

Teaching writing - a situated dynamic.

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The research reported here was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Abstract

The paper is theoretically grounded in Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) which holds that human development is founded within participation in social and cultural practices. In particular, the teaching of literacy is shaped not only by the curriculum as designated by policy makers and the institution in which it is located but also by the individuals' understanding of what literacy and learning involves [and how they act to achieve their goals](#). The paper explores data from a project that investigated the relationship between classroom talk and the teaching of writing in six early years classrooms.

~~It is argued that~~ Participants' own understandings of teaching and learning need to be taken into account by researchers and policy makers. CHAT has been used to explore the dynamic relationship between activity at societal, institutional and individual levels. It is argued that researchers and policy makers need to take account of the wider socio-cultural context in planning and evaluating curriculum development initiatives.

Key Words: Cultural Historical Activity Theory, Literacy, Writing, Early years, Classroom practice

Background

Despite attempts by educators and government agencies, primary school pupils' progress in writing lags behind that of reading and many children fail to achieve standards of writing to support their personal and academic needs at secondary school and beyond (DCSF, 2009). Initiatives have been introduced that are largely unidirectional, focusing on changing the teaching, the curriculum and/or the pupils (e.g. DfEE, 1998). In this paper [I argue the potential of cultural historical activity theory \(CHAT\) is used to explore the complex dynamic of classrooms. This theoretical perspective, already employed to explain the development of children within school and other institutions \(Hedegaard, 2009\), may also be applied to teacher practice. CHAT is used to consider the pedagogic practice in 6 early years writing classrooms and](#) to argue that classrooms cannot be taken as isolated situations in which changes in practice can be easily implemented. The paper draws on data from a collaborative project between researchers and early years teachers. The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funded Talk to Text Project aimed to explore the relationship between talk and writing [in 6 early years classrooms](#). It is argued that current approaches to literacy teaching imply an overly simplistic model of teaching and learning. The research reported here, as previous research (e.g. Fullan, 1999; Fisher, 2006; Chen and Derewianka, 2009) indicate that pedagogical practice is more complex. Elements of this complexity are explored.

The teaching of literacy is an area of concern to policy makers, educationalists and parents. Whilst all share the mission of ensuring that young people develop effective literacy, this concern is too often translated in classrooms into mandated practices and restrictive assessment regimes. However, classrooms are complex places. They have a history – a history of the institution of school and its role in society. They are also shaped by the history of the participants in the activity of the classroom – both teachers and students.

The paper is theoretically grounded in cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) which holds that all human development is founded within participation in social and cultural practices. In particular, due to the every day use of literacy as a social practice, the teaching of literacy is shaped not only by the curriculum as designed by the institution but also by the individuals' understandings of what literacy and learning involves [and how they act to achieve their pedagogic goals](#). In order to study classrooms as sites of learning therefore, research should focus on the activity of participants and their orientations within this activity since it is only through participation and collaboration with others in goal-oriented activities that human social and cognitive development can take place (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991). The particular contribution of cultural historical activity theory lies in its focus on the dynamic of activity systems in which the objects [\(in the sense of intended outcomes\)](#) of [the](#) activity at the level of the system are realised in cultural practices. However, 'human activity involves elaborate and shifting divisions of labour and experience within cultures, so that no two members of a cultural group can be expected to have internalized the same parts of whatever 'whole' might be said to exist' (Cole, 1996: 124).

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

The concept of activity in this context can be defined as an historical as well as culturally and socially constructed form of action in which people are actively engaged. Vygotsky (1978) argued that human action on an object is guided not by instinct, as with animals, but by 'motives, socially rooted and intense' (37) that provide direction. It is mediated action: a complex psychological process through which inner motivation and intentions, postponed in time, stimulate their own development and realisation' (26).

Leontiev (1978) further developed these ideas through the idea of object motive, arguing that there is no such thing as objectless activity. Leontiev discusses how the objects of activity are

formed. According to Leontiev (1978) all activity arises from a need which is seen as both an internal condition that is a precursor to activity, as in the hunger that gives rise to the hunt and as something that directs and regulates activity, as in where and how to hunt. Needs give rise to objectives that answer the need. Thus societal need gives rise to ~~objective~~ activity that is intended to fulfil the objective.

LeontievHe argues that human activity is formed not from within the individual but as a result of interaction with the external environment. The 'social conditions carry in themselves motives and goals of the individuals forming it' (51). Activity is not static; it is dynamic and evolving. Thus the object of the activity gives it its determined direction. Needs are 'filled with content derived from surrounding world' (51).

Yet, activity as described by Leontiev, is made up of actions with goal directed purposes. Actions are the means to the end. Their purposes are not contrived or created by the subject arbitrarily:

Leontiev argues that ~~they are given in objective circumstances~~ the actions of individuals arise from goals formed in relation to the object of the activity and cannot be abstracted from ~~the~~ activity in the situation. The goal is the initiator of the action. How the subject is able to achieve the goal proceeds differently according to the context. Thus actions are built up in the relation between the orientations of the individuals and the possibilities for action within the social context.

