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# Teacher produced video tours of classrooms: what matters for their teaching of writing?

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## Abstract
Australian literacy classrooms are shaped by an unprecedented time of national curriculum reform. Australian teachers follow a national English curriculum with the pressures of national standardised assessment, state interpretation (state-based syllabus and support documents) and localised system requirements influencing their pedagogical practices. It is timely to consider how teachers recontextualise these external pressures in their teaching of writing. This paper uses reflexivity theory to investigate the interplay between social, cultural and individual influences on the materiality of writing classrooms. Through our conceptual framing of reflexive materiality, we analyse video tours created by elementary teachers (Grades 3–6) to highlight classroom components pertinent to their writing pedagogy and practices. Our analysis focused on theoretically-based instruction practices, teacher professional knowledge, opportunities for students to write, and the impact of the external context on the materiality of the classroom environment. Findings demonstrate a reflexive relationship between teachers' system-based contexts and the substance of classroom objects, spaces, and teachers' ideas and philosophies regarding writing.

**Keywords** Writing pedagogies · Teaching writing · Reflexivity · Materiality · Video tours · Elementary school

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## Introduction

This paper shares findings from a large-scale, federally funded study of the teaching of writing in Australian primary schools. The project drew on Margaret Archer's (2000) theory of reflexivity as an organising framework for understanding the way teachers' and students' personal, cultural, and structural contexts impact their teaching and learning of writing. This paper reports data from part of the project where teachers in New South Wales, Australia conducted and narrated video tours of their classrooms about the way writing happens in their classroom environments.

Reflexivity is 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (Archer, 2007a, p. 4). Archer uses the term 'internal conversation' interchangeably throughout her works to describe this phenomenon and the way our reflexive capacity allows us to make decisions in our environment (Archer, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). We talk to ourselves about how, why, and what we are, know, do, think, and feel at all times of our waking lives to varying degrees. For Archer, these internal conversational capabilities afford agentic movement within our social worlds because our environments comprise 'objective' elements of experience beyond our control (2007a). Reflexivity is a useful theoretical framework for understanding educational settings because of its attunement to the individual and their context, and the interplay between the internal conversation and the social environment in which they exist. Education is inherently social. It is designed, facilitated, and experienced by humans and thus reflects the complexity of human experience. While sociological approaches to education have been under attack by government and policy in Australia (for example, the rhetoric regarding 'back to basics' curriculum under the former state leadership of Dominic Perrottet), we argue that teaching and learning must be understood as the outcome of complex social relations. In the broader study from which the data in this paper are drawn, we focused on the ways personal, cultural, and structural 'emergent properties' relate to and impact teachers' and learners' approaches to writing. In the context of our study, we understood personal emergent properties [PEPs] to concern the beliefs, knowledge systems, desires, and identity each teacher and/or learner holds in relation to writing. Cultural emergent properties [CEPs] are distinguished by cultural norms and ideologies present within the school and social environment associated with writing, while Structural emergent properties [SEPs] are defined by external systemic qualities like public policies and government mandates (Ryan et al., 2023). While we recognise video tours provided by teachers are not synonymous with private internal conversations, our interest lies in how we may identify the presence of emergent properties and their relation to each teacher's conversation. By focusing on teacher-led and produced video tours, we hope to capture understandings about the ways writing is conceptualised in NSW Grade 3–6 classrooms.

At the time of the inquiry, these teachers, and indeed teachers across Australia, were experiencing considerable upheaval generated by State and Federal education reform. Concern that Australian students were 'falling behind' internationally had generated a perceived need for changes in teaching that could produce evidence

of students' skill mastery, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Changes included National Literacy Progressions (ACARA, 2016) for tracking students' literacy and numeracy development, and state-based initiatives directing funding and professional support towards standardised teaching and assessment, particularly in the early years of school. Subsequently, teachers witnessed increased external demands and expectations on literacy pedagogies, on learners, and in the ways learning is measured. For the teaching of writing, this repositioning of teacher from pedagogue to technician challenges their expertise in content knowledge, pedagogy, and the capacity to identify and respond to the individual needs of learners. In this paper we ask:

- What do teachers believe about teaching writing and the role of teachers and learners?
- What opportunities do students have for writing?
- How do classroom materials reflect the personal, cultural, and structural contexts of literacy teachers today?

## Review of literature: a critique

Examined in this paper is the way teachers understand their writing pedagogies within their classroom contexts in relation to the current landscape of curriculum and policy in New South Wales and Australia more broadly. Literature governing teaching and learning of writing is largely government-produced and relies on the data it generates through mandated standardised high-stakes external examinations. Our critique of research literature aims to show how this approach to 'evidence' is flawed *because* it focuses on narrow outcomes rather than evidence of effective pedagogical approaches, and it lacks contextual understanding of each individual teacher and learning and their contexts. That is to say, the process by which this evidence is produced is not reflexive.

