



# TEACHERS AS WRITERS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teachers as Writers is a two-year research project offering teachers sustained opportunities to write and build co-mentoring relationships with professional writers in order to improve student outcomes. The project set out to determine the impact of professional writers' engagement with teachers, both in changing teachers' classroom practices in the teaching of writing, and in improving student outcomes in writing.

# INTRODUCTION



**Many primary teachers qualify to teach English or literacy through a generalist route, whilst secondary colleagues often qualify through an English literature degree which gives primacy to reading and being a reader. As a consequence, many practitioners are less than assured in their teaching of writing and have less personal experience to draw on.**

Arvon, the national creative writing charity, runs an annual creative writing residential for teachers. It offers them an experience of being a writer within a community of writers. The Teachers as Writers (TAW) research project, funded by a research grant from Arts Council England (ACE), investigated the impact of this residential experience and of a follow-on co-mentoring opportunity to work with a professional writer in school, on teachers' identities as writers. The project also explored how the teachers drew on the Arvon experience in their own classrooms, how they worked alongside professional writers as co-mentors and the consequences of these experiences.

**“ The way we’re learning how to do it here is write quickly in detail and then from that get your idea, get your planning, go back, edit it, make it into a story. Whereas like the way we teach children is - plan it, then write it, then add detail. So it’s almost turning it on its head—Teacher**

At the heart of the project was the concept of co-mentoring, where professional writers and teachers work together both for their own mutual benefit (as writers and pedagogues), and in order to support the development of student writers. Teachers and professional writers were engaged together, both as writers during the Arvon teacher-writer residential, and in co-mentoring dialogues in which professional writers shared their expertise in writing and teachers shared their knowledge of pedagogy. In the related Continuing Professional Development sessions, teachers and writers engaged in further co-mentoring, with the teachers helping the professional writers understand the particular context of working in their school, and their students' needs. The writers shared their expert insights into the writing process. Together they reflected on their co-teaching and how that had impacted on student learning about writing.

**“ I used to ramble quite a lot. And now I think about every single sentence I write, like it has to be part of the story...so I'll write a draft, and then I'll think what I don't need...it may work but if it's not relevant to the actual story, it doesn't need to be in there—Year 9**

The co-mentoring built on previous ACE research which argued that in order to 'be effective in helping young people develop their skills, writers need to articulate aspects of the writing process and the working lives of writers' (Horner, 2010:34). Writers need support in making their implicit knowledge, understanding and skills explicit, as recent research evidence also endorses (Cremin, Myhill, Lillis and Eyres, 2015). The TAW project, through establishing a co-mentoring frame, positioned writers as learning partners in collaboration with teachers, and afforded rich opportunities for them to recognise, articulate and share their expertise as writers.

# PROJECT AIMS

There is a strong belief in the value of professional writer visits to schools and of teacher residentials and the opportunities these give teachers to develop their own identities and skills as writers. Yet to date, research into the value of writers' engagement in education and impact on student outcomes has been undertaken on a small scale with mainly qualitative data and a recent review reveals the evidence in this area is not strong (Cremin and Oliver, 2015). The TAW project set out to determine the impact of writers' engagement with teachers in changing teachers' classroom practices in teaching writing and in improving student outcomes in writing.

## Project Methodology

The study used mixed research methods, combining a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) with a complementary qualitative data set. 32 teachers of Key Stage 2 and 3 classes from schools in areas of disadvantage across the South-West of England were involved.

**“ Put in some of your real life, and then whack in a load of your imagination and building it all up and putting it all together—Year 3**

## The Intervention

The intervention involved teachers attending an Arvon Teachers as Writers residential in April 2016, developing their own experience of being writers. They then worked in a co-mentoring relationship with a professional writer, planning, teaching, and reflecting together on one unit of work, taught in the summer of 2016. The comparison group was a 'business-as-usual' group, undertaking their normal teaching.

*I walk through early morning streets,  
I'm up before they can worry me,  
make my way down Sleepmarket Hill  
past the early morning taxi queue.  
—Teacher (poem extract)*

## Data collection and analysis

In order to determine students' gains in writing outcomes, pre- and post-intervention writing samples were gathered. The statistical analysis of the RCT used descriptive and inferential statistics and multilevel modelling to explore impact on students' written outcomes.

