'It's healthy. It's good for you.'

What children want you to know about autonomy, motivation and writing at school

Based on the following research: Young, R., Ramdarshan-Bold, M., Clark, C., & McGeown, S. (2025). 'It's healthy. It's good for you': Children's perspectives on utilising their autonomy in the writing classroom. Literacy, 59(3), 372-384. [**LINK**]

Children are rarely asked what they think about writing. Yet when we do ask them, they have a great deal to tell us and it can transform how we teach. This article shares findings from a recent study of 24 primary children aged 9–11 and what their voices reveal about their writing motivation at school.

Why this matters right now

We are living through a moment of real urgency in writing education. Research from the National Literacy Trust (2025) paints a striking picture of a generation of children becoming increasingly disconnected from one of the most powerful tools they have for learning, making meaning, telling stories and understanding themselves.

1 in 4 children enjoy writing in their free time (lowest in 15 years)	**33.5%** enjoy writing in school	**1 in 10** write something daily for pleasure

Writing motivation

In 2024, fewer than three in ten children said they enjoyed writing in their free time. This is the lowest figure since records began in 2010. Back then, nearly half of all children and young people reported enjoying writing. This decline has real and significant consequences.

Writing motivation isn't a nice-to-have. Research suggestions that when children are motivated to write, they write better. The relationship works in both directions. Children who write well tend to feel more motivated and motivated children tend to write with greater skill, stamina and engagement. Writing is also deeply connected to children's sense of self and their mental wellbeing.

And yet, for many children, school writing has become something they do for their teacher. It's become a compliance activity. It's often defined by what a scheme-writer wants, structured around someone else's ideas and measured against criteria children have had no hand in shaping.

> **"When I get to write about what I want, I get more ideas and I feel more confident."**

What the study did

Twenty-four children aged 9–11 from three primary schools in England were interviewed individually and in depth. The schools were chosen to reflect the diversity of the primary population. The sample included children from a range of backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances. They had differing levels of writing motivation and writing proficiency.

The theory behind the research: Self-determination theory

Self-Determination Theory suggests that all human beings have three core motivational needs that, when met, unlock genuine, lasting motivation. In writing, these are:

Autonomy	**Competency**	**Relatedness**
The need to feel ownership and control over one's writing	The need to feel effective, skilled and successful as a writer	The need to feel connected - to one's writing, readers and fellow writers.

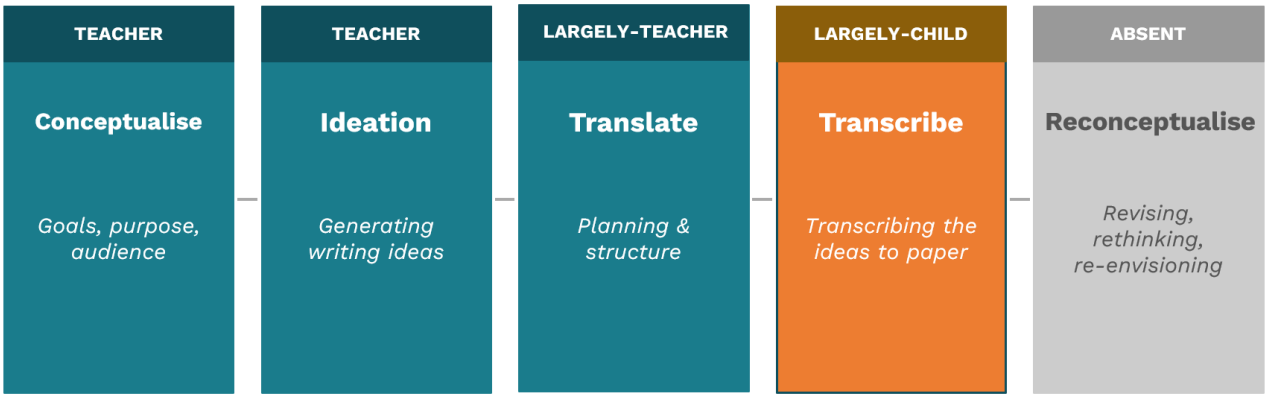
Children were asked about who makes decisions in the writing classroom, whether they get to choose their topics, how that makes them feel and what they would like most. The conversations were rich, thoughtful and candid. Three clear themes emerged.

