

## RESEARCH IMPACT

### How children learn to write

Children becoming confident writers through drawing, talking and sharing



*“... by asking them to draw ... it's providing that information for them to have a go at writing”*

Kimberly Nye, Foundation teacher

### Challenge

Learning to write is one of the big challenges for students in the first years of schooling. Writing is a complex skill and learning to write is not an easy task for many young children as evidenced by national testing data.

### Discovery

Dr Noella Mackenzie's research shows that drawing and writing are related ways of communicating and being understood. When children are encouraged to draw as the first step in communicating, they tend to become confident, flexible writers compared to children who are taught drawing and writing separately.

### Impact

An increasing number of educators and families are using Noella's approach to teaching children to write, and are finding that young children can make big gains in literacy through fun and positive learning. The approach is being adopted in Australia and overseas.

*‘to create a world worth living in’*

CSU's Dr Noella Mackenzie has been researching the link between drawing and writing as related ways of communicating since 2007. Working with a network of research partners, she has found that prioritising drawing, talking and story-telling as part of literacy programs helps children learn to write.

Noella noticed that children usually enjoy drawing and do it willingly. This program of research looked at how this motivation can be used to help children gain writing skills through fun and positive learning experiences. Shifting focus from formal writing skills to 'making meaning' through drawing has had observable positive outcomes for children meeting formal literacy milestones, and they tend to display more flexible and independent learning in general. The research findings have also suggested that when learning to write is a positive experience, there can be other benefits for student confidence, classroom behaviour and teacher experiences.

An approach to teaching writing through fun and engaging learning has developed from this research. Driven by Noella's passionate commitment to supporting educators, families and children, this approach is gaining momentum.

### Changing classroom practices and outcomes

A growing number of educators are changing the way they incorporate drawing in the classroom, and it is impacting on children's learning. At St Joseph's Primary School in Cobram, Victoria, Foundation teacher Kimberly Nye can be found teaching children in only their sixth week of formal schooling to write by first drawing for them, then having children go to their desks for drawing time. Ms Nye then demonstrates writing sentences to go with her drawings, using examples such as "I like eating apples"; with the children then having a go at writing similar sentences to accompany their drawings: "I like eating watermelon". Sarah Iddles, Deputy Principal at the school, explained that this approach to teaching has proved very successful.

### *A growing number of educators are changing the way they incorporate drawing in the classroom*

By being able to focus on the stories that children communicate with their drawing, educators are also reporting that children are achieving higher literacy standards than expected. When teachers started using Noella's approach with a low-oral language group of children in their first formal year at school in Tasmania, the children demonstrated complex writing attempts and showed a lot more confidence, according to Sally Rowlands, a Literacy and Numeracy Coach with the Department of Education, Tasmania.

At Murray Children's Centre in Albury, children as young as 12 months old are being exposed to holding, touching and using different writing materials, from pencils to paint and charcoal. They are exploring how we communicate by making marks, developing fine motor skills, learning colours, increasing their social development and showing a range of other learning and development outcomes, according to their classroom teachers.

## Informing Policy Framework

A collaboration between Noella and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) in 2015 looked at how to improve writing skills development in the final year of preschool and first year of primary school. Carmel Phillips, Manager of the Early Years Unit, Curriculum Division, at the VCAA explains that Noella's work has been "critical" to informing the VCAA's approach to thinking about literacy development as a continuum. This continuum is central to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework published in 2016. The influence of this program of research can be seen in the citation of the work in the Framework. The VCAA website also contains other permanent links to Noella's work, and resources coming out of this program of research, further showing the impact for the VCAA.



*"When we first trialed this process, teachers said ... 'I was concerned that the children wouldn't meet the achievement goals, but in fact they've gone past them.'" Dr Noella Mackenzie*

## Tools for educators and families

The VCAA produced a short DVD resource to present what Noella has learned about the development of early writing skills for early childhood professionals. Copies have been distributed in Victoria, including to the Maternal and Child Health Service, educational officers in cultural organisations (such as libraries and museums), as well as early childhood and primary school teachers. A brochure for families has also been produced, giving tips for families to encourage young children to draw, talk and start to write.

Noella and two colleagues have developed a writing assessment tool. The tool is used by classroom teachers to understand how Year 1 students are developing as writers and communicators, inform teaching decisions and help teachers to provide helpful feedback to students.

*"... we kept looking at the data and the staff, and looking at the students and we just found that it worked, and so we've continued it. That's what we do here now."*

Sarah Iddles, Deputy Principal,  
St Joseph's Primary School, Cobram, Victoria

## Program Highlights

- Research conducted with educators and children in real classroom settings.
- Working with organisations that shape policy and curriculum.
- Information sharing including professional development for educators, and opportunities for families and communities to learn about the work.
- Broad interest at a global level.

Information about the work, including resources, can be found at:

<https://noellamackenzie.com/>

<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/earlyyears/literacyresources.aspx>

## Funding and Collaborators

The program of research has been funded by the VCAA, NSW Department of Education and Training (Riverina region), CSU seed grants and Research Centre Fellowships.

Collaborators included staff from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), PhD students and colleagues from Monash University, University of Melbourne and Lapland University.

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