A significant body of qualitative data was collected to complement the quantitative data. This included: field notes; audio capture of Arvon tutorials; teacher audio diaries; interviews with professional writers, teachers and student focus groups before and after the intervention; lesson observations; and teacher and writer audio reflections. The data were analysed thematically.

**“ And what struck me was that art teachers are passing on a craft, they're passing on what they can already do, they can draw and paint. Whereas English teachers, especially in those days, were trained in the art of criticism rather than in writing—Writer**





# DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



## FLEXIBLE FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

**Focused yet relaxed engagement:** Arvon's supportive ethos facilitated focused yet relaxed engagement and afforded agency to the teachers to participate in ways which suited them. The co-mentoring relationships were also predominantly characterised by ease, mutual respect, some spontaneity and informality in team teaching.

“ *I think it's really important, it's not on the curriculum but this power to understand the imagination or explore the imagination and be creative, actually that in itself should be considered an objective of a lesson—Teacher*

**Engagement as writers:** The teachers were positioned as writers at Arvon. Some expressed initial concerns, but with support, teachers' authorial voices were heard and their agency upheld. During co-mentoring some, though not all, teachers wrote alongside students, perceiving this enabled them to teach from a writerly perspective. As writers, the Arvon tutors and the co-mentors shared the craft of writing, modelled the process and talked about their experience of being a writer.

**Engagement as teachers:** Engaged as educators, Arvon tutors adopted positions as interested readers, advisers, editors and facilitators of the teachers' writing. Teachers often adopted roles as pedagogues: noting texts and activities for school use and discussing possible pedagogical consequences. During co-mentoring, teachers strongly retained their educational role, which some perceived prevented them from adopting a writer role. Professional writers who had been teachers themselves also occasionally adopted pedagogic roles.

**Personal engagement:** Arvon tutors openly acknowledged their challenges as writers and the value of drawing on life experience. Teachers tended to write from the heart, exploring their memories and identities. However, the personal dimension of being a writer and reasons for writing were not foregrounded. Some co-mentors encouraged students to connect to their lives, few focused on reasons for writing.

**Engagement in a community of writers:** The residential created a community of writers - writing, life and published texts were shared and tutors implicitly apprenticed teachers to the writing community beyond Arvon. During co-mentoring, students were positioned as writers and the professional writers' presence helped some make connections to a wider writing community. Although no overt focus on developing community was documented, many co-mentor pairs prompted communal sharing of writing.

“ *When we encouraged them to really totally switch off their inner editor and just write - they were producing work that was really extraordinarily fresh and powerful because they lost all kind of inhibitions and self-consciousness—Writer*

**New learning through role engagement:** Teachers reported they developed new insights about writing and being a writer which they drew upon in school, including: understanding about freewriting, ownership, the social and emotional demands of being a writer, the iterative nature of writing, and to a lesser extent revision. The professional writers reported developing increased awareness of: students as writers, differentiation, the National Curriculum, schemes of work, and the pressures of time and assessment.

## IMPACT ON TEACHER PEDAGOGY

**Changed pedagogic practices:** The impact of writers' engagement with teachers on their pedagogic practices was particularly evident in the teachers' changed practices in relation to freewriting (entitled 'Just Write' by teachers), creating time and space for writing, the sharing of written work, and in how they handled the writing process.

“ *I think she's helping us more by not helping us as much—Year 9*

**The Arvon ethos:** The ethos of Arvon was widely embraced and the pedagogic practices which reflected this most clearly were the most strongly translated into classroom practice. Some of the students noticed the more collaborative and relaxed classrooms, which they perceived gave them more autonomy and choice as writers.

**Explicit teaching:** Analysis of the Arvon workshops and tutorials indicates that the professional writers provided quite a significant amount of direct input about writing, such as about story grammars, or about the importance of 'show not tell', or the significance of verb and noun choices over adverbs and adjectives. Surprisingly however, there were no references in the research team's observations to explicit teaching of writing, other than in the revision episodes.