The three themes

- **Teacher-controlled writing:** where the teacher (or published scheme) makes most or all of the writerly decisions
- **Student-controlled writing**: where children have meaningful choice over their topics, genre and writing process
- **Collaboratively-controlled writing**: a middle ground where teacher guidance and pupil autonomy work together

Theme 1: Teacher-controlled writing – the status quo

Every single child in the study described their writing classroom as one where teachers make the majority of writerly decisions, most of the time. The teacher (or scheme writer) chooses the genre, the topic, the structure, the vocabulary, the goals and often the sentence-level features children are expected to include. In many classrooms, this control extends to the planning stage where children were given key points and structures that they were obliged to follow.



The majority of children's authorial decision-making occurs at the transcribing stage. Reconceptualisation was entirely absent from the children's accounts.

It was striking that children reported only having autonomy at the transcribing stage. It was essentially their job to transcribe to paper their teacher (or the scheme writer's) planned ideas. Decisions about what to write, why to write it, and for whom it was to be written were almost always made for them.

Children who appreciated teacher control

Not all children found this frustrating. Some, particularly those who had low writing motivation, or else were motivated by producing the 'right' writing to make their teacher happy, said they found teacher direction reassuring. For them, being told what to write removed any kind of risk that they might do something wrong.

> **"I think it's a good decision [teachers choosing] because if he doesn't tell us... we might write the wrong thing."**

One child articulated something important: having constraints placed on them could support the development of their writing skills, even if it didn't always produce their best writing. Teacher-directed writing, when it's well-designed, can absolutely develop children's writerly craft.

Children who found teacher control limiting

For many other children, however, the experience of teacher-controlled writing was one of disconnection and frustration. Children described feeling sad, annoyed or simply disengaged when writing in response to someone else's idea, particularly when that idea felt far away from their own lives, creativity, interests and funds-of-knowledge.

> **"I'm annoyed because that means I cannot write about what I actually want to write."**

One girl gave an unusually vivid account of what she observed happening to her peers when they didn't connect with the teacher's idea: some children, she explained, would simply write something 'really bad', not because they couldn't do better, but as a deliberate act of resistance. The lack of ownership made producing the highest quality writing you are capable of feel pointless.

There's something important to think about here. When the writing idea doesn't belong to the child, when it doesn't connect to their funds-of-knowledge, their identity, their passions and their linguistic repertoires, then writing becomes harder, not easier. And for children who already find writing difficult, being asked to translate someone else's idea into successful words can be doubly daunting. As one child put it:

> **"When [my teacher] chooses, I might not know a lot about what they're choosing, and it's gonna be hard for me to get ideas and it takes me a lot of time to figure out."**

Theme 2: Student-controlled writing — what happens when children choose?

Across the whole data set, children consistently expressed a preference for having greater authorial control over their own writing. They didn't want unlimited freedom (because that can be overwhelming) but meaningful control. The reasons they gave had both cognitive and motivational benefits.

Children who had experienced choosing their own writing topics described feeling more engaged, more confident and more capable. Writing about something they knew and cared about removed the barrier of unfamiliarity and gave them vast content knowledge that they could draw upon easily. Several also described writing more 'passionately' when the idea was their own.

> **"Writing about what you want is good. It's healthy — like I said — it's really good for you... if I'm able to choose my own topic then I can write about what I want — passionately and it's a lot more fun."**

> **"I love that piece of writing because... I put loads of connections to me in it."**

At one of the three schools, children were given regular time to work on 'personal writing projects' in writing journals. The response was markedly positive even among those who generally described themselves as being low-motivated. Having that time and space for self-chosen writing appeared to cultivate an intrinsic relationship with writing that was absent from the usual teacher writing tasks.

When choice feels hard

It would be dishonest to suggest that student autonomy was straightforward for every child. One child felt the idea of openness and free choice was, at times, paralysing. With too many possibilities, and without strategies and guidance in generating and selecting quality ideas, some children could experience writer's block.

> **"When I pick what I write about... I'm frustrated. Sometimes I call myself a hollow head because I can't think of anything for like 20 minutes..."**

This is not an argument against authorial agency but it is certainly an argument for explicitly teaching children how to utilise it. Professional writers face exactly these sort of dilemmas. What these children need isn't for idea generation to be removed but for explicit teaching in idea generation: how to draw on their interests, their reading, their world, their creativity and their identity. With the right modelling and instruction, autonomy can become empowering rather than overwhelming.

