Final report

Initial Evaluation of the Impact of *Big Writing*

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

Initial Evaluation of the Impact of *Big Writing*

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Executive summary

Introduction and methodology

This report presents the findings from an initial evaluation of *Big Writing* carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to explore the impact and effectiveness of the programme. The *Big Writing* programme aims to raise standards in primary writing using a mixture of fun oral Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation (VCOP) activities and focused extended writing sessions. The approach also emphasises the importance of oral discussion and the creation of a stimulating and focused writing atmosphere. This report will be of interest to Oxford University Press, as the publishers of the *Big Writing* professional development handbooks; Ros Wilson as the creator of *Big Writing*; Andrell Education as the provider of the *Big Writing* professional development training; and schools who are interested in receiving the training and implementing the approach.

The evaluation focused on schools that were beginning to introduce *Big Writing* following training on the approach between January to September 2013. We collected data from 11 primary schools in total (nine schools in England; one in Scotland; and one in Wales). This included: 635 baseline and endpoint pupil writing assessments and writing attitude surveys; 28 baseline and 21 endpoint teacher surveys; and qualitative telephone interviews with five teachers. The schools administered the writing task and survey to Year 3/4 and Year 4/5 pupils at two points and teachers completed questionnaires, approximately six to eight weeks apart, during the period of the summer term 2013 and autumn term 2013. This study design was well suited to capture teachers' experiences of implementing the programme and any early perceptions of impact on schools, teachers and pupils. As there was no control group and the timescale was relatively short, it could not be expected to provide statistically robust evidence of measured impacts attributable to *Big Writing*.

Key findings: Schools' experiences of using *Big Writing*

- The majority of teachers are positive about the usefulness of the *Big Writing* training; it provides them with a clear overview of the approach and key elements and leaves them confident to implement *Big Writing* in the classroom.

- All teachers have embedded *Big Writing* into their own teaching and learning practice and most thought *Big Writing* has been embedded as a whole school writing approach.

- Teachers are positive about *Big Writing* - they see value in the approaches it highlights and commit to embedding the approach as part of teaching and learning practices, indicating that they are confident in the benefits of the approach for their learners.

- There is evidence that *Big Writing* is being implemented in a structured way across the whole school (including with all year groups and all teachers). Implementation typically involves oral VCOP activities and dedicated time for *Big Write* extended writing sessions.

- Teachers use *Big Writing* approaches to build upon existing effective approaches and adapt the elements to best meet the needs of their circumstances and pupils. *Big Writing* reaffirms existing good practice, rather than offering a radically different approach.

- Teachers value the key features of the *Big Writing* approach, particularly the oral VCOP activities and *Big Write* silent writing sessions. Where used, the *Big Writing* Assessment Criterion scale is useful in facilitating assessment of the different elements of writing.

Key findings: Impact of *Big Writing* on teachers

- Teachers are more confident to teach writing after participating in *Big Writing* training and implementing the approach in their classrooms.

- Teachers report a range of impacts on their writing teaching practice as a result of *Big Writing*, including on their repertoire of writing teaching approaches and techniques; ability to teach writing in an engaging way; ideas and resources; ability to stretch and challenge pupils; subject knowledge about teaching writing; and assessment of writing.

- The pupil writing attitude survey showed some evidence of slight changes in how pupils feel they are being taught writing. Following the implementation of *Big Writing*, they report slightly more use of the typical aspects of the *Big Writing* approach (e.g. oral discussion of writing).

- Most teachers report that *Big Writing* has impacted positively on the whole school, identifying a range of benefits on the profile of writing, the quality of writing teaching and learning across the school, and writing policies and strategies.

Key findings: *Big Writing* and pupils

- In general, the comparisons of pupils' writing performance and attitudes at baseline and endpoint show no statistically significant changes. It is typical to first see changes in teaching attitudes and practice result from the implementation of a new intervention and it takes time for teachers to embed new practices and attitudes into their classrooms and even longer to see changes in attainment.

- Against this background, some pupils individually show noticeable improvement in their before and after writing task scores. We identified six of these pupils to serve as examples of improvement. In all these cases there is evidence of progression in the key aspects of writing highlighted by the *Big Writing* approach, particularly improvements in the use of VCOP, though we cannot directly attribute these changes to *Big Writing* without controlling for the many other possible influences.

- Teachers' surveys told a more positive story, with teachers perceiving a range of impacts of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing performance and attitudes, including increases in pupils' enjoyment of writing, writing confidence and writing skills.

Conclusions and recommendations

This initial evaluation of *Big Writing* took place at a time of considerable change in the curriculum landscape for primary teachers. A revised National Curriculum is in the process of being introduced. One of its broad thrusts is to devolve more responsibility to schools on *how* to teach the necessary skills and understanding, alongside the future requirement to assess pupils' progress without National Curriculum levels.

- **Support in a changing policy environment:** *Big Writing* is a resource that has the potential to help schools adjust to the greater autonomy to decide *how* to teach pupils the necessary skills and understanding of writing. This study has demonstrated how the

approach provides a structure for teaching writing that can be adapted to suit schools' differing circumstances and needs and how the *Big Writing* Assessment Criterion Scale can be used to assess writing without National Curriculum levels.

- **Indications of the effectiveness of *Big Writing*:** teachers are strongly committed to introducing *Big Writing* as part of their school or class development. They are generally positive about the *Big Writing* approach and its effectiveness in enhancing writing teaching and learning and pupil writing performance and attitudes.

- **A model of the impacts:** the teachers consulted feel that *Big Writing* has achieved considerable impact on their writing teaching practices within a relatively short timeframe. This has not developed into detectable changes in pupils' writing performance and attitudes within the limited timescale of the study. The diagram below depicts a model of impacts that might be applicable to the introduction of *Big Writing.* It shows the Stage one to three impacts on teachers and the wider school, that were observed by the study in terms of teachers' self reports, and the Stage four impacts on pupils which are intended outcomes of the programme, but are largely un-evidenced in this study, other than by teachers' perceptions and expectations.

Model of impacts of the *Big Writing* programme

Stage 4: Outcomes for pupils (e.g. development of writing skills and ability, enjoyment and confidence, culminating benefits throughout schooling, awareness of how to develop writing).

Stage 3: *Big Writing* embedded as a whole school approach (e.g. use of VCOP activities and *Big Write* sessions in all classes, consistency of approaches in all classrooms and often across curriculum, resources, activities and approaches built into timetables and strategies)

Stage 2: Implementation of *Big Writing* in teachers' own practice (e.g. emphasis on VCOP activities, oral discussion, planning writing, opportunities for *Big Write* extended writing, *Big Write* atmosphere)

Stage 1: Outcomes of *Big Writing* Training on teachers (e.g. writing teaching techniques, subject knowledge, confidence, assessment skills, resources)

- **Further research may be needed:** a longer term evaluation with a comparison group and sufficient pupil numbers would be needed to enable us to detect whether *Big Writing* has an impact on pupil writing attitudes and performance.

- **Recommendations for developing *Big Writing* in the future:**
  – The emphasis on whole school *Big Writing* INSET is clearly a strength of the programme and should be retained.
  – Add even more focus within the training on practical activities that help teachers to practise the techniques and implement these back in their own classrooms.
  – Consider further developing *Big Writing* resources by linking them to different topics of the curriculum and to different age ranges.
  – Consider adding greater emphasis on how to develop pupils' skills in writing for different audiences and purposes, as this was a less prevalent impact for teachers.
  – Teachers particularly value the oral VCOP activities and *Big Write* silent writing sessions and we recommend retaining these in their current form. Consider providing more ideas and examples for aspects of *Big Writing* that some teachers found less useful, such as how an 'atmosphere' can be created to stimulate pupils' writing.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from an initial evaluation of *Big Writing* carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This initial evaluation of the impact of *Big Writing* sought to go beyond individual recommendations to provide more systematic evidence of the effectiveness of the approach. *Big Writing* is a well established programme of professional development in primary writing that is used by thousands of schools across the UK. Oxford University Press (OUP) recently became the publisher of the *Big Writing* professional development handbooks in September 2012 and now works alongside Ros Wilson and Andrell Education to further the aims of the *Big Writing* programme. The *Big Writing* programme aims to raise standards in writing using a mixture of fun oral Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation (VCOP) activities and focused extended writing sessions. The approach also emphasises the importance of oral discussion and the creation of a stimulating and focused writing atmosphere, as well as support for the assessment of writing and the use of the Writing Criterion Scale. This report will be of interest to Oxford University Press, as the publishers of the *Big Writing* professional development handbooks; Ros Wilson as the designer of *Big Writing*; Andrell Education as the provider of the *Big Writing* professional development training; and schools who are interested in receiving the training and implementing the approach.

1.1 Aims of the study

The aims and objectives of this initial evaluation were to:

- investigate teachers' experiences of using *Big Writing* and their perceptions of its impact
- compare teachers' confidence and competence before and after use of the *Big Writing* approach
- compare pupils' writing performance before and after exposure to the *Big Writing* approach
- compare pupils' confidence in and enjoyment of writing before and after exposure to the *Big Writing* approach.

1.2 Methodology

The evaluation focused on schools that were beginning to introduce *Big Writing* and involved four strands of data collection activity:

- Strand 1: before and after pupil writing assessment tasks in nine primary schools (a total of 635 pupils completed both baseline and endpoint writing tasks)
- Strand 2: before and after pupil writing attitude survey in nine primary schools (a total of 635 pupils completed both baseline and endpoint attitude surveys)
- Strand 3: before and after teacher survey in nine primary schools (28 teachers completed baseline surveys and 21 teachers completed endpoint surveys)

- Strand 4: qualitative telephone interviews with five teachers from five different schools using *Big Writing* (three of these schools were also involved in the writing task and surveys).