**Feedback on writing:** In contrast to the Arvon experience, there was little evidence of feedback in classrooms, other than some peer feedback, and during co-mentoring, revision was frequently led by the professional writers. This may indicate a residual lack of teacher confidence in critiquing writing or providing feedback which is not aligned to predetermined curriculum criteria.

*In the corner on her childhood shelves,  
Discarded pebbles, a mermaid's penny,  
One-eyed Ted and a cracked Russian doll,  
A miniature golden castle encased in glass.*  
—Teacher (poem extract)

## WRITER AND TEACHER IDENTITIES

**Strong professional writer identities:** The writers' identities are highly individualised and diverse, developed in different ways over different timescales. Some writers have multiple writer identities - a public writer identity, aware of publishers, editors, and readers; and a private writer identity, where the writer has more control and freedom about what and how they write.

**Secure teacher identities:** The teachers consistently demonstrated secure teacher identities both in the classroom and at Arvon. Despite wide experience, demonstrable proficiency and aspirations in respect of writing, before participating in the project few of the teachers confidently held a writer identity.

**Shifting teachers' identities as writers:** The Arvon residential made a substantial difference to the teachers' writer identities; after it, almost all were comfortable with describing themselves as writers. Evidence gathered in the term after the end of the project found that these writer identities had been sustained and in some cases strengthened, due in part to the experience of enacting them in the classroom.

**Positioning students as writers:** Most teachers developed more awareness of their students as writers, and began to acknowledge identity work in writing and the role of autonomy, agency and choice in their participation and learning. However, aligning such recognition with prescribed curriculum requirements is challenging.



## IMPACT OF THE WORK ON STUDENTS

**Effect of the intervention:** The statistical results of the randomised controlled tests show that the control group achieved higher writing scores than the intervention group. As with all statistical results, it is important to interpret these with caution, particularly taking account of broader findings in the qualitative data.

“ *Children at school, who are they writing for? Are they writing for themselves to develop their self-expression, or are they writing in order to get a really good grade, are they writing for a reaction from someone else?*  
—Teacher

**Positive responses:** The qualitative interview evidence suggests that the majority of focus group (FG) students felt the project had had a positive impact on their motivation, confidence and writing skills. Some key outcomes appear across many or all student groups: enhanced enjoyment and engagement; an increased sense of ownership; greater awareness of aspects of the writing process; and perceived progress in writing skill. A minority of students identified project activities which they had not enjoyed or found helpful, but nevertheless described positive benefits overall.

**Motivation and enjoyment:** FG students identified changes to teaching and learning, which they perceived as liberating and ‘fun’. They welcomed the introduction of personal notebooks for writing which were not assessed; more opportunities to share and discuss ideas; freewriting activities; and greater choice over topic and form. They attached particular significance to creative freedom, associating gains in enjoyment with less prescriptive writing tasks and more flexible drafting strategies. Some claimed their attitude to writing was more positive as a result or that behaviour and effort generally had improved.

*Scanning the terrain I could see what might be a cave. Could it be the lair of the evil Grendel? What had happened to the egg he’d stolen? Had it hatched? Most importantly what did he want with it?—Year 5 (story extract)*

**Confidence:** Many FG students claimed their confidence had improved. Almost all were pleased with their writing, although the percentage who described themselves as ‘good’ writers was little changed. They attributed confidence gains to more interactive and collaborative approaches to text development and improvement, whereby ideas and writing were shared and discussed at formative stages. They also identified approaches which helped strengthen their sense of ownership and self-assurance, including teachers who shared their own writing and writing insecurities; encouragement and advice of professional writers; writing tasks which drew on personal experience; and more time to reflect on writing, consult and receive feedback.

“ *I liked the part where we just kept writing and didn’t stop, because it really let my ideas flow—Year 8*

**Perceived progress in skill and understanding:** Almost all FG students felt they had improved in skill and understanding over the project and there was a marked increase in the number of references to aspects of personal progress. In particular, students cited improvements in fluency and quality of ideas; descriptive writing; vocabulary range; and understanding of success criteria. They were also better able to articulate the processes involved in constructing text, including initial idea generation, the building of drafts over time, and the purpose of editing. Some students claimed to revise their writing more extensively and in more depth than they had done previously, although spelling, punctuation and grammar remained the predominant concern of many.