Leontiev proposes that the object of the activity exists at two levels: one in independent existence and the other as an image of the object of the activity in the mind of the acting subject. 'Meanings lead a double life' (89) – in their social historical nature and in the personal meaning for the individual. Thus with literacy, or specifically the teaching of writing, the larger objective of the activity may clash with the individuals' understanding of what it means to be a writer.

Hedegaard and Fler (2008) develop these ideas with respect to child development. and They examine the relationship between the actions of the individual and contexts of their development.

They consider how activity takes place at three levels: social, institutional and individual (10). They show how institutional practices 'not only initiate but also restrict children's activities and thereby become conditions for their development' (16)

I see society, institutions, and person as three different perspectives in a cultural-historical theory of development: (a) society's perspective with traditions that implies values, norms, and discourses about child development; (b) different institutions' perspective with traditions that include different practices; and (c) children's perspectives that include their engagements and motivations. (Hedegaard, 2009: 65)

Thus she argues that institutional practices provide conditions for the development of learners. They argue that 'children's efforts and motives are usually directed towards successfully participating in the practice traditions of particular institutions' (15). Likewise In this paper I want to illustrate how teachers are subject to a similar dynamic. This creates the picture of a complex web of conditions and motives that operate in contexts such as classrooms. Thus classroom activity cannot be studied in isolation from the cultural historical situation that created it nor in disregard of this.

Failure to improve the teaching of writing

Despite attempts by initiatives such as National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), primary school attainment in writing in England lags behind that of reading (DCFS, 2009). This problem is noted also in other parts of the world (e.g. AEE, 2007). The concern about lack of progress has resulted in yet more initiatives designed to change teaching yet research shows that achieving such change is problematic (Fullan, 2003) and, in the specific case of literacy teaching in England, has

resulted in unintended and unwanted consequences (Cremin, 2006) [as explained below](#).

Writing is a multifaceted process which is often portrayed as a mainly psychological [or linguistic](#) activity (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Bereiter and Scardemalia, 1987) [or as a fine motor skill](#) (Christensen, 2009). Yet the teaching of writing involves interplay between teachers, pupils and the socio-cultural context in which it is taught. Writing involves putting together the necessary knowledge and skills to create conventional text at the same time as deciding on the message that the writer wishes to convey. How teachers go about constructing the classroom context in which young writers learn is influenced not only by the required curriculum but other societal, institutional and individual understandings of writing and of learning.

Critics have argued that the models of change adopted to bring about intended improvements are not the best ways to implement change. Myhill (2009) argues against the 'linear and transmissive' nature of such interventions (130). Fullan (1999) in a review of the factors that can contribute to the success of large-scale reform acknowledges the difficulty of implementing and sustaining change '....none of the programs can be made teacher-proof, school-proof, or district-proof' (11). Top down initiatives which operate 'a pedagogy of proficiency' (Willinsky, 1990:162) seem destined to fail. In reality, classrooms and teachers do not always operate proficiently - not because of any deficiency in themselves but because of the nature of the task itself. Cook-Gumperz (1986) stresses, 'Literacy learning takes place in a social environment through intellectual exchanges in which what is to be learned is to some extent a joint construction of teacher and student' (8).

Moreover, these attempts to implement change in the teaching of writing appear to have had a reductive influence on the curriculum (Chen and Derewianka, 2009). Evidence from research on practice indicates [a shift in teachers' goals that with](#) such initiatives ~~have~~ [resulting](#) in a

routinised approach to teaching writing in which teachers focus on the curriculum programmes at the expense of meaning and composition (Sedgwick, 2001; Grainger, 2004). Twiselton (2006) found that the implementation of National Literacy Strategy in England had resulted even in some trainee teachers adopting a focus in their literacy teaching on [the structure and organisation of tasks rather than the development of writers](#). In such approaches, it is claimed that teachers adopt a technicist view of writing (Cremin, 2006) and that interest in the content and the purpose of writing is lost (Frater, 2000; Hilton, 2001; Packwood & Messenheimer, 2003). Thus it is no longer a reluctance to change on the part of teachers as has been reported previously (e.g. Tharp and Gallimore, 1988; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall and Pell, 1999) but an overcompliance; a shift in the focus of teachers' intentions from an holistic understanding of writing to a more fragmented and curriculum led approach.

This shift in the orientation of teachers' writing instruction is situated in the current climate of many western education contexts preoccupied by targets and assessment which can dominate teachers' efforts (Earl, Watson, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan and Torrance, 2003; Hillocks, 2002; Sainsbury, 2009). Locke, Vulliamy, Webb and Hill (2005) argue that in what they describe as this 'technocratic-reductionist' construction of teaching, teachers are constrained by external accountability and driven by raising standards and measured outcomes. Grainger, Gouch and Lambirth (2005) in reviewing recent initiatives in England claim that 'primary professionals felt compromised and believed that they needed to give precedence to curriculum coverage and test preparation' (52). It is reported that these pressures from external forces on teachers' pedagogic practice have resulted in a sense of external pressure (Grainger et al, *ibid*), confusion and frustration (English, Hargreaves and Hislam, 2002) and stress (Fisher, 2004).

