



International approaches to writing instruction: a comparison of curriculum in Australia and the USA

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Abstract

Being literate empowers individuals to be active citizens and enhances individuals self-esteem, self-confidence, and independence. In today's society, literacy requires much more than alphabetic knowledge. Curriculum documents provide content knowledge for teachers to refer to as they assess and plan for the learning needs of their students. However, they also have embedded within them particular views on what is to be taught and how to teach writing. In this paper, we analyse how the teaching and learning of writing is represented in the official (intended) English curriculum standards of the USA, the state of Virginia, and Australia, in New South Wales. Using content analysis, we analysed the standards for the approach/es explicitly or implicitly embedded in the writing standards. We found that a skills-based approach was the dominant discourse in both US and Australian intended curricula. A process approach was present much more in the Virginia standards than NSW, while a genre approach was more prominent in NSW curricula than Virginia. The creative and critical approaches were less present in both countries. We acknowledge that the enacted curriculum may differ to that of the intended official curriculum as teachers bring their own interpretations to the official curriculum documents.

Keywords Writing · Standards · Curriculum · Elementary · Primary · Literacy · Writing approaches

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1 Introduction

As Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, noted on International Literacy Day 2008, ‘Literacy is about empowerment. It increases awareness and influences the behaviour of individuals, families and communities. It improves communication skills, gives access to knowledge and builds the self confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions’ (Richmond et al., 2008). With a strong focus on learning to read in the elementary grades, writing appears to be the ‘Neglected R’ (The College Board, 2003). While there is an increasing emphasis for young people to be multiliterate (Marsh, 2006; New London Group, 1996; Zammit, 2010; Zammit, 2018), writing on either paper or in an electronic medium is an essential skill.

Teachers over the years have implemented multiple approaches informed by different theories as part of their instructional practices (Ivanic, 2004), which are influenced by their own beliefs about what to teach and how to improve their students’ writing outcomes (Ivanic, 2004; McCarthey & Ro, 2011; Peterson, 2012). Some teachers utilise exemplary instruction, whereas in other classrooms writing instruction is not emphasised or adequate (Graham, 2019b; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Wilcox, et al., 2016). One form of support for teachers is curricular documents. Teachers are expected to plan their teaching of writing based on mandatory documents, including the English state or national syllabus (e.g., curriculum guides), to meet system requirements.

Curriculum documents provide content knowledge for teachers to refer to as they assess and plan for the learning needs of their students. However, they also have embedded within the content strands and descriptors or standards particular views on what is to be taught and how to teach writing (Peterson, 2012). These views promote particular intended approaches to teaching and learning which have traditionally advantaged students from white middle class backgrounds while limiting the engagement of students living in poverty from attempting to write or see themselves as capable writers (Merga, 2020; Rayner et al., 2016). They also have enabled a focus on the segmentation of writing into component ‘skills’, such as phonics, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, and reinforced a culture of decontextualised learning. For many students living in poverty, the connection between the component skills has not always been made, further distancing them from success within the educational system (Graham, 2019b).

An analysis of writing curricular standards allows educators to understand what intended writing instructional perspectives are embedded within curriculum documents (Peterson, 2012). From such an analysis on curriculum texts, a connection may be made to the approaches implicitly promoted as the way to teach writing and potentially to teachers’ beliefs and practices as they enact the curriculum. Making these approaches to writing visible supports teachers’ instruction by providing a lens for viewing existing curriculum resources. This is important because the interpretation or recontextualisation of the intended curricular content by teachers translates directly into classroom learning experiences (Bernstein, 1996). Examining approaches to teaching writing is critical for enhancing the progress of students, especially those living in poverty, to ensure frequent opportunities for them to participate in writing and use writing for meaningful learning experiences including contextual learning, authentic learning, and problem-based learning.

This paper presents the results of an analysis of writing instructional approaches embedded in intended English curriculum documents used for the teaching of primary school children (Kindergarten–5th/6th grade) across two English speaking nations: Australia and the USA.

The study compares and contrasts writing approaches, as reflected in the intended curriculum, in each country to begin a dialogue around instructional approaches and practices to support teachers to critique the implementation of mandatory standards, reflect on their instructional practices to best meet the learning needs of all students and the potential for their approaches to work against social inequities, and provide opportunities for student advocacy. It is not a full curriculum analysis but an analysis of the content of official curriculum texts. We also acknowledge that the enacted curriculum may differ to that of the intended official curriculum as teachers bring their own interpretations to the official curriculum documents to build students' competencies in writing (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999), recontextualise the contents into their own classrooms and practices (Bernstein, 1996; Zammit, 2011), and engage with system-level professional learning and curriculum initiatives which are implemented (Wall, 2017) and are influenced by the system-based assessment processes (Cumming et al., 2011).

