

4 | AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY INTO THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA THAT INSPIRE AND ENCOURAGE BOYS TO WRITE. 'CAN I JUST COPY?'

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Introduction

I currently work in a two form entry primary school and nursery. In the nursery, many children arrive with skills that are below expectations for their age, particularly in language and communication. The school geographic involves one building surrounded by housing, in an area of social deprivation that is currently being gentrified. The school experiences some level of mobility with families being relocated for different reasons, mainly due to the gentrification in recent years. Many families have been relocated to further homes, however they are still attending the school resulting in long commutes for many children.

I am a year three class teacher who has worked in the school for three years, in two main roles; a class teacher and the school music lead. I have over 5 years' experience working with children and I am fortunate to have gained experience working with children aged 5 – 12 years, in an educational and holistic role. These roles have offered me the opportunities to create different relationships with children.

I studied a PGCE at the University of Greenwich focusing on Special Educational Needs. I studied my undergraduate in the National University of Ireland Maynooth. I completed a Bachelors of Social Science studying Sociology and Social Policy. This allowed me to study the development of different policies, who participated in the making of the policies and the impact of policies on different groups within society. Sociology allowed me to focus on childhood studies and education, this guided me to my decision to work with children in an educational role.

My piece of action research took place within my Year Three class and focused on using different types of media to develop the writing skills and engagement of a small group of five boys in literacy lessons. Each week the boys would encounter different writing opportunities in literacy, through discussions, observation, and marking it was evident that the boys would easily become uninterested and lacked the confidence to complete different pieces of writing, protesting that they didn't understand the task provided or were unable to complete the task stating 'I can't do it'. It was my goal to create a stimulating, inclusive and encouraging writing environment for the whole class in particular encouraging the boys to create pieces of work they were engaged with, confident to complete independently and would be proud to share.

For this piece of work it was necessary to use three different types of data collection; survey, focus groups and sampling of work. These methods would allow me to communicate efficiently with the children and gather the information I required to complete my study. I undertook surveys and observations over six weeks, between April 2018 and May 2018, this allowed me to change my classroom environment in respect to the needs and interests of the children. During this time I also conducted focus groups with small groups of children from the whole class, this allowed for further discovery and exploration to the children's' different interests. I took samples of writing from the boys independent 'writing journals'. These samples allowed for representations of the work the boys produced during the study. Ultimately as the changes took place within the Year Three class, it was necessary to reorganise the class timetable and provide new opportunities for the children to produce writing in different environments and be inspired by different forms of media. The opportunity was provided by a 'free writing' session given three times weekly.

Methodology

My study adopted the action research approach. According to Cohen and Manion (2000) action research can be defined as a 'small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination as of the effects of such intervention'. Corey (1953) explains that action research is undertaken by practitioners who study problems scientifically so they can evaluate, improve and steer decision making and practice. This is ultimately the route I took in my research, I had identified the difficulties and concerns within my classroom discussed the problem with the children, asked the children to contribute ideas for lessons and discussed their interests, such as books, television shows, characters etc. I then introduced a 'free writing' session three times a week gave different types of media for inspiration, pictures, poetry, videos and extracts from books. After, I discussed with the class their feelings towards the different pieces of writing, I began focus group discussion and asked their opinion of the different media. I then reevaluated my action and repeated the process, allowing opportunity to reflect and realign the action.

Action Research

Action research sets out to solve specific problems that occur in this case within my classroom, it offers teachers the opportunity to tackle problems that may occur consistently. As Cohen (2000) highlights a key feature of action research is that it is an on the spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This is ultimately means action research leads to a continued cycle of evaluation and review, outcomes were constantly checked and the participant's feedback was collected and influenced the development of the next steps in the research cycle. Although this allowed for continuous evaluation of the action and development of the project it also meant that each lesson and free writing session led to in-depth conversations about this positive points and areas for development which meant that lessons extended over their given time and often the conversation circled around the same topic. As Dunn et al (2014) highlight in recent years there is a need to introduce children's personal interests into the classroom, conversations with the children allowed these interests to become part of the classroom discourse.

Cohen and Manion (2000) also stress the flexibility and adaptability of action research, the ability to change direction depending on the needs of the children and the concerns that may arise during teaching sessions. However this can also cause some difficulty as prepared resources may result in being obsolete and unused, ensuring a need for further discussion and development with the children.

A key feature of action research is the constant observation, Cohen and Manion (2000) enforce that continued observation, data collection and evaluation of the word produced meant that writing sessions were heavily monitored and evaluated, although important and allowed for the development of new skills it ensured that other lessons were somewhat impacted, marking within other subjects was reduced and not as in-depth as literacy and writing lessons. It also resulted in the children focusing on their writing skills.

Each of these features make up the action research cycle, a continuation of identification of the problem, collect data, application of the action, transpiring into a discussion with the participants and identify the new problem. For this my work undertook a dialectic research spiral, as outlined by Creswell (2012).

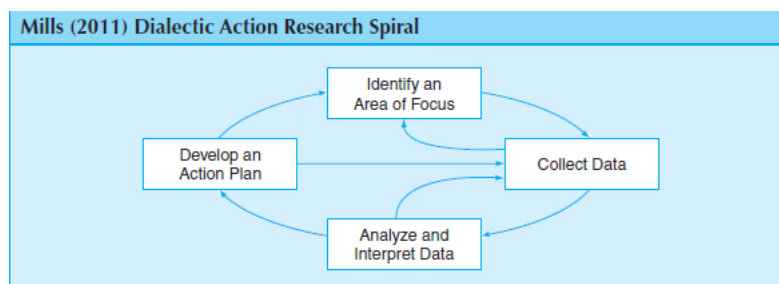


Figure 1 - The Dialectic Research Spiral (Creswell, 2012)

My Concern

Through teaching in a deprived area literacy levels have always been of concern and through pupil progress meetings, discussions with colleagues and the media attention the gap between boys and girls in their attainment and progress in literacy and writing has been highlighted, Merisuo-Storm (2011) highlights that girls are out performing boys in every level of education, in universities the number of female students is increasing while the number of male students is decreasing. In my class composition the children classified as working towards expected was mainly made up of boys. The UKLA (2004) study explains that boy's achievement in literacy is not a new concern it further reinforces that there is a gap between boys and girls particularly in writing. The boys in my classroom were continually exposed to books with higher level vocabulary, each week they experienced extended pieces of writing and interlinked grammar lessons. Through these pieces of writing it became evident that the boys were struggling with these extended pieces, they were finding it difficult to apply learned skills to extended pieces. Although, showing an interest in the text and engaging with the different genres they struggled to create interesting and coherent extended pieces of writing this often left the boys in question frustrated during literacy lessons exclaiming 'I can't do it' or 'can I just copy what's on the flip chart?'.

They became disengaged in their literacy lessons and making slow progress, although adult support was given consistently during literacy lessons, the group depended on the adult to develop their piece of writing and prompt their thinking rather than the group beginning an open discussion that would allow them to develop their own skills. This left the group reluctant to work independently and resulted in the attainment and progress in the classroom slow. It also hindered the development of the other children in the class as grammar lessons needed to be consolidated as a whole class.

Literature Support

Popular culture influenced heavily on the different media used in my study, Dunn et al (2014) emphasised that when children are given a choice popular culture features strongly in what they would like to write about. Popular culture offers children a link between home life and school, Marsh (2009) argues that the introduction of popular culture into the school curriculum can promote engagement in literacy and will provide experiences that will support literacy learning. Dunn et al (2014) reinforce that regardless of adult influence, children will bring popular culture into the classroom allowing for a link to be made between home life and school this offers children the opportunity to become more engaged in their learning, a task that was becoming more difficult in my classroom. According to Andrews and Smith (2011) it is necessary to connect real life world experiences in order to engage and enthuse students more than sterile clinical writing exercises. This piece of literature influenced my study, through focus group and discussion with the class the

children explained their interests from home and decided that they would like to have their interest from home brought into the classroom and into the learning environment.

Maynard and Lowe (2015) stressed that according to teachers it is not the boy's ability to their writing but it is their attitude. This was evident in my classroom, the boys were willing to share ideas, they could comment on the book we were reading and help create a class piece but when working independently were unwilling to write, it was a lack of confidence and a possibility of getting it wrong in order to alleviate the stress and possibility of getting something wrong the boys then became unwilling to write or would double check with an adult before completing any written task. Marsh (2009) emphasis the ease of bringing superheroes into the classroom because they show an ability to take control over a chaotic situation, the boys in the class can feel sometimes powerless in their daily lives and when asked to create pieces of literacy that they may be worried about creating extended pieces, however introducing superheroes to the classroom created a bridge or link between home life and school life. Merisuo-Storm (2011) stresses that girls will adapt to what they're reading yet boys will limit themselves to their interests, during class discussions and focus groups superheroes were an interest to the boys. They could talk confidently about the heroes' characteristics, their features and discuss at length different fights, villains and ultimately who would win between different superheroes.

Ethical Concerns

As my action research would take place in the classroom it was necessary to obtain permission from the head teacher, I spoke with the head teacher and proposed my area of research before implementing my action. To ensure confidentiality the names of the children have been withheld in my project. During parents evenings I spoke with parents and obtained verbal permission from the parents to undertake my research with their children. As outlined by BERA the Ethical Guidelines for Education research (2011) all children were given the opportunity to give fully informed consent and the ability to opt out of writing sessions and withhold any of their writing from me when I collected their journals weekly. I continually made it clear to the children throughout the study that their opinions were valued and important to the research. I continued to update my head teacher about my research throughout the project and shared different piece of work completed by the children to show different developments. I also spoke with my partner teacher to discuss different forms of media to use within the classroom and the development of some of the children's writing skills. A concern for me during the project was the relationship I had with the different children, being the teacher in the classroom there is definitely a role of authority. During the project I instructed the children that their pieces of writing would not be marked.

Throughout the action process it was necessary to allow the children to have the choice to opt-out of the process, and withhold any of their writing from the project, although their work was never marked it was important to the study to read the children's work after each session. It was also necessary to speak one to one with the boys about their work. For this it was important that I gave the boys the opportunity to say no to discussing their work and what they produced. As outlined by the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2011) all participants have the right to withdraw for any or no reason throughout the process it was important for myself to ensure I was not swaying the children's decision I accepted the children's decision and did not question their reasoning however this issue did not arise often and the children would willingly share their work with myself and the rest of the class. This process followed the dialectic research spiral (Creswell 2012) it was a continued process of application, discussion and evaluation. Privacy was also an issue I needed to consider, as BERA (2011) explains anonymous and confidential treatment is the norm I followed this procedure, names of all the children are withheld and any names within written work is redacted.

Collecting information to inform the action

Collecting data began with discussions with the whole class about their opinions on the different books we were reading in class, if they enjoyed them, whether or not they would have chosen to read them independently, what they liked about the books and if they didn't enjoy the books explaining how they would have improved the book. I then began to discuss marking with some of the children in the class, ensuring to focus on the boys in the study, this allowed me to talk specifically with them individually and discuss what issues they had experienced with the piece of writing. However the issues with this led to the boys sometimes explaining they experienced the same difficulties rather than focusing on their own work or at times they were more concerned with the appearance of their work e.g. Handwriting, length of work and paragraphs rather than the content of their work. Surveys were also taken with the whole class which allowed me to gather a whole class opinion of the different interests and it also gave me the opportunity to ask the children about how confident they feel in literacy and writing extended pieces of writing. Figure 2 (below) shows the results of the first time I asked the children how confident they were creating extended pieces of writing.

How confident do you feel when writing extended pieces during literacy?

Not confident at all I think I need a lot of support.	A little confident but I prefer when an adult sits with me.	Confident I use the class resources before I ask an adult.	Very confident I know what I need to do and rarely ask an adult.
10 (34.5%)	8 (27.5%)	8 (27.5%)	2 (6.89%)

I marked and noted different pieces of writing from the boy's work, before the study began during the project and finally at the completion of the project this allowed me to monitor the needs and areas the children needed further support. This allowed me to measure the boys writing against the Year Three expected standards. Below in Figure 3 are the boys writing attainment for the end of Spring Term.

It shows that 12 boys are working within the Year 3 bracket, 2 are working within the year 2 bracket and 1 is working within the year 1 bracket.

Males	15 (51.7%)		1 (6.7%)	2 (13.3%)	12 (80.0%)		
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Figure 3 End of Spring 2 Writing Data boys.

