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Manu kupu, the power of words: Exploring creative writing in the primary classroom

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MANA KUPU, THE POWER OF WORDS: EXPLORING CREATIVE WRITING IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Teaching writing is complex, and a number of ideas circulating among schools and teachers often belie the difficulty of how to teach the techniques and processes of writing. I've come to believe that authorship is not a passive undertaking and does not originate in the struggle to put something onto the page. Rather it emerges by living with a sense of awareness. It is, in a sense, life work, a consciousness of the significance of our experiences and the impression that they make upon us. These impressions then seek expression and, in turn, we are moved to write. I believe that being moved to write should be the driving force behind our work with young writers in schools. From experience I have seen that inquiry-driven, arts-rich invitations to write, with an emphasis on how the writing will function with respect to an intended audience and purpose, foster a sense of connection, and a respect for diverse opinions and points of view. These undertakings are part of the meaning-making process and pivotally cultivate an ability to think critically and creatively—the essence of learning to be literate. When we see that children are innately curious, we see that our role, as educators, is to foster this sense of wonder. When we begin with inquiry and a shared quest for significance, the journey from the head to the page becomes a process of growing meaning. In this article, I will be sharing a number of stories of practice, where students in a range of contexts were enabled via a range of activities to make such a journey.

“Mana kupu, the power of words, makes us the apex predator. Words define us, give us purpose, give us place, give us meaning. Meaning is everything” (Brown, 2021, Section 2, penultimate paragraph). If this is the case, then developing our capacity to enable our young learners to wield the power of words—a super power in making meaning—should surely be of paramount importance to all stakeholders in education. Regretfully, this is not the case.

Instead, commodification of education is increasingly apparent, as the latest trends seem to be focused more than ever on generic “silver bullet” solutions, with easy-to-measure outcomes, rather than making the commitment needed in proven pedagogies to facilitate real change. “Sadly, too often writing becomes merely an exercise in ‘getting words right’, or writing to teacher-prescribed tasks” (Loane, 2010a, para.1).

During my own 17 years in the classroom, both here in New Zealand and the UK, I have seen first-hand skills-based approaches, which led to the problem Michael Rosen describes when referring to SPaG (the spelling, punctuation and grammar initiative) in the UK in 2018 as the mechanical and mechanistic tail wagging the language dog.

Article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), which New Zealand ratified in 1993, states that “children have the right to freedom of expression”,

1. including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice. (Unicef, n.d.)

Freedom of expression, as outlined here in Article 13, is an important human right, which is essential for a democratic society. Yet when freedom of expression is translated as “free writing” paired with

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teacher-directed tasks and isolated skills drills in our classrooms, the product is inevitably and invariably disappointingly thin and flat.

According to Jacobson (2010),

story starters or writing prompts, fill-in-the-blank sentences or waiting until students know their letters to begin writing are just a few of the ways we communicate to students that they are not capable of writing and thinking on their own. (p. 2)

Put simply, these “tasks” seek to artificially jump-start creativity, which is ironically already inherent in the child. Can we not trust that our sacred urge as human beings to communicate will be enough to motivate children to write? Bridgett Miller invites us to consider why it is that “although we innately trust that an acorn will someday grow into an oak tree without requiring any formal instruction, we are hesitant to trust that nature has a crucial role to play in the natural unfolding of our children” (Miller, 2020, p. 15).

Here in New Zealand, it hasn’t always been this way. As a nation, our fall from literacy grace is well documented in the PIRLS survey where we ranked first in 1970 (when education was driven by a belief in the creative power of the learners themselves) and then slumped to 33rd place in the latest survey of 2016.

Ko te tamaiti te pūtake o te kaupapa: The child at the heart of the matter

In the wake of the now defunct National Standards, we are now well placed to once again put creativity at the centre of our educational discourses and practices. Yet the real question is: How can we avoid our new pedagogical freedoms becoming once again hijacked by skills-based literacy “methods”?

In contrast to our loss of pedagogical direction domestically for the past 50 years, research has been consistent regarding what world-class writing teaching entails.