The paper begins with background on literacy, and writing in particular, before outlining the approaches to writing instruction and the theoretical underpinnings that have influenced teachers' instructional practices. Drawing on this, the researchers identify the approaches that were coded in the analyses of the curriculum documents and present the results from the national and state-based curricula to consider:

- What approaches to writing are foregrounded in the intended English curriculum in different countries?

2 Background

Language is a resource for making meaning in society and serves a range of purposes (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Literacy can provide access to educational attainment and various careers (May, 2007; Reder 2000), to the language of power and production (May, 2007), and to social, economic, and cultural capital (Luke & Luke, 2001; Patel Stevens, 2011). Access to print literacy 'influenc(es) (not determin[es]) one's capacity to engage with social fields – traditional and emergent, corporate and institutional, cultural and economic' (Luke & Luke, 2001, p. 95). Students' writing proficiency and classroom writing instruction is a national and international concern (Applebee & Langer, 2006, 2009; Graham, et al., 2003; Graham & Rijlaarsdam, 2016; Persky et al., 2003). It is essential to examine common classroom practices and approaches reflective of the complexities of teaching writing (Graham, et al., 2012; Graham, 2019b).

For students to become successful writers, they need to learn tools and how to use those tools to create effective written texts. In terms of effective writing instruction, teachers acknowledge the impact of their own writing beliefs (Sloan, 2006), experiences, and practices, and that effective writing instruction is a scaffolded collaboration between teachers and students (Troia, et al., 2011; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Empirical studies in primary through high school focused on classroom writing instruction demonstrate that teachers' beliefs about writing and perceptions about themselves as writers can impact their writing instruction and students' writing development (Englert et al., 2006; Englert et al., 1991; Graham, 2019b; Hillocks, 1986; Kraft et al., 2018; McCarthey & Ro, 2011). Notably, intended reforms in writing instruction and teacher practices may vary from one another depending on how the educators adopt and implement new educational innovations (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

Over the years, specific approaches to the teaching of writing have been identified (see, e.g. Cambourne & Turbill, 2007; Campbell & Green, 2006; Ivanic, 2004; McCarthy & Ro, 2011). These approaches are grounded in different theoretical models that have influenced the teaching of writing, including psycholinguistic theory, emergent theory, sociocultural theory, and critical theory (Crawford, 1995 as cited in Graham, 2019a, p. 32). Researchers have classified the various approaches in different ways (Table 1). Three approaches are common across all these researchers: skills, process, and genre, with the socially and critically oriented approaches being included but labelled differently.

Ivanic's (2004) seminal work identifies six 'discourses of writing' defined as 'constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing and approaches to teaching associated with these beliefs' (Ivanic, 2004, p. 224). Her six discourses of writing are the following:

- A skills discourse, where writing consists of applying knowledge of sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns to construct a text and learning to write involves learning the sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns
- A creativity discourse, where writing is the product of an author's creativity and learning to write involves writing on topics that interest the student
- A process discourse, where writing consists of composing processes in the writer's mind and their practical realisation and learning to write involves learning about these processes involved
- A genre discourse, where writing is a set of text types, shaped by social contexts, and learning to write involves learning the characteristics of different types of writing which serve specific purposes in specific contexts
- A social practices discourse, where writing is a purpose-driven communication in a social context and learning to write involves students in writing for real-life contexts, with real purposes for writing; and
- A socio-political discourse, where writing is a socio-politically constructed text, has consequences for identity, and is open to contestation and change and learning to write includes understanding why different types of writing are the way they are, and taking a position among alternatives. (p. 225)

Table 1 Classification of writing approaches

Ivanic (2004)	Campbell and Green (2006)	Cambourne and Turbill (2007)	McCarthy and Ro (2011)	Peterson (2012)
Skills	Skills-based	Skills	Skills	Skills
Creativity		Language experience		Expressive/creative
Process	Process writing	Process	Writer's workshop [process]	Process
Genre	Genre	Genre	Genre	Genre
Social practices		Critical literacy social purpose		Social practice [new literacy studies]
Socio-political	Critical		Hybrid/eclectic [combination]	Critical literacy
		Multiliteracies		

