

Why diversity in writing matters! Exploring the *Writing Realities* framework



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Ross was recently interviewed by Kala Williams about The Writing For Pleasure Centre's [Writing Realities](#) framework. You can watch their interview [here](#). Alternatively, you can read their transcript below.

Kala Williams: How did the Writing Realities framework come about?

- Well, it came off the back of the excellent work being done around renewing teachers' interest in ensuring that their classroom libraries reflect the realities of school children's lives.
- I'm thinking of the work the CLPE does around [Reflecting Realities](#) as well as the work of [Dr Melanie Ramdarshan-Bold](#).
- At The WfP Centre we felt we needed to extend this thinking to the writing classroom. My colleagues and I (Professor Doug Kaufman, Felicity Ferguson and Dr Navan Govender) believe strongly that all young people deserve an opportunity to represent themselves - share who they are and what they know - through writing.
- And if you look at what's been going on with some writers and publishers in the news recently, it's never been more important that children learn how to represent others in their writing in a way that is respectful, informed and meaningful. So it all came from conversations around that really.

There are 6 main principles: writer-identity, critical literacies, culturally sustaining pedagogy, multiliteracies, translanguaging and intertextuality. Can you briefly outline what is meant by each of these?

Definitely. So:

- **Writer identity** is the idea that our writing and who we are can't really be separated. Everything we write will either share an aspect of who we are, what we think, what we care about, what we know or how we feel. Therefore, as teachers, one of our roles is to nurture and develop children's writer identities.

- **Critical literacies** is the idea that, as writers, we sometimes need to stand back and look at our writing critically. And by critically, I don't necessarily mean negatively - but we need to sometimes meditate on what we are writing. For example, sharing our composition with others to get their perspective or it might be actively subverting dominant narratives by writing a graphic novel. Another example is reimagining the traditions in fairytales. You know, how often it's a woman who needs to be saved by a man. Things like that.
- **Culturally sustaining pedagogy** is about creating a writing community in the classroom which looks to invite, sustain and nourish everyone's identity. It's about celebrating who your peers are and what they have to say. But it's also about sustaining the lives and cultures of people who might not be present in the classroom itself. Essentially writing about people who may not be like you, or maybe are like you but in different ways. It's about writing about them in an informed and respectful way.
- **Multiliteracies** is the idea that writing is just one of many ways in which we can share meaning. Writing can be undertaken in lots of different ways. You know - *multi-literacies*. So, this can mean children writing and working together. Teachers can give instruction which is responsive to their individual classes. Children can be teachers in the writing classroom. Classes can get together and think about the different ways they might want to publish or perform their writing at the end of a project. Things like that.
- **Translanguaging** is when young writers are given choice over how they decide to use language according to different circumstances and in response to the purpose they have for their writing and their audience. This means children can write in multiple languages, use different dialects, language varieties if they want to, and write in different registers (use different levels of formality). Depending on who they are writing for.
- **Intertextuality** is the idea that what we write is influenced by our reading, our play, the things we watch and listen to, the video games we play and our various life experiences - what can be called 'life texts'. These texts not only affect what we write about but *how* we write it and who we are as writers. Intertextuality is kind of like remixing or 'playful-plagiarism'. It's about children taking a text they know (whatever that text might be) and making something new with it.

Clearly a lot of research has gone into this framework but do tell us how the book [Real World Writers](#) helps teachers to incorporate the framework in everyday practice?

- Firstly, children are explicitly [taught idea generation techniques](#) that writers use to generate their *own ideas* for class (and their [personal](#)) writing projects. This helps develop their writer-identities.
- The book has a chapter devoted to helping children share what they know and, importantly, their personal response to what they are learning about, in the wider curriculum.
- We have a chapter devoted to helping children develop their sense of intertextuality. How they can use and write about their reading profitably in the writing classroom.
- [The projects we recommend are always purposeful and authentic](#) (meaning they serve the real reasons writers write) and so children always get together with their teacher and consider how they wish to publish or perform their writing - for a genuine audience - at a project's end.
- We explain how teachers can engage children in talking about their writing in a critical way during class sharing, through activities like [Author's Chair](#), and through daily [pupil-conferencing](#) with their teacher.

- We also have a number of projects which encourage children to engage in culturally sustaining practices. For example: by writing [people's life histories, biographies, memoirs, poetry, graphic novels, realistic fiction, historical accounts and discussion texts](#).

Let's get into more detail about writer identities. How do primary teachers pinpoint such identities in developing writers in order to build writing confidence?

Well this is the interesting thing. It's not the teacher's job to pinpoint children's identities on their behalf. Instead, the teacher explicitly teaches idea generation techniques which help children identify the subjects they wish to write about for themselves.

So, for example, in the Nursery and Reception classes in our affiliate schools - this is sometimes done by having what we call an '*Ideas Party*'. The teacher simply gets some flipchart paper out and asks the most beautifully simple question: 'what would you like to write about today?'. It's wonderful. Children shout out all sorts of things and the teacher draws little pictures onto the flipchart in response. Takes about 5-10 minutes. When ready, children choose something from the board and off they go to write.

Another example for slightly older children, and this is actually a lesson by writer-teacher Georgia Heard, involves children making what's called an '*Ideas Heart*'. Children write in their heart all the things that are important to them. They can then choose one of these things to write an information text or maybe a personal narrative. And actually, what's really interesting about this particular technique, is that these two genres often merge and you get some beautifully informative but also very moving non-fiction texts - great for greater-depth I must say. And actually they are a real joy to read. You get to know your pupils so much more in this type of writing classroom. It's a real privilege being a *Writing For Pleasure* teacher I have to say.