Table 1: Types of Instruction

Type of instruction	Effect size
Set writing goals	2.03
A contemporary writing workshop approach	1.75
Teach the writing processes	1.26
Pursue purposeful and authentic writing projects	1.07
Reading, sharing, thinking and talking about writing	0.89
Feedback from teacher and peers	0.80
Genre-study	0.76
Time spent revising	0.58
Time spent generating ideas and planning	0.54
Children writing in response to their reading	0.50
Functional grammar teaching	0.46
Formal grammar teaching	-0.41

This table, adapted from the book *Writing for pleasure: Theory, research and practice* (Young & Ferguson, 2021, p. 76) ranks types of instruction in terms of their effectiveness. The enduring principles gleaned from this highly influential meta-analysis of thousands of studies conducted worldwide suggest that a contemporary writing workshop approach gives an impressive effect size of 1.75 (the equivalent of more than four years’ worth of progress in your average classroom).

For this reason, I am advocating here for a contemporary writing workshop approach but with an added commitment to our *whakataukī: Ko te tamaiti te pūtake o te kaupapa: The child at the heart of the matter.*

The writing workshop

The writing workshop approach was developed from the early work of Donald Graves and Donald Murray and was popularised by Lucy Calkins and others involved in the Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University in New York City (Calkins, 2006). “It is based upon four principles: students will write about their own lives; they will use a consistent writing process; they will work in authentic ways; and they will develop independence as writers” (Wikipedia, 2021, para 1). A writing workshop session typically involves three phases: a teacher-delivered mini-lesson with a single focus about 10 minutes long, followed by independent student writing and conferencing time, and concluding with time to share.

Observations from the classroom

For the past three years, whilst working as an independent literacy coach in primary schools, I have supported teachers and leaders in developing writing-workshop-based teaching practices. When comparing his experiences of both teacher-directed tasks and the writing workshop, a former mentee and teacher from Lynmore School, Rotorua, observed that,

When we have set a writing task, with no orientation to authentic student connections and exploration of language tools, writing is tepid, soulless, more careless. The writing is a blow-by-blow recount or narration of events from beginning to end, without focus or awareness of audience and purpose. As opposed to the writing workshop, a teacher directed task does not emphasise slowing down and pinpointing moments in time to unpack; it doesn't emphasise a careful exploration of and guided application of a language device, where students are more likely to apply it meaningfully and successfully; instead, it places more weight on feeding our students “ideas” than developing the ability to express themselves. (Personal communication, 2021)

Of particular interest here is the teacher's observation that he worked to pinpoint moments in time and (through conversation) unpack them, to lead his students to have something to say. If we dig deeper, we can see that the developments observed in this teacher's understanding were not solely due to the workshop structures; it was instead a change in teacher behaviour which was fundamental in bringing the structures alive.

When describing what the writing workshop offers, (Rubin, 2021) contends that:

In the writing workshop, writing time is not about producing a response to a teacher-generated topic or learning copy-editing rules, and it is not simply ‘freewriting’ without purpose or direction. Instead, the writing workshop is about students doing the real work of writers — making choices, exploring interests and problems, and using writing to entertain others, create art, and join conversations in the world with their unique voices. (Section 3, paragraph 5)

I wholeheartedly agree, but also believe that for us to realise the full benefits of this writing practice there is more to it than the structure of the workshop alone.

In my work I meet a range of primary teachers, all grappling with the complex challenges of developing their practice. It has been my experience that, when it comes to change, while teachers can clearly see the benefits when they observe a workshop in action, the step to do it for themselves is initially too far. The greatest challenge lies in getting teachers to understand the underlying philosophy, specifically that all decisions are guided by what the child has to say, who they want to say it to and finally how best to say it. Once teachers get this, we no longer see them reducing their practice to lifeless step-by-step processes.

The role and qualities of the writing teacher

The role of the teacher in leading young writers to authorship cannot be overestimated.

There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its centre the attitudes of the teachers. The beliefs, assumptions, feelings of teachers are the air of the learning environment; they determine the quality of life within it. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, cited in Loane, 2010b, p. 6).

