A Critical Evaluation of Writing Instruction and Leadership Strategies to Transform English Language Education in the Primary Sector: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The Curriculum for Wales (CfW) aims to prepare future generations with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. Using a mixed methods case study approach, this small-scale study explored reforming English within the new CfW's Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC) Area of Learning and Experience. This study evaluated the success of evidence-based writing strategies in one primary school in South Wales (School X) and explored teachers' confidence and beliefs about writing instruction.

Data was collected through practitioner questionnaires (n=9) and semi-structured interviews (n=3). Findings indicated that evidence-based strategies were effective in supporting writing development, but required additional development to be effective in all classes. The study also explored the correlation between teachers' beliefs, confidence and their chosen teaching methods.

This study provides an example of the enactment of curriculum reform in Wales, contributing to ongoing discourse surrounding subject leadership and effective writing instruction, with recommendations for future teaching practice.

Introduction

The introduction of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) aims to equip students with the skills needed to face the demands of the future. However, research shows a national decline in writing engagement and attainment, with Estyn (2021) identifying writing as a weakness in many Welsh primary schools. Writing proficiency lagged below national expectations in the school where the study was located, impacted by staff changes and Covid-19 disruptions. Therefore, the rationale for the study was a focus on effective provision for writing improvement, by implementing a bespoke, structured, writing initiative to improve pupil engagement and increase children's writing proficiency (Helen Bowen Education, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, the progressive writing program was named 'Program A'. The program provided a three weekly, cyclical process to explicitly teach writing using evidence-based teaching strategies. It supported pupils in gathering the content for their writing, understanding the context and purpose of their writing and providing them with skills to write confidently in a range of forms. Additionally, an evaluation of leadership strategies took place to overcome reform challenges such as staff attitudes, collaboration, and change fatigue.

Literature Review

The literature review explores key research on writing instruction, identifying global challenges and best practices. The literature highlighted three primary issues contributing to poor writing instruction worldwide: the inconsistent use of evidence-based practices (Parr and Jesson, 2016; Rietdijk, 2018; De Abreu Malpique, 2023), insufficient instructional time (DfE, 2012b; Rietdijk et al., 2018), and the influence of teacher beliefs and self-efficacy on teaching writing (Graham and Rijlaarsdam, 2016; Parr and Jesson, 2016). It also revealed a lack of UK-specific research regarding writing instruction (Ofsted, 2005; KPMG, 2009; Estyn, 2021; The National Literacy Trust, 2022), with international findings providing broader insights (Kirsch et al., 2002; Graham and Gillespie, 2010; DfE, 2012b; De Abreu Malpique, 2023). Whilst writing proficiency is a global challenge, recurring successful teaching strategies for writing instruction emerged across international literature, indicating their potential relevance, despite cultural differences and contexts (Graham, 2018).

Key, global, evidence-based teaching strategies identified were Process Writing, Genre Writing, and Oracy-Based Communicative Writing. Process Writing emphasizes a continuous, cyclical approach to re-drafting and revising to improve writing (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Graham et al., 2012; Abbruscato, 2022), although this needs to be implemented carefully to be an effective model. Genre Writing provides a heavily scaffolded approach which focuses on using success criteria to enhance and guide children's writing development (DfE, 2012b; Parr and Jesson, 2016; Rietdijk, 2018), although Hermansson et al. (2019) explain that this can lead to 'over-scaffolding' which could hinder student independence and engagement. Oracy-Based Communicative writing puts collaborative learning and verbal language development at the heart of effective writing development (Corbett and Strong, 2011), with research from New Zealand particularly supporting its effectiveness (Parr and Jesson, 2016).

Although Process Writing, Genre Writing, and Oracy-Based Communicative Writing are widely recommended (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Corbett & Strong, 2011; Graham, 2018), their success is context dependent and studies show they are not consistently implemented due to time constraints and teacher confidence (Gilbert and Graham, 2010; Brindle et al., 2016; Dockrell et al., 2016). It was found that teachers often prioritized foundational skills such as spelling and punctuation over writing process instruction (Rietdijk, 2018; De Abreu Malpique, 2023), potentially influenced by their own experiences and self-efficacy (Graham, 2019; Banales et al., 2020). This study therefore contributes to filling gaps in the field, by evaluating these internationally supported strategies within one, specific, school context in Wales.