We consulted with a total of 11 primary schools (nine schools in England; one in Scotland; and one in Wales), recruited from a sample of schools that had received whole school INSET on the *Big Writing* approach between January and September 2013. The schools were asked to deliver a minimum of six *Big Writing* lessons between the baseline and endpoint writing task and survey. The schools administered the writing task and survey to Year 3/4 and Year 4/5 pupils and teachers completed questionnaires at two points during the period of the summer term 2013 and autumn term 2013. In practice, the period of time between the baseline activities and endpoint was reduced to approximately six to eight weeks. Three of the schools consulted indicated that they had begun implementing *Big Writing* prior to the baseline writing task and survey. Hence, it is possible that in these schools there may already have been an influence of *Big Writing* at the point of the baseline assessment and survey, which undermines the scope for comparison to the endpoint assessment and survey to some extent.

This study design was well suited to capture teachers' experiences of implementing the programme and any early perceptions of impact on schools, teachers and pupils. As there was no control group and the timescale was relatively short, it could not be expected to provide statistically robust evidence of measured impacts attributable to *Big Writing*.

1.3 Report structure

The data from this study is reported in the subsequent chapters:

- Chapter 2: Schools' experiences of using *Big Writing*
- Chapter 3: Impact of *Big Writing* on teachers
- Chapter 4: *Big Writing* and pupils
- Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations.

2 Schools' experiences of using *Big Writing*

This chapter reports on:

- teachers' perceptions of the *Big Writing* training
- approaches to implementing *Big Writing*
- factors supporting implementation
- effectiveness of *Big Writing* features.

2.1 Key findings: Schools' experiences of using *Big Writing*

- The majority of teachers are positive about the usefulness of the *Big Writing* training; it provides them with a clear overview of the approach and key elements and leaves them confident to implement *Big Writing* in the classroom. Teachers also value the training around the assessment of writing and the use of the Writing Criterion Scale.

- Following training, all teachers have embedded *Big Writing* into their own teaching and learning practice and most thought *Big Writing* has been embedded as a whole school writing approach.

- Teachers are positive about *Big Writing* - they see value in the approaches it highlights and commit to implementing and embedding the approach as part of teaching and learning practices, indicating that they are confident in the benefits of the approach for their learners.

- There is evidence that *Big Writing* is being implemented in a structured way across the whole school (including with all year groups and all teachers). Implementation typically involves planned sessions for practising basic skills, discussing vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation, and planning writing, as well as dedicated time for *Big Write* extended writing sessions.

- Teachers use *Big Writing* approaches to build upon existing effective approaches and adapt the elements to best meet the needs of their circumstances and pupils. *Big Writing* reaffirms existing good practice in teaching writing, rather than offering a radically different approach.

- The key features that appear to underpin successful implementation of *Big Writing* include: use of *Big Writing* resources and materials (e.g. VCOP boards, VCOP pyramids and professional development handbooks with lesson plans and resources); teacher collaboration and senior leader support; *Big Writing* activities and approach written into timetables and key documents; fit with views and existing good practice in terms of how writing should be taught; participating in whole school *Big Writing* training; and monitoring and reviewing (including pupil and teacher perceptions, assessment data).

- Teachers report that the key features of the *Big Writing* approach enhance the teaching and learning of writing, particularly the emphasis on oral VCOP activities and *Big Write* silent writing sessions. Where used, the *Big Writing* Assessment Criterion scale is found to be useful as it facilitates the assessment of different elements of writing.

2.2 Teachers' perceptions of the *Big Writing* training

The survey asked teachers to give their reasons for participating in *Big Writing* training in order to first try and understand what they hoped to gain from the programme. As can be seen in Table 2.1 below, a **range of factors are considered to be highly important in influencing teachers' decision to participate in the *Big Writing* programme**. The most important factors appear to relate to whole school concerns (e.g. all staff are expected to participate; writing is a school priority); writing teaching and learning concerns (e.g. to improve the teaching and learning of writing and pupils engagement with, and attainment in, writing); and the need to develop the individual teachers' skills in teaching writing (e.g. to improve the range of writing teaching approaches, writing subject knowledge, assessment skills and confidence to teach writing). In general, the teachers' comments reflect both their focus on pupils' writing ability and expectation that the *Big Writing* programme will contribute to progress in this area.

Table 2.1   The factors influencing teachers' decision to participate in the *Big Writing* programme

Factor	Number of teachers rating 'very important'
All staff are expected to participate in the programme	25
I want to improve the range of teaching approaches I use when teaching writing	25
I need to improve the level of writing attainment of my pupils	25
I want to help my pupils experience the excitement of writing	25
I want to improve the quality of teaching and learning of writing within my school	25
Developing writing is currently a school priority	24
I want to improve my subject knowledge about writing	20
I want to improve my skills in assessing writing	19
I want to increase my confidence in teaching writing	18
I really enjoy teaching writing and want to develop my skills further	15
I think the programme will be good for my own professional development	13

N = 28

Source: NFER (2014)

The **majority of teachers (21) report participating in *Big Writing* training delivered as whole school INSET** in their school. A handful of teachers (five) received the *Big Writing* training as INSET delivered to a cluster of schools and one teacher reported receiving *Big Writing* training via a conference.

The majority of teachers (24) are positive about the usefulness of the *Big Writing* training; it provides them with a clear overview of the approach and its key elements and leaves them confident to implement *Big Writing* in the classroom. Most teachers (23) are also convinced that *Big Writing* will help them to make a difference to their pupils' writing, indicating that the training convinced teachers of the value of the approach. Almost three-quarters of teachers (20) value the training around the assessment of writing and the use of the Writing Criterion Scale – suggesting that this is also a very useful aspect of the *Big Writing* training. These findings are presented in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2   Teachers' views on the usefulness of *Big Writing* training

Statement	Number of teachers rating 'agree' or 'strongly agree'
I felt the training gave a very clear overview of the Big Writing approach and its key elements	24
After the training I felt confident that I could implement Big Writing effectively in my classroom	24
The training convinced me that Big Writing would help me make a real difference to my pupils	23
I really valued the training around the assessment of writing and use of the Writing Criterion Scale	20
I felt the training really helped me to understand the writing process and the problems children face	17

N = 28

Source: NFER (2014)

Furthermore, in the follow-up survey, 18 out of 21 teachers who responded reflected on their *Big Writing* training and rated that it has **prepared them 'very well' or 'fairly well' for introducing *Big Writing* in their practice**.

Teacher interviews: Perceptions of *Big Writing* training

Discussions with five teachers via telephone interviews also revealed positive experiences of the *Big Writing* training. The teachers have received whole school INSET on *Big Writing*, often involving all teaching staff across different year groups and including teaching assistants. The teachers feel that the **training is very effective, involving practical work and providing lots of ideas** to support the application of *Big Writing* in the classroom. An even greater emphasis on the practical activities, rather than discussion of the approach would be welcomed by one teacher.

2.3 Approaches to implementing *Big Writing*

The follow-up survey with teachers showed that **all teachers have embedded *Big Writing* into their own teaching and learning practice** and that **most thought *Big Writing* has been embedded as a whole school writing approach**. Table 2.3 below shows that almost three quarters of teachers (14) perceive that *Big Writing* has been embedded into writing teaching and learning practices to '*a great extent*' across the whole school. These findings suggest very clearly that **teachers and schools are positive about *Big Writing*. They see value in the approaches it highlights and commit to implementing and embedding the approach as part of teaching and learning practices, indicating that they are confident in the benefits of the approach for their learners**.

Table 2.3 **Teachers' views of the extent to which *Big Writing* is embedded into writing teaching and learning practices**

Statement	Number rating 'great extent'	Number rating 'some extent'	Don't know
Embedded in my practice	15	6	-
Embedded in all teachers' practice	11	7	3
Embedded as a whole school writing approach	14	5	2
N = 21			

Source: NFER (2014)

Consistent with the finding above that most of the surveyed schools have implemented *Big Writing* as a whole school approach, overall **teachers tend to report that all year groups of pupils have experienced *Big Writing***. However, schools rarely use *Big Writing* with the reception age range (only 4 out of 21 teachers indicated this in the survey) and *Big Writing* is most commonly used with Years 3-6 pupils (in England and Wales) and Primary 4-7 in Scotland (between 17 and 19 out of 21 teachers indicated that their school uses it with these year groups).

> ### Teacher Interviews: Approaches to the implementation of *Big Writing* in writing teaching practice
>
> Based on teacher interview data, four of the five schools have **implemented *Big Writing* in a structured way across the whole school**, using the approach with all year groups and all teachers and hence there appears to be a **considerable degree of commonality to the overarching implementation approach**. All four schools have implemented a weekly (or fortnightly) structure to deliver the various aspects of *Big Writing*, including regular short **basic skills** and oral **VCOP sessions**; time to plan and discuss writing (including discussion with peers and family, and notes and diagrams on what could be included in the writing and possible vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation to use); and scheduled ***Big Write* silent writing sessions.** In two schools these activities take place across the whole school at a dedicated day and time in the week; whereas in the other two schools the *Big*

Write sessions are scheduled differently for the different class groups, amounting to an hour of extended writing time once a week, or once a fortnight for the younger children. Teachers in these schools integrate the *Big Writing* approach into their existing schemes of work and topics for the year group and class, as opposed to adopting a whole school theme. Most schools also use the **Big Write atmosphere** (e.g. music, sparkly lights, re-arranged desks and seating).

The teacher in the fifth school received *Big Writing* training in a previous school and has brought the knowledge to her current school and **implemented the approach in her own teaching practice** (in a similar way to that outlined above, using the oral VCOP sessions, opportunities for pupils to plan and discuss writing and the *Big Write* extended writing session and *Big Write* atmosphere). This **teacher is currently training a colleague in the school on *Big Writing*** via team teaching and joint planning. The teacher has advocated that other staff in the school receive the training and that *Big Writing* is implemented more broadly; however, the teacher was not aware of any plans indicating that this had been acted upon.