As institutions, schools are complex. They are defined by their place within an education 'system' (e.g., public, private, religious) that contributes to their cultural contexts, while simultaneously mandated by the structure of common state and federal education policies. They operate within their unique socially, culturally, and geographically diverse community settings, but also as part of their broader national and international contexts. And so, schools are simultaneously local and global, as they encompass the diversity of the humans who inhabit them and the complex cultural and structural qualities that govern them. Meanwhile, teachers sit at the centre of the histories, expectations, mandates, and socially driven demands for change (or not). And they must prioritise and respond to tensions generated by these competing interests to develop learning experiences for the learners in their classrooms. Thus, each teacher must make reflexive decisions drawing on their personal knowledge and values, their understanding of their students and their sociocultural backgrounds, the culture of their school, and the structural enablers and constraints that paradoxically come from beyond the boundary of their classrooms yet govern them.

The sociohistorical contexts of education perpetuate long held beliefs about the purposes of school, and indeed, different purposes of schools across systems (Barker, 1992). Schools reflect the beliefs of the day about what it means to learn, and hence, what it means to be a teacher or a learner. There is always pressure for schools to keep up with the times and to graduate citizens who can respond to society's perceived needs. But in contemporary times, the demands for participation in a highly technology driven global community appear to have generated new calls or 'metanarratives' (Greenlaw, 2015) about the responsibility of schools to develop so-called 'twenty-first century skills', although these skills are weakly defined and understood in literacy education (Mirra & Garcia, 2020). Meanwhile, others worry about the past and the need for learners to master 'basics' before they can respond to any new demand. While there are multiple interpretations about precisely what counts as a skill of the twenty-first century (and the basics), some propose they are not new skills at all, just newly important (Greenlaw, 2015; Silva, 2009). Competition between multiple viewpoints plays out in policy through curriculum reviews, syllabus rewrites, support documents, and mandated assessment at national and state levels, often generating an environment of over testing and narrowed versions of 'success' (Comber, 2011). These conflicted approaches manifest as a complexity of tensions for teachers who must recontextualise a multitude of agendas into a pedagogical approach to teaching writing (Comber, 2011; Ryan & Barton, 2020). Demand of current reforms is for 'evidence based' approaches (measured by NAPLAN assessments) that promote singular approaches to 'what works', and by association, what doesn't. As a result, critical questions emerge. Whose evidence counts? And whose doesn't?

Current Australian curriculum reform is a response to increasingly prevalent global attention on 'success' and OECD ranking of countries' educational achievements on standardised assessments, particularly literacy (e.g., PISA; PIRLS). These public comparisons appear to have generated considerable anxiety in political and social spheres about Australian children 'falling behind', the need to 'catch up', to 'compete' (e.g., Carey, 2020; Hare, 2022; NSW Government, 2021). Government response has seen a focus on changes to literacy curricula prioritising the development of '21st Century skills' through 'evidence-based' approaches (NSW Government, 2021). Currently, what counts as 'evidence' in education policy is large-scale quantitative studies such as meta-analyses and randomised control trials that look to regulate teacher pedagogies and render students' literacy learning 'visible'. Cowen (2020) attributes the current popularity of skills-focused homogeneity of practice to its capacity for the rapid development of a 'narrative that can be fed back to administrative and inspection regimes' (p. 90), hence offering reassurance to concerned educational leaders during periods of turmoil.

The uptake of visible and measurable evidence of progress is manifest in recent Australian national and state policy. Nationally, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2016) developed national Literacy and Numeracy Progressions allowing teachers to monitor students' mastery of literacy skills and understandings and help them plan, assess, and track student progress. The NSW Department of Education (DOE) had previously developed a Literacy Learning Continuum (2013) for its teachers to track student learning from the first

years of school and into secondary school. Responding to the Continuum, NSW teachers created data walls (e.g., D'warte, 2018; Singh et al., 2014) where the name of every student across every grade and across eight literacy elements was plotted onto a wall denoting their progress (or lack of) and discussed as part of professional conversations. And so, NSW leadership was well positioned to work alongside the national body (ACARA) in 2016–17 to roll out the national Literacy and Numeracy Progressions. The Literacy Progressions measured student knowledge and skills across speaking and listening, reading, and viewing, and writing. Itemised into 'sub elements', writing development is tracked in creating texts (informative, persuasive, imaginative), grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting and keyboarding (ACARA, 2016, p. 4). The Progressions focused teachers on tracking students' writing development across a set of selected skills, knowledge, and understandings about working with texts, and these are externally assessed by NAPLAN. However, Graham et al. (2015) showed in their meta-analysis that monitoring writing over time (e.g., through test results) had no effect on writing quality. Rather, high quality feedback, and the twenty-first century skills of critical thinking, creative representation, self-monitoring, strategy use and collaborative environments are crucial for writing development (Ryan et al., 2021).

