They won’t have anything to write about: the dangers of believing pupils are ‘culturally deprived’

By Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson

Children too often see themselves as passive receivers of writing subjects and as a result become disengaged and feel disenfranchised. (*Young & Ferguson 2021 p.116*)

‘They won’t have anything to write about’ is a frequently heard response to the idea that children might choose their own topics for writing. It is interesting to note, however, that teachers in the Early Years know that very young children have a ready and spontaneous fund of topics to write about. The work of researchers such as Dyson (2003) and Kress (1997) supports these observations, suggesting that even pre-schoolers have the ability to choose their own writing topics with ease. And in author Willa Cather’s view, childhood provides all the material a writer will ever need.

So when and why does this fountain run dry? Do children lose the ability to come up with their own ideas as part of a natural process? It is our belief that in fact this is not the case, but what does happen is that the potential to find their own writing subjects is suppressed by the dominant writing pedagogies used in schools (*Young & Ferguson 2020, 2021*). To give an example, the generation of ideas, which is how all writers begin their projects, is a process entirely omitted from National Curriculum recommendations. Therefore, the assumption by teachers that it’s their job to supply ideas (because children can’t be trusted to do it) would seem to be officially supported.

Our view is that it is hard to imagine a lower expectation than this of children’s capabilities. While it seems that children *in general are* not to be trusted to choose their own topics, the most harmful aspect of this kind of thinking is embedded in the particular beliefs about ‘the socially and culturally deprived child’, most often defined as working-class and in the category labelled ‘pupil-premium’. These beliefs usually include some stereotyped view of the barrenness of a ‘pupil-premium’ child’s life (enshrined in comments such as ‘they only ever sit at home and play on the computer’) that is reductive, dismissive, and has no basis in reality. In fact, as Dyson (2003) and Grainger *et al* (2003) have shown, the ‘deprived child’ has, like anyone else, resources and life experiences which deserve acknowledgment and representation and which they can learn how to mine as writing ideas (*Young & Ferguson 2020, 2021; Young *et al* in press).*

‘Most of my classmates came from low-income families, and many grew up in broken homes, lived with relatives or in foster care. We defined ourselves as a class of writers. I relished our classroom culture and told anyone who would listen - Jacky’

(*Leung & Hicks 2014*)
Below are examples of just some things children have chosen to write about in schools we have worked with in economically deprived areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls’ skateboarding</th>
<th>Tribute to Chadwick Boseman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese dynasty</td>
<td>My pregnant rabbit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physics involved in the workings of a lift</td>
<td>The Iranian revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to pass the London taxi drivers’ test</td>
<td>Being old enough to babysit your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the dentist</td>
<td>brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The food in hospitals</td>
<td>Baking cupcakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting my hair off for charity</td>
<td>Tearing my hamstring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My little sister being born</td>
<td>Catching a crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting Nigeria</td>
<td>Cracking my head open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poking my eye with a pencil</td>
<td>Meeting my cousins from Albania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to change a beer keg</td>
<td>How to wash your dog without stress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These children’s teachers refuse to routinely rely on administering teacher or scheme-assigned stimuli but rather focus their attention on teaching children how to generate their own ideas within the parameters of whole class writing projects.

If you remain sceptical, we urge you to read Anne Haas Dyson’s paper, in which she demonstrates how what she calls children’s ‘textual toys’ (which include TV, video, singing, play and the words and images of the adults and children around them at home) can be brought into the literacy classroom and remixed with school literacy practices to create something new.

We can’t give children rich lives, but we can give them the lens to appreciate the richness that is already there.

(Lucy Calkins in Young & Ferguson 2020 p.142)

Believing that the experiences of a particular group of children can never be valid and valuable subjects for writing in school has serious and far-reaching consequences. What teachers really mean when they say things like ‘they won’t have anything to write about’ is – they won’t write about things I (and the school) think are legitimate or relevant. They won’t write about things I can control, or they won’t write about things I have a reference to, and the written product won’t be good enough. Such ideas have serious and negative results on children’s writing performance (Young & Ferguson 2021). Teachers’ perceptions of legitimate writing and subjects for writing are the dominant culture in classrooms and are powerful and over-valued, while children’s cultures, and particularly those of the ‘deprived’ child, are persistently and systematically undervalued (Grainger et al 2003). By asking our pupils to leave their own cultural capital, thoughts, opinions and knowledge outside the writing classroom door, we are requiring them to take on an ‘approved’, sterile and mono-cultural identity that doesn’t honour or take advantage of the richness of their lives. Their own voices go unheard. They develop neither a personal sense of selfhood in their writing, nor do they have the feeling of contributing to a collective writing identity (Young et al in press).

Writing is a means for children to develop a sense of self, find meaning in the world, and impose themselves upon it.

(Young & Ferguson 2020 p.7)
The teacher’s capacity to choose the writing stimulus means that children are not given any autonomy or control over learning how to personally act out on the world through writing. Instead, they quickly learn the life lesson that writing is to be consumed or imitated, and in accordance with someone else’s desires. This is no less than a form of linguistic oppression perpetrated on young writers, and, according to research (Young & Ferguson 2021), it is happening more than we dare to think, and is part of the reason why so many children leave school mystified, intimidated and believing that writing and being a writer is not for them.

