

# Using 'emotional hooks' to motivate and inspire young writers

Part one: Write who we are!

**W**e are sharing with you our story so far, from a variety of perspectives (principal, lead teachers, teachers, C21 Learning Ltd and children) and have included some examples of what we did and what is happening for the children as a result of the changes we are making. We know it is early days, but we are feeling excited! We have already noticed positive changes as children **and** teachers start viewing themselves as writers. We hope our story encourages others to not give up or give in to what others might say or what the Standards may infer when looking at decontextualised data. We hope that by sharing our story we open doors to collaborating with colleagues in schools around New Zealand.

## WHY CHANGE? Sonya Carey

Our school had been through many changes which came into being as part of a network review. Due to decisions made elsewhere, two communities joined together and were required to work together as a learning community to build a sense of who we were. As this grew, so did our awareness that what we were working on were the key competencies. Our teachers had been involved in Ministry of Education professional learning that focused on building pedagogical practice in literacy and some shifts were seen in student achievement, but we knew that if we were going to see the change we aspired to, we needed to have the courage to 'dream big', be bold, and go for a cultural shift in the school. Cultural shifts are built on vision and relationships. We were looking for someone who could work alongside us as a coach; challenging us, motivating us and supporting our belief in the change.

We talked about what we were looking for and decided we needed someone who shared our vision for what learning could be like for our children, who had intellectual rigour and who had the ability to connect with our teaching team. We talked with other schools, we read, and we attended conferences - looking for the right person - until one day, Jane Garland, Deputy Principal at the time and I looked at each other during a workshop at a conference and said, "This could be the person!"

The focus of the workshop was on the key competency 'Managing Self' and was using a case study approach to explore how this concept was being made visible for children in a learning environment. The workshop was a challenging setting with educators from all of the sectors - early childhood, primary and secondary. There was uncomfotableness as people grappled with new ideas and hard questions, yet each challenge was met with openness and a willingness to engage. There were links to best practice and research and there was humour. Real teachers working together to think about and evolve their practice - just what we were looking for.

Trudy Francis joined us in 2013 with a focus on the key competencies of 'Thinking and Using Language Symbols and Texts' and 'Managing Self' through the context of 'Visual Language.' The work we did with Trudy in 2013 provided us with a strong foundation to move onto the writing focus in 2014.

## IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND GOALS. Trudy Francis and Fallon Braithwaite

Like many teachers, we are concerned with the progress and achievement of our children in literacy. At Newfield Park School there is a large cohort of boys and many children who come to school with limited opportunities to develop their pre-literacy skills (e.g., oral language, concepts about print and fine motor skills). For some of the children they have yet to develop a love for: books, drawing, writing, cutting and pasting. We wondered how we could address these concerns and promote a love of all things literacy, especially in a time when striving for higher standards in literacy is 'hot' on the political landscape as well.

Lewis and Kappan hit the nail on the head when they stated the following...

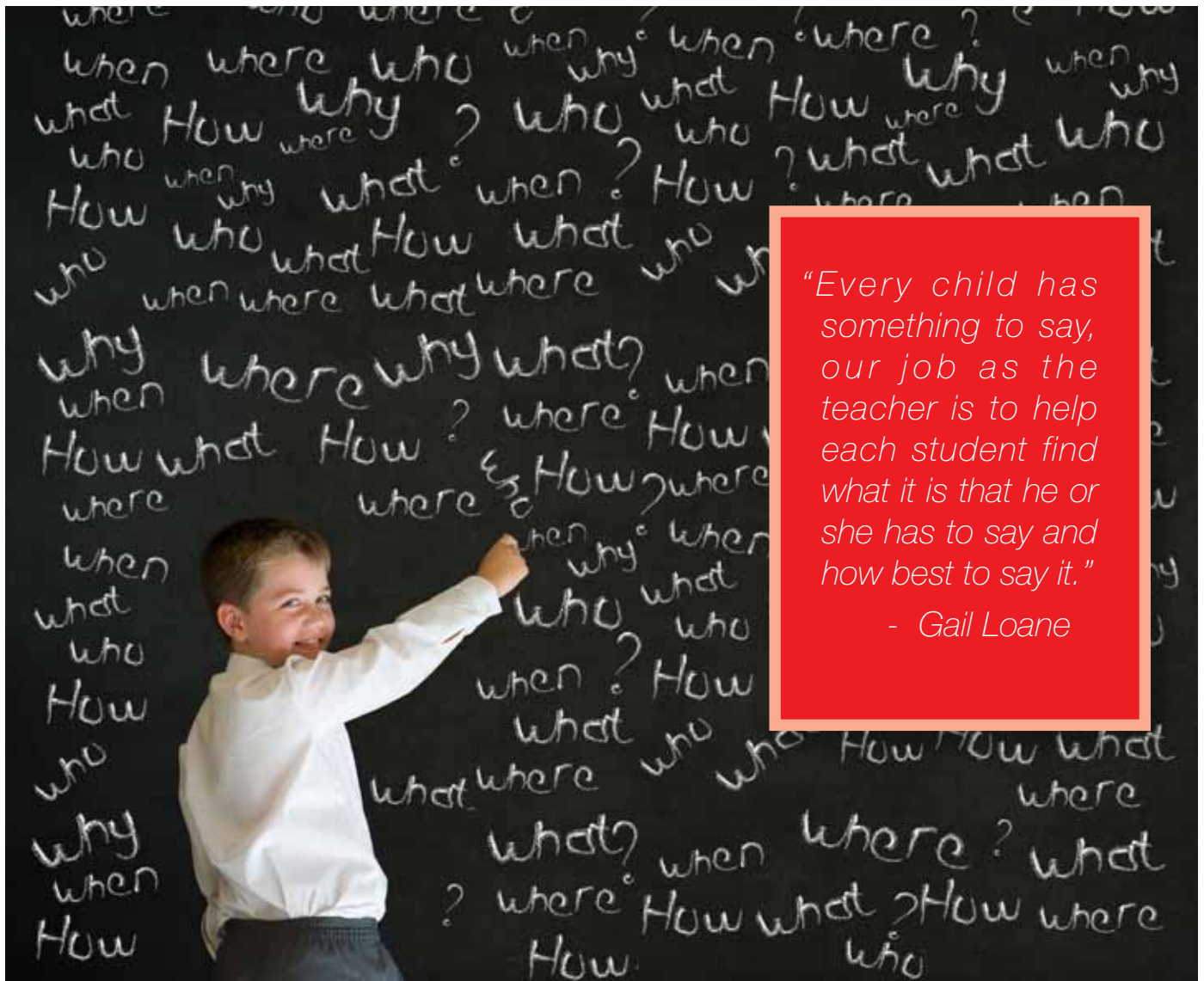
Simply Simple-Minded (or, Simply Good Sense?)