## THE ENGAGEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

**The struggle of writing:** Writers' accounts of their own writing experiences record clearly and tangibly the struggle of writing - the difficulty of creating texts and the pain of being judged by others. They accept this as part of being a writer, an inevitable element of the process. However, in school they tend to focus on the overtly pleasurable and rewarding aspects of writing with little attention paid to supporting children's understanding that 'difficulties' are normal, not a reflection of inadequacy.

“*...we do far more talking about ourselves as writers and how it feels. And I think that [it helps] the children understanding that it isn't all easy; writing is quite hard—Teacher*

**The writing process:** Writers articulate clearly their understanding of the writing process as messy and recursive, and describe diverse ways of managing it. There are multiple examples of freewriting to liberate ideas and freewriting of first drafts; and evidence of evaluation and revision occurring throughout, including during composition. This contrasts to children's experiences of the writing process in school which is frequently routinised as a linear, chronological process of plan, draft, revise and edit. There may be lessons for how the process of writing is managed pedagogically.

**Craft knowledge:** One of the more creative paradoxes of the project was the struggle experienced by writers when asked to define their craft knowledge about writing. This is in contrast to the abundant craft knowledge that they displayed when they spoke about other aspects of their writing life and process. In considering their roles as writers in schools, there was a strong theme of the writer seeing themselves as a model for children, sharing their own 'writer self'. If writers were more consciously aware of their own expertise, might they be better able to share it with children?

**Writers in schools:** the co-mentoring work highlights the need for teachers and writers to negotiate their respective classroom roles more carefully in order to maximise benefits. Significantly, the experience of co-mentoring triggered sharp reflections on previous school interactions, with substantial evidence of writers changing views about how best to be a writer in school. No longer were writers content to fulfil previously adopted roles which saw them 'parachuting in' or 'doing a show'. Rather, they found themselves more interested in being 'direct' with students about the 'grittier' aspects of drafting. This included utilising their knowledge of receiving and giving feedback, which writers saw as having been central to their own development and growth.

“*I'm also taking back what it feels like to be a writer I think and how hard that can be and what you can do if you're stuck. And also just that it doesn't have to be perfect, you know. It's the enjoyment of it and the enjoyment of creating it... we're going to have to build that culture of actually we're writers in here. We're not doing writing or having writing done to us—Teacher*





# IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The TAW project suggests that teachers' engagement with professional writers is a valuable way to enhance student achievement in writing. With strengthened writer identities, teachers made pedagogic changes which in turn impacted upon students' reported motivation, confidence, sense of ownership and skills as writers. The statistical data did not however reveal enhanced attainment. The professional writers also benefitted from working in co-mentoring relationships which challenged their established ways of working in schools.

**“ I just think because the writers came in I know how to maybe write better...instead of just putting like one idea and just sticking with it, you can put multiple ideas and then choose whatever one you want, and edit it—Year 8**

**In terms of teaching, learning and research it is therefore recommended that:**

- Follow-up research examines the causal pathway from teacher-writer engagement to impact on student attainment more closely, paying attention to practice implications;
- The implicit craft knowledge of professional writers is made explicit as a framework to develop teachers' subject knowledge and support their teaching;

- Teachers re-examine the writing process and professional writers' descriptions of this, considering whether their handling of this constrains students' writing experiences;
- Teachers offer time and space for freewriting, integrating 'Just Write' sessions and sharing into the writing process;
- Teachers write alongside students, acting as role models, sharing struggles and reflecting upon the differences this role position affords;
- Teachers pay increased attention to students' writer identities and to fostering their autonomy and agency as writers;
- Teachers make richer use of feedback and peer-editing to support revision;
- Teachers explore the personal dimension of writing, alongside the social and emotional demands involved;
- Teacher-writer engagements foreground co-mentoring in order to maximise the educational potential of professional writers' work;
- Teacher-writer engagements encompass more of the writing process, attending to editing and revision as well as generating writing;
- Teacher-writer engagements include close attention to pedagogical follow-through and sustained professional support.

**To find out more, and to request a copy of the full TAW Report, email [learning@arvon.org](mailto:learning@arvon.org)  
[www.teachersaswriters.org](http://www.teachersaswriters.org)**

## References

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