Peterson (2012) drew on Ivanic's six discourses to analyse the writing practices in Canadian curriculum documents. Peterson also lists skills, process, and genre approaches, but in her description of the creative discourse, she includes the expressive, and within the social practice discourse, she makes a connection to new literacy studies and multimodal text construction. In relation to the socio-political, she references critical literacy. Graham (2019a, p. 43), however, in her critique of Ivanic's (2004) six discourses proposes that three of the discourses of writing, genre, social practices, and socio-political discourse, are actually 'social' discourses because all emphasise writing for social purposes. Writing for social purposes includes learning how written texts are constructed at the organisational level and associated language choices which utilise well-known forms (genres) or model texts. Similarly, these texts may also enable the writer to engage in social action as they comment on issues or attempt to influence others' points of view.

From an Australian perspective, Campbell and Green (2006) identify four approaches to teaching writing:

- (1) A skills-based approach, which focused on separate series of skills learnt through drill practices
- (2) A process writing approach, which encouraged students to draft, conference, edit, proofread, and publish;
- (3) A genre approach, which explicitly taught students the structural and textual features of a range of text types or genres
- (4) A critical approach, which refocused on the purpose and content of writing and the use of writing to make an impact on community

Of note here is the inclusion of a 'critical approach', similar to that inferred by Peterson (2012), acknowledging the continuing importance of critical literacy. Cambourne and Turbill (2007) also identify critical literacy with a focus on social purposes of writing as an approach reinforcing the importance of this approach. They also include the language experience approach which 'is based on the premise that if children could tell their 'story' and someone could scribe (i.e. convert this story to written text) the children would then be able to read and re-read it' (Cambourne & Turbill, 2007, p. 12).

McCarthy and Ro (2012) in their investigation of US teachers' practices found four approaches dominated. Similarly, they found three 'common' approaches—skills, genre, and process—of which the latter was re-labelled as writers' workshop. They did not identify a critical approach but added a hybrid/eclectic approach. The hybrid/eclectic approach combines elements from the other three approaches.

However, it should be noted that curricula do not address how to teach (the pedagogy), content area specifics, or how to assess students. It is the classroom teacher's responsibility to engage and inspire students to write. Historically, students living in poverty have performed poorly in literacy, in particular in the area of writing (Connell, 1994) as they develop a negative mind set towards writing early in their education. This disengagement may be attributed to the over-focus on skills in isolation (i.e. decontextualised learning). Luke's (2010) study of 106 early years' classrooms in Queensland found that teachers in low SES schools spent more time on direct alphabetic instruction and drill of grapheme/phoneme generalisations than their middle or high SES counterparts. Luke argues that, far from students in poorer communities lacking 'basic skills', these students do in fact receive more work on decoding, at the expense of other critical aspects of literacy.

A rich literacy learning environment for students living in poverty needs to affirm students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), engage them in authentic contextual learning that involves them in thinking hard (high cognitive), feeling good (high affective), and active involvement (high operative) (Fair Go Project, 2006). Zammit and Callow (2013) in analysing the literacy practices of 28 exemplary teachers of students in poverty found that teachers in the primary years employed explicit teaching of different forms. The teaching of writing reflected aspects of reading pedagogy, in terms of discussion and modelling of various text types and their features. They note 'a model text was read, structural features and grammar discussed and the class jointly constructed another text with the teacher, before students worked independently writing their own piece' (p. 114). All teachers integrated writing into meaningful contexts or activities that provided high cognitive, affective, and operative learning.

Over the decades, different writing approaches have influenced state and national curricula and standards that teachers interpret for their instructional practices. As Peterson (2012) notes, using categories of approaches can provide a framework for an investigation of which approaches are foregrounded in curriculum documents. Using such a framework provides opportunities for cross-country comparisons which can shed light on approaches embedded in different countries' curricula and whether there are similarities and differences across the years of schooling.

3 Methodology

Using extant literature, national standards, and state English syllabi for primary years writing instruction, we investigated how different writing approaches are implicitly promoted to teachers. Using content analysis (Cohen et al., 2011), we identified the approaches foregrounded in intended curriculum documents associated with primary grades (Kindergarten to Year 6). Comparisons were made between Australia and USA on which approaches formed part of the dominant views for writing instruction.