What then are the qualities which we should be seeking to nurture as teachers of writing, to honour the depth and complexity of the act, and to provide an environment within which effective writing practice can thrive? In this section I will be addressing how I have worked to foster certain qualities and behaviours in teachers in their individual journeys and illustrate this with actual classroom examples.

My own journey

My own journey started with Gail Loane. Awarded the Queen's Service Medal in 2007 for Services to Literacy with teachers and children, Loane has worked on national projects for the Ministry of Education, such as the Literacy Taskforce, Literacy Leadership, the development of the English exemplars, the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP) and schooling improvement projects. I first met Gail Loane in 2013 when, along with her associate Sally Muir, she embarked on a long-term coaching project at our large, Auckland-based primary school. Her coaching during the subsequent three years proved to be pivotal in my career and her advice and guidance continues to be invaluable today.

Whilst countless books have been written about the writing workshop, it was Loane's belief in putting the child at the heart of our practice by developing our role as practitioners, which for me set her work apart. As Loane (2010b) succinctly states, "I see my job as helping each student find what it is that he or she has to say, and then help them find the best way to say it" (p. 6). I found her use of the *helping circle* to enhance the usual sharing time in the final phase of the workshop to be invaluable in supporting the non-linear processes of writing. In the helping circle, as a team of writers, students are led to verbalise their own challenges and triumphs and to recraft their pieces in response to precise peer feedback. It is an opportunity for the community of writers to make adjustments, negotiate and question their shared knowledge, settle arguments, clarify, confirm, dismiss hypotheses and make discoveries. When used to good effect, it can be the most powerful tool we have.

Gail Loane's book *I've got something to say* (2010b) is a touchstone text. Of particular relevance is Chapter 1: "The teacher of writing: Becoming joyfully literate". During my own quest to be a "joyfully literate" adult in both the lives of students and fellow teachers in their own coaching journey, I started with the foundational trait that, "the teacher of writing will first and foremost take a deep interest in the students in their care as precious human beings" (Loane, 2010b, p. 8).

Who am I? Finding our voice

In 2019, in his blog *Leading and Learning*, Bruce Hammonds reminisces about when New Zealand artist Colin McCahon created a controversial large abstract painting called *I Am* (1954):

“For us the message was answering the question that we all struggle with—who am I? What things are important to me? What makes me who I am?” Hammonds proposed that a cherishing of these questions should underpin our decisions regarding literacy and indeed aspects of our education system. Hammonds presses for our commitment to place the child at the heart of the matter, honouring and nurturing students’ identity in our practice.



Figure 1: I am. (McCahon, 1954)

In order to focus on students’ own lives in our practice, I suggest that being moved to write arises from our experiences. In this regard, Daniels and Bizar (2004) view the classroom as a metaphor for “working laboratories or studios, where genuine knowledge is created, real products are made and authentic inquiry is pursued” (p. 152). The term “authentic inquiry” is something of a buzzword today and is open to both interpretation and misinterpretation. Pennie Brownlee illustrates in her online article “The Wonder of Spring” (2013) both what authentic inquiry is and what this is not.

Most of us can recall a time where we ‘did spring’ somewhere in our education. We were given the templates of skipping lambs to draw around, cut out and stick cotton wool on. They gave us yellow paper and a model we could copy, and if ours was good enough, we could put our ‘daffodil’ onto the class frieze of daffodils ... It is true, many of us enjoyed these busy-work activities, but the activities themselves carry absolutely no knowledge of the season called spring. (Paragraph 1)

Instead, Brownlee walks us through how to lead children to *notice* in a way that will give them real, authentic knowledge of the way life unfolds in the place where they live and play. Many people from John Dewey onwards have argued for our classrooms to be more lifelike, more genuine, more authentic. Therefore, in order to lead our young writers to a place where they genuinely have something to say, we must acknowledge that before the word must come the experience. If we focus on using the students’ own lives and interests as the foundation of our workshops, we can lead all learners to find their own voice as writers.