Critical thinking is also required of teachers to understand political stances, loyalties, and preferences played out through government policy and media outlets, often with the effect of generating binaries about a single 'best' way to learn. Popular versions of 'what works' (e.g., Cowen, 2020; Wiliam, 2019), and by association, what doesn't, can undermine teacher autonomy and lead teachers to disregard their own wisdom, experience, and expertise. For writing, the binary also plays out commercially through the generation of programs addressing almost any concept, skill, or understanding (Mantei et al., 2022). Commercial products sit outside mandated curricula and yet, in the Australian context, commercial packages and frameworks have been adopted as curriculum at state and even national level. For learning to write, we see increasing volumes of paraphernalia focused on the surface features of language (Green, 1988) such as the alphabetic principle, spelling, punctuation, handwriting, grammatical structures, literary devices, formulae for writing 'text types', and so on. For teachers of writing, then, the landscape is complex. How do teachers understand and navigate the matches and mismatches between their own pedagogical expertise in writing and external pressures?

To write is to actively create meaning in ways that position an audience to understand a particular stance on the world (Ryan, 2014). It is intentional, individual, and personal (Haas Dyson, 2020). It is artistic, and a reflection of the way children in particular make moral and aesthetic judgements about the world (Weber et al., 2023a). And whilst the accurate use of standardised forms of spelling, punctuation and structure are important for clarity and precision of meaning, more significant to the act of making meaning is the embedded nature of those meanings within the context of the author's beliefs, practices, and relevance to their life (Haas Dyson, 2010). Teaching writing requires a nuanced understanding of the purposes for which we create texts, the audiences with whom we seek to connect, and therefore, the nature of the content required. And so, teaching writing must draw on a complex and sophisticated combination of language content knowledge and pedagogical content

knowledge (Ryan et al., 2021). The myriad of reforms and associated data-initiatives discussed thus far highlight the widespread devaluation of context, nuance, and individuality in Australian classrooms.

## Materiality as a reflexive frame

In this paper, classrooms are understood as material spaces comprising ongoing and everchanging interactions between and among human and non-human resources. The materiality of classroom spaces reflects the real context within which teachers and students learn. The material qualities of classrooms reveal various personal, cultural, and structural emergences experienced by teachers and learners in contemporary classrooms. By conceptualising the material classroom space as a reflection of each teacher's reflexivity we can examine how teacher agency is enabled and constrained in the teaching of writing in their unique contexts. Materiality in our view operates as a mirror of context.

A materiality lens affords an examination of the ways spaces and resources are interpreted and reinterpreted in response to external influences [CEPs and SEPs] and teacher knowledge and beliefs [PEPs] alongside increased teacher accountability [SEP] (Kervin et al., 2019). A theoretical frame of materiality as reflexivity positions classrooms as embodied multidimensional spaces characterised by assemblages of people, materials, and the interactions between and among them all influenced by the contexts from which they emerge (Burnett, 2011; Fenwick & Landri, 2012). These multifaceted interactions produce classrooms that are complex social worlds (Kervin et al., 2019) where some explicitly formed practices are planned, articulated, taken up, or even mandated while others are implicitly held. Implicit or tacit practices that shape 'the way we do things here' are well understood by some insiders (Kervin et al., 2017; Mantei & Kervin, 2018; Stephen, 2010) and often acutely frame the explicitly defined practices of the setting (Fenwick & Landri, 2012). However, implicitly held practices can also be the result of 'expectations' from external pressures including the requirements of governing bodies and the resources that are made available within a system or school community. Roehl (2012) observes that educational research has long focused on the nature of human interactions within classroom spaces while often overlooking the role of non-human resources in defining and impacting those settings. A focus on human and non-human resources and the interactions generated during teaching and learning affords a closer look at the complexity of the classroom, acknowledging these spaces neither as neutral or static, but a constant negotiation (Kervin et al., 2019). Burnett (2011) and Fenwick and Landri's (2012) concept of assemblages assists the reflexive focus of this investigation into the complex and fluid ways classrooms work because of the focus on the texture of classroom experience and the centrality of the individual.

What is available in classroom spaces matter. Resources are not neutral objects awaiting use (Roehl, 2012), nor are they taken for granted (Fenwick & Landri, 2012). They are created by humans and thus reflect human knowledge, beliefs, and concerns. They are part of a reflexive network where human and non-human objects interact within dynamic learning spaces that shape and are shaped by the learning.

In this research, teacher-identified physical resources are the 'things' important for teaching writing—posters and charts, programs, whiteboards, classroom layout, specifically designed spaces, and so on. They simultaneously reflect the personal and cultural knowledge, beliefs and values of the teacher, the school in which they work, and the formal structure of education that governs their school context. Teachers recontextualise their personal beliefs about the teaching of writing alongside mandated syllabus content and outcomes, and the range of expectations external to their classroom, their school, and the system in which it sits. Important too are how human participants (themselves as teachers and their learners) are expected to interact with what is available in their classroom spaces.

Returning to reflexivity, the act of conversing with the self to make decisions in relation to one's personal beliefs and values within the broader cultural and structural context will influence the course of action one may take. For Archer (2010), reflexivity strikes a 'causal balance' by giving credit to an individual's inner lifeworld and their consciousness and the outer contextual system in which they exist. This nuanced approach is essential to the analysis shared here because we examine the self-produced documentation of teachers' professional contexts. The value of empathy in conducting research in contemporary classrooms has been one focus of our work for this project (Weber et al., 2023b) and thus we understand our duty as researchers to acknowledge the complexity of teachers' work. Thus, we apply a reflexive lens to these tours so we can appreciate the real qualities of the complex relationship between personal, cultural, and structural properties reflected in the materiality of classroom life.