A couple of teachers discussed how the implementation of *Big Writing* did not necessarily constitute a radical departure from existing practice, but rather **teachers used *Big Writing* approaches to build upon existing effective approaches and adapt the elements to best meet the needs of their circumstances and pupils**. As one teacher explains:

> *The training has provided us with ideas of how to go about it, I've talked to staff about it, everybody has taken it on board - it's just a matter of getting it working for you because everybody has their own style of teaching. We were told not to throw out good practice, to use ideas we had before and incorporate them in this system of teaching.*

For instance, one school has adapted the *Big Writing* approach for the Foundation Stage age group in a Welsh medium school, recreating a VCOP display as a train with consistent colour coding of the VCOP elements (to those used higher up in the school) and equivalent English and Welsh words. The *Big Write* sessions are organised as breakout group sessions to provide more intensive teacher support in scaffolding the pupils' writing. Another school has integrated the *Big Writing* elements alongside their existing good practice in teaching writing (e.g. pupil partnering and discussion, the use of drama to encourage ideas and creativity for writing). This school has experimented with creating a *Big Write* atmosphere but has found it to make little difference to pupils' learning and engagement in comparison to the other elements, so has discontinued this aspect of the programme.

2.4 Factors supporting implementation

The teacher follow-up survey asked teachers to rate their extent of agreement/disagreement with a series of statements to help explore the important **factors in implementing *Big Writing***. Most teachers (17-19 out of 21) agree with the statements below.

- They are enthusiastic about introducing *Big Writing.*
- The senior management team of the school has been championing the use of *Big Writing.*
- *Big Writing* fits well with their views about how writing should be taught.

- All teaching colleagues have been involved in *Big Writing.*
- It has been a gradual process to introduce *Big Writing* in the classroom.

The prevalence of agreement with these statements may suggest that **these factors play an important role in supporting the effective implementation of *Big Writing*.**

Around three-quarters of teachers (14-15 out of 21) agreed that:

- they have had time to integrate *Big Writing* into Schemes of Work
- *Big Writing* has been incorporated into whole school writing policies and strategies.

For the smaller proportion of teachers who did not agree with these statements, the absence of these factors may have undermined the extent to which *Big Writing* has been implemented.

Half of teachers (11) agree that '*Big Writing* has involved a major change to the school's way of teaching writing'. This finding suggests that for half of teachers in the remaining schools, the introduction of *Big Writing* does not represent a major change in the school's way of teaching writing and that the principles of *Big Writing* are consistent with what is already widely established effective practice in schools. Thus, **the implementation of *Big Writing* in some schools may have involved a reaffirmation of the techniques of good practice in teaching writing, rather than a radically different approach**. One possible explanation of the findings of this study is that *Big Writing* provides greater confidence for teachers in the effectiveness of their existing approaches, as these are supported by the established *Big Writing* approach. For some teachers already aware of and using these techniques, ***Big Writing* may not substantially *transform* practice and hence no particular changes evident in pupils' writing performance and attitudes would be expected**.

Teacher interviews: Factors supporting the implementation of *Big Writing* in practice

In discussions with the five teacher interviewees, five themes emerged as supporting the implementation of *Big Writing* in practice. We describe each one below.

Use of *Big Writing* resources and materials

The teachers we interviewed are all using various *Big Writing* resources to support the implementation of the approach in their own teaching practices and more broadly in classrooms across the school. These resources include **VCOP display boards and VCOP desktop pyramids** displaying examples of vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation associated with each National Curriculum level of writing. Three of the five teachers interviewed are using the ***Big Writing* professional development handbooks** with exemplar texts, lesson plans and CD-ROM resources. Teachers find this resource useful in providing ideas for *Big Writing* lessons, particularly valuable in the early stages of implementation; as the teachers grow in confidence using the *Big Writing* approach they are able to develop and source more of their own resources. One teacher feels that **even more exemplar texts would be useful, as well as texts and lesson plans linked to different topics of the curriculum and different age groups**.

Teacher collaboration and senior leader support

In the schools that have implemented the *Big Writing* approach as a whole school initiative, **support from senior leaders** and the role of the English subject leader to champion and support colleagues in pushing forward a strategy for implementation appear to underpin successful roll-out of the approach. One teacher reports that the use of peer observation and moderation has underpinned the implementation of *Big Writing* across the whole school, ensuring the approaches are being applied consistently in different classrooms. Another teacher reports that their school used staff meetings as a platform to agree a whole-school approach to the implementation of *Big Writing*. One of the teachers commented on the need for classroom assistant support for pupils who require extra support during the *Big Writing* tasks.

Timetabling *Big Writing* sessions

The four schools that have implemented *Big Writing* in a structured and formalised way have a scheduled programme of activity for regular basic skills and VCOP sessions, oral discussion and *Big Write* silent write sessions timetabled in for each class. Several teachers identified the need for **additional input of time to implement *Big Writing,*** including for planning activities, facilitating extended writing sessions and undertaking assessment of full pieces of writing.

Monitoring and reviewing evidence

Some of the teachers who have embedded *Big Writing* into their practice highlight that it has been important to **review and monitor the impact** of this change. This involves holding (informal) discussions with pupils and staff and monitoring assessment data. The general perception from this reviewing is that schools' feel that *Big Writing* is making a difference to pupils' learning in writing and so are continuing to use the approaches.

Whole school training

Several teachers explained that it is important that the *Big Writing* training involves the whole school teaching staff (and teaching assistants) as this is key to subsequent whole school implementation of the practices and approaches. This enables **greater consistency in the application of *Big Writing* approaches and greater scope for teacher collaboration** as all teachers receive the same input, develop the same knowledge and agree how they want to implement the programme. Individual teachers experiencing the training and trying to cascade to colleagues may be a more challenging model of implementation.

Figure 2.1 below draws together the evidence from the teacher survey and qualitative telephone interviews to summarise the factors that appear to be influential in the successful implementation of *Big Writing* in schools' writing teaching and learning practices. We do not have sufficient evidence to assess the relative contribution of each of these factors.

Figure 2.1   Factors supporting the implementation of *Big Writing*
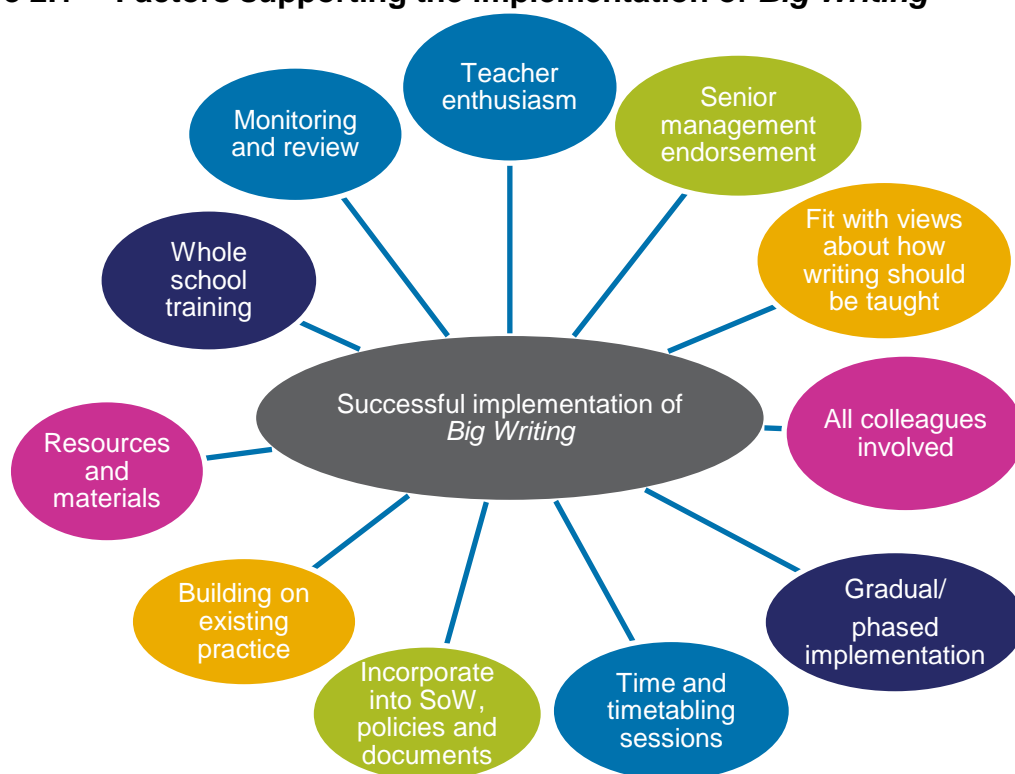
2.5 Effectiveness of *Big Writing* features

Teachers value the key features of the *Big Writing* approach as being effective in enhancing the teaching and learning of writing. Table 2.4 below shows that almost all of the 21 responding teachers feel that the *Big Writing* oral VCOP (vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation) activities and *Big Write* silent writing sessions are 'quite' or 'very' effective in enhancing the teaching and learning of writing. Around three-quarters of teachers (N = 16, 16 and 15 respectively) feel that the *Big Write* atmosphere, daily, short basic skills sessions and Formative Assessment Criterion Scale are effective in enhancing writing teaching and learning.