How best to say it

Once our students are clear about what it is they have to say, our role then turns to leading them to explore how best to say it. Whilst the traditional structures of the writing workshop are foundational to success, as education researcher Michael Fullan (2010) notes, “The solution is *not* a program: it is a small set of common principles and practices relentlessly pursued. Focused practitioners, not programs, drive success” (p. 59).

As teachers of writing, to bring the workshop alive we have a pivotal role to play. We must seek to embrace the complexity of its execution and commit to the idea that “none can predetermine the best teaching decision. It is an exhilarating and challenging vision of our professional work. We never arrive, never know for sure. We are observers and improvisers, always” (Newkirk, 2013, p. 203). Ultimately, our aim must be to lead our young writers to realise that writing is in fact life work and not desk work. It is not a small thing we do when we mark the page, but a big thing we do with our whole lives.

Recount vs memoir

Loane advises (2010b) that, at the outset when working with children, the teacher of writing seeks to draw on students' own personal experience and, most importantly, their responses to it.

A sensitive teacher will know that Monday's writing will not necessarily spring out of 'What I did at the weekend'... Instead, we must look for the significance within the experience—the personal response to it—not a bland recalling of events past. (p. 10)

For this reason, it is helpful to begin by exploring the fundamental differences between traditional recount writing and memoir or vignettes, where a vivid experience is recalled with precision, sincerity and personal voice.

When helping learners find what it is they have to say, student voice and choice should be at the centre of the decisions driving our workshops. However, for the same reasons free writing is inherently flawed, inviting free choice without purpose or direction is also counterproductive. In contrast, memoir writing invites us to lead our students to find significance in their experiences—to identify what it is that moves us.

Through sharing parts of our lives as teachers, we develop trust and sincerity, whilst also modelling how to find significance in our experiences and how these stories can make the journey from the head to the page. It is about students being deliberate in their choices in order to foster sincerity in their responses.

By teaching the essence of memoirs, we will move students from their thin narrative attempts, or dreary personal recounts, such as in 'The sweat is pouring down my face' to exploring a remembered moment—realising why it is remembered, and capturing the significance within. (Loane, 2010b, p. 102)

Young writers need to understand that they don't need to have visited Disneyland or conquered Mount Everest to write well. Rather, there is real significance in their own everyday experiences. "Memories ... are triggered by any number of things: things that have touched us, things that others have said, sights seen, feelings experienced, stories read, and so on" (Loane, 2010b, p. 103).

In this way, the journey from the head to the page becomes so much more than the act of simply getting the details down; it is instead an opportunity to make *meaning* of our lives and to realise that writing is an important and deeply satisfying life skill. Words give us a sense of purpose, place and meaning. As Calkins (1994) argues:

The richness in writing comes from a struggle to put something big and vital into print, but it also comes from lingering with a bit of life and layering it with meaning. Writing is not a process of recording details but one of making significance of them. Holding moments of our lives still in our hands, and as thinkers, make sense of them. (pp. 4–5)

The writing samples shared below are taken from the same student's draft writing book. The first is a recount prompted by the task to write "What I did at the weekend", set by a teacher new to the school and unfamiliar with the workshop approach. This second sample is a memoir extract produced after a single workshop conducted as described above.

Table 2: Writing Sample

Before: Recount	After: Memoir
In the holidays I went to the snow. There was not a lot of snow on Mount Ruapehu but we still went up Rocky Garden and Happy Valley. I went straight up Rocky Garden, don't worry, I'm a pro. Then after every day when our shins were burning, we would go home to a store house (with a pool table we mostly played with) was perfect for hide and seek so we also played that in our spare time.	Birds chat in the morning, sitting in the sun as if it were a bath. The sweet smell of bacon and eggs leads you out of bed. Waves collapse with salty sand as boogie boarders are tossed in the breakers. Tiny waves play a game with you like they are boiling lava as you bob forwards and backwards. The chill of the white cold sunscreen leaves a trail of goose bumps on your skin. You run into the waves, like they were portals to a different dimension. Fishing is a favourite at Ohope; snapper, kahawai, king fish, you name it. Sadly, you have to leave, but you always have next holidays to look forward to.