3.1 Data sources

The main data sources were the official national and state English curricula documents in Australia and the USA. These included *The Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015) the *NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English* (NSW Board of Studies, 2012), the *Common Core State Standards for English Language* (Common Core State Initiatives, 2011), and the *English Standards of Learning* (Virginia Department of Education, 2017). All of the standards were available in openly accessible websites. Each curriculum document was reviewed to locate the items used for students in grade kindergarten through year 6. In the case of the Virginia Standards of Learning, an overall curriculum stairstep document that showed when standards were introduced and mastered was also included as part of the analysis.

3.2 Data analysis

Content analysis takes texts and analyses, interrogates, and reduces them into summary form through the use of pre-existing categories or emergent themes (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 564) and

is useful for describing the focus of group and institutional attention (Weber, 1990). A content analysis was undertaken on the writing standards in the intended English curriculum documents using five pre-existing categories of writing approaches used in the literature to describe writing instruction. As mentioned in the literature review, there were three approaches common across the literature, skills, process, and genre, with varying definitions of a genre approach but which all associated with writing for social purposes using knowledge of text structure and language. The ‘critical approach’ was included as a category because it was also more frequently used and considered to encompass Ivancic’s socio-political ‘discourse’. The ‘creativity approach’ was included as it was also used in other research and considered to encompass the language experience approach. Hence, the five categories for undertaking the content analysis were the following:

- Skills approach: separate series of skills, writing consists of applying knowledge of sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns to construct a text, and learning to write involves learning the sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns.
- Creativity approach: writing is the product of an author’s creativity, and learning to write involves writing on topics that interest the student.
- Process approach: it encourages students to draft, conference, edit, proofread, and publish, and learning to write involves learning about these processes involved.
- Genre approach: writing is a set of text types, shaped by social contexts, and learning to write involves learning the structural and textual features of different types of writing which serve specific social purposes in practice.
- Critical approach: writing is a purpose-driven communication in a social context, and learning to write involves students in writing for real-life contexts, with real purposes for writing that impacts the community.

Content descriptions were coded for each approach. Descriptions that used the terms ‘understand’, ‘identify’, ‘discuss’ or ‘show’ needed to be related to writing not just associated with the reading/writing connection where students learn about how a text is constructed in order to employ the knowledge in their own writing. In the *NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English* (herewith, NSW English Syllabus) (NSW Board of Studies, 2012), many content descriptions were complex with more than one approach implied in the wording. If the content description was categorised as including writing, it was included within the data set.

In the case of the Virginia English Standards of Learning (herewith, Virginia English SOL), data analysis began by reviewing the progression charts for each of the strands. The content standard descriptions were included in the analysis for the years in which they are directly taught. The curriculum is cyclical with students gaining mastery of standards after several years (typically 2–4 years) receiving instruction on the topic. Teachers are responsible for reviewing standards taught earlier in the curriculum, but are not *required* to provide instruction on previously addressed standards. For this reason, standards were only included in the initial analysis for the years when they are required instructional elements. Following a cursory analysis of the progression charts, the individual grade-level standards were analysed to determine whether there was variability in the descriptions between the progression charts and the full Virginia English SOL document.

4 Findings

4.1 New South Wales, Australia

The Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E) (ACARA, 2015) was established in 2012 with an update in 2015. The AC:E includes three strands of language, literacy, and literature organised according to grade, from foundation (kindergarten) through year 10. Within each of the strands, there are sub-strands with content descriptions which are identified as W (writing), R (reading), T (talking), or L (listening). In the language strand, the five sub-strands are language variation and change, language for interaction, text structure and organisation, expressing and developing ideas, and phonics and word knowledge. In the literacy strand, the four sub-strands are texts in context, interacting with others, interpreting, analysing, and evaluating, and creating texts. In the literature strand, the four sub-strands are literature and context, responding to literature, examining literature, and creating literature. Content descriptions for writing occur across all three strands of the AC:E.