## Methodology

Findings shared in this paper are drawn from analyses of a series of 'video tours' created by classroom teachers. We draw from Kervin and Comber's (2024) conceptualisation of the 'video tour' to understand how teachers organise and resource their writing classrooms, the opportunities made available to learners as a result, and the repertoire of practices teachers identify in relation to their materials. A video tour is a full motion video of a linear walk-through of a teacher's classroom. Participants use the video recording function on a phone, iPad or tablet to document their classrooms, moving from one point to another, identifying and annotating key aspects of the classroom space in connection with the topic at hand.

Thirteen video tours make up this data set—seven from metropolitan and six from regional schools (See Table 1). The tours ranged in length from 41 s to 6.04 min, with an average length of 2.50 min (see supplementary material for an example). Apart from one tour, all teachers recorded commentary to accompany the images captured as they moved through the space. In this way, video tours are an example of 'dialogic encounter' between researcher and teacher as the teacher prioritises the context and specific foci of the recording. Kervin and Comber's (2024) video tour method is expanded in this paper to examine teachers' reflexive understanding. That is to say, the dialogic encounter afforded by the video tour reveals the reflexive

**Table 1** Summary of participant teacher data

| Metropolitan and regional schools | Teacher pseudonym | Year group | Length of tour (min) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Met1 | Billy | Year 5B | 2.27 |
| | Lee | Year 5/6R | 3.21 |
| | Morgan | Year 6 M | 6.04 |
| Met 2 | Chris | Year 5C | 2.25 |
| | Sam | Year 5S | 3.28 |
| | Glenn | Year 6G | 1.52 |
| | Ray | Year 6R | 2.44 |
| Reg1 | Tavin | Year 3 K | 4.01 |
| | Val | Year 3 M | 3.45 |
| Reg2 | Emmersen | Year 3/4 K | 1.27 |
| | Charlie | Year 4/5C | 0.52 |
| | Kelly | Year 5C | 0.41 |
| | Beau | Year 5/6G | 1.03 |

reality of each teacher as they communicate with the research team about their personal, cultural, and structural context in relation to writing.

While we acknowledge this dialogic encounter is not analogous to an internal conversation, we argue it may be understood as an accurate depiction of the material, social reality of each classroom context. As independently constructed artefacts, the teacher controlled what was shared or omitted in each tour and when to share it with the research team. This agentic approach to the data collection process reflects the reflexive sensibility we seek to cultivate in this paper.

The teachers who created the video tours were employed in NSW primary schools that were research sites of the NSW arm of the broader project Improving classroom writing by enhancing reflexive decisions and practice (DP190101033). Two schools were in regional NSW and two in metropolitan Sydney. The varied choice of schools offered contrast to the research because they were in different communities and cultural contexts—they are from different demographics. And so, while teaching and learning at each was mandated by the same English syllabus, they were socioculturally diverse. The metropolitan schools—Met1 and Met2—were in well-resourced north-western Sydney suburbs. At Met1, new classrooms were under construction on the school site and so Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6 classes) had been temporarily relocated to alternative, demountable classrooms. Met2 was a relatively small school with less than 350 enrolments and included students from a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The regional schools (Reg1 and Reg2) were located south of Sydney. Reg1 was located near the region's education precinct, and in recent times had undergone substantial demographic change due to increased enrolments of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Reg2 was located in a community further south with a high concentration of families experiencing educational disadvantage and low socio-economic status, meaning children from this community largely commence school with more limited proficiencies in oral language, reading and writing than their peers in

communities with higher levels of socioeconomic advantage. And so, Reg2 received an equity loading—funding tied to improved student literacy and numeracy outcomes under the NSW Department of Education Resource Allocation Model (RAM) (NSW Department of Education, 2014), previously, the Priority Schools Funding Program. Teachers in RAM schools must take up rigorous assessment and reporting processes beyond the requirements of non-RAM schools. For literacy, this means increased administration and reporting of formal reading and writing assessments and the pressure to demonstrate academic growth in children with the least experience and the most to learn; children who are the hardest to teach.

## Analysis

Three iterations of thematic analysis were used to examine the teacher video tour data. The first—an inductive analysis—examined each classroom tour as a whole to identify what each teacher captured in the visual recording and the connections they made through their commentary. This first iteration afforded the development of three categories: (1) the nature of the classroom spaces, (2) paraphernalia for supporting writing, and (3) pedagogical approaches.

A second iteration involved separating the oral commentary from the visual recording. Here, a closer examination of the visual data provided insights into categories 1 and 2 in terms of the ways the resources and spaces were used. For example, isolation of the visual component revealed the types of resources used—whether they were teacher made/student made/commercially produced. Whether they were static (e.g., a laminated poster outlining the structure of a certain text type) or adaptable in response to classroom activity (e.g., a vocabulary word wall where words were added as they came into use). And how the teachers positioned the resources in the classroom in connection with the ways students might access them. A focused analysis of each teacher's oral commentary offered insights into category 3 pedagogies as the teachers shared beliefs about the role of teachers and students, the pedagogical processes, the purposes of the resources in enacting these pedagogies, and the tensions evident through competing internal and external mandates.