When exploring new concepts in writing, wobbly steps often precede steady ones. Sometimes, as in this case, one lesson can be all it takes.

Where to next? Writing across the curriculum

Sadly, over the years, opportunities for writing across the curriculum have borne witness to a reduction in focus to a limited range of inauthentic classroom “genres” without true audience or purpose.

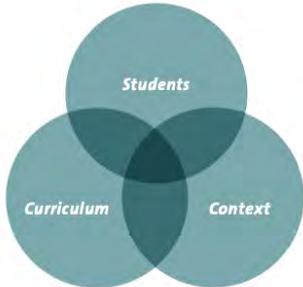
This can be at the expense of helping our students see the real purpose for writing, and can result in teachers and students getting bored with the prescribed structure and features of a particular genre being ‘taught’ for weeks on end. (Loane, 2010b, p. 209)

In our own practice, we wanted students’ writing to be an expression of a sincere response to experience—to transpose the same thinking regarding personal narrative, so that writing for different purposes could also be driven by authentic experience as outlined in *Teaching Writing across the Curriculum in Years 4–6* (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Three aspects of planning

There are three aspects of planning to consider:

- the big ideas that underpin the New Zealand Curriculum and the big ideas contained in the specific learning area of your focus
- the relevance of the topics and contexts for your students
- the learning strengths and needs of your students.



These three aspects (curriculum, context, and the students’ learning strengths and needs) are integral and reciprocal. They naturally overlap, and so learning tasks and activities address each aspect. It is the point where the planning starts that may vary (MOE, 2012, p. 3).

Figure 2: Three aspects of planning.

With this in mind, I wanted to develop workshops that placed children’s natural curiosity at the heart, so that they were encouraged to explore who they were and the world around them. I wanted to then honour these authentic reasons to write by planning workshops in response to student need, context and curriculum as opposed to “coverage” and pre-determined lists of genres.

The example below describes a journey to explore planning as driven by a shared experience of a particular “place”. I was conscious of wanting to facilitate rich experiences with the students before inviting them to write—before the word, the experience.

Acers

Together, a class of Year 1 students and their teacher had been exploring autumnal changes in the school grounds, specifically transitions of leaves from green into flaming orange, buttery yellow and earthy browns. The teacher had done a wonderful job leading her students to notice the changing seasons in a way that had given them real, authentic knowledge. Yet at the heart of their playground was a cluster of gorgeous acers, a firework display of monochromatic crimson, and seemingly untouched by the patchwork of kaleidoscopic changes affecting surrounding trees. The acers had been hitherto ignored by all who played close by. I saw it as a genuine “itch to scratch”, keen to explore the “why”, to give the children the lens with which to “notice”, so that they could discover for themselves, with awe and wonder, what was right in front of their noses.

I knew that to enable the students to “do a good job”, I would need to teach the skills to write an explanation and to draw a scientific diagram, but not yet; this would come much later, after the experience.

I was excited to research the phenomenon myself. I discovered that in autumn the leaves change colour as trees recycle the nutrients. Whilst the leaf is collecting the nutrients back in, the chlorophyll is still absorbing the sun’s energy, but with no photosynthesis happening, they end up passing the unused energy along to the leaf which damages it. I discovered that the red pigmentation (anthocyanin) is used by the leaves as a type of sunscreen to protect their cells during their recycling phase.



Figure 3: Children role-playing the process

I wanted to lead the children to reach this quite complex, scientific understanding by letting them experience the phenomenon through guided discovery. In this case, to role play, so that they could build a body of knowledge through experience to elevate the concept beyond knowledge to genuine understanding.

We used hoops to represent the stomata, green balloons for the chlorophyll and little red riding hood style capes to represent the red pigmentation. Together, we breathed life into the usually hidden cellular and seasonal battles waged within the leaves. On our walk back to class the children were given a challenge: “Let’s see if we can find some of these special red leaf recyclers!”