Leadership plays a crucial role in improving writing instruction through professional development and effective communication (Parr and Jesson, 2016; Fullan, 2011) and studies suggest that strong leadership fosters teacher-confidence and supports curriculum reform (Collins, 2001; Sinek, 2009). Therefore, this research further investigated specifically how School X can enhance writing instruction by considering time allocation for writing, teacher beliefs, and leadership strategies, to ensure high-quality writing education.

Methodology

A combination of case study methodology and action research was used to gain a deep understanding of the context and to support organizational improvement

(Lune and Berg, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2014). This was well suited to curriculum development at School X. The study was guided by an interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology, recognizing that social reality is shaped by subjective experiences (Thomas, 2023). Ethnographic methods, including interviews, provided an insider perspective (Denscombe, 2014), while acknowledging researcher positionality bias (Bell and Waters, 2018).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee before data collection commenced and British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) guidelines were followed throughout. BERA (2024) mandates voluntary participation and full disclosure; A participant information sheet outlined the research aims, objectives, and expectations, and participants completed a consent form.

The right to withdraw was emphasised, in line with Gray (2017) and BERA (2024), who note that participants should be able to withdraw at any point without justification and this was reiterated throughout the study.

Privacy and confidentiality were prioritised, ensuring participant anonymity under the Data Protection Act (2018), and participants were informed that confidentiality might need to be waived in cases of safeguarding concerns. Data was securely stored using the University's One Drive, and participant identities were anonymized using coded identifiers.

Denscombe (2014) highlighted the challenge of bias when teacher-researchers attempt to balance practitioner and researcher roles (Bell and Waters, 2018). The study addressed this by adopting Street and Timperley's (2005) 'Collaborative Enquiry' approach, promoting teamwork and a constructivist ontological perspective. This approach positioned the researcher as an active participant alongside staff participants. Despite efforts to reduce bias, the researcher's positionality was considered during data analysis, accepting that this remained a limitation of the study.

Sampling Procedure and Description

The study used a qualitative approach to evaluate Program A, exploring teachers' beliefs through questionnaires and interviews. Likert scale questions facilitated

initial data collection (Greetham, 2014; Thomas, 2023) whilst qualitative data provided rich, in-depth insights. A mixed-method approach allowed for triangulation, enhancing reliability (Denscombe, 2014; Walliman, 2022). While Bryman (2015) noted inconsistencies in mixed-method research, Walliman (2022) argued that these foster further inquiry.

Participants were strategically sampled. An initial questionnaire was distributed to nine teachers, followed by purposive sampling of three interviewees (Lune and Berg, 2017). Selection criteria were based on responses needing elaboration or diverging from existing research. Teachers from different year groups participated to assess instructional differences due to age of students. Data collection ran from June to July 2024 and findings informed the 2024–2025 School Development Plan.

Data Generation and Analysis

Interviews provided richer, more detailed insights following the questionnaire (Kvale, 2007; Bell and Waters, 2018). Semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while keeping the conversation focused, explored teachers' perceptions in depth and aligned with the study's ethnographic methods and constructivist ontology, enabling a shared learning experience for participant and researcher (Denscombe, 2014; Edward and Holland, 2013).

A deductive approach was applied for data analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis model to identify patterns in qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative responses, with visual and comparative analysis to identify trends and correlations between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis aimed to explore how provision at School X improved writing standards and how a Language, Literacy and Communication Leader can ensure successful implementation of a writing program. Five themes emerged from the analysis, drawing from the reviewed literature on teaching strategies, time allocation, teacher beliefs, self-efficacy, and leadership (Graham and Gillespie, 2010; Fullan, 2010).

Theme 1: An Evaluation of Evidence-based Writing Instruction

The analysis revealed insights into three key evidence-based teaching practices for writing instruction within Program A at School X: Process Writing, Genre Writing, and Oracy-Based Communicative Writing.

   Process Writing was widely used, although there were variations in its application. A minority of participants, particularly in Nursery and Reception, did not teach it, aligning with literature suggesting its introduction from Year 2 (Graham et al., 2012). Others used Process Writing linearly, which led to student disengagement due to repetitive drafts. This supports Process Writing as a flexible, cyclical process, refining and improving writing consistently (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Abbruscato, 2002). Around 45 per cent of teachers already used it recursively, demonstrating best practices for developing effective writing skills.

   Genre Writing involved using Success Criteria to guide students' writing. Most teachers reported using Success Criteria regularly, incorporating both written and oral Success Criteria to support pupils. However, a third of teachers, particularly those working with younger year groups, did not find Success Criteria helpful. Therefore, their effectiveness seemed to increase with student progression (Hermansson et al., 2019). However, some teachers adapted Success Criteria to oral feedback, suggesting differentiation for younger learners, and so this is a possible solution to enhance Genre Writing in younger classes.