The NSW English Syllabus (NSW Board of Studies, 2012) includes content descriptions from the AC:E but also additional content descriptions. It is organised around strands based on modes which are connected to specific outcomes and objectives. The strands in the NSW English Syllabus are speaking and listening 1; writing and representing 1; handwriting and using digital tools; reading and viewing 1; spelling; speaking and listening 2; writing and representing 2 (kindergarten to year 4)/responding and composing (years 5 and 6); reading and viewing 2; grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary; thinking imaginatively and creatively (kindergarten–year 2)/thinking imaginatively, creatively, and interpretively (years 3 to 6); expressing themselves; and reflecting on learning. Each strand is further categorised into the threads of ‘develop and apply contextual knowledge’, ‘understand and apply knowledge of language forms and features’, and ‘respond to and compose texts’. The recontextualisation of the AC:E content descriptions into different strands and threads shifts the connection from the broad strands of language, literacy, and literature to more specific isolated modes even though it could be argued that many of the AC:E content descriptions are relevant to more than one mode.

In addition, the NSW English Syllabus presents content in stages not according to year level. Early stage 1 is interpreted as foundation/kindergarten, and stage 1 is associated with years 1 and 2, with years 3 and 4 aligned to stage 2 and years 5 and 6 aligned with stage 3. While stages are associated with years, it is anticipated that students in a class could be working at or towards a number of different stages and differentiation of instruction would be expected to meet the learning needs of all students.

In the NSW English Syllabus from kindergarten (early stage 1) to year 6 (stage 3), we identified a total of 226 content descriptions related to writing in the seven strands of writing and representing 1; spelling; writing and representing 2/responding and composing; grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary; thinking imaginatively and creatively/thinking imaginatively, creatively, and interpretively; and expressing themselves.

Across the seven strands, skills-based approach had the largest number of content descriptions accounting for 38% ($n = 87$) of the total, genre approach accounted for 29% ($n = 66$), creativity approach for 13% ($n = 30$), with critical approach associated with 11% ($n = 25$), and process approach with 8% ($n = 18$) (Table 2).

Skills-based content descriptions, including skills in context, were focused in the spelling strand (98% of total for strand) and the grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary strand (56% of

Table 2 Approaches in NSW English Syllabus kindergarten to 6th grade writing content descriptions

	Writing and representing 1	Spelling	Writing and representing 2/ responding and composing	Grammar punctuation and vocabulary	Thinking imaginatively and creatively interpretively	Expressing themselves	Total
Skills	7	39	1	40	0	0	87
Creative Process	11	0	0	5	11	3	30
Genre	16	1	0	0	1	0	18
Critical	22	0	15	23	3	3	66
Total	6	0	7	3	1	8	25
	62	40	23	71	16	14	226

total for strand). Genre-based content descriptions were also highly represented in the grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary strand (32% of total for strand), with no process-based approach present in this strand. The writing and representing 2, responding and composing, thinking imaginatively and creatively + interpretively, and expressing themselves strands had minimal or no skills-based content descriptions. Examples of skills-based standards include the following:

Early Stage 1 (ES1) Writing and representing: identify and use words around the classroom and in books during writing.

ES1 Spelling: know how to use onset and rime to spell words (also AC:E).

Stage 2 Spelling: use a variety of spelling strategies to spell high-frequency words correctly when composing imaginative and other texts.

Stage 2 Grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary: identify and use grammatical features, e.g. pronouns, conjunctions, and connectives, to accurately link ideas and information.

Content descriptions reflecting a creativity approach were present predominantly in the thinking imaginatively and creatively + interpretively strand (69% of total for strand) and writing and representing 1 strand (10% of total for strand). Examples of standards reflecting the creativity approach include the following:

Stage 1 Thinking imaginatively and creatively: recreate texts imaginatively using drawing, writing, performance, and digital forms of communication (also AC:E).

Stage 1 Writing and representing 1: experiment with publishing using different modes and media to enhance planned presentations.

The process approach was the least represented across all strands, with the majority clustered in the writing and representing 1 strand (16 of the 18 content descriptions). For example:

Stage 2 Writing and representing 1: plan, compose, and review imaginative and persuasive texts.

Genre-related content descriptions were present in six of the seven strands with the largest representation in writing and representing 2/responding and composing (65% of total for strand), as well as being the highest for writing and representing 1 strand (35% of total for

strand) and second for grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary strand (32% of total for strand). Genre descriptions include the following:

ES1 Writing and representing 2: compose texts for known audience, e.g. self, class, other classes, and parents.

Stage 1 Writing and representing 1: compose a range of written forms of communication, including emails, greeting cards, and letters.

Stage 2 Grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary: compose a range of effective imaginative, informative, and persuasive texts using language appropriate to purpose and audience.

Stage 3 Responding and composing: compose more complex texts using a variety of forms appropriate to purpose and audience.

Content descriptions reflecting a critical approach, while not large in number, were present primarily in the three strands of expressing themselves (57% of total for strand), writing and representing 2/responding and composing (30% of total for strand), and writing and representing 1 (10% of total for strand). For example:

ES1 Expressing themselves: compose simple written and visual texts that include aspects of home, personal, and local community life.

Stage 3 Expressing themselves: compose a variety of texts, e.g. poetry, that reflect their understanding of the world around them.

Stage 2 Writing and representing 2: make constructive statements that agree/disagree with an issue argument.

Stage 3 Responding and composing: identify and use a variety of strategies to present information and opinions across a range of texts.

4.2 Virginia, USA

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were established in the USA to address the demand for high levels of literacy knowledge required in the world outside of school (Common Core State Initiatives, 2018/2021). In order to best prepare students for life, the CCSS provides an outline of literacy skills and content in six language arts areas: reading: literature, reading: informational text, reading: foundation skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. The CCSS academic standards outline learning goals for each grade level including grades kindergarten through grade 12. According to the CCSS website (2018/2021), most states and territories have voluntarily chosen to adopt these standards and participate in this national effort (41 states and most territories). The standards include literacy in a variety of forms and seek to support learners to become better prepared for life beyond high school. The CCSS website notes that students are required to:

read stories and literature, as well as more complex texts that provide facts and background knowledge in areas such as science and social studies. Students will be challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they have read. This stresses critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills that are required for success in college, career, and life.

Although many states in the USA have adopted the national standards, the Commonwealth of Virginia has not adopted them. Virginia's curriculum standards, the Virginia English SOL, are comparable to the CCSS and set learning goals for students in grades kindergarten through grade 12 covering four key strands: communication and multimodal literacy, reading, writing (including writing/grammar), and research (VDOE, 2018). They also align with the goals of the Commonwealth of Virginia College and Career Readiness Initiative (2011) by defining 'the content and level of achievement students must reach to be academically prepared for success in entry-level, credit-bearing English courses in college or career training' (p.1).

In 2016, the Virginia Legislature considered the adoption of the national standards. However, the Virginia Board of Education unanimously voiced opposition to the CCSS indicating they would be a step backward from the Virginia SOL that had been in place in the Commonwealth since 1995 (Virginia Board of Education, 2013). In his veto, Governor Terry McAuliffe opposed both the adoption of the CCSS as well as usurping the Virginia Board of Education's authority by adding unnecessary legislation noting that:

The Commonwealth led the nation nearly two decades ago in the development of state-wide educational standards. Virginia's education system is one of the best in the world because of this innovative work. Currently, our state standards meet or exceed the rigor of the Common Core State Standards, while maintaining our independence. (Virginia's Legislative Information System, 2016, p.1)

The current study focused its analysis on the writing content descriptions in the curriculum progression charts standards and full Virginia English SOL which was adopted in 2017, with training during 2018–2019, and fully enacted in 2019–2020 academic year. In addition to the standards, teachers utilise a curriculum framework that further outlines instruction related to each standard, a crosswalk between the previous and newly adopted standards, and progression charts that show the literacy standards taught at each grade level across the entire curriculum (Nogueras, 2018).

The initial analysis of the curriculum strands in the progression charts showed that the skills-based approach and process approach were utilised most frequently in grades K through six. There was a notable absence of writing-related content descriptions in the reading strand, which was unanticipated because of the expectation that teachers provide integrated instruction across all areas of literacy instruction.

Data analysed across the four strands and one sub-strand (writing grammar) of the Virginia English SOL showed that the skills-based approach had the largest number of content descriptions accounting for 57% ($n = 110$) of all writing content descriptions, followed by the process approach with 21% ($n = 40$). Both the critical and creative approaches were associated with 9% ($n = 17$) of the content descriptions. The genre approach accounted for only 3% ($n = 6$) (Table 3).

Table 3 Approaches in Virginia English Standards of Learning, K-6

	Communication and multimodal literacies	Reading	Writing	Writing (grammar)	Research	Total
Skills	0	11	37	53	9	110
Creative	0	0	13	0	4	17
Process	0	0	23	5	12	40
Genre	0	0	6	0	0	6
Critical	1	0	12	0	4	17
Total	1	11	91	58	29	190

Skills-based content descriptions were focused in both the writing (41% of total for strand) and the writing (grammar) strands (91% of total for strand). Process-based content descriptions were concentrated in both the writing (25% of total for strand) and research strands (41% of total for strand). The creative and critical approaches' content descriptions were both centred in the writing strand representing 14% and 13%, respectively, of the content descriptions. Genre-based content descriptions were found only in the writing strand.

