'The more connections I can make with it, the more I enjoy it'

Children's relationship with writing at school

Based on the following research: Young, R., Ramdarshan-Bold, M., Clark, C., & Mcgeown, S. (2026). 'The more connections I can make with it, the more I enjoy it': children's relationship with writing at school. Education 3-13, 1-14. [**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 is a relationship

Ask a child why they write at school and many will tell you: because they have to. Writing is part of the curriculum. The teacher set us a task. There's a test coming up. These are not wrong answers. But they hint at something we need to take seriously.

Writing is not just a cognitive skill. It is a social, emotional and deeply relational thing. When children write, they are always in some kind of relationship. They form bonds with their own ideas, with their readers and with the community of writers around them. These relationships shape how motivated children feel, how hard they try and ultimately how well they write.

Our recent study asked children aged 9–11 about their experiences of writing at school, with a focus on one of the most underexplored aspects of writing motivation: *relatedness*. This is the need to feel connected. What the children said was illuminating.

The research

24 children from three diverse primary schools in England were asked about their relationships with school writing. Through individual in-depth interviews, they talked about who they write for, what it feels like to share their writings, what collaborative writing is like and, crucially, whether and how writing connects them to anything or anyone.

Three themes emerged from these conversations. There appears to be three kinds of relationship that shape children's experiences of writing at school. Each offers a window into the current reality of school writing.

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.

The three writing relationships

Relationship	What children said	What was missing
1. A relationship with their own writing	Mostly saw writing as a compliance task. Only some found the means for personal connection and self-expression.	Regular opportunities to connect writing to personal identity, interests, creative ideas and funds-of-knowledge.
2. A relationship with their readers	Audience was almost exclusively teachers. Teachers were seen primarily as evaluators. Family members occasionally offered more encouragement. Wider authentic audiences were rare.	Teachers responding as genuine, sympathetic and interested readers. Varied and real audiences beyond the school gates. Emotional engagement with the reader-writer relationship.
3. A relationship with their fellow writers	Peer collaboration was valued when it happened but was often rare. Teacher-as-a-fellow-writer was almost entirely absent.	Structured collaborative writing. Teachers writing alongside and sharing their own writerly identity. A genuine community of writers in the classroom.

Theme 1: Relationships with their own writing

"Every piece of writing that I've done — it sort of has a connection to me"

For most of the children in this study, writing at school was primarily understood as an academic exercise. It was something you do to meet curriculum requirements, improve your spelling and punctuation, get good marks, and prepare for later life. This is not unreasonable and the children weren't wrong to think this way. The messages policy sends about writing make these conclusions almost inevitable.

> **"We have to do it … because it's part of the curriculum."**

But alongside this dominant view of writing-as-skill, a different, more alive relationship was visible in some children's responses, particularly in a school where dedicated personal writing time was built into the weekly timetable. In that space, children described connecting writing to their own emotions, experiences and identities. They chose topics that mattered most to them. They also brought family stories into their narratives and embedded their real feelings into their characters.

> **"Every piece of writing that I've done … it sort of has a connection to me. The more connections I can make with it, the more I enjoy it."**

This was one of the most striking findings in the entire study. Being able to make personal connections appeared to drive children's enjoyment. Enjoyment appeared to drive their motivation and their motivation is what drove them to want to produce writing of real quality. The child quoted above has articulated, with beautiful clarity, the entire logic of motivating writing teaching.

Some children also found ways to connect with teacher-assigned tasks. Again, when the content resonated with something personal. A boy who was fascinated by the second world war enjoyed writing in role about the Blitz. A girl who wove her grandmother's locket into her fantasy story. These moments of 'identified motivation' (where an external task becomes personally meaningful) are not accidental. They are the result of teachers who create enough space for children's own identities to enter their writing.

> **"If you were writing about a character you could express some of your deeper feelings ... that character could be you."**

At the other end of the spectrum, some children reported a relationship with school writing that could only be described as indifferent. When asked to recall a time they wrote about something they were passionate about, one boy replied: "There wasn't any. I don't have any stories that I was interested in. And I don't care." Importantly, this isn't a child who has given up. They are simply a child who has never been invited in.