I also spoke with our assistant head teacher who gathers and collates the school data, she was able to confirm that boys writing is an issue across the school. Although progress is expected, six steps a year (one step per half term) boys were still lagging behind their female classmates. However when the children were broken down into ethnicity groups, the children who were struggling the most were classified as White British Boys.

Methods of Data Collection

For my study I used questionnaires and focus groups, I monitored the work they produced before the study began and after action was put in place. I also tracked the children's writing against the Year 3 expectations, focusing on the skills the children were using before the study began and which skills they began to use during the action was put in place and finally which skills they continued to use at the end of the process.

According to Descombe (2010) questionnaires when used effectively allow for consistency and precision in terms of wording of the questions and allows for ease when processing the answers. Merisuo – Storm (2006) used questionnaires in their study, to measure the attitudes of the pupils towards reading and writing. This study highlighted the importance of asking children each the same questions in a situation where the children could answer without adult input or being intimidated or nervous about answering on front of their classmates. The original action in my study was taken from the results of a questionnaire subsequent actions were tailored from the written pieces of work produced and through my personal field notes and through focus groups undertaken with different members of the class. Cohen and Manion (2011) explain that interviews and focus groups can be used for a variety of reasons such as; sampling respondents' opinions and for gathering data. Marsh (1999) uses focus group and interviews to discuss the children's' interests in the class and allowed the children to voice their opinions and explain their thoughts on the different elements on the study. This encouraged me to use focus groups because it allowed me to interact with the children gather their responses and review their reactions from the piece of writing and from the form of media used to inspire the piece of writing. Cohen and Manion (2011) reinforce that interviews allows for greater depth insight over other data collection techniques, it allows for the interviewer to gather what the person likes and dislikes, allowing me in particular to gauge which form of media the children enjoyed using and which piece of work they were proudest to share with the rest of the class. However Wilkinson (2003) stresses the limitations of interviews and focus groups, the questions may be predetermined and the participants may be conscious of giving an answer the interviewer wants to hear rather than how they actually felt about the media used to produce the different pieces of writing. To overcome this problem, I focused on using open ended questioning and developing questions from the answers given to me rather than using a list of prescribed questions, I ensured to ask the children to explain their answers this resulted in the group consciously thinking about the work they produced and explain what they liked and disliked about the pieces they created. As Wilkinson (2003) highlights it is important to have themes and questions prepared but allowing a natural conversation to develop between myself and the participants as it meant that the conversation was natural and the participants were willingly talking about their personal experiences rather than producing answers they felt I wanted to hear.

Data Analysis

I used interviews, focus groups and surveys to gather data from the children. Interviews and focus groups allowed me to discuss the main interests with the children, what they liked and disliked about the different images. Descombe (2010) highlights that interviews and focus groups allows the questioner the opportunity to focus on emotions and perceive the children's opinions of the images used.

Interviewer: Which image did you use to help make your piece of writing?

Child 1: I liked using the pictures of the forest and the men fighting, I wrote about ninja who was chasing bad guys.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to describe a ninja who chased bad guys?

Child 1: Cause the ninja saves the day so he needs to get rid of the bad guys

Child 2: Yeah the goody saves the day

Interviewer: Did you write about a ninja too?

Child 2: No in my story I wrote about a goody who had to chase away the robbers because they were trying to steal the money.

This discussion was continued with the rest of the group they all explained that they had written pieces about adventure and a 'goody' saving the day. This was compounded with results from the survey given to the children at the start of the research project. In the survey I asked; What type of books do you like to read and was given many responses but concentrating on the five boys they explained they liked to read books such as; Beast Quest and Harry Potter. The use of surveys although limited in what they can ask, Descombe (2010) highlights that when using a large group of people it allows ease to collate standardised data, this meant that I could look at the main themes that arose and apply the most common theme to the images I would use to inspire the children.

After each writing session I asked the children how they felt about their piece of writing. I gave each child a slip and asked them to tick how they felt about the piece of writing.

Not Confident	No Change	Confident	Very Confident

This was also discussed during focus groups sessions, the first few writing sessions most of the children showed no change in their feelings towards writing. During the focused group sessions with the children they explained the reason they choose no change was because they were unsure if their piece was good enough.

Child 1 "I don't know if what I wrote was right because these was no LO or steps to success"

Child 2 "I don't know if I wrote about the right thing like I wrote about superhero but that's not what's happening in our book so I don't think it's right"

During this discussion it became apparent that I explain to the children before each session that the piece of work they write does not need to be linked to the book we are reading.

As outlined in Figure 2 above only ten children stated they were confident in writing extended pieces of writing before the study began. There was little change after the first as the children still explained they were either not confident or there was no change in how they were feeling. However towards the end of the six weeks when I asked the children again about how they felt about their writing ability and saw an increase in the children's confidence and enjoyment.

How confident do you feel about writing extended pieces?

Not confident at all I think I need a lot of support.	A little confident but I prefer when an adult sits with me.	Confident I use the class resources before I ask an adult.	Very confident I know what I need to do and rarely ask an adult.
1 (3.4%)	6 (20.6%)	16 (55.1%)	5 (17.2%)

Figure 4 Children's Perceived Confidence at the end of the Action Research

I then asked the children if it would be helpful to place some steps to success on the board, they agreed that it would be helpful, however it was necessary for me to continue to explain to the children that their piece of writing would not be marked and that it was their decision to write about what the pictures inspired them to write.

I continually tracked the boy's progress during the writing sessions and monitored the work completed in their literacy book against the Year 3 writing targets. By the end of the year the boys had made the expected progress, with two of the boys making seven steps progress.

3w+		Yr2 Sum2	Yr3 Aut2		Yr3 Spr2		● ○ Yr3 Su...
3w+		Yr2 Sum2		Yr3 Aut2		Yr3 Spr2	● ○ Yr3 Su...
3w+	Yr2 Sum2			Yr3 Aut2	Yr3 Spr2	○	● Yr3 Sum2
3s		Yr2 Sum2		Yr3 Aut2	Yr3 Spr1	Yr3 Spr2	○ ● Yr3 Sum2
3w+		Yr2 Sum2	Yr3 Aut2		Yr3 Spr2		● ○ Yr3 Su...

Figure 5 Boys Attainment from End of Year 2 to End of Year 3.

Action

During class discussion and whole class surveys it became apparent that a theme the children were interested in was adventure with a focus on books such as beast quest, harry potter and superheroes. Some children also shared they would enjoy writing some poetry and would enjoy reading more poetry.

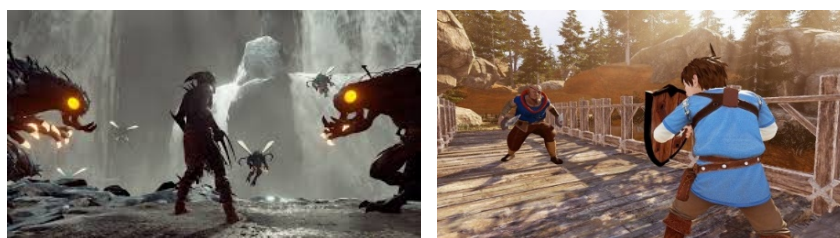
- **Step 1 – Questionnaire**

The first step of the process was to begin with a questionnaire, discussing and examining the children's main interests. I used a questionnaire with closed ended questioning which made it easier to analyse data and produce different forms of media to inspire writing.

- **Step 2 – Free Writing Sessions**

Next I introduced three weekly free writing sessions consisting of half an hour each to the class time table. I used information gathered from the questionnaire to select different pieces of media to encourage and inspire the children to write.

Figure 4 – Images from Beast Quest inspiring session one.



- **Step 3 – Focus Group Discussion**

After each free writing session I undertook some focused group discussions with different mixed abilities groups and discussed the work they produced and the media that was used to inform the writing. This process was repeated after each free writing session to allow the media used to be modified in order to support the children's interests further.

- **Step 4 – Classroom Environment**

I began by changing the appearance of the classroom. I removed computer generated displays from the wall, these were replaced with work produced by the children giving them the opportunity to showcase their work with the rest of the class. I discussed with colleagues some of my concerns about this, whether or not the children would be nervous to have their work on display and choosing work from just able children's work. Through discussion it became apparent that I needed to choose a range of work produced by the children from the children who are working towards the expected standard as well as those who are working beyond the expected standard.

- **Steps 5 Gentle Reminders**

During the second and subsequent free writing sessions I placed reminders on the board in order to help the children create a piece of constructive writing.

- Capital Letters.
- Full Stops.
- Use a dictionary to check for spelling.
- Tip Top for paragraph (Time Place Topic Person).

The subsequent free writing sessions produced work that included grammar structures that the children had learned in class.

- **Step 6 Focus Group Discussion and Review**

The children were still concerned with writing lengthy pieces of writing that they thought were impressive rather than pieces of work that were structured well, therefore it became important to begin one on one verbal feedback discussion with certain children to check the quality of their work and remind them to use the skills they have learned. This resulted in some of the children becoming slightly apprehensive when writing independently and beginning to ask if the work they produced was ok and if they have used the correct grammar skills.

- **Step 7 – Grammar Lessons**

During the next writing sessions the children continued to ask about the quality of their work and whether they had included the necessary grammar requirements. From this I began to increase the amount of grammar lessons taught each week from one to two with a focus on the grammar issues the children were finding the most difficult to apply. This meant that the working walls in the classroom would better support the children and their independent work. This insured that the children were immersed in their own writing and the different expectations for Year three, I also made sure that the classroom was decorated with the children's work.

- **Step 8 – Focused Group Discussion about Grammar Skills**

After each grammar lesson I discussed with the whole class what they struggled with during the grammar session and I wrote a tip or reminder of how to apply the new grammar skill to their writing. This particularly helped as the children were able to see the rules for the grammar skill and how to apply it in a writing context. The development of grammar skills was not the focus of my action but it meant that most of the children were now focused on the quality of their work rather than the quantity of their work and how much they were writing. Although not a focus the children were now concentrating on the quality of their work rather than the quantity of their piece.

Conclusion

The action research cycle allowed me to take a look at my teaching practise and allow me the opportunity to discuss with the children their interests and how they feel about the different areas of their education. My study confirmed that boys are apprehensive and nervous writers, the National Literacy Trust (2012) stresses that there is a significant gap between boys and girls in literacy and that boy's lag behind their female classmates. The boys that I was concerned about in my class fell into this area, they were lagging behind their female counterparts regardless of the support being provided. They showed a lack of interest in their writing, were unwilling to share their work with the rest of the class, they were apprehensive to start writing by themselves and they were dependent on an adult supporting and guiding different pieces of extended writing. When working with an adult the children were expressive and confident sharing their ideas but sometimes showed a lack of interest in the different pieces of writing.

Through the action research cycle I have learned the importance of taking into account the children's views and opinions. It also highlighted the need to review difficult grammar procedures and break them down into separate steps. An area that I had not considered before was the need to give children the opportunity to display their work around the classroom and share pieces of work created by children of different abilities in the class.

In the future I would begin discussions with the class and children earlier in the year, encouraging the children to share their opinions and their interests creating that bridge between home life interests and school life literature. A resounding theme brought up with the boys was the idea good vs evil, adventure and fantasy these are themes I will continue to explore during literacy lessons with new classes.

My action research project aimed to encourage and develop boys confidence and attitude towards writing, as Marsh (1999) explains that children were interested in a wider range of literacy materials at home than they have access to in school, it became apparent to me that I needed to expose the children in my class to a wider range of media and literature. Through focus groups and discussions with the class opinions of literacy slowly began to change, the introduction of new media began to bridge home life and school life, Merisuo – Storm (2006) explains that children and teenagers in Finnish schools who read at home showed significantly higher achievement. As I work in a deprived school encouraging children to read at home is necessary but reading isn't often undertaken at home, therefore introducing the children's interest in the classroom sparked their interest and ultimately developed their confidence as outlined about in Figure 4.

There are some limitations to my study, although performed with the whole class the study focused on a small group of boys and their development. This group of boys who were working towards the expected standard benefitted greatly from the free writing sessions and the grammar skills explained in their style displayed around the classroom.

My study can be used by teachers who may find it hard to engage their lower achieving boys in writing, although each class cohort is different the steps used to discover the children's interests may be applied and developed depending on the cohort. My study has shown the necessity to introduce the children's interests. The introduction of these elements into my classroom had a positive impact on the attitudes towards literacy and attainment in writing.

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