The sources cited above provide insightful critiques of current initiatives and the impact that they have had on teachers and their approach to the teaching of writing. They point to the futility of

policy makers imposing more curricula programmes to address the issue of lack of progress in writing. ~~The research reported here draws on CHAT to examine teachers' practice and what they say about it.~~ Literacy, and here specifically writing, provides an interesting context for examining the complex dynamic of the classroom. ~~A theoretical lens such as~~ CHAT, as a theoretical lens, focusing ~~as it does~~ on the broader socio-cultural activity system of school and; can illuminate this situated dynamic that is a classroom to develop better ways of taking teaching forward.

Method

The Talk to Text Project was a partnership between researchers at Exeter University and schools in the south of England that aimed to explore the relationship between talk and writing in children aged 5-7 years. The project was a design-based study that lasted two years. CHAT was used retrospectively as a theoretical lens to reflect on the process of the project and the data. The first year was a development year and researchers worked with four class teachers and head teachers to develop talk activities to support children in their writing. In the second year, two more classes from different schools joined the project. These six class teachers used the talk activities designed in year one of the project and continued to refine and develop these and other similar activities. Throughout the second year data were collected with the intention of identifying ways in which the talk activities supported children in their writing. Samples of children's writing were obtained at the beginning, end and during the year of the project from the six project classes. Full details of this project can be read in Fisher, Jones, Larkin and Myhill (2010).

The teachers were full partners in the project and meetings were held with class teachers, head teachers and researchers at every stage of the design, implementation and analysis of the data. Two researchers were employed on the project to collect and analyse data but class and head teachers were also encouraged to observe and/or video in classrooms when Talk to Text activities

were being used. Teachers also identified six children from their class to act as focus children. These were a boy and a girl who were identified as making good, average and poor progress in writing. The full data set can be seen in Table One.

Table 1: Data collection

Data	Collection	Collected by
Interviews with 6 focus children in each class (36)	September and July of project year	Research staff
Two writing samples (one narrative and one non-fiction) from all children in each class	September and July of project year	Class teachers
Videos of writing lessons focusing on teachers in whole class sessions and one pair of focus children during talk and writing activities.	One per class per term	Research staff
Writing samples from focus children	After videoed lessons	Class teachers
Classroom observation using field notes or video as chosen by class teacher	Lessons selected by school	Class teacher or head teacher
Teacher interview	At the end of the project	Researcher

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In all [videos of 24 hour long lessons](#) were collected. [The design allowed for the research team to video once per term in each of the project classrooms. In addition, teachers were provided with cameras and encouraged to collect their own video data.](#) Due to problems with equipment and some teachers' reluctance to [be-videoed themselves](#) there was an uneven number of [videos recorded/recordings](#) per class ([see Table Two](#)). The camera and microphone were placed to capture teacher input in the whole class parts of the lesson and trained on the focus pair during talk and writing activities. This also captured any teacher input to the individual children and the audio picked up teacher input to the whole class while the camera remained focused on the pair of children. [These video data were Uanalysed](#) using Atlas Ti software, [these video data were and initially](#) coded [by the research team](#) for content of the talk and further analysis [was conducted](#) of

critical episodes.

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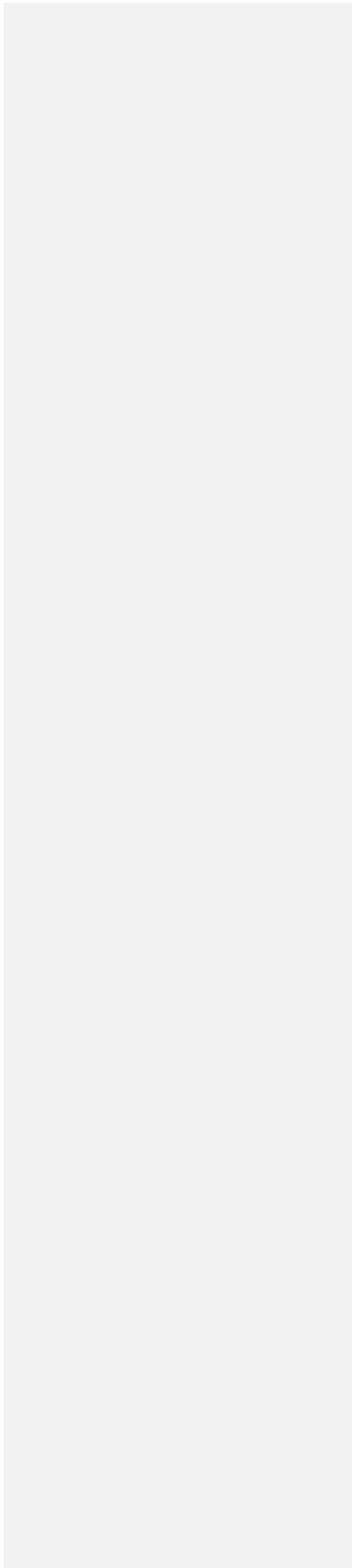