A final deductive iteration allowed connections to be drawn across the tours. Here, the categories were compared and contrasted through similarities and differences between and among the teachers' accounts of their teaching of writing. And by returning to the tours as a whole (image and audio together) themes could be developed: (1) teacher beliefs about the teaching of writing (2) the roles of teachers and students in the writing classroom, and (3) the ways spaces, resources and interactions afforded opportunities for students to write. These themes comprise a complex blend of personal, cultural, and structural emergent properties and shape the reporting of findings that follow in connection with the frames of materiality and reflexivity.

## Findings

### Teachers' personal beliefs about the teaching of writing and the role of teachers and learners in conversation with materiality

Evident across the tours was the belief that writing and learning to write are social activities developed within a supportive environment. Teachers often described their classrooms in relation to the ways students experience space while writing. Examples such as, 'over here we have…' (Reg1, Tavin), 'we move our desks around' (Met1, Billy) or work in 'table groups' (Reg1, Val) highlights the ways students move through and share space as a social community for and during their writing practices. Contrasting this flexible, social view of writing as physical movement and choice, the teachers expressed a more constrained view of writing itself as the mastery of a range of writing skills developed through a defined set of practices. Skills mastered here related to phonemic awareness, spelling conventions, and vocabulary usage. Teachers from all sites identified either a spelling or a word wall. And dedicated spaces were described in connection with the expected activity, for example, a 'reading corner' (e.g., Reg1, Val; Met2, Ray), 'engine room' (Reg1, Tavin) and 'my dining table' (Met1, Morgan) where students worked individually and together with resources and/or a teacher or other adult. The teachers also articulated their roles in relation to content delivery using different practices for specific purposes, and spaces for 'doing' particular types of writing. For example, there were spaces to 'do modelled writing' (Met1, Morgan; Reg2, Emmersen), or 'do Sound Waves' (a commercial spelling program) (Met1, Billy). These findings point to the reflexive materiality of classrooms as the personal and cultural value of writing as a social, communal activity is mediated by additional cultural and structural views of writing as a series of constrained skills.

The personal value of supporting students' writing also emerged as teachers expressed feeling a sense of responsibility for mentoring students in their learning. Variously, teachers shared similar responses about their desire to 'guide, help and support' students to 'go through the writing activities', to 'help them complete their writing', and 'remind them about what is going to make them successful for today'. This range of personal, cultural, and structural values regarding writing and their material articulation exemplify the inherently reflexive nature of teaching and learning writing at school today. Emergent across the tours was each teacher's movement between their personal values concerning writing pedagogy, the culture of writing established within their classrooms and their school more broadly, and the external structural constraints associated with a 'skills' approach to writing and the monitoring of these skills that has come to dominate curriculum and policy.

### Teachers' and students' writerly roles: establishing classroom cultural practices

Also evident were beliefs about students' roles in the writing classroom. For example, Chris (Met 2) and Tavin's (Reg1) 'hand out helpers' could quickly disseminate

writing materials from labelled tubs. Sam's (Met2) 'secretary' updated the class calendar to show 'what we're learning about for the day', and Morgan's (Met1) students used 'feedback crosses which they write in their book to remind them what they need to do'. The teachers expected students to 'collaborate', 'brainstorm' and participate in group work with peers, to meet 'learning goals', 'write and publish', consult with exemplars of 'good writing', and seek to incorporate the features of a 'good' text into their own.

Similar across the schools and classrooms was the teachers' talk about resources for writing. Regardless of their location, funding, or grade level (Years 3–6 in this project), every teacher identified whole class and individual 'Success Criteria', 'Learning Goals' and 'Learning Intentions'. They all referred to resources for building knowledge about writing at whole text level, for example, expected structures for texts that were identified as 'text types', as well as exemplars about 'What A Good One Looks Like', that is, a 'WAGOLL' (see Fig. 1). Some resources were teacher generated and others commercially produced.

The teachers shared a process for achieving these preferred structures through various approaches to writing. Using commercially produced posters, students were encouraged to make use of writing strategies coined and promoted by the commercial programs such as a 'sizzling start' and 'dynamic dialogue' in an effort to 'ban the boring' and appropriate the preferred text structure (see Fig. 2).

Within this whole text structure, the teachers also captured a focus at the sentence, word, and letter level through other sets of teacher-made and/or commercially produced posters and charts (see Fig. 3). These displays conveyed information about letter sound relationships, letter patterns for spelling ('word walls'), vocabulary and literary devices as well as grammatical structures for word order ('grammar dots').

The secretarial or surface level skills of writing (Green, 1988, 2012) were clearly prioritised across all tours in both the volume and consistency of these resources.