Critical literacies is an interesting principle. However, it can be challenging to develop writing projects that take into account social action of relevance to a wide spread of cultures and classes within a classroom. Any practical tips for teachers to take into account the backgrounds of their pupils in order to come up with projects that appeal to all writers in their classroom?

Certainly, in terms of writing for social action, we suggest a number of projects.

We have our [Letter For Personal Gain](#) project. This is where children write to someone who they think can get them something they really want - or make something happen. All the children send their letters off at the end of the project - and you see what happens. This [introduces](#) the idea that writing can be used as a tool for persuasion and action. You can then build on this by undertaking our [Advocacy Journalism](#) project. This is where each child writes an article about a local charity they are personally moved by. They advocate for that charity in their article. You can run this project like a competition - so the best articles actually win a cheque for their charity. Regardless, all the children send their articles (with a covering letter) to their specific charity inviting them to read it and use it if they want to.

Finally, we have a [Community Activism](#) project. Children identify a local issue which they are moved to write about. They can send articles or letters to the local press and other local magazines and things. Or they write to the council department or any other body which is responsible for the issue they've identified.

Can you give some primary based examples of how culturally sustaining pedagogy has been prioritised so as to shed some light on the impact of research and care in the writing journey?

I think my favourite example of this personally has always been [People's History](#). It's a project which invites children to interview someone at home or in their community and write a brief personal narrative from their life. A small moment from that person's life that has stayed with them - for whatever reason. These can then be put on public display in the school hall (along with some artwork) and families and the local community can be invited to come read, talk and share - a bit like a gallery exhibition really. Again, it's such a pleasure to read these pieces. Children take such care over them and it brings the community together.

Primary writers often struggle with connections to audience and tend to write from an 'inverted position' not necessarily taking into account the reader. How does the approach of multiliteracies develop critical thinking?

This is a really good point you make. It's true that children are often, usually unnecessarily, asked to write for - you know - 'pseudo-authentic' reasons. Essentially, 'fake reasons'. A diet of this kind of writing results in children as you say writing from an 'inverted position' or not being able to take into account a reader - usually because there is no genuine reader beyond their teacher's evaluation. A good example of this is requiring children to write letters to glue sticks persuading them to come back into the classroom.

Multiliteracies, I suppose, invites a class to get together to talk about their goals for a class writing project. Questions can be asked like:

- Who do we want to receive our writing at the end of this project?
- What might they need from us?
- What are we going to need to do and think about to ensure that our writing is seen as successful and meaningful by these people?

It's very difficult for children to give genuine answers to these sorts of questions if there isn't a genuine reader to discuss. You know?

Let's talk more about translanguaging. It is important children are able to demonstrate their writers flair and often this means personalities through characterisation coming through their descriptive and expressions. We always as primary teachers encourage Standard English with some degree of informal colloquial language based on English dialects but is this inclusive enough?

[Dr Ian Cushing](#) is doing some wonderful work about this at the moment. He would be a great guest to have. I would like to listen to him answer this question. But you're right. Standard English is what is asked for by the curriculum. Writing in Standard English for a long time has granted people access and credibility. Ian Cushing is sociolinguist and so can talk about the problems with that. Certainly, we need to teach Standard English because, rightly or wrongly, at the moment, it continues to give people that access and credibility. However, we also need to make sure that children don't come to see Standard English as *the* standard. Instead, Standard English is just one of many English varieties which they can *choose* to write in. Choice is the key word here. Choice based on what they think their audience will actually want, expect or need from them.

Intertextuality as referenced in the framework seems to be an ultimate outcome of readers who write to me but can you break down how primary teachers can get children to develop written responses to what they read in terms of when on the writing journey (this question is more about handling lower abilities who might struggle with this cognitive level of critical response)?

It's funny because I see it a bit differently to you. I always consider intertextuality to be something that starts very early. For example, when I write with children in Nursery or Reception, they absolutely love to play around in intertextuality. They will make me *Frozen*-inspired picturebooks or they'll write about when they crashed their motorbike on the playground and it exploded into a ball of flames. These pieces of writing are artefacts which represent children's responses to what they've read or their 'life texts'.

For example, if I read *The Mole Who Knew It Was None Of His Business* by Werner Holzwarth & Wolf Erlbruch to a Reception class just before I invite them to go make books - I know for a fact I'm going to get a lot of pooey - messy stories back by the session's end!

One thing our Nursery and Reception teachers do is they will show children a well-loved book. A book they've read a few times for pleasure. They'll bring it to the writing classroom and they'll flick through the pages and they'll simply ask: what do you see on this page that we could do in our books today? This is intertextuality too.

The easiest way to see intertextuality in action - and this goes for teachers of any age - is to read them a poem and invite them to draw or write 'something', 'anything' after they've heard it. You'll receive 30+ different personal responses in return. These personal responses can then be shared with each other as a whole class and they become your class' collective response to that poem. And through this process, through hearing other people's responses - children develop a much deeper understanding of that poem than they would otherwise. It's a beautiful thing.

Your framework mentions some interesting case studies where all 6 principles of Writing Realities are evidenced. Do share some key examples of how the principles have led to enriching writing outcomes in a British context.

Oh my goodness I know! The case studies are just all so wonderful and inspiring to read aren't they! It's very difficult for me to choose a favourite. Today, I think I'll choose the case study of Chris Searle. He was an amazing teacher in Stepney - London - well worth investigating him online. He created a true community of writers in his classroom. They wrote *People's History* of the lives of women in the local area. They helped people translate all their home language writing into English. They published commercially available poetry and memoir anthologies about working-class life in Stepney. They started their own community action group to help save the docklands. They would regularly write in response to what they were reading in the local papers. Really transformative stuff.