Table 2: Lesson videos

Teacher	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
A1	0	1	1
A2	0	1	1
B	2	2	2
C	School dropped out early on		
D	2	3	2
E	1	2	1
F	1	1	1

Semi structured, in-depth, audio taped interviews were undertaken with the six teachers involved in the study after the end of the project and were intended to provide a reflective evaluation of the project but were also driven by the cultural historical framework. The interviews took place during school time and supply cover was provided to allow teachers the time to talk at length. The length of time during which the researcher had worked with the teachers and the exploratory nature of the project provided a familiarity that allowed the teachers to speak openly about their involvement in the project and how it had impacted on their thinking and their practice. The interviews focused on four aspects: the project; teachers' perceptions of children's progress during the project; the teacher's own experience of writing itself and of learning to teach writing; and their own concerns in the teaching of writing.

At the beginning and end of the year of the project semi structured interviews were conducted with 18 dyads of children aged between 5 and 7 years from six classes. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Writing samples from the focus children were collected at the beginning and end of the year of the project and at the time of each video recording. This paper draws in the main from the video evidence and the teacher interviews. There is also brief mention of the other data sources.

Analysis

Analysis was undertaken in two phases. In the first phase, the analysis was driven by the purpose of the funded study to investigate the relationship between talk and writing. Subsequent analysis for the purposes of this paper drew on the original analysis in addition to further analysis of all interview and video data in an iterative process to investigate the relationship between teachers' statements and their practice. In this process as researcher I had to recognise the impact the research team will have had on the data collected and how my own goals influenced my interpretation. The final interviews were conducted at the end of one or two years of working with these teachers. This meant that there was a certain amount of trust between us but also the teachers were only too aware of my own orientation in writing pedagogy. Furthermore my construction of their meanings is inevitably influenced by my position as a researcher rather than an actor within the classroom practice.

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Video data

~~Using ATLAS ti allowed the research team to take a grounded approach to coding the video data. This was important due the exploratory nature of the original project. The video data were coded initially by the research team. Subsequent analysis for the purposes of this paper drew on the original coding as well as further analysis of critical episodes from a cultural historical perspective.~~

In the initial analysis, each of the 24 hour long videos was watched in its entirety to get a sense of the whole lesson. Then the video was sectioned into small clips and coded. Codes were selected to describe the content of the talk and both child and teacher actions. Coding was discussed and refined in research team meetings to clarify meanings and attempt to limit overinterpretation.

New codes were added to the code list as they occurred in different videos until no new codes ~~emerged~~ were identified. In all 37 codes were allocated to the 24 lesson videos. Frequency counts of the behaviour corresponding to each code were made. Six of the 37 codes were teacher codes and 31 were child codes. Table one-three provides summary of the most common codes: that is

those that had a frequency of more than 40 instances. The focus of this paper is on the teacher but child codes are included in the table to provide a fuller picture overall.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE](#)

[Table 3: Frequency count of most common codes](#)

Code	Number of recorded instances
Teacher supports ideas and/or builds on content	104
Teacher manages task	70
Teacher supports oral rehearsal/form	70
Children manage or talk about the task	69
Children talk about writing, spelling or scribing	69
Child writes or works silently	66
Teacher supports talk	65
Child says sentence as writes	52
Child sounds out spelling	51
Children share ideas together	45
Teacher input related to secretarial aspects	45
Social talk (children)	44

The six teacher codes were identified according to the focus of the input or interaction. Thus the codes related to three aspects specifically focused on [linguistic features of writing](#) and three further aspects of teaching. The three aspects of writing were [secretarial-orthographic](#) (spelling, handwriting, punctuation), form (the way meaning is expressed, [for example selection of vocabulary](#)), and content ([such as character choice and plot](#)). The other three aspects of teaching were focus on the task (for example, getting out pencils, how much to write); the actual talk (for example, what to say to your partner, whose turn to talk); and reflection (in which children were asked to think about what helped them or what was difficult). Five of these six teacher codes were to be found in the list of ten most common codes; only 'reflection' as a teaching code is missing from this list of most common codes.

The coding of the video data also allows codes to be attributed to each of the teachers. Although

most numbers become too small to be meaningful at this level of analysis, table [three-four](#) allows us to see how different teachers emphasised different aspects of teaching in their interactions with their pupils. The figures are given as a percentage of the overall number of coded interactions for each teacher. The number of interactions about the content of the writing for each teacher cluster around the average. Other aspects of teacher interaction vary considerably between teachers. Such coding allows us to consider the possible orientations and understandings for individual teachers and to speculate on how such differences may be interpreted by children in each of these classes. For example, the children in class F may develop a different understanding of the importance of [secretarial/orthographic](#) aspects of writing than those in classes A2 and E. Similarly, children in class A2 may afford more importance to completion of the task than those in class F.