Table 2.4   Teachers' views of the effectiveness of *Big Writing* aspects

Big Writing aspect	Number of teachers rating 'quite' or 'very' effective
Oral activities to develop use of Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation (VCOP)	20
Big Write silent writing sessions	19
Big Write atmosphere	16
Daily, short basic skills sessions	16
Formative Assessment Criterion Scale	15
N = 21	

Source: NFER (2014)

Teacher interviews: Effectiveness of *Big Writing* aspects

As with the surveyed teachers, interviewees chose to highlight the **oral VCOP activities** and ***Big Write* silent writing sessions** as the most effective features of *Big Writing*. The oral VCOP activities are felt to provide regular opportunities to practise and develop these key aspects of writing, helping pupils to understand how to develop their writing using a broader range of vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation. The *Big Write* session provides pupils with an opportunity to plan for and produce an extended piece of writing enabling them to develop their ideas and demonstrate their skills. The ***Big Write* atmosphere** is identified by a couple of interviewees as helping to stimulate creativity and make the writing activity more engaging, focused and '*special*', though this is considered a less effective feature of *Big Writing* by at least one interviewee. Overall, **the *Big Writing* approach is felt to effectively scaffold and structure pupils' writing development**. This teacher explains:

> *I think emphasising all those important elements of writing in one day, and how they all build on each other and support each other to produce good writers, is key to it.*

Use of the Criterion Assessment Scale is not consistent across the five schools consulted via interviews. **Two of the five schools are currently using the Criterion Assessment scale and find it to be useful**. However, the other **three schools are not currently using the assessment scale**. One school uses the scale once every half term to formally assess a piece of writing for each pupil. This teacher is very positive about the Criterion Scale and feels it is better than any writing assessment tool they have used previously. The second school finds the Criterion scale particularly useful for newer teachers as it **breaks the assessment down to look at different elements of writing**. The more experienced teachers in the school find it easier and quicker to assess based on the National Curriculum level descriptors as they are more familiar with identifying the features and structure of pupils' texts and can relate these directly to the National Curriculum levels. A third teacher anticipates that the Criterion scale could be useful and the school hopes to start using it as it is more specific than the current assessment approach employed. However, the tool will require adaptation for the school's circumstances and for application to the Foundation Stage specifically.

Generally, teachers feel that marking pupils' writing is time consuming as it can be considerably subjective and requires moderation. In the two schools not using the Criterion Scale, the preferred methods of assessing pupils' writing include Assessing Pupil Progress (APP), peer- and self-assessment, formative assessment and 'two stars and a wish' - feeding back two aspects that are strong and one area where the writing can be improved. Thus the respondents recognise the importance of formative assessment in the teaching of writing, but are not consistent in the structure they use for it.

3 Impact of *Big Writing* on teachers

This chapter explores:

- teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on their confidence and practice
- pupils' perceptions of how writing is taught
- teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on the whole school.

3.1 Key findings: Impact of *Big Writing* on teachers

- Teachers are more confident to teach writing after participating in *Big Writing* training and implementing the approach in their classrooms.

- Teachers report a range of impacts on their writing teaching practice as a result of *Big Writing*, including on their repertoire of writing teaching approaches and techniques; ability to teach writing in an engaging way; ideas and resources; ability to stretch and challenge pupils; subject knowledge about teaching writing; and assessment of writing.

- While there is still positive impact of *Big Writing* on teachers' ability to teach children to write effectively for different audiences and purposes, this benefit is rated slightly more modestly.

- The pupil writing attitude survey shows some evidence of slight changes in how pupils feel they are being taught writing. Following the implementation of *Big Writing*, they report slightly more use of the typical aspects of the *Big Writing* approach (e.g. oral discussion of writing).

- Most teachers report that *Big Writing* has impacted positively on the whole school, identifying a range of benefits on the profile of writing, the quality of writing teaching and learning across the school, and writing policies and strategies.

- Interviewed teachers anticipate positive outcomes on the standards of pupils' writing as *Big Writing* is embedded across the school. All interviewed teachers plan to continue to use *Big Writing*.

3.2 Teachers' perceptions of impact of *Big Writing* on their confidence and practice

Teachers are more confident to teach writing after participating in *Big Writing* training and implementing the approach in their classrooms. Figure 3.1 below shows that on all aspects of teaching writing, teachers are more confident at endpoint (having received training and implemented *Big Writing*) than they were at baseline. However, these findings need to be treated cautiously due to being based on only a small number of teacher survey responses.

Figure 3.1   Teacher confidence in teaching aspects of writing
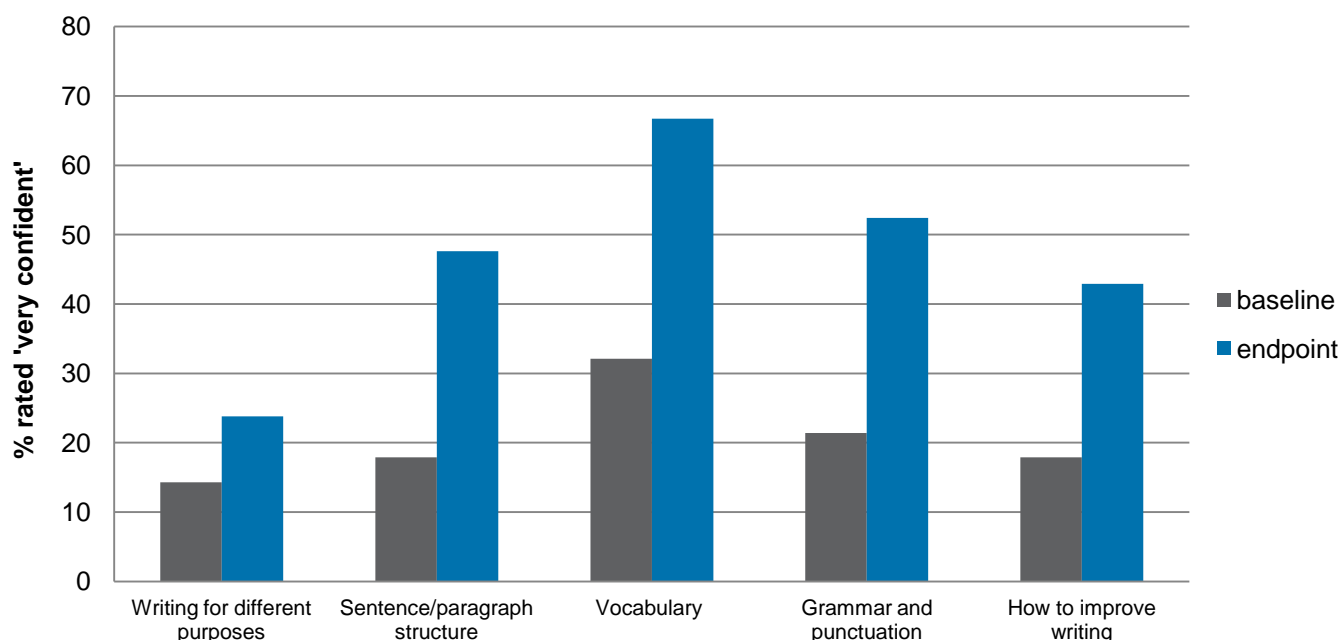
Source: NFER (2014)
Baseline N = 28; Endpoint N = 21

Teachers report a range of impacts on their writing teaching practice as a result of *Big Writing*. Table 3.1 below shows that the biggest reported impacts of *Big Writing* are on teachers' repertoire of writing teaching approaches and techniques, followed by the ability to teach writing in an engaging way, ideas and resources, ability to stretch pupils' writing learning, writing subject knowledge and writing assessment. While there is still positive impact of *Big Writing* on teachers' ability to teach children to write effectively for different audiences and purposes, this benefit is rated slightly more modestly (also a finding depicted in the chart above). This finding may indicate that **teaching children to write effectively for different audiences and purposes could have a more prominent focus in the *Big Writing* training and approach**. It is interesting to note that *Big Writing* is also felt by almost two-thirds of teachers to impact positively on teacher collaboration and sharing. This is presumably a consequence of the whole school training and implementation, which may in turn facilitate school-wide implementation and school-level impact. **More than four in five teachers rated that, overall, their writing teaching practice has improved to 'some' or a 'great' extent as a result of implementing *Big Writing***: a very positive finding.

Table 3.1   Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on their writing teaching practice

Type of impact	Number of teachers rating 'to some' or 'a great' extent
Increased my repertoire of writing teaching approaches and techniques	19
Improved my ability to teach writing in an engaging way	18
Increased my access to new ideas and resources	18
Improved my ability to stretch and challenge pupils' writing learning	18
Enhanced my subject knowledge about writing	17
Improved my assessment of pupils' writing	17
Improved my ability to teach children to write effectively for different audiences and purposes	14
Increased teacher collaboration/sharing	13
Enhanced my career development (e.g. new role/responsibility)	5

N = 21

Source: NFER (2014)

Teacher interviews: Impacts on teachers

All five interviewed teachers are **positive about the impact of *Big Writing* on their confidence and capacity to teach writing** as it offers a structured approach to follow and incorporates the delivery of the basics of writing to help build and develop pupils' skills. The teachers' enjoy teaching writing more since they have implemented *Big Writing*, particularly as the pupils have responded positively. The teachers feel they have more ideas to incorporate in their teaching of writing and understand more about pupils' writing development and how text is constructed of various features and elements. *Big Writing* is valued for reinforcing and highlighting the features of effective practice in teaching writing.

3.3 Pupil perceptions of how writing is taught

The pupil writing attitude survey shows **some evidence of slight changes in how pupils feel they are being taught writing** following the implementation of *Big Writing*; reporting slightly more use of the typical aspects of the *Big Writing* approach. In the endpoint questionnaire slightly more pupils (between one and five per cent) reported 'yes' to doing the writing-related activities listed below than at baseline (in order of degree of difference, with the largest difference first).

- To learn about writing we practise saying things out loud (the increase in pupils responding 'yes' to this statement was statistically significant).

- We learn about ways to connect our writing (e.g. words like Then, Next and But).

- We play games in class that help us to learn about writing.

- We learn exciting new words to use in our writing.

- We think about interesting ways to open our writing.

- We learn how to use different types of punctuation (e.g. capital letters and full stops).

- We think about how to plan our writing.