It was a gloriously autumnal May day and there were many leafy treasures to admire in the school grounds. The atmosphere was one of anticipation and adventure as we embarked on our exploration with the fresh eyes of scientists. Waves of excitement rippled through the class as the children began to notice the stunning acers in their very own playground, which had been there all along! “I never knew this was here!” one child shouted, visibly in awe.



Figure 4: Children collecting acer leaves



The children ran to be in the tree, to climb, to explore and to collect their own leafy specimens. All the while, we collected their noticings and wonderings to drive our ongoing inquiry. Back in the classroom, we invited the children to observe their leaves closely and we talked a lot. How many spikes do you have on your leaf? Do you have the same? Is it the same for everyone? Is all of your leaf red? Mine has crunchy brown bits. Mine are on the edges, are yours? We shared our collective knowledge and understanding and, together, using a variety of deliberate acts of teaching (DATs), co-constructed our body of knowledge as to why our gorgeous acers were such a vibrant red.

To begin the journey from the head to the page, we then invited the children to organise their thinking by sitting on the author’s chair and sharing their responses. The “helping circle” were keen to question to clarify their thinking, to contribute to, and to agree or disagree with the ideas presented.

Figure 5: Tara noticing and drawing her acer leaf

At the point where all children had something to say, we explored how other authors had drawn diagrams to explain scientific phenomena. Using a model text, we explored how an author had “done a good job” by saying what they noticed and why they think it happened.

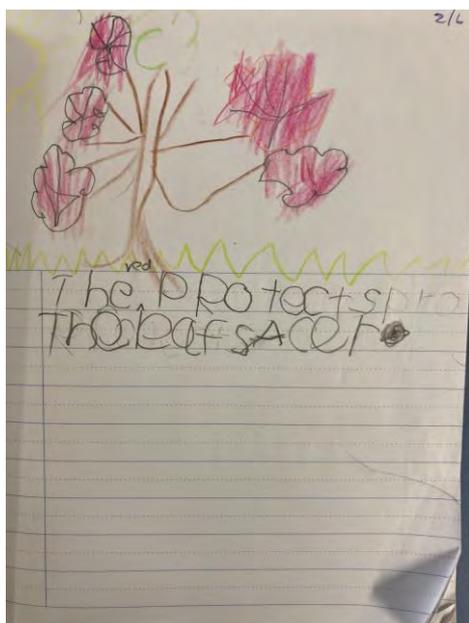


Figure 6: The (red) protects the acer.

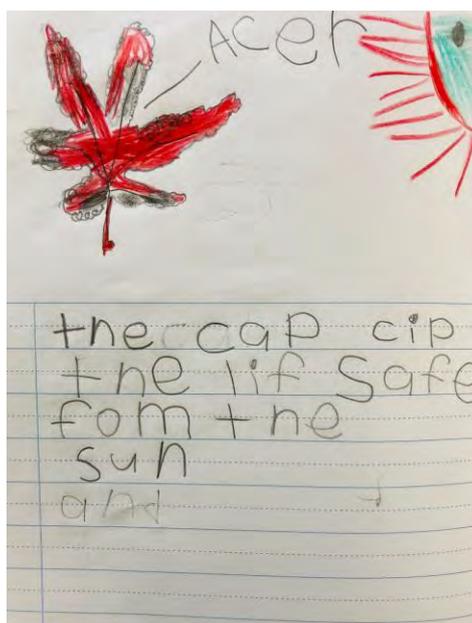


Figure 7: The (red) cape keeps the leaf safe from the sun.

By leading children to experience a scientific phenomenon by bringing it to life, we helped them build a body of understanding. The experience was deepened by the balance of teacher-directed and student-driven exploration to invite a spiral of inquiry. We reached a point where children were genuinely moved to express their experience. What we did to lead children to observe and notice with greater depth was crucial to realising a quality outcome. It was our belief that, as teachers of writing, we had a responsibility to “lead the children to become closely observant in their environment, becoming more aware of their own existence, helping them to look and see things that they might not have seen before, thus raising their levels of sensitivity and response” (Loane, 2010b, p.12).