   Oracy was universally viewed as essential to the writing process. All teachers acknowledged its importance before independent writing. Teachers generally felt confident in planning and delivering oracy activities, although two teachers expressed lower confidence due to their recent return to the school or absence from professional development. This suggests that oracy is a strong aspect of Program A at School X, benefiting from recent professional development focused on rich texts and collaborative writing activities.

Theme 2: Time Allocation for Writing Instruction

The data highlighted a discrepancy in writing instruction time. Some teachers felt their ideal time allocation was greater than actual time due to curriculum and extracurricular pressures (Rietdijk, 2018; Parr and Jesson, 2016). While the current time allocation for writing is generally adequate, clarification and integration of

mandatory phonics instruction are needed, particularly in early years. Despite time pressures, some teachers prioritised Process Writing, particularly in higher year groups, following best practice (Graham et al., 2012). However, some teachers remain unconfident in teaching Process Writing and rarely teach it, consistent with research linking teacher confidence to effective instruction (Dockrell et al., 2016). To improve writing standards, a balanced approach between Basic Writing Skills and Process Writing is essential, alongside ongoing professional development and leadership support.

Theme 3: Teachers' Theoretical Beliefs

Questionnaire data revealed that teachers predominantly favoured Explicit Instruction and Correct Writing in their teaching practices, aligning with formal, systematic approaches and beliefs. Despite these preferences, teachers also valued the writing process, as they supported aspects of Natural Learning, such as the focus on composition rather than final outcome. This reflects Program A's integration of multiple teaching theories. Overall, teachers showed weaker support for Natural Learning methods, which emphasise peer feedback and opportunistic writing, consistent with previous research (Graham et al., 2002; White and Bruning, 2005).

Further analysis of teachers' theoretical beliefs revealed a contradiction; whilst staff primarily held Transactional beliefs – emphasizing communication and collaboration – their teaching aligned more with Transmissional beliefs, focusing on Explicit Instruction and Correct Writing (White and Bruning, 2005). This suggests a weak correlation between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices, contrary to the literature (Graham et al., 2002; White and Bruning, 2005). This contradiction may be influenced by recent training associated with Program A, which combines aspects of both approaches and theories. The study concludes that teacher beliefs are complex and interdependent, supporting the need for a balanced approach integrating Correct Writing, Explicit Instruction, and Natural Learning to foster effective writing instruction (Graham et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Teacher Confidence and Professional Development

The data revealed mixed perceptions of pre-service training, with some teachers feeling it was inadequate, aligning with research on insufficient teacher training in

writing instruction (Graham et al., 2002; Gilbert and Graham, 2010). Confidence in teaching Basic Skills and Process Writing stemmed from experience and professional development rather than pre-service training. Teachers requested support in curriculum mapping, lesson observations, and resources as well as targeted training in Communicative and Process Writing, aligning with Parr and Jesson (2016)'s research which emphasises the importance of high-quality training to improve teacher confidence and capability.

Theme 5: Leadership Capabilities

Teachers highly valued respect, collaboration, and humility in leaders, aligning with effective leadership recommendations (Collins, 2001; Hargreaves et al., 2014). These qualities, central to Collins's Level 5 leadership, emphasize modesty, respect and teamwork, which have been prioritised throughout the implementation of Program A by taking a collaborative approach to curriculum change and welcoming feedback from staff. While trustworthiness, praise, and ambition were rated lower, they remained important. Teachers prioritised certain attributes, but communication and commitment also played key roles in leadership effectiveness (Sinek, 2009; Fullan, 2011). Further research into developing these leadership capabilities at School X would support further curriculum development.

Conclusion

This research critically evaluated Program A's implementation at School X, focusing on its impact on writing standards and the challenges middle leaders face in curriculum reform. Findings revealed Program A's success, with evidence-based practices supporting pupil engagement and writing progression. Teacher confidence is shaped more by experience and professional development than pre-service training. Key leadership qualities for success include respect, collaboration, and humility.

   Recommendations include embedding Process and Genre Writing in younger years and reviewing time allocation for Writing Instruction. Limitations include a small sample size and time constraints. Further research is needed to assess long-term writing improvements and enhance leadership at School X to support reform (Graham et al., 2002; Parr and Jesson, 2016).

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