[Table 4: Teacher codes by class](#)

Teacher	Orthographic	Content	Form	Reflection	Talk	Task	Total
A1 (Wells)	8%	35%	15%	2%	15%	25%	100 n=67
A2	0	33%	8%	0	17%	42%	100 n=95
B	7%	27%	23%	8%	20%	15%	100 n=234
D	19%	31%	11%	5%	16%	18%	100 n=135
E	0	22%	19%	9%	22%	28%	100 n=163
F (Chester)	29%	24%	28%	0	12%	7%	100 n=163
Total	12%	28%	19%	5%	18%	18%	100 n=857

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE](#)

In addition, critical episodes were selected by the research team to provide examples of the various codes and to illustrate aspects of the findings as they emerged.

Teacher interviews

Each teacher interview lasted at least an hour and was audio taped. These tapes were transcribed

and analysed firstly according to the four topics introduced in the interviews: the project; children's progress on the project; the teacher's own experience of writing itself and of learning to teach writing; and their own concerns in the teaching of writing. Following this, the transcripts were coded inductively to identify possible teacher orientations in the activity and their values related to writing and the teaching of writing. [As indicated earlier, such coding was inevitably influenced by my own preconceptions: as with the teachers my actions were led by my own goals.](#)

All six teachers expressed enthusiasm for the project. They described how it had helped them reflect on their own practice and that it had shifted their emphasis from teacher talk to child talk during teaching sessions. Although all teachers said that they felt it had helped children to grow in confidence as writers and to improve the content of their writing, three mentioned concern that children had not made as much progress as they should in spelling and presentation. Apart from this, all six teachers appeared to express a relatively balanced view of the different aspects of children's writing: both [secretarial-orthographic](#) aspects and communicative intent.

On a personal level, [when asked about their writing histories,](#) the teachers expressed very different experiences of learning to write and of any engagement in writing in their adult life. Of the six teachers only one admitted to doing any writing, beyond necessities, now as an adult. She was the only one who had more than the vaguest memories of writing as a child, although three did remember that they quite liked writing at school. Not one could remember learning how to teach writing during their training.

Teachers also referred to the external forces that influence what they do in the classroom. Many of these linked directly and indirectly to the assessment regime and teachers referred frequently to the importance of institutionally imposed targets as well of outside agencies that monitored literacy performance. They talked about the number of sub-levels of improvement required for the

school or for their class in the seven-year-old assessments. One mentioned a recent inspection in which the school had been criticised for poor presentation, [in particular untidy handwriting](#). They spoke of the way these pressures came also from indirect sources such as parents or the teacher in the next class. One teacher referred to training videos produced for teaching literacy that she felt unable to emulate.

Although the analysis of the main responses in the interviews indicated many similarities among the teachers, further analysis indicated some differences. Key words were identified for each teacher by identifying and counting the instance of frequently occurring words in the transcripts. Although there were many different words used, it was possible to group them into those that focused on the learning climate in the classroom such as confidence, practice, enjoyment; those that focused on the communicative and creative aspects of writing such as ideas and imagination; and those that dealt with the [secretarial/orthographic](#) aspects of spelling, handwriting and punctuation. These different emphases provide possible insight into how each teacher conceptualizes their role in the teaching of writing. Table [four-five](#) shows how frequently certain of the key words found across the sample were used in the interviews. This coding indicated two teachers, named here by the pseudonyms Wells and Chester, who appeared, from what they said at interview, to have very different understandings of writing.

[Table 5: Frequency of key words](#)

	A1 Wells	A2	B	D	E*	F Chester
Confidence	2	8		3		
Enjoyment		3				5
Think			10			
Practice			7			
Handwriting	25	4		5		2
Spelling	7	8		6		4
Punctuation	1	1		1		3
Ideas	11	5	12	1		4
Exciting/boring		1				4
Interesting						6
Creativity	7			3		3
Imagination				3		4

[*Failure of audio equipment meant that no transcript was possible for this interview](#)

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE](#)

A situated dynamic

Teacher cameos

[Data from the two teachers described below are used to illustrate the complex nature of classroom activity. Both teachers are clearly motivated to their best by their pupils. However, their histories as writers and teachers together with external influences have shaped their practice and how they think about their practice. Their situation and the history of that situation both enable and restrict the actions they, as acting subjects, take to engage with the learners they teach.](#)

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Mrs Chester

Mrs Chester had been teaching for ten years and was an experienced practitioner with early years learners. The focus children from Mrs Chester's class made above average progress (for the project schools) over the year in composition. However, they made on or below average progress in spelling and handwriting; this was an aspect that worried her. From a personal perspective, she spoke enthusiastically about her own experiences of writing. She was unusual among this group of teachers in that she is a keen writer herself.