3.4 Teacher perceptions of impact of *Big Writing* on the whole school

Most **teachers report that *Big Writing* has impacted positively on the whole school**, identifying a range of benefits on the profile of writing, the quality of writing teaching and learning, and policies and strategies in relation to writing. Table 3.2 sets out these results.

Table 3.2   Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on the whole school

Type of impact	Number of teachers rating 'to some' or 'a great' extent
Raised the profile of writing	18
Enhanced writing teaching practices across the school	17
Improved the quality of writing teaching and learning	17
Revised or new policies/strategies in relation to writing	16
N = 21	

Source: NFER (2014)

Teacher interviews: Impacts on the whole school

Four of the five schools have implemented new whole school approaches to teaching writing; embedding *Big Writing* in teaching practices across the school. These teachers all convey that **the introduction of *Big Writing* has been a positive development** leading to enhanced consistency and quality of teaching and learning in writing and to **indications of positive outcomes on the standards of pupils' writing**. As a result, **all the schools plan to continue to use *Big Writing*** and to embed this further into writing teaching and learning as part of the new curriculum. This teacher explains this whole school impact on pupils' writing standards:

It has improved the standard of writing in the school, they've [the pupils] *started to think in a different way, so that's the way they are writing. I think it's the structure, the openers, the wow words – they like looking for really difficult words.*

Several teachers highlight the **importance of implementing *Big Writing* as a whole school approach** involving all teaching staff and teaching assistants. They feel this leads to greater consistency in the teaching of writing across the school, which helps to reinforce the development of writing skills and the focus on the distinctive aspects of writing, accumulating benefits for pupils as they progress through the school. As two teachers explain:

It's helped with the whole school approach and continuation and progression through the school. When the children go from one year to another they can see that [VCOP] display and they know what they're doing and what's expected. So hopefully in a few years as they go through the school we'll see more of an improvement.

Our writing has improved dramatically with everybody using Big Writing. I think doing it as a whole staff, all the TAs, all the teachers did the training, so everybody knows what's involved, it's a consistent, strong message. I think it's important to do the training like that together.

Another teacher discusses how **the introduction of *Big Writing* has led to changes in assessment** of writing and more target setting:

Lots of things have come out of the Big Write – it's made us look at how we're marking and assessing, we're doing more target setting, we're making the children respond to marking, I don't think we've ever spent so much time analysing bits of writing in the past, it's jiggled everybody up to think about it more.

Furthermore, ***Big Writing* is felt to have relevance and application as an approach for teaching writing across different subject areas** and so can be integrated into the school-wide literacy framework. For instance, in science, pupils can refer to the VCOP boards to get ideas for different vocabulary, openers, connectives and punctuation to use in writing up their science experiments and methods.

Two interviewees discussed how the ***Big Writing* programme is particularly useful for specific teachers**, for instance less experienced teachers and those who are less confident teaching literacy. It provides them with a structured approach to teaching writing, highlighting the key elements of writing and providing ideas and strategies to develop pupils' skills in different aspects of writing.

4   *Big Writing* and pupils

This chapter explores:

- pupils' writing performance (before and after implementation of *Big Writing*)

- pupils' writing attitudes (before and after implementation of *Big Writing*).

4.1 Key findings: *Big Writing* and pupils

- In general, the comparisons of pupils' writing performance and attitudes at baseline and endpoint show no statistically significant changes. It is typical to first see changes in teaching attitudes and practice result from the implementation of a new intervention and it takes time for teachers to embed new practices and attitudes into their classrooms and even longer to see changes in attainment.

- A further explanation for the lack of change in pupils writing performance and attitudes between baseline and endpoint is that several schools reported already implementing *Big Writing* prior to baseline, which undermines the scope for comparison to the endpoint assessment and survey to some extent. Furthermore, for some teachers *Big Writing* has not involved a major change to the schools way of teaching writing; the training may have reaffirmed and formalised existing good practice in teaching writing, rather than transformed it. Hence, in these cases we might not expect to see substantial changes in pupils' experiences of writing teaching and learning.

- Against this background, some pupils individually show noticeable improvement in their before and after writing task scores. We identified six of these pupils to serve as examples of improvement. In all these cases there is evidence of progression in the key aspects of writing highlighted by the *Big Writing* approach, particularly improvements in the use of VCOP, though we cannot directly attribute these changes to *Big Writing* without controlling for the many other possible influences.

- This link between improvement in writing performance and VCOP is also made in the teachers' surveys, as teachers reported that *Big Writing* has the most impact on pupils' vocabulary (the first component of VCOP).

- There were few statistically significant changes in pupils' writing attitudes from baseline to endpoint and even in the six case studies, pupils' attitudes towards writing did not consistently improve with their improved writing performance. Typically, pupils' attitudes to learning can be very entrenched and take a long time to change; they are likely to be intrinsically linked to performance in a complex way.

- There are some modest changes in pupil writing attitudes, in that pupils feel they have more opportunities to orally discuss writing since *Big Writing* has been implemented. There are also positive changes in the regularity with which the pupils are writing emails, text messages, letters and cards to friends and family.

- Teachers' surveys told a more positive story, with teachers perceiving a range of impacts of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing performance and attitudes, including increases in pupils' enjoyment of writing, writing confidence and writing skills.

- Interviewed teachers seemed to suggest that *Big Writing* is an effective way to teach writing to a range of pupil abilities as it includes different elements and teaching approaches that appeal to different strengths.

4.2 Pupils' writing performance

4.2.1 Pupils' baseline and endpoint writing task scores

To measure change in pupils' writing performance, we administered two similar writing tasks. The first task (baseline), which asked pupils to write a letter, giving advice about good games to play, was administered at the beginning of the study. A second task (endpoint), which asked pupils to write a letter suggesting an interesting place to go for a class trip, was administered after at least six weeks of *Big Writing* instruction. We assessed pupils' writing performance on each task in four key areas (strands), illustrated in Figure 4.1 below, using a mark scheme devised to capture key characteristics of *Big Writing*. Marks in the four strands were then added together to derive a total score.

Figure 4.1   Strands of writing assessed

address to reader
vocabulary
form and style
→
compositional form and purpose (CFP)

textual shape (TS)
←
organisation
structure
linking of ideas

connectives
punctuation
sentence openers
→
sentence structure and punctuation (SSP)

spelling and handwriting (SH)
←
accuracy
neatness
control

We analysed baseline and endpoint scores of 635 pupils by strand and by total score, to measure pupils' writing performance at both points in time. The analysis shows that, **overall, there was not a statistically significant change in pupils' writing performance from baseline to endpoint by total score or by strand**. The mean total score at both baseline and endpoint was 21, which is roughly equivalent to a typical lower Level 3 National Curriculum score. The statistical analysis also shows that girls scored significantly higher than boys at both baseline and endpoint, as they typically do on literacy assessments.

Figure 4.2 below shows the number of pupils (frequency) whose scores increased, decreased or stayed the same from baseline to endpoint. Some pupils' scores improved from baseline to endpoint, with increases ranging from 1 mark to 15 marks. Similarly, some pupils' scores declined, with decreases ranging from 1 mark to 13 marks. The highest frequency (56 pupils) consists of pupils whose scores did not increase or decrease from baseline to endpoint. It is important to note that this lack of change is typical for change evaluations with short timescales, such as this one, because only short term impact can be detected in such a short period of time. **We would be more likely to be able to detect whether there is an impact on pupils' performance, if there was more time between baseline and endpoint assessments** and attribution of any impact detected over a longer time period to the effects of *Big Writing* would require a control group. **It is typical to first see changes in teaching attitudes and practice result from the implementation of a new intervention and it takes time for teachers to embed new practices and attitudes into their classrooms**. This issue may be compounded by the potential for summer learning loss as over half the sample of schools completed baseline tasks in the summer term and endpoint tasks in the autumn term.

Figure 4.2   Change in pupils' total scores baseline to endpoint
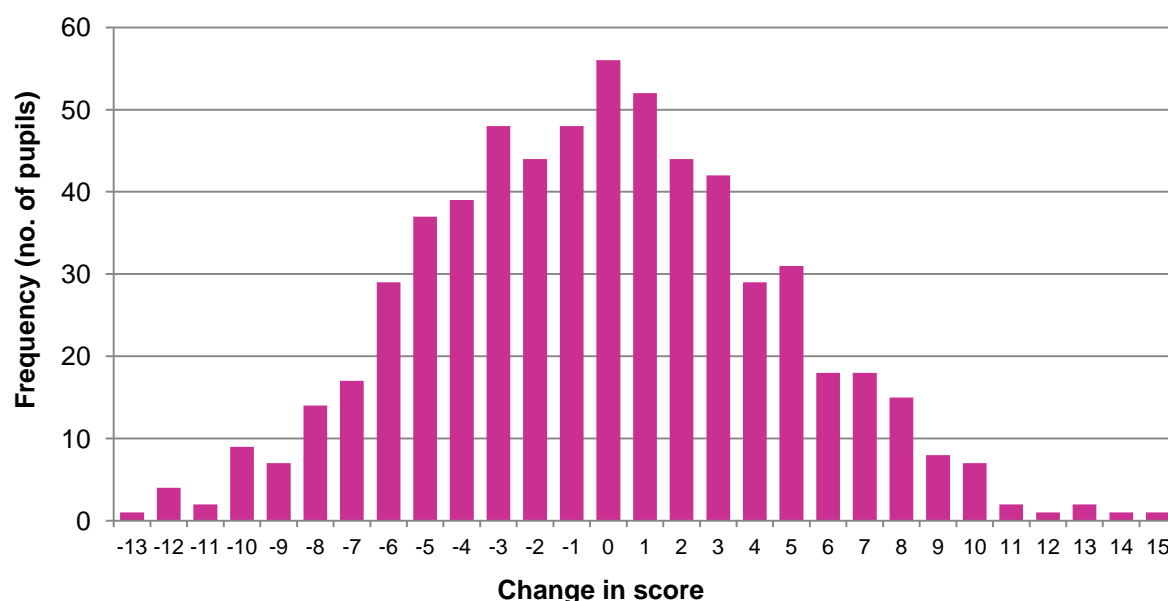
N = 635
Source: NFER (2014)

One further consideration here is that three of the schools consulted indicated that they had begun implementing *Big Writing* prior to the baseline writing task and survey. Hence, it is possible that in these schools there **may already have been an influence of *Big Writing* at the point of the baseline** assessment and survey, which undermines the scope for comparison to the endpoint assessment and survey to some extent. Indeed, the one school where there was a significant difference between pupils before and after writing task scores was one of these schools. This finding may provide **tentative evidence that in some instances, where the *Big Writing* approaches have had chance to become more embedded, positive outcomes on pupils writing performance are beginning to be seen**. However, there are clearly a plethora of possible explanations for these scores and it is beyond the scope of this study to control for these and attribute any changes to the effects of *Big Writing*.