Observation at the outset

Such is the importance of observation to give depth and meaning to our children’s experiences, that many authors have written in detail on the subject. I believe it to be fundamental to our role as teachers.

In his book *The school as a home for the mind*, Art Costa (2008) proposes that

it may be that from within the aesthetic realm the skills of observing, investigating, and questioning germinate ... Aesthetics may be the key to sustaining motivation, interest, and enthusiasm in young children; since they must become aware of their environment before they can explain it, use it wisely, and adjust to it. With the addition of aesthetics, cognition shifts from a mere passive comprehension to a tenacious quest. (pp. 27–28)

However, again, simply releasing our students into the outdoors, without guidance and clear expectations can lead to a superficial experience; in the worst of cases, children strip mine the setting. What form then should this support take to find an appropriate balance?

Clarkson (1991) refers to one valid starting point in leading quality inquiry in the classroom.

Rather than motivate, is to *observe*. This requires children to be taught and persuaded to look closely, notice things and ask their own good questions about the things they notice. These questions will form the most valid opening to a child-centred path of learning (p. 3)

Similarly, Melsner (1964), when describing New Zealand educator Elwyn Richardson’s work at Oruaiti School in Northland in the 1950s and 1960s in the foreword of *In the early world*, declared that “the primary demand on the child was that he should think through to exactly what he observed, felt, or believed ... a great deal of careful training went into eliminating the merely stock response and the expected answer” (Richardson, 1964, p. vi).

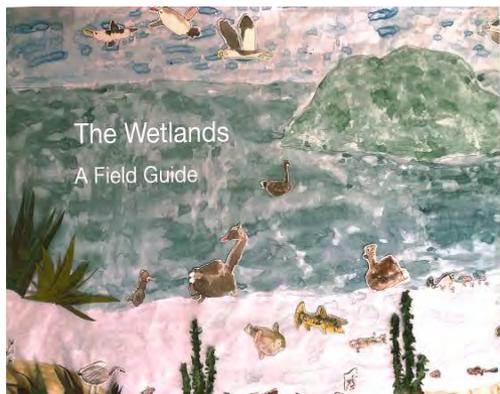
When tracing his beliefs back to their origins, Richardson recalls that it was Wal, a farm hand, who was a pivotal presence in his childhood, and it was Wal’s way of “learning to look” which later shaped his way of “being” as a teacher.

Wal never said or did too much—he felt when to say something and when not to ... he taught me to look, feel, see change, respect, love, be astonished, respectful of nature ... He took me out to learn to look, as I did at Oruaiti with the tamariki [children]. (As quoted in MacDonald, 2016, p. 21).

So, too, we see Lizzie, a teacher at Tiaki ECE in Rotorua locate the development of the skills of observation as the genesis of quality response.

The wetlands: A field guide

For Christmas, 2020, the parents of the children at Tiaki ECE in Rotorua were presented with an extraordinary gift by the teachers and children. It was a book entitled *The wetlands: A field guide* (Tiaki, 2020), and was an expression of the children’s impressions of their experiences at the local wetland, which they visited weekly. The children had played, undertaken conservation work and in turn had made a deep connection with the area. The resulting book was utterly exquisite.



Such was the quality of the entries and watercolour illustrations, not only did the field guide serve as a genuine book for the identification of animals, birds, flowers, in their natural environment, it revealed much more. It described, for instance, what kind of habitat each species preferred. Special quirks of behaviour and even migratory patterns were mentioned.

Figure 8: The wetlands: A field guide.

Kakahi (Freshwater mussel)

Hyridella menziesi

The kakahi are mussels. Kakahi live in the sand at the bottom of the lake. They suck up water until they find the yummy bots in it, then they spit out the water and keep the yummy bits in his mouth. It’s called filter feeders. Well the glochidium is a little larva. It’s the baby kakahi. The kakahi blows the glochidium out its hole and the glochidium find a koaro fish and hang on until they grow bigger and grow a shell and then they let go and sink to live in the sand. (Archie).



