There is a separate drama department that has a significant impact on the 'speaking and listening' curriculum. The pupils have a session of English every day with the addition of small group time to focus on individual needs. The 'Value Added' in the English Department is in the top 5% nationally.

Most of the pupils have highly challenging needs. In English they require more thinking and processing time, many more oral activities to assimilate ideas, more planning time, support with low self esteem and a great deal of support with writing. ASD children have particular difficulties with language, organisation and the ability to empathise with others which immediately makes any attempt at improving creative writing a difficult one.

We have always been confident, as a department, in raising standards, but were worried that it was only at word level. We needed something to give us the confidence to tackle extended writing. We really thought the Ros Wilson (RW) approach would be too 'mainstream' for us, with our low levels of literacy, but it has transformed our thinking. Our pupils have a simple structure on which to base the writing process and this is what most of our pupils with ASD crave. That, in turn, gives them confidence and builds their self-esteem. It has, therefore ,not only been a major factor in raising standards in writing, but something which has excited the department and the pupils.

## Class Context

Two classes were chosen for the Case Study: Year 8, with seven boys and one girl and Year 9, with eight boys and one girl. In addition, I focused on a sub-group, a Year 8 Small Group Literacy Class I taught for two periods a week. The main focal point was on improving their writing. All pupils were working at levels 1-3 in writing.

### Rationale for choosing focus pupils

The pupils were chosen on the following basis:

- They had low levels in writing
- They were not making the progress required to reach their end of KS3 targets
- They did not enjoy the process of writing
- Their literacy skills had not shown much improvement.

### Aims for choosing the approach?

- I wanted the pupils to be more aware of their targets and how they could individually meet them.
- Through the school's self-evaluation process, raising standards in writing was identified as a priority. There was a noticeable difference between reading and writing standards.
- I was familiar with, and impassioned by, the Ros Wilson strategy delivered on the Raising Standards in Writing course and arranged for the departmental staff to attend a subsequent training day.
- It was decided to adopt the approach as a department priority. The tightly focused structure was found to be beneficial as a starting point for many of our pupils with ASD.



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## Where was change needed?

After an audit of writing in spring 2008, we found that:

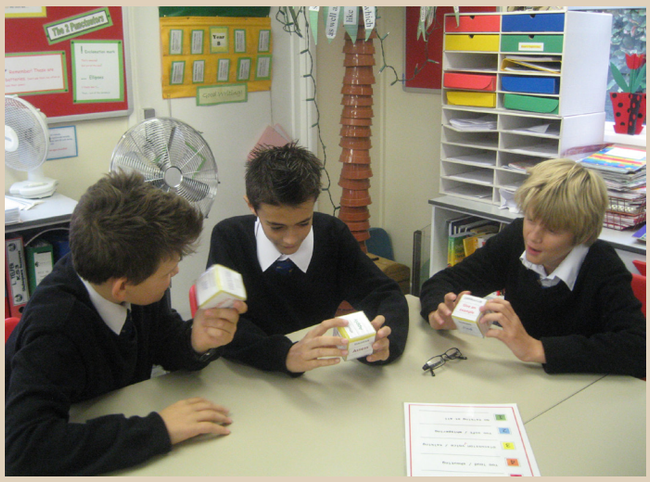
- Pupils had few opportunities to complete extended, independent pieces of writing.
- Teachers lacked confidence in modelling good writing skills in an exciting way.
- The department had placed too heavy an emphasis on developing reading skills, which hadn't had the expected knock-on effect of improving writing skills.
- SATs results confirmed that standards in writing were lower than in reading.
- There was also too large an emphasis on word skills, often using a de-contextualised approach.

