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## Evaluation of every child a writer

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### Introduction

In 2008, the University of Exeter and the National Foundation for Educational Research were commissioned by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) now Department for Education, to conduct an evaluation of the *Every Child a Writer* initiative. The study employed quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate impact and explore process and practice over the second year of the project.

### Aims

The research aimed to evaluate:

The impact of involvement in Every Child a Writer (ECaW) on standards of writing in the schools: on teaching, of both class teachers and one-to-one tutors; on pupils' attitudes and perceptions; and on the whole school.

The delivery of ECaW including investigating processes which supported/hindered the effectiveness of ECaW, and identify features of effective and ineffective practice.

Perceptions of cost effectiveness.

### Methodology

The research involved a sophisticated blend of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The mixed methodology research design adopted sought to address the specific aims of the research. There were essentially four major strands to the research design:

- a quantitative analysis of the impact of the initiative on pupils' progress in writing using a quasi-experimental design with a comparison sample of pupils in schools not involved in ECaW
- a quantitative analysis of questionnaires completed by teachers, headteachers, pupils and Local Authority Lead Consultants

- a series of case studies exploring the context in which ECaW is being introduced and the perceptions of the initiative and its impact on those involved
- a qualitative study of the writing produced by a sample of pupils involved in ECaW.

### ***Quantitative strand***

The quantitative element of the evaluation of ECaW comprised three main elements:

- the collection and analysis, including multilevel modelling, of teacher assessment data concerning pupils' writing skills in both ECaW and comparison schools
- a series of questionnaires – collecting information about teachers', headteachers' and lead ECaW consultants' perceptions of the ECaW programme and its impact or anticipated impact on teaching strategies and on pupils' attainment
- a pupil questionnaire to both ECaW and comparison schools – collecting information about pupils' perceptions of themselves as writers and their attitudes to writing

Teacher questionnaires were administered at two time points during the academic year 2009/10. In November 2009, four different questionnaires were administered, distinguishing between recipients in schools who took part in ECaW in 2008/09 (cohort 1) and those in schools who began ECaW in 2009/10 (cohort 2), and between Supported Teachers and Leading Teachers. In June/July 2010, questionnaires were again sent to teachers involved in the project. There were two different questionnaires, one for Supported Teachers and one for Leading Teachers. Questionnaires were also sent to headteachers and Local Authority (LA) Lead Consultants in June/July 2010.

### ***Qualitative strand***

Central to the qualitative strand were ten case studies of both cohort 1 (five) and cohort 2 (five) schools. Each case study focused on one LA. Selection of case study schools provided as broad as possible a range of characteristics. These characteristics cover demographics such as geographical location as well as economic and social background; schools making exceptional progress as well as those experiencing difficulties; schools with the Leading Teacher based in the school and those where this is not the case. Data included interviews with LA staff, teachers, one-to-one tutors, parent focus group and pupils; classroom observation of literacy teaching; and analysis of writing samples from pupils in case study schools. The case studies were conducted in the spring and summer terms of 2010.

# Key Findings

## *Impact*

### **Impact on standards**

- Statistical analysis of pupils' attainment data showed that the rate of progress in writing in ECaW schools was no greater than that in comparison schools.
- The perception of staff in ECaW schools was that ECaW had had a positive impact on the attainment and confidence, at least, of pupils receiving one-to-one tuition.
- There was some evidence that staff see the impact on pupils as broader than the criteria used in national curriculum teacher assessment. This could be because elements that may support longer term gains such as increased confidence and enthusiasm are not measured in national curriculum assessment. Furthermore, ECaW focuses on sentence construction and text cohesion which form only one part of the teacher assessments of writing.

### **Impact on teaching**

- Perceptions of staff in ECaW schools were that ECaW had had a positive effect on teachers' practice and confidence. Recently qualified teachers in particular found the extra support and contact with colleagues from outside their own schools very supportive. Leading Teachers also found the experience of benefit to their professional development both in relation to the teaching of writing and to leadership experience.
- A key aspect of impact was that Supported Teachers had been encouraged to plan their teaching according to the needs of their pupils as indicated by the writing that they produce rather than according to some external programme.
- ECaW had improved access to materials that support planning and assessment such as Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) for Supported Teachers. However, evidence from the observation of teaching and examination of the writing samples indicated that some teachers did not follow their plan but resorted to well established routines.
- There was evidence of increased and improved use of guided writing in ECaW classes. Based on research evidence into the teaching of writing, it is likely that improved use of guided writing targeted on the needs of pupils (rather than on the level they have attained) will have a positive impact when it becomes well established. Some teachers were still reluctant to work regularly on guided writing at the expense of overseeing the whole class as they write.
- There was evidence that some teachers focused more on encouraging pupils to include particular grammatical features such as connectives, adjectives, etc in their writing rather than focusing on how these are used to promote meaning and effect.

### **Impact on pupil attitudes and perceptions**

- There was no evidence of improved attitudes to writing over the year of the evaluation of pupils in ECaW classes. This is in line with other findings that show attitudes declining as pupils grow older.
- Nevertheless, staff in schools and in LAs all spoke positively about the impact on enjoyment and confidence of pupils receiving one-to-one tuition.

### **Impact across the school**

- There was little evidence of the impact of ECaW across the school except in a few, mainly Leading Teacher, schools.
- Although survey data and some case study interviews indicated that staff outside Years 3 and 4 were informed about ECaW, evidence from the case study interviews indicate that this may be limited.

## ***Delivery***

### **Leading Teachers as a model for professional development**

- Leading Teachers have found the experience beneficial to themselves and their own schools. However, many have found the time away from their own class the most difficult aspect.
- Evidence from the different strands indicates that the positive experience for Leading Teachers was impressive.
- Headteachers of schools with a Leading Teacher also recognised the benefit of the experience of this role for these particular teachers.
- Data from the headteachers' questionnaire indicates that 95% of headteachers were confident in their ability to judge the quality of the teaching of writing. However, LA staff felt that headteachers may overestimate quality, particularly when it relates to the more specialised area of teaching writing.
- On the whole effective relationships have been established between Leading Teachers and teachers they support. This was seen to be crucial to the success of the initiative.
- Most teachers were positive about the impact of the initiative on their own teaching and professional confidence.
- There was some concern about the practicality of increasing the number of schools involved and finding good quality Leading Teachers to support them. The selection of Leading Teachers who have a good understanding of the process and skills of writing is essential and may be a threat to the continued roll out of the initiative.

- A major challenge to the successful delivery of ECaW identified by teachers related mainly to the initial stages of the set up, including training, and the flow of information from the centre to teachers and headteachers. Another potential hindrance was concern about the amount of time that Leading Teachers spent out of class.
- ECaW has increased teacher knowledge and use of available materials to support the teaching of writing. Opinions varied as to the usefulness of these materials with Leading Teachers being most positive. Where teachers already had their own way of planning and assessment there was some reluctance to take on new ways, particularly when the rest of the school would continue to use the established way. However, many schools had appreciated the support of ECaW in implementing APP.

### ***One-to-one tuition***

- The one-to-one tuition element of ECaW was viewed very positively by all parties. Both headteachers and class teachers reported that one-to-one tuition has had a positive impact on individual pupils.
- There was also a sense that the gains for pupils who were not making good progress may be longer term and reach beyond writing skills in that class teachers and parents reported an increased confidence and willingness to participate in classroom activities on the part of these pupils.
- A key finding from the focus group interviews was the fact that, in each of the ten schools, parents who did not have children receiving one-to-one tuition were unaware of ECaW.
- Parents/carers whose children had received one-to-one tuition were positive about it. They reported that their children were making progress and also, that in almost every case, they enjoyed the sessions and liked being singled out for it.

### ***Local authority involvement***

- Local authorities played an important part in the set up of ECaW and in ongoing support and monitoring.
- Limited time was available for support and monitoring of ECaW and some LA staff expressed concern that the initiative took time and resources from other LA based programmes.

### ***Perceptions of cost effectiveness***

- On the whole participants indicated that they perceived ECaW as providing value for money although opinions varied as to which aspect and how much. It was not possible to evaluate this in any quantifiable way.

### ***Evidence from classroom teaching***

- Support by Leading Teachers in planning was useful but evidence from observations of teaching indicates that further opportunity to discuss lessons resulting from the

planning would be helpful. In only some areas were Supported Teachers allowed to observe Leading Teachers teaching in their own schools. This modelling of practice could be advantageous.

- Some teachers were still not fully confident in the planning and organisation of guided writing.
- Evidence from classroom observation of some ECaW teachers indicated that their subject knowledge of writing is insufficient to support understanding of the purpose and effect of linguistic features.
- Resources used in ECaW schools were varied. Leading Teachers encouraged the use of a range of resources, not all of which supported a developing understanding of the purpose of writing as opposed to merely acting as a mnemonic.
- The selection of targets for pupils receiving one-to-one tuition through ECaW was not always fully discussed with parents and tutors. These targets did not always focus on the key element of ECaW: sentence construction and cohesion.

### ***Evidence from writing samples from ECaW classes***

The evidence from the writing samples shows only a snapshot in time. The evaluation has no evidence of change in practice other than as reported by teachers and others involved in the school. Summary points below relate to both Leading and Supported Teachers.

- The best writing samples came from lessons where teachers focused on meaning and communicative effect. Such lessons were observed both from supported and leading teachers.
- Scaffolding was used extensively by teachers. In some cases scaffolding appeared too strong or 'supportive' and may have been limiting student learning and creating over-dependence.
- Lesson plans and the teacher feedback frequently focused on particular grammatical constructions such as connectives, verbs, adjectives, sentence starters etc. This was directly evident in the writing samples where pupils used these features in their texts but without necessarily using them effectively.
- Teacher feedback often lacked focus on meaning and communicative effect. Thus, often the communicative purpose of the writing was lost, or subordinated to, the emphasis on grammatical features, making the writing task more of an exercise in demonstrating usage than act of communication.

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.