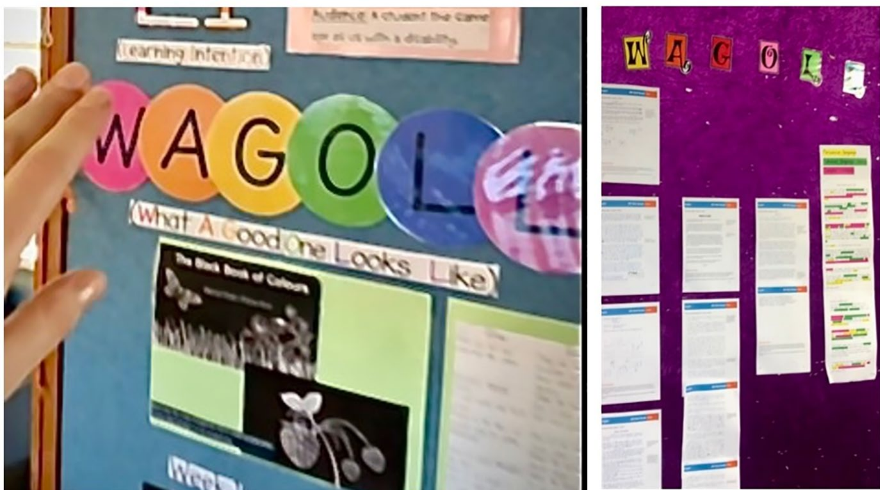


**Fig. 1** Examples of a 'WAGOLL' resources (Reg1 and Met1)

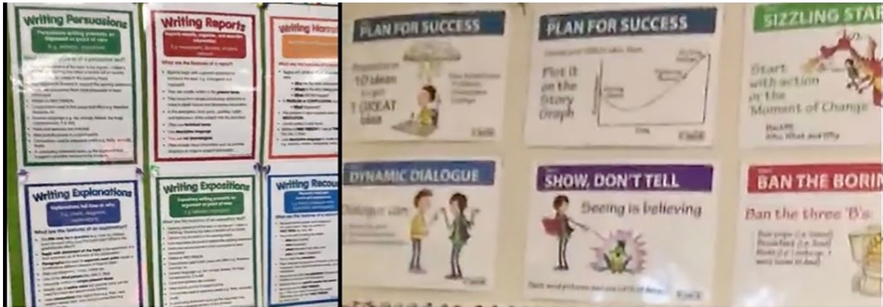


Fig. 2 Examples of resources for writing (Met2)

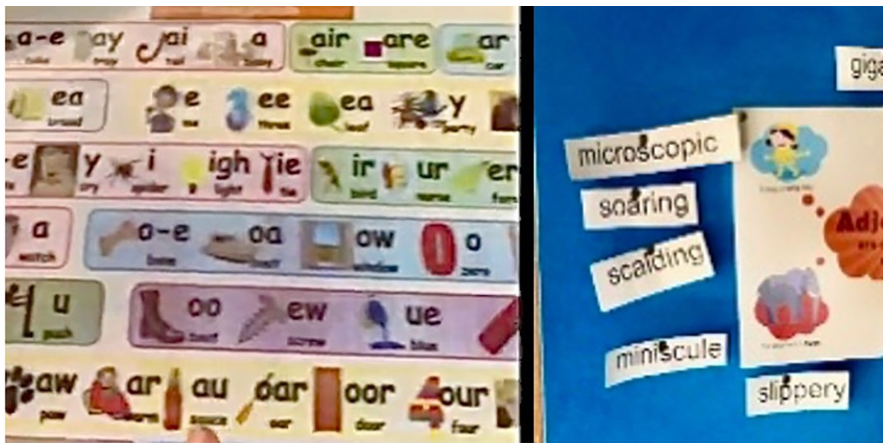


Fig. 3 Examples of letter and word level resources (Reg1 and Reg2)

Display boards, windowpanes, sections above and below permanent installations, and stretched out strings spanning the room contained a plethora of resources and student work products focused on writing skills.

Within each school, the tours revealed commonalities suggesting shared approaches to teaching writing were influenced by external, cultural and structural properties. For example, Met2 teachers (Year 5 Chris and Sam, and Year 6 Glenn and Ray) displayed commercially produced posters promising '7 Steps to Writing Success' and a set of 'Visual Literacy' elements from 'Miss D' at teacherspayteachers.com. Reg1 teachers (Tavin and Val, Year 3) pointed out resources for ensuring spelling accuracy including dictionaries and phonics charts. And the Met1 teachers (Year 5 Billy, Year 5/6 Lee, Year 6 Morgan) identified 'Learning Intentions' and 'Success Criteria' posters as important resources from which teachers could 'start a lesson' for writing.

However, the focus for Reg2 teachers (Year 3/4 Emmersen, Year 4/5 Charlie, Year 5 Kelly, Year 5/6 Beau) was slightly different in that they paid particular attention to the ways their resources and spaces could be used for whole group explicit

teaching followed by individualised support and monitoring. For example, Beau (Reg2) identified a space in his classroom as.

> our main room for big stage lessons...almost 90 kids kinda squeeze in here. My kids sit at the tables and the other guys come and sit on the floor here. So that's where we do our modelled writing lessons, just on the whiteboard there.

Opportunities for teacher led individualised support were evident in Reg2. For example, Kelly organised the students' desks into rows to increase teacher/student interaction. Emmersen pointed out a space for 'individual conferences with students' while Charlie had dedicated a space—the 'individual conference corner'—for supporting students' writing development. As an Equity Loading School (NSW Department of Education, 2013), Reg2 bears added external pressure (linked to funding) to take up extra tracking and reporting of students' academic gains. This difference in funding and reporting requirements between Reg2 and the others in the study perhaps accounts for the use of whole class didactic explicit teaching episodes led by individual teachers considered to have expertise in the area and followed by individual tutoring.

## Opportunities for students to write

Opportunities for students to write appeared to fit within a set of pedagogic structures determined by the teacher's program and mediated through the externally produced 'Learning Intentions', 'Success Criteria' and in some cases, 'Writing Goals'. The teachers identified pedagogic structures that demonstrated movement in teacher and student control across lessons and units of work. For example, writing sessions began with an overt focus, 'we align ourselves with a visible learning process where the success criteria and learning intention are presented on the board' (Met1, Lee), 'go through our learning intentions and our daily plan' (Met2, Glenn), and 'revise our success criteria' (Reg1, Val). Subsequent teacher-led writing lessons further framed the writing opportunities. These lessons occurred within designated spaces defined by their purpose (to show students what to do) and the physical resources (screen display, posters) required for conveying these messages. For example, Morgan (Met1) identified 'the front of the room for all modelled lessons', and so 'the desks need to be pointed in a similar direction'. Smaller group instruction occurred in different places, for example, Beau (Reg2) had constructed a 'writing corner where I'll guide my students', while Tavin (Reg1) pointed to 'my engine room where I will do my guided writing (small group lesson)'.

Student choice occurred within these pedagogic structures. Billy (Met1) reported 'physical writing or typing would be sitting on the floor or at desks, but we move our chairs on the other side so we can collaborate'. Lee (Met1) identified multiple spaces for writing, including pillows and a quiet corner, the teacher's desk, a desk with computer screens for working on a common document, and 'an enormous floor area'. Other areas identified for students to write included various configurations of desks (groups, rows etc.), 'the wet area' (Met2, Ray and Chris; Reg2, Beau), 'the room next door when the door's open' (Reg2, Emmersen), 'the stand-up desk for

brainstorming activities or the low table desk for group work' (Met2, Chris) and 'the computer room and quiet learning area' (Reg2, Charlie).

While student choice about spaces for working appeared flexible, the teachers shared expectations about accessing the resources on offer—word walls (spelling and vocabulary), posters identifying different focus areas (e.g., literary devices, multimodal/visual literacy, grammatical structures, punctuation conventions, spelling rules, thesaurus), WAGOLLs, success criteria and so on. And there were particular expectations for certain students related to perceived needs. Some of Ray's students (Met2) were 'strategically placed at certain desks to help and support their learning'. Sam (Met2) positioned 'the students I need access to the most are sitting on the ends…I need to access them readily and spend time to make sure they are listening to instructions'. Other expectations related to the attainment of certain skills. For example, Tavin (Reg1) expected students to engage with spelling strategies commensurate with ability, 'looking up what are the phonemes and graphemes', 'using the right dictionary' and placing flip dictionaries on the desks of 'kids who are struggling'. While Glenn (Met2) replaced independent writing time for the 'less proficient students' with teacher-led instruction and 'spelling activities', while 'more capable students [would] use spelling words of a higher level' from the list of 700 words on the 'Vocabulary Ninja' poster.

## Discussion

The video tour methodology where teachers control the way content is shared about the teaching of writing in their classrooms, provides insights into potential opportunities, decisions made, perspectives, and assumptions held about students as writers. Each tour offers insights into the complexities of the classroom environment and evidence of the decisions teachers make to translate curriculum, policy and stakeholder influences into practice. The tours represent authentic multimodal accounts embedded in these classrooms and reveal much about what it means to be a teacher and learner of writing in these contexts. To understand the complexities of the insights shared, this discussion focuses on the way cultural and structural emergences are recontextualised into the materiality of the classroom environment and mediated by the personal approach of each teacher to teaching writing.

### Culture and structure: a paradoxical context

The teachers in this study were mandated by the same NSW English syllabus content (NESA, 2012) and the same Australian Curriculum Literacy Progressions (ACARA, 2016). The teachers must demonstrate and track students' cumulative achievements to the syllabus outcomes and the ACARA Progressions (2016). And while these curriculum documents are the only mandates for teachers in NSW, teachers' accounts of classroom practices revealed a range of other policies, practices, and theories of learning at play. Each teacher captured resources and spaces that 'count' in the teaching of writing in their classroom. They described their role

as one of support, encouragement, and explicit teaching, and shared their intention for developing independent solvers of writing problems. There was clear evidence in the tours of each teacher's tremendous efforts to create a classroom environment that could support a certain version of writing. And the complexity of their work became evident in the resources captured and the ways they talked about their students' engagement with them.

The teachers' talk about the different resources and approaches for teaching writing revealed similarities across classrooms and school settings well beyond the content of the mandated syllabus. Revealing examples are the WAGOLL (What a Good One Looks Like) and the replication of 'steps' for writing as the solution to the problem of creating texts for specific purposes. While exemplars are useful for demonstrating how something works, the concept of a single text structure or 'text type' positions the creation of text as a series of simple steps or recipes for replication. These versions of writing draw teachers and students into narrowed understandings about the personal and complex nature of expressing meanings for different purposes and audiences (Haas Dyson, 2020). Resources and frameworks like the ones shared in this study reflect the increasing accountability on teachers and students to meet ever-narrowing definitions and benchmarks about what 'good' writing is (Comber & Hayes, 2023; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Kervin et al., 2019). When there is so much to do and keep track of, the infinitely complex task of writing shrinks to become easily measurable, simple, unified products valued for the visibility of their surface level features (Comber, 2011; Cowen, 2020; Green, 2012), that can be 'ticked off' when complete. It seems the abundance of policies, mandates, and the generation of associated commercial material, has narrowed rather than expanded the ways writing has materialised in contemporary NSW classrooms.

### Personal approaches to teaching writing: presence and absence as reflections of culture and structure

The teachers in this study described feeling responsible for cultivating a positive classroom culture of writing and facilitating their students' learning by offering support and guidance. They articulated physical space as integral to their teaching of writing, identifying the locations for different types of writing for unique purposes, i.e. 'where the writing happens'. The teachers appeared to care deeply about offering students opportunities to write in spaces where they can receive instruction from human and non-human resources to improve their outcomes. And while this instructive approach reflects a lack of student autonomy for writing, our findings suggest that teacher autonomy is also compromised as the opportunities to make real decisions is taken out their control (Haas Dyson, 2020; Ryan, 2014). The tours revealed considerable commonality in their talk about teaching writing, the design and visual appearance of their classrooms, and programs required. And while coordinating teaching approaches between teachers in a grade makes sense for cohesion and shared workload, there is still the need for acknowledging differences in beliefs, interests, skills and abilities of students and teachers about the nature and purposes of writing. Because teaching and learning are reflexive and contextual, any claims

about singularised approaches—or ‘what works’—can only ever be made about the specific people and places where the research happened (Wiliam, 2019), and therefore must be constantly reconsidered within the contexts of new settings and new people as ‘what works here’.

While the tours offered much about *processes* for creating text, missing was a sense of *reasons* for writing—purposes, topics, audience, the concept of being an author, the inherent value of creativity and self-expression (Ryan, et al., 2021). Undoubtedly teachers of writing hold knowledge about these qualities, but it is through understanding the decisions they make and how they justify their deliberate work as writing teachers that we more fully understand the power of discourses that shape their practices. The absence of more generative talk about writing, of creative freedom and capacity to exercise the range of mediums for expressing the self speaks volumes about the current literacy teaching landscape. Where culture and structure aim to constrain what writing is and does, teachers’ ways of teaching writing follow suit. In this study, the voices of external, de-contextualised commercial programs spoke loud and clear. While studies investigating the impact of ‘shadow education’ on teachers and students has focused on external tutoring/coaching centres and programs (Zhang, 2023), we argue these commercial resources and products are another example of a shadow system driven by commercial logics impacting student learning. We acknowledge these tours cannot possibly account for the extent of teachers’ values as they were acutely aware of their audience (in this case, the researchers). However, we argue that the absence of such talk and of materials that reflect more nuanced and diverse approaches to writing, are a finding that reflects contemporary cultural and structural constraints in Australian education.

## Conclusion

We know teachers are the single biggest predictor of classroom success because of their expertise in curriculum, pedagogy, child development, and knowledge about the uniqueness of each classroom. Reform that strips away this expertise risks teachers’ capacities to support students in ways that develop proficiencies for writing within and beyond school. Our video tour analysis provides accompanied and private insights into the teachers’ writing practices and implications for their students as they negotiate tensions between and among these recontextualisations. The teachers’ internal conversations as content and pedagogical experts within their cultural and structural contexts impact their classroom decisions. The translation of this complex assemblage of self and context shapes students’ learning opportunities.

Ultimately, we found an explicit interplay between each teacher’s personal values and pedagogical practices and the external cultural and structural context in which they teach. This interaction emerges materially in the classroom as a space where the teacher’s internal, reflexive practice becomes externally visible. The implications of these findings are twofold. First, curriculum and policy makers must acknowledge the sociocultural nature of teaching and encourage teachers’ reflexive capabilities rather than dictating their work based on decontextualised assumptions. Second, teachers may benefit from explicit understanding about the reflexive nature of the

teaching of writing. An awareness of the reflexive affordances and constraints of teaching writing in today's classrooms may support teacher agency and their capacity to make choices. Our findings reveal the multitude of competing interests teachers must navigate as they teach writing. It is imperative that the broader educational context recognises the complexity of teaching writing and the mental and material space required to write.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** These authors report no conflict of interest.

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