## What did we do?

- From Summer 2008 to early 2009, Linda Telfer and four teachers in the English Department attended RW courses and subsequently arranged INSET on the VCOP approach.
- We set individual and specific writing targets identified through the RW assessment process ( see LG Appendix 1).
- We delivered the RW Strategy, both in subject lessons and in literacy small groups, by providing pupils with a consistent, structured framework to develop the skills required for successful writing. (see Ref 1 and main Appendix 2).
- Through focused weekly PDMs, whole school literacy targets, individual class VCOP displays ( see various pictures) and all SLT monitoring across the school, including a focus on VCOP, we raised the profile of writing across the whole school.
- We held regular department meetings to look at pupils' work and make informed decisions about the best way to approach raising standards in writing.
- We made many resources and displays to support children's writing. Each of the four English classes displayed the four generic elements of the strategy in a visual and mnemonic way as a model for other staff.
- All pupils completed a baseline writing test and results were recorded on the school's tracking database. These included the expected end of year targets for pupils. Due to the nature of our children's difficulties this was not the mainstream school's expectation of two sub-levels .
- A 'Home Writing Guide' was prepared for parents to enable them to participate in the strategy (see LG Appendix 2).
- Candles, CDs, writing journals, decorative book coverings and special pens were purchased for the regular Big Writing sessions.
- High impact lessons were planned and delivered and the impact of these was shared by colleagues (Ref 2).
- Assessments of writing were carried out in January 2009, after the first term's work, followed by moderation exercises using the RW Criterion Scale (Main Appendix 3). Revised Writing Targets were devised from these and displayed and shared with pupils .
- Three further assessments in writing followed, alongside regular moderation meetings, revised target setting and a clearer understanding of levelling pupils' writing. In order to achieve a measure of comparability of progress, a range of writing samples were collected for assessment.

## How has practice been modified/improved during the focus?

- Although staff did not feel fully confident that they could embrace the changes, all were delivering high impact lessons by the end of the second term with a welcomed enthusiasm.
- Assessment/moderation meetings were much more focused and generated more valuable discussion linked to AfL. Nevertheless, this was an area I knew could be enhanced and it gave a new impetus to assessment.
- Weekly 'Big Write' sessions proved to be too overwhelming for our pupils and were changed to weekly smaller sessions and monthly more extensive tasks.
- Although oral work had always been a priority in the department, this was now given greater emphasis.





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Building in many opportunities for the children to create their own oral stories prior to writing, had a huge impact on their writing and allowed them to play with the style of language best suited for different genres.

- To keep the elements of VCOP in focus, daily reference was made to them and regular, thrice-weekly sentence work was carried out in their new VCOP Sentence Books, where they created short VCOP descriptions.

## What was the impact?

Setting achievable targets, together with the focus on writing using the VCOP elements, has improved standards of achievement in writing across the subject, as demonstrated by the school's tracking data. Success was mainly due to a consistent, focused approach to teaching writing skills and the department's belief in the effectiveness of the RW approach. Future success is therefore ensured by the continual collaboration, review and support between all of us.

Immediate impact on the pupils was most apparent by the increased enthusiasm and motivation for their writing tasks. They were stimulated by the provision of the VCOP materials in the classroom that pupils could understand and access. These had an impact on the quality of their writing: more precise and exciting vocabulary, more sophisticated connectives, a variety of sentence types used for effect, engagement of the reader and more awareness of punctuation.

It's true to say that our pupils were enthused and empowered by the consistent, structured approach to their writing and very excited by the four generic elements presented by the strategy. They were keen to experiment in 'up-levelling' activities and responded effectively to teacher feedback. The 'Writing Journals' were a particular success and in these they were justly proud and celebratory of their achievements and progress. As a result, they were more aware of their individual targets and of how to improve their writing. These targets arose from the pieces in their journal and all work was marked using VCOP targets and supported by clear expectations as to what the children had to do to be more successful.

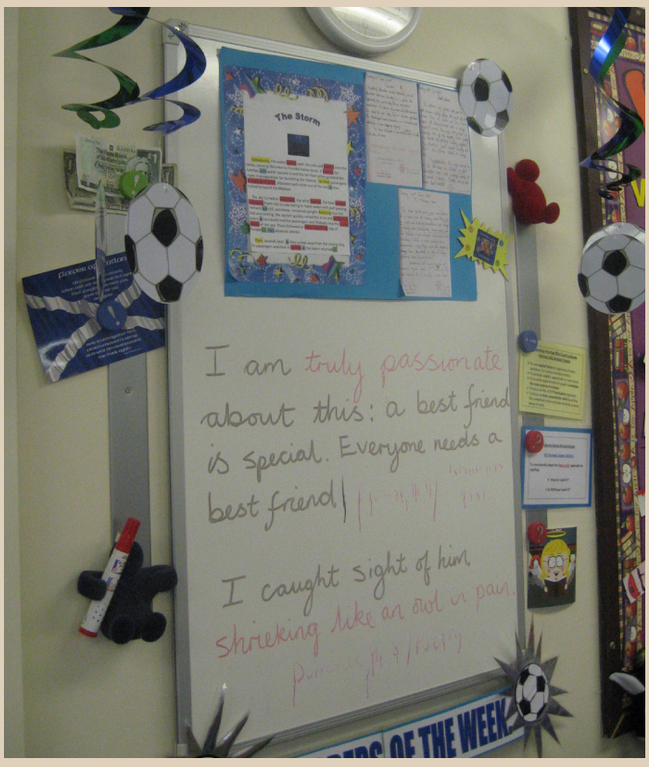
## What were the standards in writing pre-case study?

Pupils looked at the writing process and its outcomes as dull and challenging. Their writing showed:

- Reliance on simple and compound sentences
- A lack of or inconsistency in punctuation
- Speech-like text
- Over reliance on the connectives 'and'/'but'
- Dull vocabulary choices
- Poor sentence structures
- No coherent text structure

## How do our pupils' special needs affect their writing?

A top priority in our school is to use teaching methods that are flexible enough to accommodate individual characteristics. Because autism is a spectrum disorder it is difficult to develop a particular set of learning features, and then a specific teaching approach, that will meet these needs. We have repeatedly found that



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prescriptive teaching methods are too inflexible for the differentiation needed for our pupils. We soon realised that we needed a teaching approach that could be easily modified to meet the individual needs of our pupils.

Furthermore, we also felt that our children were coming from a mainstream education where they were often excluded from rich and meaningful literacy experiences because of their difficulties. We wanted an approach that encouraged our learners to experiment, imagine, work with each other, take risks, create, collaborate and enjoy so that they see themselves as real writers.

One of the most important features we can provide for our students with ASD is structure. Many prefer routine and predictability; noisy and poorly prepared environments can result in these children constantly feeling on edge and unable to learn in the classroom.

Their social skills are weak and so they need the abstract social rules of the classroom translated into concrete concepts by the use of visual aids and prompts, diagrams, simple scripts and frameworks. Discussion, turn-taking, sharing of ideas, group work – these all present problems to a child with ASD.

Much of the work in English needs to be adapted as they often struggle with abstract concepts across the subject. Emphasis on building understanding through concrete teaching methods really helps these pupils to understand. Children with ASD have difficulties in word learning and need support in vocabulary-building. Many of our pupils experience significant problems in pragmatic language and lack the skills of conversation: taking turns speaking, staying on a topic (particularly if it is not a topic they like), showing interest in others' comments, etcetera. They tend to talk 'at' people instead of with them, and will often talk on and on about their favourite interests, not recognising their listener's disinterest.

Another problem is their preference for literal language and an inability to be flexible with more figurative or colourful vocabulary. This is an area of difficulty in both expressive and receptive language and also in writing.

## Assessment

From the beginning, I marked the children's writing using lots of praise through stickers, traffic lights, 6 Hat Thinking (Ref 3) and targets, thus combining things that already worked for us with the Ros Wilson approach. My main aim was to get them to reflect on their learning such as:

- Have you learned anything new?
- What were you most pleased with?
- What did you find easy?
- What did you find more difficult?
- What helped you to solve your difficulty?

With each approach, we discussed the writing in class. For example, with the traffic light system we made the results around the following:

Green = A fantastic piece of writing

Amber = No major mistakes but some targets needed

Red = Some serious mistakes

The pupils gave feedback on the writing excerpts and suggestions on the displays were used to support the discussion. They were involved in explaining why their work had not been awarded 'green' and what they needed to do to improve. This happened on a regular basis. Six Hat Thinking (Ref 3)was also used in the same way to facilitate thinking about what was good or



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creative about it or what was needing improving.

However, it soon became clear that an improved focus was needed on self and peer assessment and this has proved to be a most valuable way of raising standards in writing. The first thing we did was to move away from NC Levels. Our pupils had low national levels of attainment and we decided that the responsibility to raise these would lie with us, the teachers (we had just adopted a new assessment approach that would keep us focused on levels of progress). Along with my Year 8 class, I devised a new levelling system where the levels were decided upon by the pupils themselves. These were made up into individual cards for the pupils and displayed prominently in class.