However, it is in our power to change this depressing state of affairs.

- Believe that children will discover what they want to write about if you give them the right support. Every child can find their own ideas for writing if they are taught the kinds of idea generation techniques we describe in our book Real-World Writers. As we have said, this is how all writers begin their process, and it’s therefore among the essential first steps in a child’s writerly education.
- Interest them in why they might want to write. To write well and meaningfully, children need to have the feeling of being moved to do it. For example, they might be moved to teach, entertain or persuade, perhaps to paint with words and be poetic, maybe to reflect on an experience, or to record something that shouldn’t be forgotten (Young & Ferguson 2020). They need to write in personally important ways, and by helping them find their own writing urges and ideas, you will be ensuring that they have personal investment in the writing. And as we know, greater motivation and engagement on the part of the writer results in their writing better texts (Young & Ferguson 2021). Therefore, giving children strategies to identify for themselves what and why they want to write is a highly effective instructional decision.
- ‘When we shape our writing curriculum around genre, we give children access to the world and the fundamental reasons we are all moved to write’ (Young & Ferguson 2020 p.39). Teach an array of genres in which to write and give time for children to practise and become competent in using the linguistic features and conventions which typically govern them. For more practical advice on this please see our Class Writing Projects and Genre Booklets. Instead of setting the topic, let children find and place their own writing idea into the genre being studied. This crucial teaching decision stops writing from simply being the reproduction of generic conventions which, ironically, is often what happens when teachers choose the topic. By having agency over their writing idea, children learn to use the genre for themselves, creating meaning in their own way and for their own purposes.
- Allow children’s writer-identities to develop and flourish. If the act of writing is to be meaningful and successful, all young writers must be able to express their identity - who they are - in their writing. In our book Writing For Pleasure: theory, research and practice, we suggest that writer-identities are influenced by many factors, of which socio-economic circumstances are only one. We show that teachers who promote children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al 2005) and ‘funds of identity’ (Subero et al 2016) in the writing classroom give children opportunities to use their outside school learning experiences, life style, interests, objects, artefacts, activities, talents, popular cultures and knowledge, powerfully connecting them with what they are learning about the craft of writing and being a writer in school.
- We invite you to consider what is possible and not typical in writing classrooms. We want you to examine your own assumptions and biases in relation to children and families living in economically disadvantaged communities. For more information on how to do just that see Laman et al (2018).
- Watch your classroom change and see how children now approach their writing. Through our school residency programme, we have found it amazing to watch children go from producing pieces which were depressingly identical and without social and personal significance to writing meaningfully, with motivation, confidence and precision, on their own chosen topic.

In conclusion, we maintain that so-called ‘deprived’ children have, in common with all their peers, valid and valuable ideas for writing, and that we as teachers must show them how to mine their lives and experiences for those ideas. In the many and varied pieces which will result from this instruction, they will draw on their own funds of knowledge, cultural capital and identities, and their compositions will be a rich resource and contribution to the whole writing community of the classroom.
References:

Further Reading

What we have provided you with here is just a quick guide to get you started with implementing our resources successfully. However, there is still a lot more to explore and learn! We call our approach the *Real-World Writers* approach, and it is based on our own research into evidence-based practice and case studies of world-class writing teachers. You can read about this research in our book *Writing For Pleasure*. 

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**REAL-WORLD WRITERS**
A Handbook for Teaching Writing with 7-11 Year Olds

**Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson**

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**Writing for Pleasure**
Theory, Research and Practice

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Class Writing Projects

All our class writing projects come with comprehensive teacher notes. There are suggestions for year group and whole school progression, advice on writing your own mentor texts, dozens of craft knowledge and functional grammar mini-lessons, and suggested books you can use to support the project. You also receive our highly-prized and popular pupil-facing Genre-Booklets which help children take a germ of an idea and see it through to publication or performance. This includes giving them idea generation techniques, exemplar texts, drafting advice, revision techniques, revision and editing checklists and our publishing and performance menu.

To read more about a project, you simply click on its icon.
Year 4
- Sensory Poetry
- Character Driven Short Stories
- Setting Focused Short Stories
- Memoir
- Information
- Instructions
- Persuasive Letter For Personal Gain
- Match Report

Year 5
- Inspired By... Poetry
- Poetry That Hides In Things
- Developed Short Stories
- Graphic Novels
- Memoir
- Information
- Advocacy Journalism
- Biography
Year 6
Social & Political Poetry

Year 6
Flash-Fiction

Year 6
Autobiography

Year 6
Community Activism

Year 6
Explanation

Year 6
Discussion

Year 6
Historical Account
And finally...

- We are always looking to add extra exemplars to our Genre-Booklets. Please share your own writing with us or any good examples written by the children in your class. You can send any pieces to www.writing4pleasure.com/contact

- If this writing project or one of the mini-lessons has gone really well, please consider writing it up as an example of practice. You can find out more by visiting www.writing4pleasure.com/get-involved

- If you’re interested in developing your writing teaching further, we offer a wide-range of evidence-informed CPD including our popular school residency programme, teacher workshops and multi-day institutes. Find out more at www.writing4pleasure.com/training

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