4.2.2 Qualitative analysis of six pupils' pre and post writing task scripts

Although most pupils' writing performance did not change from baseline to endpoint, there are **some pupils who individually showed noticeable improvement. We identified six of these pupils to serve as examples of improvement to show some of the ways in which pupil writing performance can develop with time and practice**.

We selected pupils whose scores had improved in all four strands (with some pupils improving to a greater or lesser extent within different strands). Improvement in their total score varies (from six to 15 points). In all six case studies, the pupils showed greater improvement in the first three strands (CFP, TS and SSP) than in the fourth (SH). It should be noted that the first three strands were also given more weight in the marking as they feature more prominently in the *Big Writing Criterion Scale*. To reflect this, the first three strands are given more emphasis in the analyses below.

The first two case studies (Tony[1] and Jasmine) were selected because these pupils showed the greatest overall improvement out of the 635 participants. Therefore, their writing was examined more thoroughly with consideration for all four strands, while the other four case studies emphasise improvement in a particular strand with a focus on one or two elements of VCOP; this acronym for some of the key components of *Big Writing*, vocabulary, connectives, sentence openers and punctuation, is commonly used in *Big Writing* literature, training and lessons and played a prominent role in the mark scheme used in this evaluation. Each case study includes:

- a table, showing marks by strand, total marks, estimated level[2] and change in marks and level from baseline to endpoint (in case studies 3-6, the strand of focus is indicated with shading)

- samples of each pupil's writing extracted from baseline (sample A) and endpoint (sample B) tasks

- qualitative analysis, focusing on noticeable areas of improvement.

When looking at the estimated level achieved by each pupil, it is important to note that these are based on the total scores and that the estimated levels for each individual strand would likely vary as a pupil's writing might be stronger or weaker in one strand or another.

It is also important to reiterate that these assessments provided a snapshot of pupils' writing on two occasions, and that the case studies have been selected to demonstrate what improvement can look like, rather than to illustrate typical cases.

Case study 1: Tony

Table 4.1   Tony's writing performance

| Strand | Marks | | Change |
	Baseline	Endpoint	
CFP	4	8	4
TS	4	8	4
SSP	5	9	4
SH	3	5	2
Total score	**16**	**30**	**14**
Estimated level	**2**	**4**	**2**

Tony's baseline task (sample A): I like to play hide and tig at school I think it's fun to play it because you get explore the playground and run around.

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[1] All names of pupils and teachers have been changed.

[3] Levels are estimated based on the levels indicated in the *Big Writing Criterion Scale.* In this evaluation, pupils' levels are 'estimated' because of the narrow evidence base (two writing assessments similar in text type and demand).

Tony's endpoint task (sample B): Last time I went on Facetime he said that the Penguin Castle is in big danger because it is melting! So please Miss Hodgeson, I don't want my friends home to obliterate and especially my friends Life. He has already arranged 26 beds all stacked on top of each other!

In sample A, Tony's punctuation is insecure (*school* [.] *I*) but in script B, it is more secure and varied, using full stops, exclamation marks and commas. Tony uses the pronoun *I* to begin each sentence in sample A (*I like*, *I think*) but in sample B, his sentence openings are more sophisticated and varied, beginning the first with an adverbial (*Last time*) and using different subject pronouns (*I*, *He*). Although Tony's use of vocabulary in sample A is appropriate to the task, it is mostly very simple (*play*, *school*, *fun*), employing more ambitious choices in sample B (*obliterate*, *especially*, *arranged*). Tony demonstrates limited sentence expansion in sample A, but expands in sample B, using noun phrases (*my friends home*, *26 beds*) and adverbial phrases (*in big danger*, *on top of each other*). He also includes a direct address to the reader (*please Miss Anderson*) in script B, demonstrating awareness of audience and purpose. Spelling of polysyllabic words is accurate in both scripts, but sample A consists of spellings more familiar to pupils (*explore*, *playground*), while script B contains spellings of more challenging polysyllabic words (*Penguin*, *obliterate*, *especially*).

Tony's responses on his baseline and endpoint writing attitude surveys are largely the same, and generally positive, indicating on both that he learns about the different aspects of writing often and responding positively to questions regarding his enjoyment of learning about writing. From baseline to endpoint, his level of enjoyment in learning about some aspects of writing increases; his enjoyment in learning different ways to connect writing, and how to use different types of punctuation, increase slightly from '*a little'* to '*a lot'.*

Case study 2: Jasmine

Table 4.2   Jasmine's writing performance

Strand	Marks		Change
	Baseline	Endpoint	
CFP	4	8	4
TS	4	8	4
SSP	4	9	5
SH	3	5	2
Total score	**15**	**30**	**15**
Estimated level	**2**	**4**	**2**

Jasmine's baseline task (sample A): I think at breaktime people Should be aloudd to stay inside and do Art to practise Art work. People should be aloud to come in at a Sertain time and go into a quiet room and practise singing.

Jasmine's endpoint task (sample B): I think I would like to go there because I would like to see the pandas and all the other interesting animals. If we don't already know about some of the animals we will be able to ask questions for example what do they eat., Where do they come from, are they nearly extinct.?

In sample A, Jasmine's use of connectives is limited to *and*, while in script B she displays more variation (*and*, *because*). In sample B, she uses more complex sentence structures than in script A, including a subordinating clause (*If we don't already know about some of the animals...*). Although Jasmine demonstrates accurate sentence demarcation in sample A, her use of punctuation is limited to full stops. In sample B, however, she shows more ambitious use of sentence punctuation, including commas in a list and a question mark (although there is some erroneous use of full stops after *eat* and *extinct*). There is evidence of advancement in Jasmine's spelling; while she makes phonetically plausible errors in spelling in sample A (*aloudd*, *sertain*), her spelling of polysyllabic words in sample B is accurate (*example*, *extinct*).

Although Jasmine's writing shows evidence of improvement from baseline to endpoint, her writing attitude survey responses show several decreases in her level of enjoyment in learning about writing. For example, her enjoyment in learning about different types of punctuation and checking that writing makes sense decreased from '*I enjoy it a little*' to '*I don't enjoy it*' and her enjoyment in learning about how to plan writing decreased from '*I enjoy it a lot*' to '*I enjoy it a little*'.

Case study 3: Amir

Table 4.3   Amir's writing performance

Strand	Marks		Change
	Baseline	Endpoint	
CFP	4	8	4
TS	5	8	3
SSP	4	8	4
SH	2	4	2
Total score	**15**	**28**	**13**
Estimated level	**2**	**4**	**2**

Amir's baseline task (sample A): I am doing a fun play whith my friends wright now and I'm henry VIII its really fun doing them [paragraph break] I have played all these games before and loved them.

Amir's endpoint task (sample B): I am certain that the rest of the class would really enjoy it. They will enjoy it because they can have fun as well as learn lots as dinocas [dinosaurs] are very interesting creatores.

Amir's writing demonstrates a development in vocabulary and purpose. In sample A, Amir uses appropriate yet simple vocabulary (*fun*, *play*, *loved*), while is script B his vocabulary choices are more adventurous (*certain*, *enjoy*, *creatores*). Additionally, his writing in sample B is fit for purpose, containing elements of a persuasive appeal to his teacher (*the rest of the class would really enjoy it*), while sample A focuses more on his opinions (*its really fun*). Despite his improved use of vocabulary, his writing attitude surveys do not indicate a shift in learning about vocabulary; at both stages he indicates learning about vocabulary often and enjoying it '*a lot*'.

Case study 4: Farah

Table 4.4   Farah's writing performance

Strand	Marks		Change
	Baseline	**Endpoint**	
CFP	4	8	4
TS	4	7	3
SSP	5	7	2
SH	3	4	1
Total score	**16**	**26**	**10**
Estimated level	**2**	**3**	**1**

Farah's baseline task (sample A): chess is an indoor game that is very good for focasing and consentrating. [paragraph break] I play lots of diffrent thing's like it and chess.

Farah's endpoint task (sample B): *I think we should go to...* the corall reeff because you can learn so much about the habbitat of unsuall creatures. Not only that you can see the stunning colourful corall wich glows beneath you.

In sample B, there is evidence that Farah has made progress in her use of connectives and organisation of ideas. In sample A, she moves from one paragraph to another without any transitional phrases to link ideas and the two ideas seem to be ordered the wrong way around, with the benefits of playing chess coming before the statement of what she likes to play. In sample B, she links ideas using connectives (*because, Not only* that) and the second sentence develops ideas from the first. Farah's improvement in using connectives is in keeping with her responses on her baseline and endpoint writing attitude surveys; at baseline she indicates not often learning about ways to connect writing but at endpoint she indicates often learning about ways to connect writing. At both points, Farah indicates that she enjoys learning about connecting writing '*a lot*'.