✓ Advantages children described	✗ Challenges children described
• Knowing the content you're writing about • Writing with passion and personal investment • Feeling more confident and competent • Expressing your identity and interests with and for others • Writing more and with greater enjoyment • Feeling the writing is genuinely yours. When you feel like you own something, you're more likely to take care of it and look after it	• Having too many ideas and not knowing how to choose their best one • Not knowing how to get started • Worrying about teachers' judgement • Limited experience in making writerly choices

Theme 3: Collaboratively-controlled writing

Here is perhaps the most practically useful finding for teachers: most children don't want to choose everything and they don't want everything chosen for them. What they want, and what they articulated with remarkable maturity and clarity, is a genuinely collaborative relationship with their writer-teacher when crafting their piece of writing.

"If I do not really have an idea, I quite like the teacher just choosing a little bit of something... and then make it to your own really good idea."
"I sort of like in between because I like having a story base [a parameter]... But then I like having my own creative freedom for the other half."

What this could mean for your classroom: practical starting points

This idea of 'collaboratively-controlled writing' is not new. It echoes what writer-teachers have argued for years. But hearing it articulated so clearly by children themselves gives it a fresh voice. What does it look like in practice? Here are just a few ideas:

1. Invite children into the conceptualisation stage

The study found that children were almost never invited to help conceptualise class writing projects. This means to contribute to decisions about the purpose and audience for a project. Yet this is precisely where a child's investment begins. Before a writing project launches, try opening up a conversation: Who might we write our pieces for? What sort of writing could we make? Who would really want to read this? Even small amounts of input at this stage can transform a child's sense of ownership of what follows.

2. Invite children to contribute to the assessment criteria

When children arrive at a writing project to find the success criteria is already written on the board, an opportunity has been missed. Co-constructing the criteria (through reading and discussing strong mentor texts together) by asking children what they notice and admire gives them both ownership and insight. Children who help define what good writing looks like are far more invested in achieving it for themselves.

3. Teach idea generation explicitly

Don't assume children know how to generate great writing ideas. Many lack practice. It's certainly not a lack of imagination! Explicitly model idea generation techniques as a writer-teacher so that children see it as a visible and discussable skill. Show children how writers draw on their reading, their memories, their passions, their knowledge and their questions about the world. Create a writing community where ideas are shared, discussed, supported and celebrated.

4. Protect time for self-chosen writing

The free-time writing journals used at one of the schools in this study made a real difference to children's relationship with writing, particularly for those who were generally disengaged. Regular slots for children to pursue their own writing projects can cultivate the intrinsic motivation that teacher-directed tasks alone cannot build. This shouldn't be seen as unstructured time; it's purposeful time for children (alongside their writer-teacher) to develop as writers on their own terms.

5. Build in process autonomy

Children in the study reported having very little control over how they wrote. Planning formats, drafting approaches and editing strategies were usually predetermined by their teacher or the scheme. Yet writers differ hugely in their processes: some are planners, others are discoverers, some like to draft sentence by sentence, while others write in great floods and revise later. Teaching children about different writerly strategies builds up their metacognitive understanding.

6. Make writing genuinely purposeful and public

Another motivating thing you can offer any writer is a real audience. When children know their writing will be read, performed, shared, listened to or watched by classmates, younger children, parents and audiences beyond the classroom walls - the stakes are real and their investment increases.

A final thought: listening to children

What strikes us most about the children in this study is how thoughtful, articulate and fair-minded they were. They weren't demanding to write whatever they wanted with no guidance. They understood that their writer-teachers have important things to teach them. They do not reject teacher guidance and structure but they are asking for more of a writerly partnership.

> **"It's also good to get other people's ideas, and it's also good to get my own ideas."**

These were children who wanted to develop as agentic and true writers. They wanted to be challenged and pushed by their teachers to be the best writers they could be. They also wanted to bring something of themselves to the page: their knowledge, their questions, their creativity and their voices. This is not too much to ask because it's exactly what writing is for.

This research is a timely reminder. When we invite children into the writing process as real participants (not just recipients), we don't sacrifice rigour. We show we have the highest possible expectations anyone can have of you: that you have something worth sharing. We create the conditions for writing that is personal, purposeful, powerful and profoundly pleasurable.

The children have spoken. Now we need to listen.

About this research

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The study involved 24 children (aged 9–11) from three primary schools in England, interviewed individually about their experiences of autonomy and motivation in school writing.

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