## Vocabulary

1. 1 good WOW! word
2. 3+ WOW! words
3. More than 6 WOW! words
4. Many WOW! words and IMAGERY.

## Connectives

1. Use of 'and' only
2. 2 different connectives
3. 4 or more different connectives
4. 6+ connectives, also used as openers.

## Openers

1. 1 good opener
2. 2 good openers
3. 4 good openers and a Power Opener
4. 6+ including all 3 Power Openers

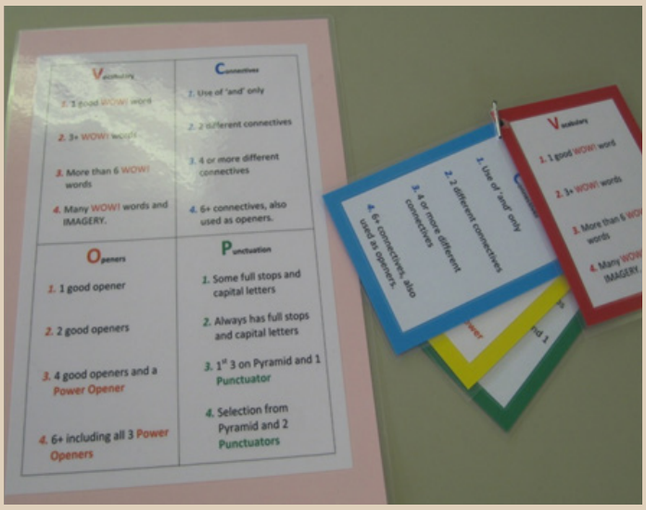
## Punctuation

1. Some full stops and capital letters
2. Always has full stops and capital letters
3. 1st 3 on Pyramid and 1 Punctuator
4. Selection from Pyramid and 2 Punctuators

A new idea in small-step learning was introduced which was very successful:

**WWW - What Went Well**

**EBI - Even Better If...**




I referred to these criteria on a daily basis, applying them to most of their work in class so that they were well-versed in it. It was always displayed in class and became part of their vocabulary.

Before writing, the children would give themselves a level in their VCOP levelling scheme – sometimes the focus would be on all four and sometimes a selected one or two, i.e. vocabulary and openers. This helped them to think about what level they were currently working at and the task itself.

The use of an imaginary friend, **Hamish**, facilitated the assessment process enormously (as recommended by RW).

In the first few months of a new class, the children are more reluctant to share their mistakes with others so I would put all of their 'errors' into Hamish's writing and present it to the class for assessment. If there were repeated examples of missing apostrophes or dull vocabulary or limited openers or few connectives, they went into Hamish's writing! It eliminated the fuss caused, initially, of the children unable to take what they perceived as criticism and building their own confidence through Hamish.

We would then use the 4 colours of VCOP to underline the elements so they would see the VCOP visually and in colour.

## Hamish: The Storm

These were part of an extended writing lesson on modelling where a Year 8 group were being introduced to longer VCOP description pieces. I took various parts of their attempts to write a short descriptive piece about a storm and put them together as an example that 'Hamish' had written. The class had to read the piece and work together to improve it. By modelling quality work through the progression of activities (assessing, grading,



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Hamish The Perfect Storm

One night a bad storm began in the far away sky. The howling waves covered the clouds. It was like a big blanket.

The waves smashed against the rocks and pounded with a big noise. It was like the sea was alive. I felt terrible and I hid on the beach it began to rain and the lightning cracked open the sky it wouldnt stop. Then it went quiet

Hamish The Perfect Storm

One night a bad storm began in the far away sky. The howling waves covered the clouds. It was like a big blanket.

The waves smashed against the rocks and pounded with a big noise. It was like the sea was alive. I felt terrible and I hid on the beach it began to rain and the lightning cracked open the sky it wouldnt stop. Then it went quiet

Hamish The Perfect Storm

One night a dreadful storm began in the distant sky. The howling waves enveloped the clouds like an enormous ebony blanket.

Smashing against the rocks, the waves pounded noisily and the sea showed its mighty anger. Feeling terrible, I crouched on the damp sand. When the rain began, the lightning cracked open the sky. Would it ever stop?

Suddenly, there was a fearful silence...

Hamish The Perfect Storm

One night a dreadful storm began in the distant sky. The howling waves enveloped the clouds like an enormous ebony blanket.