Case study 5: Ben

Table 4.5   Ben's writing performance

Strand	Marks		Change
	Baseline	**Endpoint**	
CFP	5	6	1
TS	5	6	1
SSP	4	7	3
SH	3	4	1
Total score	**17**	**23**	**6**
Estimated level	**2**	**3**	**1**

Ben's baseline task (sample A): The seeker counts to 20 slow closing their eyes while the other people hide. The seeker tries to find the other people and people who hide stay quiet and wait.

Ben's endpoint task (sample B): Excited boys would like watching football for 90 minutes!...When I was 6 or 7, I remember being hungry at the football match... Lots of fans support Hull city so they might be there...

In sample B, Ben begins to use a broader range of sentence openers, changing the subjects (*boys*, *I*, *fans*) and adding variety and detail by beginning sentences with noun phrases and adverbials (*Excited boys*, *When I was 6 or 7*, *Lots of fans*). Ben's use of sentence openers in sample A is less sophisticated than in Sample B and is sometimes repetitive. For example, in the sample above, he repeats the subject at the beginning of both sentences (*The seeker*). In both his baseline and endpoint writing attitude surveys, Ben indicates that he often learns about interesting ways to open writing but there is a downward shift in his enjoyment of learning about interesting ways to open writing from '*I enjoy it a little*' to '*I don't enjoy it*'.

Case study 6: Tyler

Table 4.6   Ben's writing performance

Strand	Marks		Change
	Baseline	**Endpoint**	
CFP	5	9	4
TS	5	9	4
SSP	5	9	4
SH	3	4	1
Total score	**18**	**31**	**13**
Estimated level	**2**	**4**	**2**

Tyler's baseline task (sample A): ...you have to get their flags to your half. For this game you need to have 3 flags for each team. You need to have 5 people one each team.

Tyler's endpoint task (sample B): *I think we should go to...*the Fitz William Museum in Cambridge. I think this would be a good place to go because there a lots of interesting facts and there are some objects which are over 1000 years old!...There are lots of paintings, new and old.

The samples of Tyler's writing show that his use of punctuation has developed from sample A to sample B. Although his sentence demarcation is mostly secure in sample A, he uses only full stops and his capitalisation of the first word of sentences is sometimes insecure (*for*). In sample B, however, he begins to use a wider variety of punctuation, including an exclamation mark, a comma and correct capitalisation of beginnings of sentences (*I*,*There*) and proper nouns (*Fitz William Museum*, *Cambridge*). At both stages of the evaluation, Tyler indicates in his writing attitude surveys that he often learns about using different types of punctuation but he indicates a shift in enjoyment between baseline and endpoint from '*I enjoy it a little'* to '*I enjoy it a lot'*.

The case studies demonstrate several examples of different ways pupils' writing performance can develop. Some pupils (i.e. Ben) develop in one particular strand more than in the others, while other pupils show improvement in several strands (i.e. Jasmine). **In all six case studies, there is evidence of progression in the key aspects of writing highlighted by the *Big Writing* approach, particularly improvements in the use of VCOP**. This suggests that there has been some impact of *Big Writing* in these cases. However, we cannot directly attribute these changes to *Big Writing* as VCOP are likely to be similar to aspects of writing that are developed in other writing teaching approaches.

4.2.3 Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupil writing performance

Four fifths of teachers surveyed agree with the statement that '*most pupils in my school make good progress in writing*' and there was no difference in the baseline and endpoint survey responses (23 out of 28 teachers at baseline and 17 out of 21 teachers at endpoint responded in this way). This finding indicates that teachers consider that there is a good level of performance in writing in their school.

The endpoint teacher survey asked teachers to rate the extent to which *Big Writing* has impacted on pupils in a range of ways. Table 4.7 below sets out the teachers' responses in order of the highest to lowest rated impact areas. The table shows that, according to teachers, ***Big Writing* has the most impact on pupils' vocabulary, use of different writing styles and attainment in writing**. *Big Writing* is also felt to have a substantial impact on improving the creativity and structure of pupils' writing and improving pupils' grammar and punctuation. Most teachers feel that *Big Writing* does not have a substantial impact on improving children's handwriting and spelling, though these are less central elements of the approach.

Table 4.7   Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing performance

Type of impact	Number of teachers rating 'to some' or 'a great' extent
Improved pupils' vocabulary	20
Enhanced pupils' ability to write for different audiences and use different writing styles	19
Raised pupils' attainment and progress in writing	19
Improved pupils' creativity of writing	18
Improved pupils' structure of writing	18
Improved pupils' grammar and punctuation	16
Improved pupils' handwriting	7
Improved pupils' spelling	7

N = 21

Source: NFER (2014)

The finding that teachers rated the same extent of progress in pupils' writing in the before and after surveys appears incongruous with teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupils' attainment and progression in writing (outlined in the table above). It may be that teachers anticipate the longer term benefits of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing performance, but this may not have transpired in actual results in the relatively short period between the baseline and endpoint survey.

4.3 Pupils' writing attitudes

4.3.1 Pupils' responses to baseline and endpoint attitude survey

Pupils' attitudes towards writing were collected in baseline and endpoint surveys. Factor analysis[3] was conducted to combine several questions (or 'items') on the pupil attitude survey to create a measure of pupils' writing confidence. Figure 4.3 shows the questionnaire items that contributed to this overall measure. The items all contributed reasonably well to the measure at both time points and the measure was robust[4]. Pupils could therefore be given a 'writing confidence' score which could then be compared at the two time points.

Figure 4.3   Factor analysis of pupils' writing confidence

We can conclude that **there was no significant change in pupils' writing confidence overall, or for boys or girls, from baseline to endpoint**. Similarly, there was no significant change in responses to each item from baseline to endpoint (e.g. pupils' enjoyment of writing stayed the same). This is not a surprising finding though, considering it typically takes more time than the timescales of this evaluation allowed to see shifts in pupils' attitudes towards learning, which can be very entrenched. Girls were significantly more confident than boys at both baseline and endpoint which is a finding in keeping with general trends in gender difference studies in literacy.

There was a positive change in pupils' responses about a key component of *Big Writing*: more pupils responded 'yes' to the statement '*to learn about writing we practise saying things out loud*' at endpoint than at baseline. This change was statistically significant, suggesting that **pupils feel they have more opportunities to orally discuss writing since *Big Writing* has been implemented**.

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[3] Factor analysis is a statistical technique used to combine responses from separate questions which individually measure different aspects of the same underlying trait. It is used to determine whether it is valid to combine the questions and whether each question contributes equally to the overall measure or whether they are weighted differently. The combined measure (the factor) becomes a more comprehensive measure that reflects all of the useful information in the separate individual questions (or 'items').

[4] Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of the internal consistency of a set of items, was 0.643 at endpoint and 0.717 at baseline (on a scale between 0 and 1, 1 being total consistency across item responses).

Further analysis also shows that pupils indicate doing more of certain types of writing at endpoint than at baseline. Pupils were more likely to respond that they **wrote emails, text messages, letters and cards to friends and family *often*** at endpoint than at baseline, and this change was statistically significant.

4.3.2 Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupil writing attitudes

The teacher survey revealed **a large increase in the extent to which teachers feel that pupils enjoy learning writing following the use of *Big Writing*** during the survey period. Almost all teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement '*most pupils in my school enjoy learning writing*' in the endpoint survey (91 per cent), whereas only half of the teachers felt that this was the position in the baseline survey (54 per cent). This finding indicates that **teachers believe that pupils enjoy the *Big Writing* approach**.

The teacher survey also revealed a **substantial increase in the extent to which teachers feel that pupils are confident in learning writing following the use of *Big Writing*** during the survey period. Three-quarters of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement '*most pupils in my school are confident in learning writing*' in the endpoint survey (76 per cent), compared to half of teachers (54 per cent) in the baseline survey. This finding indicates that **teachers believe that the *Big Writing* approach aids pupils' confidence in learning writing**.

When asked directly about the impacts of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing attitudes, **the majority of teachers indicated that *Big Writing* increases pupils' enjoyment of, and confidence in, writing**. Table 4.8 below sets out these findings.

Table 4.8   Teachers' perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing attitudes

Type of impact	Number of teachers rating 'to some' or 'a great' extent
Increased pupils' enjoyment of writing	20
Increased pupils' confidence in writing	18
N = 21	

Source: NFER (2014)

Teacher interviews: perceptions of the impact of *Big Writing* on pupils' writing performance and attitudes

All five interviewed teachers are positive about the benefits of *Big Writing* for their pupils. They feel that pupils are more engaged by the *Big Writing* approach and are able to write in much more detail and length due to the extended writing session and opportunity to prepare ideas before commencing writing. Indeed, the teachers discussed how placing greater emphasis and time on planning writing **helps to encourage pupils' creativity and removes the pressure and fear of not knowing what to write, enabling students to enjoy the experience of writing more**. Teachers report that *Big Writing* helps them to scaffold and

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structure their pupils' writing learning. Teachers explain these impacts:

Giving the children time to prepare what they're going to write is monumental – it makes such a difference. if you give them 'write about a stormy night' they sit for half an hour thinking 'oh my god what shall I write' and then the time is up, if you give them the night before to talk about it, magic...the children come with lots of ideas and are keen to put them down.

One thing we were finding was that the children didn't have very good stamina for writing. They would only write a few sentences which doesn't give enough evidence for what they can do so it's increased their stamina and meant that they're writing more.

Writing comes into everything, so it's paying off on all subjects. Generally the children are more in to writing and I think if you can get them interested you've ticked quite a few boxes.