Theme 2: Relationships with readers

"I've written for my teachers, I've written for some of my friends ... I think that's it"

One of the most revealing patterns in this research was just how narrow children's sense of audience had become. For most of the children, their school writing life contained essentially two kinds of reader: teachers and their classmates. Some mentioned family. A few made reference to the need to write to 'fake' audiences - government officials and a fictional building company. But these were exceptions and some children struggled to even understand the concept of writing for an audience.

The implications of this are significant. Writing for diverse audiences is not just a curricular expectation: it is one of the primary drivers of writerly development. When children write for readers, they have to develop their theory of mind, their perspective-taking, their sense of how language can land differently in different hands. A classroom where the only reader is the teacher is a classroom where this development is severely constrained.

The teacher as evaluator - and what else they could be

These children really valued their teachers' guidance. They liked clear feedback, checklists and targets. They took pride when a teacher praised their compositions. The teacher-as-academic-evaluator was understood as part of the deal and most children had accepted it and some really appreciated it.

> **"If Miss is proud of my work — then I'll be proud of my work"**

But there was something noticeably absent from the data: almost no child described a moment when their teacher had responded to their writing as a genuinely interested and emotionally engaged *reader*. There was no moments of: "I was genuinely moved by that ending" or "I never knew that. How fascinating!" The teacher's role, in the vast majority of children's accounts, was to judge and improve - not to be delighted or moved.

“You can try your best and the teachers say ‘that’s not really good’ and I just kind of disagree with that … they could just start complimenting it instead.”

One notable exception came from the school that offered regular personal writing time. There, a child described how their writing journal allowed the teacher to ‘get to know us more’. This is a beautifully simple articulation of what happens when writing becomes a genuine channel of communication between a child and their teacher, rather than just a performance for assessment.

Peers as readers: between assessment and genuine response

When children described sharing their writing with classmates, their language often mirrored the language of teacher assessment: Was it ‘good’? What needed improving? Even peer response had been turned towards evaluative thinking. Only one child in the whole study described explicitly trying to provoke an emotional response in her readers. She talked about her desire to make them laugh:

“I write for myself to enjoy it. I write for other people to enjoy it – like the teachers. I also make sure it’s funny so that if someone else read it – then it would be amusing for them as well.”

This quote is worth reading twice. This child has internalised what it means to be a writer with an audience in mind - to genuinely care about their readers’ experience. She was aiming for all three of what we describe as the key relationships in school writing: (1) meeting academic expectations, (2) expressing herself, and (3) connecting with her audience. She was looking to achieve something wonderful.

The untapped power of readers outside school

Family members appeared to offer something qualitatively different from teacher feedback: warmth, pride and encouragement. Children described parents and siblings responding to their writing at parents’ evenings with something close to relief: ‘At least they didn’t say it was bad’. However, this praise was sometimes viewed with a little scepticism. One girl reflected, thoughtfully, that family ‘don’t want to hurt your feelings’.

What this suggests is that children are sophisticated enough to understand that different readers respond differently and that authenticity in audience matters. The invitation here is to think carefully about who else might be invited to read and enjoy our students’ writing: members of the local community, local organisations, adult authors and readers with genuine stakes in what the children have to say.

Theme 3: Relationships with fellow writers

"Two minds combined and you could write a really funny story"

It takes a community to develop a writer. Children who write in classrooms that function as genuine communities of writers, where collaboration is structured, peer dialogue is valued and the teacher writes too, show stronger motivation, greater confidence and richer writing. The children in this study knew this even if their classrooms didn’t always reflect it.

Peers as fellow writers: the joy and the complications

When children were given the opportunity to write collaboratively, they were broadly enthusiastic. They described riffing ideas from each other, getting unstuck through conversation, swapping books for peer review and generally finding that two writerly minds are better than one.

However, for many children, collaborative writing was something they spoke about in the hypothetical – they could only imagine what it might be like. Collaboration was actually quite rare in practice.

When collaboration did happen, it was not without its tensions. Dominant voices could crowd out quieter ones. Group disagreements could derail momentum. Some children found that working with others made them feel unheard or that the noise and activity became distracting. These are not reasons to abandon collaboration but they are certainly reasons to structure it carefully and teach children how to be generous, sympathetic and responsive writing partners.

The teacher as fellow writer: An almost total absence

Perhaps the most striking finding in the entire study was this: across 24 interviews, only one child described a moment where their teacher had written alongside them or shared their own writing.

This is not a criticism of individual teachers. Teachers face enormous pressures and insufficient professional development. But the research is clear: when teachers write with and for their students, when they share their own joys and struggles as writer-teacher, something profound happens in the room. Children stop seeing writing as a task assigned and start seeing it as a practice shared by the whole community.

> **“Sometimes, before we start a piece of writing … our teacher will maybe write — will come up with ideas — and … will write a first paragraph and she says if we get stuck we can magpie some things off of what the whole class have thought about”**

This example of a teacher writing a shared first paragraph and inviting children to borrow from it was the only glimpse of teacher-as-fellow-writer. It’s shows the teacher being willing to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. In the children’s eyes, they had credibility as a teacher of writing.

What we can do: Building a classroom full of writing relationships

The findings of this study suggest that writing classrooms are fundamentally relational spaces where the pursuit of rigorous, ambitious and technically excellent writing is inseparable from the relationships that shape it. Here are some starting points for practice.

Four aspects of a great writer-teacher

Children's responses suggest that teachers can build different kinds of writerly relationships with their pupils depending on the moment and the need:

As an academic authority Clarify concepts, correct conventions and support children to meet high academic standards	**As a writerly friend** Give constructive and sympathetic feedback that focuses on what it is the student is wanting to share.
As an engaged reader Offer genuine emotional responses to children's writing. Let them know how their words landed with you. Laugh at the funny bits. Be grossed out at the disgusting moments. Show your awe and wonder at the fascinating parts.	**As a fellow writer** Participate in the class writing project alongside the children. Share your own writing - your joys and your struggles.

Relating to their writing

- Build regular personal writing time into the week - where children have opportunities to write for themselves.
- Teach idea-generation strategies so children can find their own genuine entry points into class writing projects.
- Invite children to bring their funds-of-knowledge, identities and personal interests to class writing projects.
- When assigning topics, still create enough space for children's identities to enter: a character who feels like them, a setting they know, a detail only they could imagine.

Relating to readers

- Design class writing projects with real and varied audiences in mind.
- Respond to children's writing sometimes as a reader - not as an evaluator.
- Use writing journals where the relationship between teacher and child can be more personal and warm - not *just* academic.
- Teach children what it means to write for an audience: to think about what their readers will know, feel, need, and want from them.

Relating to fellow writers

- Write alongside your class. Share your own writing, your process, your uncertainties. Be a writer-teacher.
- Create structured collaborative writing opportunities: shared drafting, paired writing, co-authored pieces and peer review partnerships.
- Teach children to be generous, specific, and genuinely engaged readers of each other's compositions - not *just* evaluators.
- Consider joining a teacher writing group or CPD that supports your own identity as a writer.

Questions for reflection and discussion

Use these questions individually, with colleagues, or in a staff meeting to deepen your thinking about children's relationships with writing at school.

1. When children in your class write, how often do they choose the topic? How often can they bring something of their own identity, experience or knowledge into the writing?

2. Who reads children's writing in your classroom? Is the teacher the primary audience? What would it take to introduce more varied and authentic readers?

3. When do you last remember responding to a child's writing as a genuinely interested reader - not as an assessor? What did that feel like for you and for them?

4. How often do children in your class write collaboratively? Is it a regular, structured practice or occasional and informal?

5. Have you ever participated in a class writing project alongside your class or shared your own writing with them? If not, why not? What benefits do you think this would have for you and the children?

6. Which children in your class might be the ones who 'don't care'? What might you do differently to support these pupils?

A final word

The child who said 'The more connections I can make with it, the more I enjoy it' understood that making connections is part of quality writing instruction.

When we build classrooms where children feel genuinely connected to their writing, to their readers, and to each other as writers, we are being rigorous. We are building the motivational foundations on which all the technical and compositional aspects of writing can be learnt, used and applied.

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 relatedness and motivation in school writing.

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