Smashing against the rocks, the waves pounded noisily for the sea showed its mighty anger. Feeling terrible, I crouched on the damp sand. When the rain began, the lightning cracked open the sky. Would it ever stop?

Suddenly, as I stood up, there was a fearful silence...

correcting, refining, etc.) the class were able to produce a piece of writing much higher in standard. This was a low-ability class but by assessing and criticising the work and then going on to improve it creatively, they were involved in quite complex skills in English.

The class would then work together to up-level the piece of writing and this was so useful in giving them ideas and examples. Once corrected, new levels would be given to assess the improvements made.

The children could then go back to their own writing and self assess it by underlining and leveling their writing. The new levels were then compared with what they had predicted and, until they built their confidence and got more accurate, these were always found to be very different – their predictions being lower. WWW and E B I stickers were then applied to their work and 'Writing Buddies' (in-class partners) were used to record the comments (see pupils' work).

Our department is now involved in introducing this approach across the curriculum so that there is consistency.

I am aware that there is a statutory obligation to record and track the pupils' progress but I believe that deep learning is fundamental to assessment and our system facilitates this.

Certainly, for these children, their main barrier was understanding that their writing needs to be able to be read again after it is committed to paper. They lacked comprehension of purpose and audience, perhaps linked to a belief that they were not 'real writers' and the assessment procedure changed this. Their self and peer evaluation up-levelled their writing via shared writing and shared monitoring against the success criteria.

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I have a display on my 'Up-levelling Wall' that supports this assessment.

I believe the children would get bored and frustrated with their writing if they did not get the opportunity to get involved in the process. They could listen to me all day long, but the real opportunity for learning comes with the ability to apply any information that they gain. Through the pupils doing the peer reviews with the WWW/EBI stickers themselves, they developed responsibility. Not only were they challenging their writing skills but they were also helping their peers to get a better level. Because of this, applying what was learned in the lesson became even more important.

## Working with Challenging Pupils

Teaching pupils with communication difficulties is hugely rewarding, but it doesn't come without many challenges. While our pupils may undoubtedly benefit from verbal instruction, many also require an additional avenue of input as they learn. We provide this input by using a range of visuals in class before and during writing sessions. There are also children we teach who seem to comprehend written text better than speech, due to them taking a longer time to process auditory information and work out the meaning behind the words. They find it easier to tackle a written text because, in conversation, they have to also read the expressions on a person's face and study their body language, skills they do not have.

There is a belief that children on the ASD spectrum cannot cope with any distracting visual displays in the learning environment but I cannot go along with this theory. I have made many attempts, in my classroom, to make language highly visible and the key is to familiarise them with the material as much as possible. All the materials are introduced and discussed before they are displayed and constant reference is made to them in lessons.

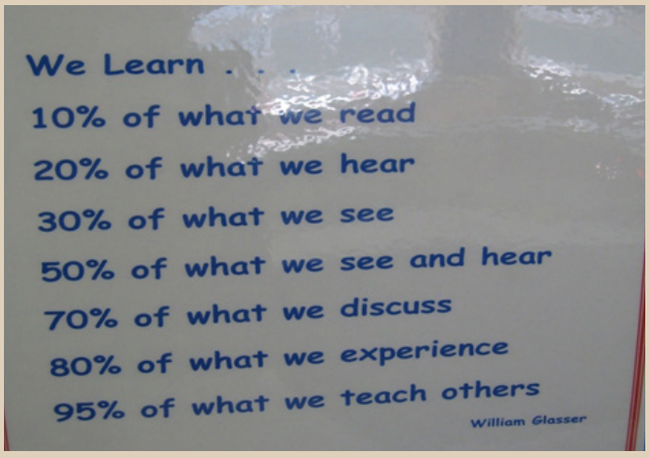
Sometimes there is a need to adapt the materials based on the language experiences of the classroom routine. A successful way is to take digital photographs of the writing activities and incorporate into a Power Point show with simple text and/or symbols. It is then much easier for our children to 'see' the process.