*The maddening thing is that the proponents of higher academic standards ... are out of touch with reality. Let me put it in the simplest language possible: children differ by socio-economic background, by development rate, by interest in given subject matter, and by motivation to master it. Teachers can teach until they are blue in the face, but students will learn only when they are ready, willing, and able to do so. And, in this nation that celebrates (or at least pays lip service to) diversity, every child does not need to learn the same things at the same time or to the same degree.*

## Getting Specific - Starting with the Data?

Our data shows that the children in their first 12 months were having difficulty in reaching the National Literacy Standard. The data shows our children leave this school as Year 6 students who are achieving at levels similar to the national averages, yet this is not reflected in our 'whole school' data. This is a pattern that we have identified over time. What can we do to change this pattern? What can we do to close the gap in our achievement?

We want higher standards, but not at the cost of the child; we want to avoid the 'lip service' and find ways for our children to be who they are, share their stories and feel proud.



*“Every child has something to say, our job as the teacher is to help each student find what it is that he or she has to say and how best to say it.”*

*- Gail Loane*

PHOTO: ALISTAIR COTTON

Therefore, we needed to think about children, understand how they learn best, and what motivates them. We needed to change our approach so we could ‘hook’ the children into learning, providing opportunities to build oral language in the classroom and inspiring and providing opportunities for risk taking without fear of failure. Writing about their weekends every Monday morning did not inspire them to write, in fact it only created anxiety and worry over whether their weekend activities were good enough to write about. Our kids need to be able to find the wonder in the ‘everyday’ and know that what they have to share is valued and important.

**Our Goals. Trudy Francis**

As we reflected on the challenges we faced we realised that we needed to clarify our perspective and our aspirations, and trust ourselves to find our own way. To trust ourselves to find our way, we needed to analyse what we were doing well, and

identify what we could adapt in order to achieve the goals we had in mind.

Our number one priority was to ensure that all children developed a love of literacy and in particular writing. We wondered how we could ‘emotionally hook’ (Francis) the children so that they wanted to write. Gail Loane talks about people being joyfully literate, and this resonated with us because we felt that if we were able to create conditions whereby children saw themselves as writers, they would develop an understanding of the power of language to enrich and shape their lives and the lives of others (New Zealand Curriculum). The emotional hook, hooked everyone including the teachers.

*I notice the things around me now; I see things that might motivate the children to write. The emotional hook is giving the children many more ideas, thoughts and wonderful words that they use in their writing. Writing use to be a chore for me, worrying at night and on the*

*way to work... what are we going to write about today? I am finding teaching writing easier now. I feel proud of the children’s writing and they are very proud too. Julie (teacher of NE).*

We developed teaching strategies that engaged children’s curiosity; we cultivated their sensory pathways so they could discover things they may not have noticed before; we used multi-media, artefacts and the arts to promote motivation and, as Loane says, to help children to find personal significance and feel they have something to say.

Our second priority was to make thinking as a writer more visible. To achieve this goal we needed to deepen our understanding of the two intellectual key competencies, ‘Thinking and Using Language Symbols and Texts’ and find ways to teach relevant aspects of the key competencies explicitly and contextually. Our planning and teaching strategies were adapted to include a focus on this, for example, children as young as 5 years old

## SONYA CAREY, FALLON BRAITHWAITE, HAILEY CUNDALL AND TRUDY FRANCIS

learnt that they could use metacognition to help them write interesting stories. They asked themselves three questions as they created their piece, 'what do I need to do first?' I need to draw a picture plan that will describe my wolf. 'How am I going?' Which words describe my wolf the best? And, 'How did I go?' Do my describing words match my picture? There is an example of this writing below.

We discovered that the children were, and are, fascinated with how their brains work, and how writers think and work in the real world. As we make our thinking more visible we discover what we are capable of. The changes we have observed in the children suggest to us that they feel empowered, and emboldened, viewing themselves as capable writers and capable learners.

The third priority was for teachers to develop their own capacity to write. As they wrote they felt first-hand what it is like, and what it is most likely like for the children when we expect them to write. The insights we have made have helped us be more sensitive to the children's emotional needs and it has also helped us improve our practice as we are literally practising what we preach.

Our fourth priority is for children to develop stamina and pride in their pieces of writing, developing their awareness of audience and viewing their own writing from the perspective of the reader. We are currently exploring how to do this. We are learning more about the key competencies 'Managing Self and Relating to Others', and just as we did with the intellectual key competencies we are making space and time available for explicit and contextual teaching to promote desired behaviours.

### IMPLICATIONS

#### Building a Professional Community

To achieve our goals we knew we would need to focus on our relationships with each other and provide teachers with opportunities to feel creative, energised, challenged and committed to making significant and lasting changes in their practice. We have developed a coaching ethos and approach to support each other. Fundamental to this approach is the view that people are naturally creative, resourceful and whole (Newnham-Kanas, Morrow & Irwin). We have communicated this to people so they might feel passionate about writing and

enjoy what they are doing with the children and for themselves.


#### Environment Matters. Hailey Cundall

Previously, we knew that the way our junior school was working was not targeting the specific needs of our children. Sonya had an interest in the principles of Reggio Emilia and was keen to explore how the foundations of communicating using the '100 languages' could be used within our school to increase student engagement

After attending a course at Bromley School in October 2013 we saw how a 'Reggio Inspired' approach was being used to increase student achievement. During our two days there we saw how the teaching and learning we were exploring with Trudy, through making thinking visible, was an integral part of this approach. We saw how Bromley targeted the literacy and key competency needs of the children in their school; who were starting school at very similar stage to ours.

At the beginning of 2014 our Year 0-1, 1-2 teachers adapted their classroom environments to invoke curiosity, embrace beauty and joy, and ensure that students felt valued and safe. During Literacy and Numeracy time these classrooms have stations that are targeting specific needs in these areas. Arts, communication, fine motor skill needs, passions and interests, kinesthetic learning, key competency needs and discussions are woven throughout the students literacy and numeracy needs, and personal voice is embraced and valued.

The process is being valued, not just the product, and motivation to teach and learn is high. This all fits so naturally alongside the way we are viewing our children and ourselves as writers. We are all given the chance to be the teachers of writing as we all have something to say, which is valued. We are building the image of the child and of the teacher to be successful, proud and persistent communicators. Many of these ideals are now filtering up through the school as teachers at other levels strive to emotionally hook their children.

Find out what they did in Issue 30! 

**Trudy** is recognised in New Zealand as a leader in Curriculum Integration, Holistic Literacy Approaches, Visible Thinking, Empowering forms of Assessment, the Key Competencies and Habits of Mind. She is in demand as an in-school coach, conference speaker and workshop facilitator. Trudy is dedicated to collaborating with teachers in the effort to improve outcomes for all students. She is focused on how to transform teaching and learning within school communities and to genuinely innovate the curriculum to achieve challenging goals. Trudy is the Director of C21 Learning Ltd and you can reach her through [www.c21learning.com](http://www.c21learning.com), or you can be linked by <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/trudy-francis/67/a11/b37>

**Sonya** has been Principal at Newfield Park School for five years. She leads a passionate team who work alongside families and the community to support their children's learning. Sonya's leadership is informed by her belief in the capabilities of children and the power of school communities to find creative solutions to the challenges they face.

**Fallon** is a passionate teacher who devotes her time to problem-solving children's difficulties in Literacy. She works as a Classroom Teacher, Literacy Leader and Deputy Principal at Newfield Park School in Invercargill. Fallon is focused on improving student achievement for all students and has a particular interest in changing current traditional teacher practice to accommodate the needs of all learners. She is driven and excited by children's learning and is motivated by children's success.

**Hailey** has been a Primary School Teacher for 10 years, with the last six spent teaching in junior rooms at Newfield Park School, Invercargill. She is passionate about teaching and learning across the curriculum, with a particular interest in Reggio Emilia and Key Competency approaches to teaching and learning. She is dedicated to giving students the strategies and skills for success and to become effective lifelong learners.