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Teaching & Analysing Writing Progress

Written language areas of learning are always popular discussion topics at interviews and over the years teachers have explored many ideas to improve written knowledge and skills. The issues relating to the value placed on technical skills, correctness of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, creativity and of course the “impact the writing has on the reader” have been well aired and debated. Teachers talk about *transactional writing* (explanation and argument), *poetic writing* (personal experiences and character). You will hear them talking about *surface* and *deep features*, *context* and *process*.

There are a number of approaches used in schools to promote good writing qualities. Language experiences are often used to share and talk about real experiences before going on to write about them. Shared writing involves the teacher working with the children to plan and construct text together.

The teacher may model the use of a ‘mind map’ or ‘web’ to show how the writer develops ideas and sorts them for writing. This approach helps the children learn about how the text can be organised. It also exposes them to new and rich language adding to their range of vocabulary options that they can use to improve the quality of their work. At other times teachers model quality writing by helping the children scribe a common text, or by guiding the children through focused tasks. This is most often used in small group instructional lessons.

It’s all good fun and as it has always been, good writers have common writing attributes. They are usually good storytellers, read a lot, love to write, demonstrate imagination and are comfortable about taking risks with the pen. They are fortunate enough to have a good knowledge of writing conventions and enjoy expressing their thoughts in a variety of forms. Such qualities can be recognised in their writing samples that also reflect the importance of title selection, a good beginning to capture the reader’s interest, paragraphing to highlight sequence of thought, and a closing message that will leave the reader something to think about.

Our teachers have a set of national exemplars that they refer to when analysing writing qualities. The reference points of the national exemplars allow teachers to moderate children’s writing within standardised levels. English levels and corresponding year levels are classified as follows:

Level 1i	=	Year 1
Level 1ii	=	Year 2
Level 1iii	=	Year 3
Level 2	=	Years 4 and 5
Level 3	=	Years 6 and 7
Level 4	=	Years 8 and 9

The Poetic Writing Progress Indicators are divided into two different sections, surface and deeper features. The Surface Features consist of the following aspects:

Spelling – the writer’s ability to use letters to represent sounds according to accepted spelling conventions,

Punctuation – the writer’s ability to punctuate written material correctly,

Grammar – the ability to write grammatically correct sentences, and

Layout – the ability to write from left to right and to leave spaces between words.

Each of these features is relatively easy to assess.

The other section of the Progress Indicators is entitled Deeper Features, which are listed as follows:

Impact – the effect the writing has on an audience,

Voice - the writer's ability to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas in an individual manner,

Ideas – the content of the writer's material,

Structure – the writer's ability to organise their thoughts, feelings and ideas in a logical sequence,

Sentences – the writer's ability to use a variety of sentence structures to create effects,

Vocabulary – the writer's choice of words to suit the audience and purpose of the writing, and

Language Features – the writer's ability to use language features (e.g. simile, onomatopoeia etc) as appropriate to the nature of the writing.

These deeper features investigate how the child is using language as a writer to express his or her thoughts, feelings and ideas. These aspects are much more difficult to assess with some of them demanding a personal response from the reader to the writer's thoughts.

Check your child's writing out – I am sure that you will be pleased with the knowledge and skills they have. They love to share and talk about what they have written. Helping take the next step by reshaping ideas, changing a few words to add value to the storyline and observing how the sentences are structured will assist what we do at school. Teachers are very happy to share with you the national exemplars they use to measure progress gains.

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