Analysis of the Virginia English SOL indicates variability between the content descriptions in the full standards document and those listed in the progression charts. The progression charts provide an overview of the total curriculum but do not include the complete range of descriptions present in the Virginia English SOL. The full document includes standards related to letter formation in print and cursive handwriting, expectations for accurate spelling of words, phonics, vocabulary, and some grammar elements that are not included in the progression charts.

Unlike the progression chart analysis, the analysis of the full Virginia English SOL indicates that writing is definitely represented within the reading strand. Content descriptions in this area included standards related to phonics and vocabulary instruction, such as:

2.4 The student will use phonetic strategies when reading and spelling.

- a) Use knowledge of consonants, consonant blends, and consonant digraphs to decode and spell words.
- b) Use knowledge of short, long, and r-controlled vowel patterns to decode and spell words.

4.4 The student will expand vocabulary when reading.

- e) Develop and use general and specialised vocabulary through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

6.4 The student will read and determine the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases within authentic texts.

- f) Extend general and cross-curricular vocabulary through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

The analysis of the content descriptions in the communication and multimodal literacies strand also presented a challenge because the creation of multimodal presentations is placed under oral language development, when they actually also encompass writing tasks. For example, in second grade the standard states,

2.1 The student will use oral communication skills.

- m) Create a simple presentation using multimodal tools.

As the document clearly expects the presentation to address oral language development, the creative approach is not evident in the communication and multimodal literacies strand (Table 3). One might argue, however, that the standard be moved to another strand to capture the skill development in the area of writing accomplished during the development of multimodal presentations.

The same situation was evident when considering the skills approach in the communication and multimodal literacies strand where the progression chart content descriptions did not specify that the ‘use of specific vocabulary to communicate ideas’ and ‘organize ideas sequentially or around major points of information using appropriate facts and relevant details’ would only apply to oral language instruction. Therefore, the skills approach was also not represented even though written skills are taught related to multimodal presentations. There is only one writing content description in the communication and multimodal literacy strand, which relates to a critical approach:

6.3 The student will determine the purpose of media messages and examine how they are constructed.

d) Craft and publish audience-specific media messages.

The writing strand and sub-strand and research strand clearly reflect the use of a process approach to writing instruction with 21% of content descriptions falling in this category. The Virginia Department of Education (2017) notes in the introduction to the Virginia English SOL that students become increasingly aware of the writing process across the grade levels. Teachers are expected to provide daily writing experiences, so students have frequent opportunities to apply knowledge of the process approach, represented by content descriptions such as:

K.11 The student will write in a variety of forms to include narrative and descriptive.

b) Use prewriting activities to generate ideas including drawing pictures.

1.6 The student will write in a variety of forms to include narrative, descriptive, and opinion.

e) Revise by adding descriptive words when writing about people, place, things, and events.

3.8 The student will write in a variety of forms to include narrative, descriptive, opinion, and expository.

a) Engage in writing as a process.

j) Revise writing for clarity of content using specific vocabulary and information.

4.3 Comparison of the international standards

After examining both the New South Wales Syllabus and the Virginia SOL documents, similarities and differences across the two countries were noted. Both countries had an extensive focus on the skills of writing which included an emphasis on grammar and teaching the mechanics of composing a written text. Skills were represented 87 times (38% of total items) in the NSW English syllabus and 110 times (58% of total items) in the Virginia English SOL. We noted that the curricular categories often separated writing from the other language modes rather than integrating writing. In the US, there tended to be more emphasis on the process of writing (21% of total) whereas in Australia the other main approach was writing in different genres (29%). Both countries focused least on creativity (Virginia, 9%; NSW, 13%) and critical approaches (Virginia, 9%; NSW, 7%) with few opportunities for learners to write on topics of their own interest or use writing to improve or make an impact on the community.

5 Discussion

Teachers are expected to implement the mandated English curriculum but the pedagogical approach is not mandated and teachers may draw upon their own experiences and identities (Sloan, 2006). Through the analysis of the language used in the standards and content descriptors, particular approaches to writing are embedded in both the NSW English Syllabus and the Virginia SOL which may influence teachers' interpretations and practices in the classroom.