To further enhance their literary development, our pupils share their Power Writing stories (Ref 4) because reading them aloud helps ASD children learn more about language and human interaction. As our children struggle so much with recognising emotions and body language, we encourage great expression in the reading of the work produced. An example of this was when my Year 8 group were studying WW1 War Poetry as part of their study of the novel 'War Game' by Michael Foreman. After creating their own poems, they were encouraged to present them with expression and we then took photographs of freeze frames of their work. This not only led to better understanding of the text being shared, but may further help them in understanding postures, facial expressions, and uses of volume, tone, and inflections in speech.

A common myth related to teaching pupils with ASD is that they lack imagination and, therefore cannot write creative works of fiction or description. I wholly refute this idea and work daily with young people who love their fiction. Yes, it can be more difficult for them for it forces their thoughts to go beyond the literal, but the VCOP approach has supported this process enormously, giving them a framework and providing a set of 'rules' for support. The predictability and structure of this cannot be underestimated: it suits their learning style, particularly if it offers short sessions, time limits and transitions and clear success outcomes.

> "I can think of all sorts of imaginary stories in my head – in fact, my imagination is epic!"
> Megan , Year 8

Having a structure is very important because working with other children and sharing ideas is so demanding on them – listening to, responding to and recalling instructions being particularly problematic when directing these to the whole group. Working together in pairs or groups puts social demands on our pupils and their attention and organisation can suffer as a result. Add to this the difficulties with communication and language and it is clear that their ability to make sense of their literacy tasks will be undermined if there is no structure or framework. Some pupils I teach, who are more rigid about routines, even monitor my teaching to ensure I don't miss any of the elements!



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Many of our pupils have experienced years of difficulty and frustration in selecting ideas for writing but their standards and enjoyment have far surpassed anything I could have imagined. It is just sensible, therefore to build in a set of strategies that allow for all these problems. With our Power Writing sessions, the key is to adapt:

- We have clear time limits in Writing Sessions but these are short, i.e. 10 minutes for word-finding, 20 minutes for a writing session, etcetera, There is always support at transitions.
- Accepting their lack of social empathy and stepping in quickly when behaviour is inappropriate.
- Visual elements are always built in to sustain attention. Many of the support materials are highly visual.
- Strategies (chunking, repetition, etc.) are used to support their problems in processing language. Many of our pupils have better expressive than receptive language and so checks need to be made on their understanding.
- Lots of display materials, picture-writing prompts, photographs, Power Point shows, comic strip conversations and social stories about VCOP are used to support their weak auditory memories. Pupils also have the opportunities to record their oral sentences, either electronically or with an LSA, so they are not 'lost' before writing down.

Many experts say that figurative language should be avoided because of ASD pupils having such a poor grasp of the flexibility of language. I disagree. Although there are many situations where literal language must be used, the Creative Writing session is not one of them. My pupils are steeped in metaphor, idiom and irony.

Because they have great difficulty communicating their thoughts and feelings in their writing, so much time needs to be spent in working out a sentence verbally before writing. Again, once the child has verbalised the sentence, it can be written down to be copied until they become better at writing thoughts on their own.

We constantly have to transform the hidden, abstract, social rules of the classroom into concrete concepts that can be taught to our pupils through the use of visual aids and prompts.

## A sample Social Story:

### Preparing for Power Writing

In Power Writing sessions, we talk about our ideas first.

Sometimes, we talk as a class, sometimes in small groups and sometimes in pairs with our Writing Buddies.

It is okay to get excited about our ideas but it is important to allow everyone to have a say otherwise it will get too loud.

I collect my pen, Writing Journal, VCOP bag and my Writing Target card.

Mrs Telfer will play music and light the candle but I can ask for these to be stopped if I find them annoying. Sometimes we have to think of others and I won't get upset if someone else doesn't want them and I do.

Social Stories are relatively short, straightforward descriptions of social situations, specifically detailing what a pupil might expect from the situation and what may be expected from him/her.

## Summary

The implementation of the Big Writing approach had great impact on our pupils' attitudes to writing, ability to self assess and set personal targets, ability to say how they could improve their work and last, but not least, their standards or writing.

## Laleham Gap School

### English Department

Percent of pupils in Year 9 making two NC sub-levels of progress in writing in one year

**2005 – 2006: 16%**

**2006 – 2007: 18%**

**2007 – 2008: 23%**

**2008 – 2009: 62%**

**2009 – 2010: 84%**

**That's the wonder . . .**
**the wonder of VCOP!**

*Linda Telfer - Head of English*



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