Big Writing is felt to be **extending pupils' knowledge and use of vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation** due to having more regular opportunities to develop these skills. *Big Writing* is also felt to be effective in engaging students who perhaps previously have not engaged that well in writing; these pupils are able to write for the full *Big Write* session and often want to write for longer. However, one teacher intimated that *Big Writing* may be most beneficial to higher ability pupils who are able to display a greater range of skills in their writing, which the *Big Write* approach facilitates. On the other hand, this teacher also discussed the advantage of having **more opportunities to orally discuss and plan writing** (one of the central tenets of *Big Writing*), which is beneficial for lower ability pupils who perhaps find it harder to convey their ideas in writing alone. One teacher reported that *Big Writing* has helped some pupils to extend their writing ability and reach Level 3 criteria in writing. Overall, the **teachers seemed to be suggesting that *Big Writing* is an effective way to teach writing to a range of pupil abilities** as it includes different elements and teaching approaches that appeal to different strengths. These teachers describe these impacts:

Children like routine and by doing it more regularly, they're doing more writing, they weren't doing a written piece as such once a week, which obviously they nearly always do now.

It's definitely had an impact on the children's writing level because they're constantly revisiting the same things. So things like... connectives come much more naturally instead of having to remind them all the time.

It's gone well, the children love it, they are writing a lot more and already we can see that standards are improving.

The consistent use of *Big Writing* resources is felt to facilitate **pupils' greater understanding of how they can improve their learning** and what is expected of them is considered to be more transparent. For instance, the use of VCOP boards and VCOP desktop pyramids provides examples of how pupils can extend the types of vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation they are using to use examples associated with a higher level of writing ability. This teacher explains the impact of one *Big Writing* resource:

[The VCOP desktop pyramid is] *a handy resource for the pupils to be looking at while they're writing, very accessible, very easy for them to see and understand the progression in writing, they know what level 3 punctuation and openers look like, it's very transparent and open, they can make progress because they know how to make progress and what it involves.*

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Background: current policy

This initial evaluation of *Big Writing* took place at a time of considerable change in the curriculum landscape for primary teachers. A revised National Curriculum is in the process of being introduced. One of its broad thrusts is to devolve more responsibility to schools on *how* to teach the necessary skills and understanding, alongside the future requirement to assess pupils' progress without National Curriculum levels. Against this background, *Big Writing* could be seen as having the potential to help schools adjust to this greater autonomy. This study has demonstrated how the approach provides a structure for teaching writing that can be adapted to suit schools' differing circumstances and needs to emphasise some of the key aspects of writing development and how the *Big Writing* Assessment Criterion Scale can be used to assess writing without National Curriculum levels.

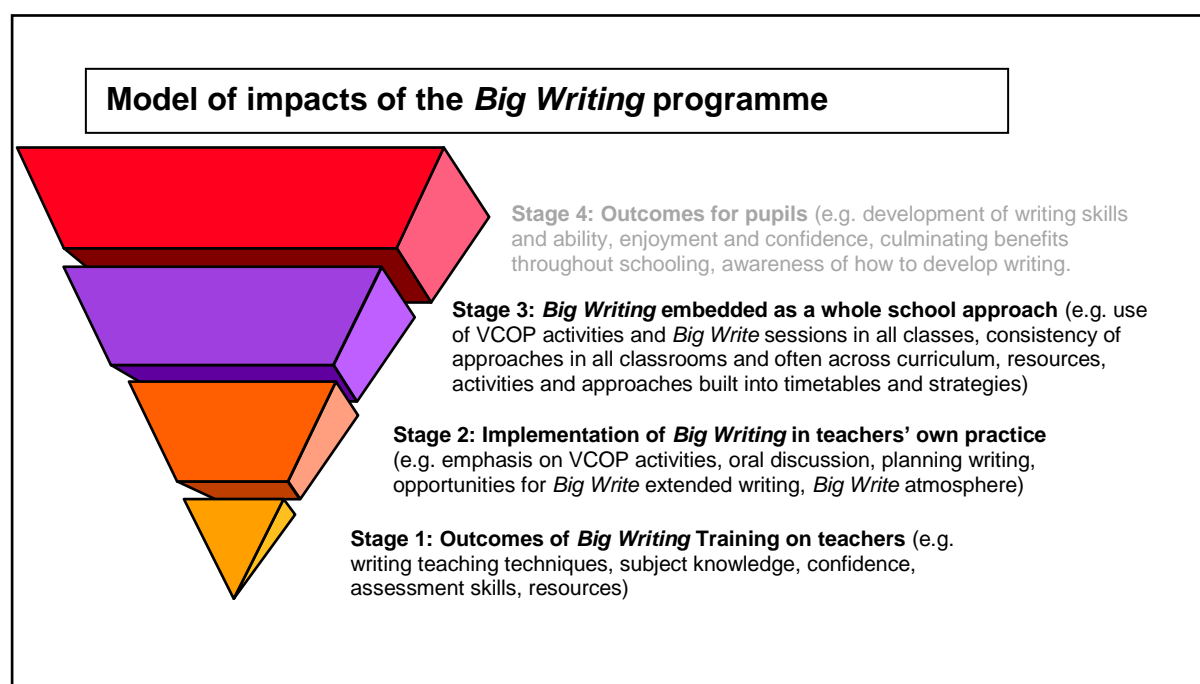## Early indications of the effectiveness of *Big Writing*...

This initial evaluation of the *Big Writing* programme has found evidence that teachers are strongly committed to introducing *Big Writing* as part of their school or class development. The teachers consulted are generally positive about the *Big Writing* approach and its effectiveness in enhancing writing teaching and learning and pupil writing performance and attitudes. Most teachers see it as continuing the features of existing good practice in a more systematic way.

The model of impacts and change revealed in the evaluation is typical of the early stages of the introduction of an intervention. Indeed the approach appears to have achieved a considerable degree of impact in a relatively short timeframe on the writing teaching practices of the schools consulted; though this has not yet developed into detectable changes in pupils' writing performance and attitudes in the limited timescale of the study.

A model of the impacts of *Big Writing*...

The diagram below depicts a model of impacts that might be applicable to the introduction of *Big Writing*. It shows the Stage one to three impacts on teachers and the wider school, that were observed by the study in terms of teachers' self reports, and the Stage four impacts on pupils which are intended outcomes of the programme, but are largely un-evidenced in this study, other than by teachers' perceptions and expectations. The evaluation has revealed convincing evidence of the positive outcomes of the *Big Writing* training on teachers (i.e. Stage 1 impact) in terms of development in their confidence and strategies for teaching writing according to their self reports. Teachers appear to have been convinced of the value of the *Big Writing* approach and have therefore sought to implement changes in their teaching practice (i.e. Stage 2 impact). This has involved the integration and embedding of the major features of the *Big Writing* approach into their own writing teaching practice. Furthermore, the evaluation has also found evidence of impact of *Big Writing* at the whole school level (i.e. Stage 3 impact). The *Big Writing* approach has been embedded by most of the schools consulted as a whole school writing teaching approach involving all teachers

and most pupil age groups, creating a formalised structure for *Big Writing* activities to be delivered. The whole school INSET on *Big Writing* is clearly a powerful approach to achieving such widespread impact in a relatively short timeframe, which may be far more challenging to achieve for individual teachers experiencing and cascading Continuing Professional Development interventions. There is also perceptual evidence from teachers that the *Big Writing* approach is leading to positive outcomes on pupils' writing performance and attitudes (i.e. early evidence of Stage 4 impact). However, the before and after pupil writing tasks and writing attitude surveys employed in this evaluation did not identify this, showing no significant change overall.

Model of impacts of the *Big Writing* programme

Stage 4: Outcomes for pupils (e.g. development of writing skills and ability, enjoyment and confidence, culminating benefits throughout schooling, awareness of how to develop writing.

Stage 3: *Big Writing* embedded as a whole school approach (e.g. use of VCOP activities and *Big Write* sessions in all classes, consistency of approaches in all classrooms and often across curriculum, resources, activities and approaches built into timetables and strategies)

Stage 2: Implementation of *Big Writing* in teachers' own practice (e.g. emphasis on VCOP activities, oral discussion, planning writing, opportunities for *Big Write* extended writing, *Big Write* atmosphere)

Stage 1: Outcomes of *Big Writing* Training on teachers (e.g. writing teaching techniques, subject knowledge, confidence, assessment skills, resources)

Further research may be needed...

As there is no evidence yet of changes in pupils' writing performance and attitudes as a result of introducing the *Big Writing* programme, a longer term evaluation would be needed to explore the extent to which this is achieved in practice. Further research may also usefully explore how *Big Writing* can benefit pupils in different ways and whether it is more effective with some pupils than others. However, the suggestion from teachers here is that *Big Writing* can be a useful approach for all pupils. As this initial evaluation sought to focus on responses to the introduction of *Big Writing,* it has been beyond the scope of this study to explore the views and practices of teachers and schools that have not implemented such approaches. A study of this kind, with a comparison group and sufficient duration and pupil numbers, would enable us to investigate robustly whether *Big Writing* has an impact on pupils' writing.

Developing *Big Writing* in the future...

The emphasis on whole school *Big Writing* INSET is clearly a strength of the programme and should be retained: it enables schools to quickly and efficiently implement the approach in teaching practices across the school, leading to widespread benefits on the quality and consistency of writing teaching and learning. The *Big Writing* resources are valued by teachers and clearly support implementation, though there may be scope to develop these further by linking to the different topics of the curriculum and providing resources appropriate for application with a wider range of age groups and pupil needs. There is also some evidence to suggest that the *Big Writing* approach could incorporate slightly more emphasis on how to develop pupils' skills in writing for different audiences and purposes, as this was a less prevalent impact on teachers. The components of the *Big Writing* approach appear to work well and resonate with teachers' existing views about good practice in teaching writing. Teachers value the different elements of the *Big Writing* approach, particularly the oral VCOP activities and *Big Write* silent writing sessions and we recommend retaining these in their current form. Not all teachers are convinced of the benefits of the *Big Write* atmosphere and there may be scope to provide more ideas and examples for how an atmosphere can be created to stimulate pupils' writing and engage them in the activity. The training appears to prepare teachers well to implement the approach, though perhaps could focus even more on practical activities that help teachers to practise the techniques and equip them to implement these back in their own classrooms.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes