

## *Becoming curious about cats: A collaborative writing project*



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*Students' interests and achievement in writing are often debated and located in theoretical and pedagogical arguments. These issues can polarise understandings of effective teaching practice. This article describes one teacher's classroom practice in a New Zealand primary school. It outlines a collaborative project between a local teacher and a university lecturer. The two educators were concerned about political and educational changes and the influence this had on teachers' writing pedagogy. They were concerned about the differences between the children's reading and writing achievement evident in this year three classroom. As researchers they were keen to explore the 'power of literature' as a way of enriching children's oral and written language experiences. The writers argue that by using quality literature in the classroom, with an explicit focus on authors' literary techniques, students develop an awareness of how authors craft and construct texts. The young writers were apprenticed to experts and developed a metalanguage, which enhanced their own writing skills.*

### ***Introduction: Collaborative conversations***

This article began from a conversation between two educational professionals, Steph, a university lecturer in literacy education at the University of Waikato and Liz, a practicing classroom teacher at a local primary school. We were both interested in young writers and their writing development. In particular we held a common belief that beginner writers can be scaffolded to gain and sustain a passion for writing. We believe that children who are enthusiastic and motivated about creating texts, who have opportunities 'to play' with language, maintain ownership and writers' voice, and children who are supported with relevant teaching interactions will achieve success with their writing. As educators we were keen to design and implement a writing programme that would support young writers. This article describes our journey and presents a descriptive case study in one New Zealand classroom.

### *Concerns and pedagogical shifts*

During our initial conversations several concerns were shared. Changes in pedagogy, writers' attitudes and abilities were discussed and related to political and social changes which took place in New Zealand in the 1990s (Wilkinson, 1998). The teaching of written language, in particular, was influenced by the implementation of new curricula introduced to New Zealand schools at that time. The *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* [EiNZC] document (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1994) signaled major theoretical and pedagogical shifts for teaching writing in New Zealand schools. Previous classroom practices reflected process theory; whole language orientated teaching, integrated and contextualised learning, focusing on students' ideas. The EiNZC document (MOE, 1994) shifted the focus from a writer-orientated perspective to a text-orientated perspective (Hyland, 2002). This outcomes-based document directed teachers to identify students' learning in relation to a progression of learning steps. The curriculum discourse signaled pedagogical changes by identifying expressive, poetic and transactional writing functions, which 'are not mutually exclusive' but enable students to 'write on a variety of topics, shaping ideas in a number of genres' (MOE, 1994, pp.33–36). The professional development for many New Zealand primary school teachers and Facilitators of the English Curriculum was to attend 'First Steps Writing' workshops introduced through the Education Department of Western Australia. The *Writing Resource Book* and the *Writing Developmental Continuum* (1994) became a central teaching resource for teachers, thus a Systemic Functional Approach to teaching genre was adopted (Derewianka, 1990; Knapp & Watkins, 1994; Martin, 1989). A focus on the linguistic aspects of genre, the schematic structure of text and associated grammar, dominated language teaching, and teachers had to learn a new metalanguage to talk about texts (Macken-Horarik, 2002). These theoretical shifts challenged teachers 'ways of working' and resulted in the appropriation of a pedagogy which was to become more teacher directed, text orientated, and created a 'structuralist' approach to teaching writing in New Zealand primary schools (Watkins, 1999).

Steph, a facilitator of the 1994 English curriculum (MOE, 1994) and currently a university literacy lecturer who regularly visits schools was concerned about the writing practices she observed being implemented. She noted that long term planning for writing focused on covering a narrow range of subject specific genres rather than adopting a more rhetorical approach (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Implementation of the genre approach in New Zealand signified a narrow understanding of genre theory and did not acknowledge the shifting demands of language use, context of the situation or the multi dimensions of genre functions (Halliday, 1994).

It was also noted that during genre studies the children often constructed written texts according to headings or specific criteria of a text structure. While the use of frameworks is not being challenged, it was observed that teachers

often taught writing in a sequential decontextualised way and assumed the 'the role of "textual police" ensuring students understand and reproduce these textual rules' (Watkins, 1999, p.118). The context of the situation, the audience and the goal or purpose for writing which determines the content and form was often ignored as students headed their writing as 'argument' or 'recount'. The initial implementation of the genre approach in local schools had taken the voice, creativity, decision-making and independence away from the learner-writers. Writing was being taught in a prescriptive, teacher directed, text-based manner.

The loss of creativity and ownership for learner-writers, also concerned Liz. Based on her classroom practice she had observed that the overcrowded curriculum allowed less time for children's personal creativity and exploration of language use. There were fewer opportunities for children to play with language and make choices about what they wanted to write about. The teaching of written language had become very curriculum directed. Liz valued Robinson's (2001) work as he argued that the lack of opportunity for students to be creative in the classroom was due to living in a world of rapid change, and global competition where students are inundated with information. Liz believed that it is important that schools focus on teaching critical and creative thinking building independent learning communities.

A second concern was voiced by Liz who was keen to set up opportunities for the children to practise and extend their oral language skills – as a way of enhancing their written language. The school had tracked and profiled the children's use and control of oral language over time. In particular, they had concerns about the students' use of complex language patterns (syntax) and specificity or rich use of vocabulary (Baumann, Ware & Edwards, 2007; Clay, 1975, 1991). When referring to the school's entrance assessment data which had been collected over the previous five years using the *Record of Oral Language* (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon, 1983), it was noted that there had been a significant decline in children's oral language levels on entry to school. 50% of children currently entering school now needed to begin the assessment test at an earlier level, at level one, part one, instead of level two, part one. The decline in oral language scores in this school highlighted the need for a stronger foundation of oracy as oral language skills are a major factor in children's success as fluent writers (Braunger & Lewis, 1998; Hood, 1997).

A third concern shared by the authors was the decline in student motivation and interest in writing as they progressed through school. As Liz stated, 'I have found that most young children on entering school are eager to write and consider themselves to be competent authors. But by the time they have spent two or three years at school a lot of the children are losing this passion for writing and are finding the process of writing an undesirable chore' (Discussion 15/3/08).

From a national perspective on writing achievement, Steph acknowledged

the research carried out by the New Zealand National Education Monitoring Project [NEMP] responsible for monitoring and assessing students' achievement at year 4 and year 8. The most recent report on students' writing achievement discusses students' ability and their enthusiasm for writing in the classroom. *The National Monitoring Project; Writing Assessment Results 2006* (Flockton & Crooks, 2007) stated that in terms of expressive writing, 'Most students were not able to achieve clarity, vividness, richness and personal feeling or humour that distinguished top quality writing' (p. 14). This ability to select language patterns and vocabulary for effect concerned us. Furthermore the report stated that while it is recognised 'students attitudes, interests and liking for a subject have a strong bearing on their achievement' (p. 55) ... 'compared to year 4 students, fewer year 8 students were highly positive about doing writing at school, about how good they believed themselves to be at writing, and about how they felt their teachers and parents viewed their writing abilities' (p. 58). This indicator posed a concern for us; how can positive attitudes and interests be maintained while developing quality writing?

### ***Informed by research***

Students declining attitudes to writing, the need to build a strong oral foundation and the provision of further opportunities for students to explore and experiment with language encouraged Steph to reflect on the research relating to beginner writers and possible teaching strategies.

### **Beginner writers**

It is well recognised that young children are presented with many challenges when learning to write and require scaffolding and explicit teaching throughout the writing process (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Dix, 2003, 2006; Fox, 2001), in particular before writing and at the point of writing, not just in relation to the final product. Fox (2001) recognises that,

Young children, as novice writers, are likely to have persistent difficulty in sustaining their attention to writing. They need to maintain a coherent view both of the task and of their text, as so far written, in the reflective phase, and to use this to re-enter the text generation process in order to keep the cycle of composition going. (p. 4)

Young writers struggle with what Fox (2001) refers to as 'writerly constraints'. Controlling motor skills for letter formations, using phonemic knowledge for recording letter-sound relationships, locating words, placement of letters and words on the page, using punctuation and leaving spaces between words: learning these skills ties up writer's mental resources which temporarily distract the writer from the larger task of generating and composing the text (Clay, 1993, 1998). Teachers need to find ways to sustain the

writers' attention across phases of engagement (generate and produce text) and reflection of text (review, interpret and select text), to avoid break down which often centres on the difficulties involved with transcription (Fox, 2001). Steph and Liz thus wanted to identify effective teaching strategies, which would support children's writing development.

While in the United Kingdom presenting a paper at the Reading Association Conference [UKRA] in 2003, Steph became aware of a local writing project. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education [CLPE] presented their project RaW [Reading and Writing power]. It was an exciting project as it explored the relationship between children's reading and writing development at Key Stage 2 (10–11-year-olds). The CLPE had been concerned about National Curriculum assessment data identifying an imbalance between children's achievement in reading and writing. They stated that children's progress in reading was considerably higher than their writing achievement at this Key Stage. This project and the resulting text, *Reader in the Writer* (Barrs & Cork, 2001) appealed to this researcher as it aimed to help teachers promote writing through the study of challenging literature by reading aloud to children and discussing issues with the class (Huck, 1999). Reading aloud is a major teaching approach in New Zealand schools (MOE, 2003, 2006).

The RaW project promoted literature as 'texts that teach' this notion was introduced through Margaret Meek's work. Meek (1988) validated the richness of literature as a means to improve literacy. She stated,

To learn to read [or listen to] a book, as distinct from simply recognising words on the page, a young reader has to become both teller (picking up the author's view and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter). This symbolic interaction is learned early. It is rarely, if ever, taught, except in so far as the adult stands in for the author by giving the text a 'voice' when reading to the child. (cited in Barrs and Cork, 2001, p. 10)

We wanted to make the author's voice more explicit to children. As Barrs & Cork (2001) state: 'Texts that teach are the ones that challenge and make demands on readers [and listeners]; they require readers to become active and involved in the world of the text' (p. 36). Using 'texts that teach' is based on the premise that literature provides quality models of writing (Dix, 2003; Graves, 1983).

Young writers become more closely attuned to the rhythms and patterns of literary language as they apprentice themselves to the experienced writers of challenging and powerful texts. Aesthetic reading helps them to attend to their own responses and to their experience of the text as a whole, as well as to its local features. Teachers develop children's responses at all of these levels, initially by their interpretations of the text as they read it aloud, and then through their orchestration of discussions of text, which draw on the multiple responses present in any group (Barrs & Cork, 2001, p. 43).

The RaW writing project, when analysing students' writing responses, (Barrs & Cork, 2001) noted the writers' use of 'literary turns of phrase'. Although the authors recognised that the adoption of phrases might not improve the quality of the writing, it did demonstrate that children were more aware of words and language devices and how these could be deliberately used for effect (p. 192). Also the project identified what was termed 'echoes,' looking to see if children had indirectly echoed texts, or directly made 'liftings' from the authors' writing (p.193). In apprenticing young writers it was recognised that, 'words appear from under the writers' fingers on a page or a screen as they balance fluency and control, ideas and technique. Their media are language and imagination; their models are other writers' (Barrs & Cork, 2001, p. 11).

While the RaW was successful in enhancing older students' writing, we were curious to determine whether engaging younger students with rich texts, using texts that teach, could make a difference to developing more vivid writing (Flockton & Crooks, 2007). We were looking for strong writing that created visual images through use of detail and description, encouraging reader response.

### *Our research focus*

Three key purposes provided a research focus. Overall we wanted to enhance, enrich and extend the quality of children's writing when creating their own written texts. Second, we were curious to see if immersion in literature and discussion of texts could make a difference to the children's oral skills and transfer to their writing. Could using literature as models of writing extend children's semantic and syntactic knowledge? Would the 'rich' vocabulary and more complex phrases that adult authors use be transferred to children's writing? Would the young writers 'echo' or make 'direct liftings' from the literature studied? Finally, we wanted to explore teaching strategies that would enable us to use the literature to support writers. We wanted to find ways to highlight authors' writing techniques and language use by making it more explicit and visible to young writers. We wanted to apprentice these children to expert writers.

The writing project involved a two-week language unit based on the literature theme of cats. This provided a literary context for writing. The topic 'cats' was selected as there are many beautifully illustrated and written texts that teachers can use to explore descriptions of cat characters and feline adventures. We selected a range of literature (see book list) for the teacher to read daily and discuss with her class of Year 3 children (7-year-olds). The program was to focus strongly on the children engaging in the processes of listening, thinking, talking, planning, writing, rereading and revising. It would also involve Steph and Liz engaging in multiple reflective conversations about the young children's learning.

### *Becoming curious about cats: Teaching strategies*

We realised that it was necessary to develop a learning context, to build an ideational field (Halliday, 1994) of experiences for the children to draw on and transfer to their writing. After more conversations, Steph and Liz identified several teaching strategies that would expose the students to a wide range of language ideas and features, and which could build children's semantic and syntactic understandings of written texts. We hoped that children would use more complex sentence patterns and specific vocabulary to create writing that was vivid and expressive.

The first strategy was to immerse children in quality models of literature to introduce new and different ideas, to encourage conversations and expose students to multiple responses, ultimately encouraging transfer or spillover to their own writing (Barrs & Cork, 2001; Brown & Cambourne, 1992). The next two strategies focused on building children's awareness and knowledge of literary techniques and language use. We referred to these as 'zooming in on author's writing techniques', and using 'powerful words'. The final two writing strategies provided opportunities for children to collaboratively create poetry and to describe a feline character. These strategies are discussed in terms of their purpose, application and findings.

### **Immersion in literature: Reading to and talking with children**

Reading aloud to children and immersing them in literature provided the foundation for extending children's oral language and ultimately written language. Mooney and Young (2006) stated that, 'reading aloud in general develops oral language proficiency, which has a tremendous impact on eventual success in reading and writing' (p. 13). Steph and Liz valued the importance of reading to students believing that children's listening and speaking competence, usually in advance of their reading and writing competence, would be enhanced and that there would be 'linguistic spillover' into written language and vocabulary development (Baumann et al., 2007; Brown & Cambourne, 1992).

The first strategy was dependent on selecting high quality texts. We regarded high quality texts as those that children relate to and want to revisit again and again. These texts are appealing to look at, have enticing illustrations, a strong plot sequence which draws in readers, and characters that are well developed, enabling readers to connect with them. The language should be varied and introduce children to new 'rich' vocabulary, enabling them to visualise situations. The appeal of a book is enhanced by *reading it aloud expressively*, then rereading and *talking* about specific *aspects* as 'it is important to let children talk about a book, link it to their experiences, somehow make it memorable' (Huck, 1999, p. 20).

Exciting literary texts expose children to quality models of authorship in a variety of ways. Literature enables the teacher to not only introduce

students to new titles, authors, illustrators and text structures but also provides students with access to books that they as readers may not be able to experience on their own. Beginner writers would be immersed in literary texts, demonstrating how authors develop the elements of narrative story, and how they shape their ideas and create specific images, meanings and emotions through selected language use. Such literature provides new ideas for developing writing content, builds on children's semantic knowledge and exposes them to new and richer vocabulary. By focusing on aspects of the story at paragraph, sentence and word level, the teacher could discuss language techniques: poetic devices, descriptive words and phrases, and use of similes, all used for a particular effect (Barrs & Cork, 2001).

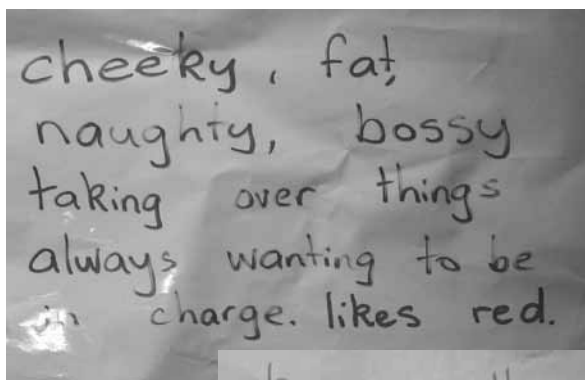
Before reading aloud the teacher always initiated discussion around the book cover, pictorial images and words. Children were encouraged to predict the plot and character. Having posed some questions and engaged the children, the book was read out loud. When reading aloud Liz engaged the children's curiosity and interest through performative readings to bring the author's voice alive, to 'lift the words off the page' (Barrs & Cork, 2001). The teacher encouraged the children to discuss the story and in particular the characteristics of each cat. Such discussions included:

- The cat's name and personality? Was it adventurous, lazy, sleepy, or active? How do we know? What do the *words* say? What do the *pictures* tell us?
- How active is the cat, how does it move? What *words* did the author use to tell us? Can we act out these movements? How do the images portray the cat's movement? Why does it move this way?

To develop an understanding of the literary characters, Liz photocopied and pasted an image of the main character onto a chart. The teacher captured the children's discussion, recording the words and phrases. It was important to compare the characters in the literature, how they were described and in particular what made them different. This enabled children to use their own or the author's book language. The phrases and words scribed onto the charts were left for the children to read and use later for writing. We were interested to see if the children 'echoed' the authors' writing. See Examples 1 and 2.

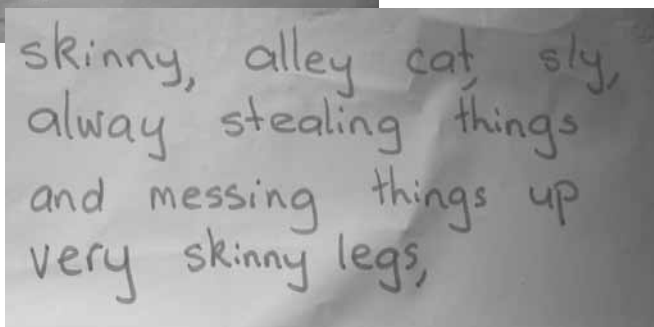
After reading the story the students took part in a Think, Pair, Share [TPS] activity. The TPS activity is a metacognitive strategy used to get students thinking and reflecting on their own responses first. They then pair up and talk out their ideas with each other. In this instance, the children had to reflect on the story and consider the appearance of the cat and how it behaved. Liz stated that it was 'interesting to note that by the end of the reading of the story, the children's opinions and mental images of the cat's character could change' (Discussion date 17/6/08).





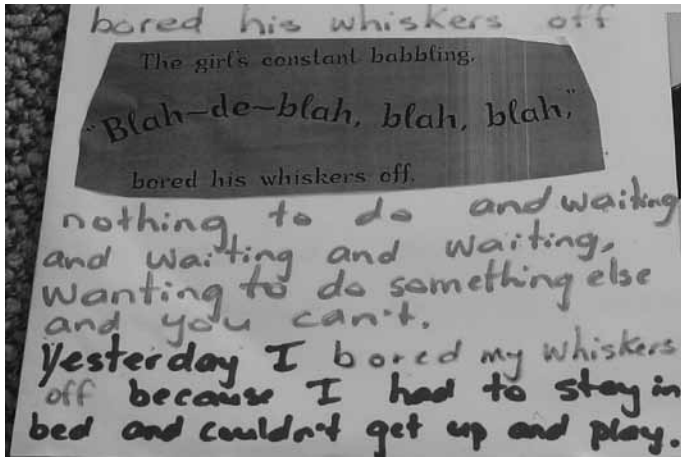
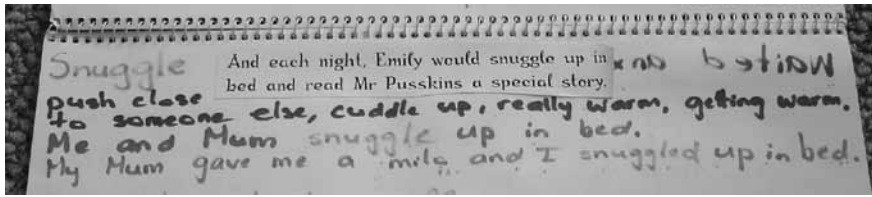
**Example 1.**  
Language used to describe Chester (Watt, 2007).

**Example 2.**  
Language used to describe Slinky Malinky (Dodd, 1990).



### **Zooming in on authors writing techniques**

The second strategy, ‘zooming in on authors’ writing techniques’, enabled us to take the children deeper into the detail and construction of the text. Thus, while children focused on the story and engaged in print and visual readings of the literary text, they also focused on understandings about how authors used language for a particular purpose, zooming in on writing techniques. Our intention was to make children more aware of each author’s use of language and their writing style and techniques, thus making these written skills more explicit for the children. To challenge children’s awareness we decided that the teacher needed to revisit the text focusing on the written text, what the author actually wrote! Children were asked to listen closely, go back into the text and discuss the meanings and effects of words and phrases. The teacher then selected challenging phrases from the text. These chunks of text were photocopied, highlighted and glued into a flip-chart book. The author’s descriptions, phrases and vocabulary meanings were interpreted and discussed with the intention of extending the children’s own understanding of language and word meanings. The teacher also asked for and wrote the children’s interpretation of the words or phrases. The children were encouraged to create new sentences using the phrase or word. By exploring the author’s construction of ideas, the author’s ability to build emotive images, and by unpacking the language patterns, writing techniques and exciting words, the young writers apprenticed themselves to experts (Barrs & Cork,

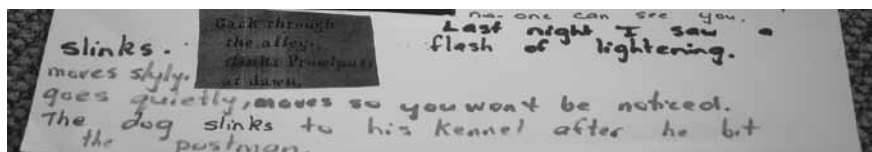
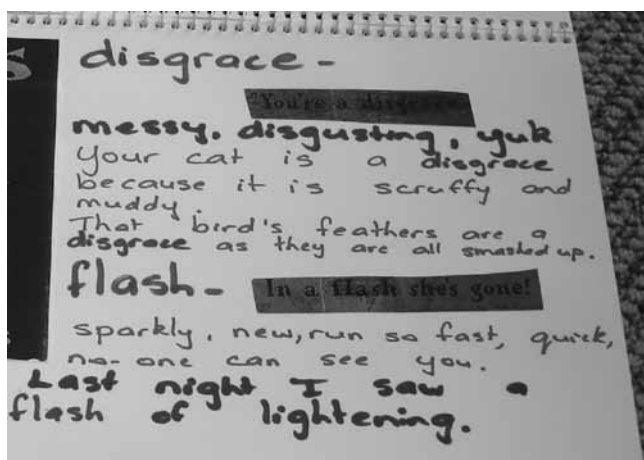


Example 3. Exploring author's use of language from *Mr Pusskins* (Lloyd, 2007).

2001). See Examples 3 and 4 from *Mr Pusskins* (Lloyd, 2007) and *Prowlpuss* (Wilson, 1994) in the flip charts.

Liz became excited about the children's discussion, stating that, 'I believe children need to be encouraged to extend their vocabulary and use words that convey a more precise meaning to the reader, and by encouraging the children to explain the meanings of selected words or phrases and provide sentences using the word/s in context. By the time we got to reading and identifying exciting language in our third cat book, the children were wanting to choose their own words and phrases to study' (Discussion 20/6/08).

We believed that by highlighting the authors' language techniques it would provide models of sentence structures and vocabulary development, thus the completed flip chart was displayed so that the children could reread and echo the texts explored. As Mooney and Young (2006) stated, responding to 'the text promotes reader engagement which deepens student understanding and appreciation of the text and helps them become more sophisticated in their ability to understand and respond to literature' (p. 15). These charts were displayed around the room in a manner that both encouraged and nurtured their learning about writing. Vocabulary research points to the need for frequent encounters with words if they are to become a permanent part of the individual's repertoire (Bauman et al., 2007). By building up a flip chart of



**Example 4.** Exploring author's use of language from *Prowlpuss* (Wilson, 1994).

phrases and enriched vocabulary we were hoping to see if the children could transfer the word or phrase into a similar or different context from the one used in the literature. Transfer became evident in the children's own writing, both when writing about cats and when creating other stories (see Examples 5 and 6). Liz excitedly emailed Steph to say 'It's happening!' (email 26/6/08). There was 'linguistic spillover', the children in Liz's class were now playing with language and transferring their learning with enthusiasm.

These two young writers have 'uplifted' the text, in different ways. The first writer is writing an adventure story and borrowed the adverbial phrase 'waited anxiously' to explain the kittens sitting by the door waiting for it to open. The writer then 'uplifted' and borrowed the phrase 'bored their whiskers off' in an attempt to express the kittens' feelings. The second writer has 'uplifted' the same two phrases when creating a fairy tale of castles and ogres. First he tells of the ogre 'waiting anxiously' for the kids to come and then tells us that the pet cat had nothing to do so he 'bored his whiskers off'. This writer also echoes traditional story telling by beginning 'In a land far, far away ...'

### Word power

The third strategy we adopted, developing 'word power', focused on building imagery through use of similes. Liz and Steph selected several texts highlighting the language that provoked strong mental imagery. The children were

They saw their house. They waited <sup>anxiously</sup> ~~anxiously~~ for the door to open. They just sat at the doorstep ~~measuring~~ <sup>measuring</sup> their heads off. <sup>While</sup> ~~While~~ they were waiting they ~~board~~ <sup>boarded</sup> their whiskers off. A car was coming but it went zoom right past them. "Oh

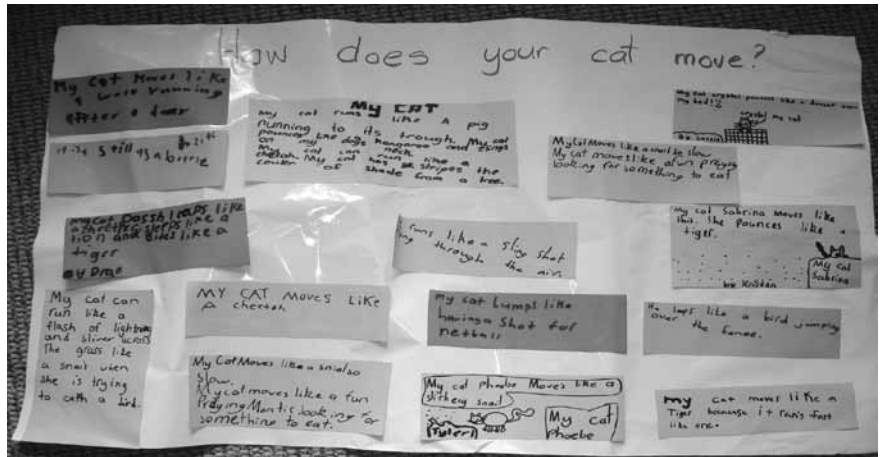
### Example 5

<sup>fantastic beginning</sup> In a land far far away  
 There was a <sup>castle</sup> ~~castle~~ <sup>There</sup> Lived a  
<sup>ogre</sup> ~~ogre~~ in that <sup>castle</sup> ~~castle~~ He <sup>casts</sup> ~~casts~~  
 a <sup>kid</sup> ~~kid~~ but he <sup>waited anxiously for children to</sup> ~~waited anxiously~~ <sup>and</sup>  
 The <sup>ogre</sup> ~~ogre~~ has a pet cat -  
 The cat had <sup>boarded</sup> ~~boarded~~ nothing to do  
 so he <sup>boarded</sup> ~~boarded~~ his <sup>whiskers</sup> ~~whiskers~~ off.  
<sup>finally</sup> ~~finally~~ a kid came. The  
<sup>car</sup> ~~car~~

### Example 6

encouraged to first identify and then record similes. They were involved in playing with words and trying out possibilities. Opportunities for risk-taking, and playing with novel and unusual ideas were encouraged as 'creativity involves a dynamic interplay between generating ideas and making judgments about them' (Robinson, 2001, p. 133). One phrase that the children really liked out of the *Black cat* (Meyers, 1999), was 'balanced like bottles somebody left on the wall'. When writing their similes to describe how cats move, the children wrote phrases such as; 'My cat Crystal pounces like a tiger over my bed', and 'My cat can run like a flash of lightning or slither like a snail when she is trying to catch a bird.' Again the children wrote out their phrases and posted them onto a chart for further rereading. Refer to Example 7.

The next two teaching strategies provided opportunities for the writers to draw on the literature and create their own written texts. As we were interested in 'linguistic spillover' it was important to let the students know that it was alright to borrow and copy phrases from the literature, to use the writers' phrases and literary techniques and incorporate them in their own writing. We were interested to see if seven-year-olds would continue to 'echo', or make direct 'liftings' as the eleven-year-olds demonstrated in *The Reader in the Writer* (Barrs & Cork, 2001).



Example 7

### Collaborative poetry writing

The first writing strategy involved collaborative poetry writing, as one of the aims of the project was to extend the students vocabulary by exploring language and using words that convey more precise meaning to the reader. Creating a poem was manageable in that children had to consider words to describe cats. A large poem format with blank spaces was displayed for the insertion of adjectives or adverbs to create a poem. To encourage thinking of exciting words the children paired up with a talk buddy. Together they discussed their words, many these borrowed from literature. The words were then written on to cards (and later laminated and fixed with velcro dots). Liz gradually built up the poem, inviting children to offer their words to fill in the blank spaces. Each line of poetry had a different focus describing how cats feel, look, sound and move. The words were placed to create a blank verse poetry format collaboratively creating a class poem.

As the poem was being built, the teacher had the children reading and rereading the arrangement of words so that they could try and focus on the rhythm and sounds of language as well as the images. This chart was left up on the wall and the students were encouraged to reorganise the words to create different readings. This proved to be very successful as it was not unusual to see groups of children rearranging the descriptors and reading the poem together. In fact there was a race in the morning to see who could put their re-arrangement of words up first' (discussion 27/6/08). This type of writing not only lent itself to multiple re-readings but it became a very motivating and social activity initiating collaborative discussions between the children. By providing a framework and by modelling its use, children's learning was scaffolded for independence. Later the children were given their own poetry format, where they were observed going to the chart reading and

copying vocabulary that they wanted to borrow. The children read these to each other, had the spelling checked and then published.

### **Feline character descriptions**

The second writing strategy provided an opportunity for the children create a feline character description. Here the children could write a character description based on one of the book characters or they could create their own. Our purpose was to encourage the children to use adjectives and adverbs, specific nouns and verbs to describe what their cat looked like and how it moved. A writing framework scaffolded young writers in shaping their texts. The students revisited the charts and the flipbook that they as a group had discussed and helped create.

One writer borrowed heavily from *The tale of two kitties* (Pichon, 2006). She named her cat Crystal and made notes about the detail of the bow stating 'It is small, white and pink and with crystal in it.' The young writer wrote that 'Crystal lives in a fancy pink room with a purple airbed, a blue blanket and violet pillow.' It is interesting that this writer borrowed more from the pictorial images than the written text.

Another writer borrowed from the texts of *Slinky Malinky* (Dodd, 1990), *Black Cat* (Meyers, 1999) and *Prowlpuss* (Wilson, 1994) creating a character 'who lives in the alley and sneaks around at night raiding the rubbish bins'.

### **Conclusion**

There were probably three main outcomes for the young writers in this project. First the children were highly motivated by the literature. They enjoyed listening and talking about the stories, becoming engrossed in elements of the narrative structure as the plot was played out. They related to the cat characters and their personalities. Their oral language vocabulary and sentence patterns were enhanced as they engaged with the cat characters and their personalities. The children were able to describe and compare the different cats in greater depth because of the way the authors and illustrators had shaped the characters through words and images. It was important that the children were given time to revisit the literature and ponder on the pictorial information along with the written language; this initiated a great deal of talk and discussion and had an influence on the writing.

Second, the literature provided models of quality writing and provided opportunities for the children to zoom in and focus on aspects of the authors' texts. This enabled them to look more closely at the writing techniques used and how each author's choice of words created mood and feeling as well as enhancing the plot and character development. A metalanguage to talk about writing techniques became part of the classroom discussion. The writers became aware of the phrases particular authors used in terms of specifying nouns, adverbs and adjectives. The children could discuss the vocabulary

and the impact these words had in creating visual images. The children were fascinated with phrases in the texts and enjoyed the play of words.

Third and most importantly, the children did borrow from the literature and took ownership of many of the phrases that appealed to them. The children's awareness of language use was deepened as they listened to the literature and discussed the meaning of words and phrases. They copied phrases and applied them appropriately to their own stories. There was evidence of 'linguistic spillover,' 'echoes' and direct 'liftings' from the authors' writing. As a result the students' writing became more detailed, more focused and descriptive. They borrowed words to enhance their meanings. These young authors were excited and motivated to write, they were keen to apprentice themselves to expert writers.

This was an exciting project that enabled many interactions and varied collaborations, between young children, the authors, their literature, the teacher and lecturer. However, this project took place over a short time and it is difficult to know if the children will continue to transfer or borrow from literacy phrases from the literature they were immersed in. It would be interesting therefore to work with these children for a longer period of time or revisit this unit using another theme or topic. However, we both thought the writing project was worth pursuing in the classroom as it highlighted children's awareness of literature and influenced their literacy skills in multiple ways.

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