Figure 9: Archie’s drawing of kakahi.

When talking about their journey together to create the field guide, their teacher Lizzie asserted that the message was clear—that it took time. The children learned through observing, through conversation, through drawing and, most importantly, over time and lots of it. Lizzie shared her belief that “the most valuable teaching/learning (for me they’re often the same thing) comes from a way of being, not a way of doing. It comes with shared experiences, observations and conversations”.

When talking about her learners, she referred to Archie. “Neither Archie nor I knew much about the kakahi to begin with, but we were both curious and learned together. We observed them every week in their natural environment. Archie’s enthusiasm was infectious, which meant his friends and family learnt from him.”

Matuku moana (White faced heron)

Ardea novaehollandiae

The white-faced heron likes the stream because that’s where the fish hangout and that’s his food. He lunges down and grabs it in his beak. I’ve seen him do it. He’s only at the wetlands in summer, maybe he goes to the tropical in the winter. (Willow).



Figure 10: Willow’s drawing of matuku moana.

Lizzie noted that another learner, Willow,

has always had an affinity with the matuku moana; she watched it for over a year. She knew its behaviour intimately. She realised that it would wait at the mouth of the stream if the children were splashing about in it because they would disturb the small fish who would then flee to the lake and provide a feast. She knew enough to be able to put forward her own theory about why it wasn’t at the wetlands in the winter.

The warmth and detail of the anecdotes Lizzie recalled show the deep connections she fostered with the children. She was both interested and interesting, a sentiment echoed by Holt (2009) when he shared his belief that “it’s a most serious mistake to think that learning is an activity separate from the rest of life, that people do it best when they are not doing anything else and best of all in places where nothing else is done” (p. 278). I saw that the children at Taiki learned because Lizzie not only knew and valued their individual interests, she used them to guide their inquiries as they explored the wetlands together as part of their day. Their exploration was an itch to be scratched, not a “task” to be completed.

Conclusion

Whilst the workshop is without doubt an invaluable map to our journey in leading young writers to authorship, it is only part of the story. The journey starts with a connection to the internal and external lives of our students and a commitment to the adoption of workshop structures, but most importantly is driven by the role, qualities and beliefs of the teacher.

It is about being present and responding, in real time, with evidence-based, proven teaching tools at our fingertips to facilitate quality written expression from all of our young writers. It is not easy and, as Newkirk and Kittle note (2013), “It is a challenging pedagogy, placing demands on teachers for organisation, observation, reflection, and change—we never fully arrive at anything final, definitive, certain” (p. 14).

Central to its success is an understanding by the practitioner that this quest is less about the destination and is instead more about the journey. It is, as with many aspects of life, about striking a balance and

comparable to riding a bike, where, in Albert Einstein’s words, “To keep your balance you must keep moving”.¹ We also need to remember that when shaping our practice today, we are not inventing the wheel; the enduring principles of best practice have been around for the past 50 years. It is a timely reminder of what is possible, in an era when teachers feel increasingly constrained by forces beyond their control.

Therefore, in order to be confident in making sound pedagogical decisions today, we might heed Fraser’s (2015) words:

We need to know about the finer aspects of our past—the people, policies and philosophies that have shaped us and continue to shape us—in order to reveal the rich soil from which our best ideas and practices came. If not, we risk a mediocre deference to—or worse, a seduction by—whatever latest trend is marketed the hardest by those who decide what counts as fashionable, regardless of its longevity and worth. (p. xii)

In this way we can all truly invite freedom of expression and genuine creativity into our classrooms. This means developing our students’ ability to express themselves through open inquiry, as an act of perpetual renewal and learning, for both students and teachers—with the child fully at the heart of the matter.

The importance of adopting these structures and behaviours in our classrooms here in Aotearoa has never been more urgent or more crucial. Leading young writers to value and to express their cultural capital, confident they have the words, and so honour their own stories, beliefs and ideas, is a responsibility we all shoulder as practitioners, as a service to our future communities.

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ⁱ See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/06/28/bicycle/> for a comment on this quotation.