I mean I do like writing, I write diaries and I always have. I just came back from France at the weekend and so all my holiday I have been writing. It is sort of an ongoing joke in my family, because I do remember doing that when I was little, we used to stick things in like scrap books and write about what they were.

I write and not worry about it. I really enjoy it, and it just comes I

find it very therapeutic and I write if I have got worries or anything I write it down and it just really helps me.

Her memories of learning to write at school were less positive, 'I remember at school, my earliest memory is them telling me that my handwriting wasn't very good. My school sort of input was much more negative'.

She had enjoyed working on the project and felt that it had helped her classroom practice. She particularly made the point that the children's confidence had grown.

I think that the project helped them to get the creative ideas and the quantity was definitely there.

Some of it was just enhancing what I already did in the classroom, it was just taking it that little step further, just because we were given ideas of how to use it, it broadened the ideas that I was using. [We] were already doing a lot of discussion and a lot of drama, but it just gave me some different tools to do it with.

But there was one area that worried her: 'the things they get marks for'. She commented that national assessment results and school inspectors (Ofsted) were concerned about spelling and presentation. She felt that this aspect had been neglected over the year of the project.

But I feel I need to do much more work on the sort of structured handwriting and spelling and the things they are getting marks for like that, punctuation and letter formation things like that because we were

being quite experimental and imaginative they got that side beautifully,
but the more boring...

we wanted them creative, we wanted them to write so we did so much of
that and hoped that the rest would come naturally, but it wasn't quite as
much as we'd hoped.

Mrs Chester's own enjoyment of writing appeared to cause her anxiety about writing becoming boring to her class. This may have been accentuated by her more negative memories of writing at school. She repeated the theme of making writing 'exciting', 'interesting', enjoyable several times during the interview, as can be seen from table four. However, at the same time, an awareness of external pressures raised her anxiety that these areas were being neglected through attempts to make the teaching more interesting. It must be recognised that these interviews took place at a time when she knew the results from the writing assessment for the project and the national levels for her class. Thus she was aware that spelling and handwriting had been identified as a weakness.

Mrs Wells

Mrs Wells was more recently qualified, the project year being only her second year of teaching. Despite her lack of experience she was thought of very highly by her school and had been the regional newly qualified teacher winner in the national teacher awards. The focus children in her class made above average (for the project) improvement in composition and about average improvement for spelling and punctuation.

Unlike the other teachers she has some memory of learning to write.

I remember tracing over dots. And having a sentence at the top of a page and copying it. My mum used to do a lot with me, she used to buy a lot of books and stuff. I went to school being able to read and write.
Spelling particular words, like 'necessary', you know learning the two c's and two s's, you know those rules I think. No, I would say I quite liked it at school, well all through infant and middle school I never really had a problem with writing. I always had nice handwriting. I prided myself on my handwriting.

When asked if she continues to write as an adult, she replied,

No, I don't. I'd think, 'oh I'd love to do this, oh I'm going to write a children's book one day', but I don't know, I just never have the time, just to sit there and write. I don't keep a diary or...

Even though she had qualified relatively recently, she did not remember being taught how to teach writing. She only remembered being shown the stages of development of writing.

She felt very positive about the project and pleased with her children's response.

I felt like I could really see a difference. they can all happily have a go at writing, they are really creative and all get on and do writing and it is now the technical side of it that's let them down. the handwriting and the punctuation and that kind of thing has gone.

She commented,

It's not until When they go up into year two and the year two teachers say, 'God, how can you read their handwriting?'

However, this did not seem to concern her,

I'd rather get them to the stage where they want to be writing rather than worry about how their handwriting looks, I know that's really important but I think for this age they just need to get it down.

Mrs Wells also evidences the complex concerns of teachers and the way in which past history and current imperatives work together as they talk about their teaching. Her concern to develop children's confidence to have a go at writing seems tempered by her memory of being a neat writer herself. Although she seemed to be saying that spelling and handwriting should not be a concern with young children, handwriting figured large in all that she said about writing for both herself and her class. In interview, she mentioned handwriting 25 times.

Video evidence

As can be seen from table three above, Mrs Chester's interactions with children were coded as being about [secretarial orthographic](#) aspects at more than twice the average and 10% more than any other teacher. In fact nearly one third of her interactions were about [secretarial orthographic](#) aspects of writing, despite her concern that this was an aspect that she [felt that she](#) had neglected during the year of the project. Three lessons involving Mrs Chester were videoed over the course of the year of the project. The episode transcribed below is one of several in which the interaction between this teacher and children in the class illustrates how concern for spelling and presentation permeated much of the interaction about writing – even when the purpose of the interaction seemed otherwise.

The lesson involved children making up stories from a collection of objects that the teacher had put out on the carpet. Children worked in pairs giving ideas for a story based on these objects. Following this they were asked to go and write an individual story. The teacher emphasised that the story should be exciting. When the stories were written they came back to the carpet and one

child was chosen to read out her story. After listening to the story, the teacher commented:

Brilliant loads of writing. Look. You said you had lunch and that was really good but you've forgotten your full stops. You were talking about the food I would really have liked to know what it tastes like so instead of just saying I had a sandwich you could say I had a sandwich and tell me what it tastes like. When you go back to it I'd like you to put in your full stops.

A ~~revealing~~ episode in another lesson [revealed the conflicting goals apparently driving this teacher's actions. was when the](#) The children's interest had been really stimulated by the receipt of a letter coming from a large toy bird puppet that was kept in the classroom. The task for the day was to write a really interesting reply to the bird. When the class was asked what should be in the letter the responses included: Alliteration, neat writing, finger spaces. To each of which the teacher responded, 'brilliant'. These young children were clearly able to provide the right answer in the eyes of the teacher despite the apparent demands of the task.

Unlike Mrs Chester, Mrs Wells' highest percentage of coded interactions was about the content of writing (35%) and management of the task (25%). Only 8% of her interactions related to ~~secretarial~~ [orthographic](#) aspects of writing. Only two videos were made of Mrs Wells' class during the year. In neither of these two lessons did she mention handwriting in her interaction with children. Although it is likely that other lessons took place where the focus was on handwriting, in the videoed lessons where the focus was on expressing ideas, handwriting was not mentioned. Both in interaction with individuals as they wrote and with the whole class in introductory or plenary sessions, there was no mention.

One lesson was based on a story about a young owl that is afraid to fly. The first half of the lesson consisted of a talk activity known as 'Conscience Ally' where children stand in two lines facing each other and whisper thoughts to a child who walks between them. Here the thoughts were

either about being brave and flying or about how frightening it was. Children then role-played mother owl and baby owl before writing their words in speech bubbles. The following exchange took place between the teacher and two children who have worked as a pair. The girl had just finished and showed her speech bubble to Mrs Wells.

Girl: I've finished

Teacher: Have you acted it out? Has one been Mum and one been Billy Wise?

Girl: Yeah

Boy: Yeah

Teacher: Have you made sure that your writing makes sense?

Boy: (Reads own writing) 'It's too scary'

Teacher: That's nice. (Reads girl's writing) 'Don't look down'. That's very good

At the end of the lesson when the teacher brought all the children all together, some children came in pairs to the front of the class to read their speech bubbles. After hearing what they had written, the other children had to guess which child had written the mother's words and which had written the baby owl's words. Mrs Wells praised children's good writing saying that she knew it was good as the others could guess who was speaking. She also praised them for sitting nicely and listening well to each other. The same focus on meaning of the writing and following the procedures of the lesson was evident in the second videoed lesson.

Discussion

This brief glimpse of two writing classrooms set alongside the other data provides some illustration of the complexity of classroom activity. In Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) the unit of analysis is set within the concept of an activity system arising from societal need and evidenced in the practice of societal institutions such as school. [In this paper, these six teachers.](#)

[working in a project to improve their teaching of writing, are taken as a case. The data provide insights into their goals and the actions they take to achieve these goals within the activity system of schooling.](#) Activity is seen as an explanatory principle not merely a framing context (Tulviste, 1999). It is 'a complex psychological process through which inner motivation and intentions, postponed in time, stimulate their own development and realization (69).' CHAT takes the idea of cultural models in figured worlds ([Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998](#)) in which action is mediated by cultural tools (Vygotsky, [1978](#)) and activity is object-oriented as well as mediated by social norms and rules within communities.

The idea of teaching as goal directed activity goes some way to explaining the difficulty experienced by some teachers in implementing externally imposed reform. Teachers' understandings are influenced by a range of cultural and social, historical and present influences on their practice. How teachers are able and are enabled to teach writing in a way that retains their individual understanding of the practice of writing and teaching; that retains the elements of composition and meaning at the same time as teaching [secretarial/orthographic](#) aspects of writing will depend on the societal and institutional context in which they teach.

The individual orientation of the teacher is embedded within the activity in dynamic relation to the institutional and societal context. [These teachers articulated clearly their awareness of the external pressures on their practice.](#) Activity as described by Leontiev is made up of actions with goal directed purposes. Actions are the means to the end. However, when there is dissonance between the object motive of the activity and the intermediate purposes of the actions, short term purposes get in the way of long term goals. These teachers in discussion of their practice identified different influences on their practice. Not only was there their own understanding of writing, there were also their own stated beliefs of how it should be taught. In addition external pressures were ever present and, at least for Mrs Chester, seemed to work counter to what she

said about teaching and learning.

These teachers, as many teachers, have to contend with competing motivations. At societal and institutional levels the activity of schooling requires progress to be evidenced according to externally imposed criteria. At an individual level Mrs Chester is faced with a class of children whom she wishes to motivate. Also, she is a person who loves writing and wants to share this enthusiasm with her class. On the other hand, Mrs Wells says she believes firmly in allowing children to develop in their own ways and own time. This is reflected in her classroom interactions but her discussion of learning foregrounds other objects which impinge on her practice.

Activity is always relational. 'Society produces the activity of the individuals forming it' (51 Leontiev). We can understand more about human activity by disclosing its internal relations: 'an analysis specifically of its internal systematic connections' (67). Activity is characterised by transformations between activity and actions. Hedegaard (2009) develops these ideas and considers how activity takes place at three levels: societal, institutional, and individual, [in a cultural historical theory of child development. She argues that society produces values and norms; that different institutions develop different practice traditions and; that children's engagements and motivations within these contexts initiate and restrict their development.](#)

~~I see society, institutions, and person as three different perspectives in a cultural historical theory of development: (a) society's perspective with traditions that implies values, norms, and discourses about child development; (b) different institutions' perspective with traditions that include different practices; and (c) children's perspectives that include their engagements and motivations. (65)~~

~~Thus she argues that institutional practices provide conditions for the development of learners.~~

The data presented here indicate that the same relational model can apply to teachers. It seems

clear from the literature described earlier that teacher development is both directed and restricted by the socio-cultural context within which it operates. In particular, in the current climate of heavily policy driven curricula, the policy agenda predominates. If we examine motives at three levels as evidenced by the data presented here, we can begin to trace the dynamic relations that influence how classroom priorities develop.

Figure 1: A relational model of teacher practice

	Societal conditions Policy perspective	Institutional practice Teacher (as member of school) perspective	Individual perspective Teacher (as individual) perspective
Need	Society as economic unit	Instrument of institution of school and needs of society	
Object of the activity	Literate members of society	Practice traditions with possibly conflicting values of good early years practice and high achieving pupils.	Teacher as both subject and agent
Goal – intentional aspect of action	Improved literacy test scores	Possibly conflicting goals of happy motivated learners and improvement of test scores	People with differing engagements and motivations
Actions – operational aspect of action	Impose targets (tool) on schools	Dissonance between object motive of institution and the intermediate purposes of the actions.	Dissonance between personal, institutional and societal goals

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

Societal conditions give rise to the sort of schooling within society’s institutions. Institutional history gives rise to practice within institutions. The individual brings their own orientations and goals to impact on classroom interactions and actions. Yet individuals as members of institutions and society both participate in and contribute to the activity. Teachers are both subject and agent. Their personal activities are processes not systems, not manifestations of institutional practice. ‘They are not inscribed into each other but each influence each other dialectically’ (Hedegaard, 2009: 65).

Thus whereas the object of the activity at a societal level may be largely agreed by all concerned, practice traditions within institutions and individual engagements result in differing goals and different actions. It cannot be forgotten that societal objects are mediated by institutions such as governments and schools through individuals such as politicians and teachers. CHAT allows us to

consider how, even where the object is shared, goals and actions may vary.

Implications and Conclusion

This analysis allows us to explore the 'figured world' of the classroom with greater understanding. [Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain \(Holland et al., 1998\)](#) draw on Leontiev in developing their concept of 'figured worlds' to categorise social contexts. Figured worlds are historical phenomena which are entered or into which people are recruited and which themselves develop through the engagement of their participants. 'Figured worlds are socially organised and reproduced. They divide and relate participants (almost as roles), and they depend upon the interaction and intersubjectivity for perpetuation' (41). How children learn to be as pupils and as writers is shaped by the mediation of the teacher – in both explicit and implicit ways. In the same way, teachers are acting subjects within the broader cultural and societal context. Rather than deplore teachers inability to respond effectively to policy initiatives to raise standards of writing; rather than pointing blame at the initiatives themselves, a cultural historical explanation points to working on the orientations and goals of the participants at every level of the activity.

As reported earlier in the paper, research shows that while the external imposition of programmes and targets has had limited impact on assessed standards it has had a negative affect on the way some teachers teach writing. The cases reported here indicate the need for an improved professional climate where the actions of policy makers are measured not only by their impact on pupil performance but at every level of the classroom and school context.

The research reported earlier and the teachers described here point to the negative impact of externally imposed targets either from assessment or inspection regimes. New initiatives to encourage newly qualified teachers in England to take extra Masters level training (TDA, 2009)

will have little positive impact if the institutional context of the classroom overrides any burgeoning understanding of teaching young writers. It is clear from the research reported here that the two teachers responded differently to the external forces of which they were both aware. Further work is needed to understand how teachers as acting subjects within the school system prioritise goals and develop the orientations that influence the actions they take within the classroom.

This paper has tried to offer a different way of looking at the perceived lack of development in the teaching of writing and some further explanation of the reported narrowing of teachers' approaches to the teaching of writing. The object in the primary school writing classroom is that children should learn to write. Yet the practice traditions also require certain conditions for what is considered to be good early years practice: that children should be interested and confident. Furthermore, writing means different things to different people: different things in different contexts. Cultural historical activity theory has been used to explore the dynamic relationship between the different levels of activity. It is argued that the goals underlying the different objects of activity at the different levels need to be taken into account in developing understanding of how these objects are operationalised.

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