The dominance of the skills approach reinforces Ivanic's (2004) assertion that this view underlies 'a great deal of policy and practice in literacy education' (p. 227). This dominance contrasts with the Canadian curricula in which a skills approach was not predominate (Peterson, 2012). The valuing of the process approach is more apparent in the Virginia SOL, similar to Peterson's (2012) analysis of Canadian curricula, but less apparent in the NSW English Syllabus. This may reflect the influence of exponents of process writing in the USA in comparison to Australia, which has a greater emphasis on explicit teaching of writing using a genre approach as the basis to also build critical literacy competence.

In Australia in the mid-1980s, a process approach to writing and a skills approach were preferred, but there was a distinct lack of successful writing for students living in poverty with additional disengagement in learning and dislike of writing. In the late 1980s–1990s, a genre approach with explicit teaching of writing aligned to social purpose and research into the educational genres that enabled success in schooling (Language and Social Power Project) saw an improvement. This approach was mainstreamed in NSW English K-6 syllabus in 1994/1998. Today, teachers include a more critical approach in writing which promotes greater connections to local issues, but this is not represented in the intended curriculum documents.

In the USA, it is evident that students must write across the different categories. In a just society, every child is encouraged to write about their own topics as and embed their own learning within a process approach. To engage every learner, children in a writing workshop participate in a variety of strategies to promote critical thinking. Instead of uniform assignments, teachers offer various short, mid-range, and long-term assignments across all genres (narrative, explanatory, persuasive, informational) to motivate students and meet the needs of diverse learners.

The Australian content descriptions do not simply represent a single approach but draw together multiple approaches into a single content description. This complexity demonstrates

the complementary nature of the approaches for developing students' writing capabilities across the primary years. For students living in poverty, as Luke (2010) noted, the challenge is to ensure there is rich literacy learning, in authentic and relevant contexts, not decontextualised learning of aspects of writing. Literacy educators must build the linguistic and cultural capital of students living in poverty to improve their educational outcomes (Carrington & Luke, 1997). The foregrounding of writing approaches influences how teachers recontextualise them in their classrooms and in their interpretations of the content, pedagogy, and assessment.

Through being able to identify and articulate the approaches embedded in curricula and the influence on their teaching of writing, teachers can benefit from critically reflecting on curricula and their practices to 'maximise what they offer to learners, ... and from recognising which discourse(s) of writing they are inhabiting' (Ivanic, 2004, p. 242).

Peterson (2012, p. 281) notes that professional development that increases teachers' awareness of the underlying approaches to writing:

might lead to new practices and ways of thinking about writing as teachers adapt writing curricula so that the contributions of skills, creativity, genre, and writing processes to social and political goals, values and practices involving written communication can be recognized to a greater degree in their classroom teaching.

In selecting which approach would best improve students' writing outcomes, Ivanic (2004) and Peterson (2012) both call for a more comprehensive approach to the teaching of writing and drawing strategies from each. Fenwick (2018) notes that many teachers require significant support to know how to integrate standards into classroom practices. 'Teachers who do not have a literacy background ... rely heavily on the intended curriculum to create learning activities and assessment involving literacy reflection' (Fenwick, 2018, p.349). The intended curriculum offered only limited information about literacy, which may not assist teachers to design learning that builds students' written capabilities across time. Teachers also require more professional learning that supports how to interpret, implement, and integrate the writing standards. Thoughtful literacy tasks which require authentic learning could reshape classroom writing, enhancing the literacy development of all learners, especially those from socio-economic, ethnic, or language backgrounds that are conventionally not well-served by schooling.

6 Conclusion

Teachers are influenced in their teaching by the intended curriculum, by more experienced colleagues, and by their own views built around the approaches foregrounded in their initial teacher education coursework. Choice of pedagogical approach to the teaching of writing has a significant impact on the literacy outcomes of students from socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to understand the writing instruction approaches they are adopting and their limitations, such as a skills-based approach or process approach on students' identities as writers. We must provide students, especially those living in poverty, with opportunities to write in the powerful written genres required for educational success.

The policies and practices that systems and schools adopt differ at the national and state levels. A comparative study of intended English curricula in different countries opens up dialogue about practices and pedagogy which influence the educational outcomes of students living in poverty, the construction of their cultural capital and provides opportunities to critique

the approaches embedded in mandated English curricula. Further research investigating the enacted curriculum for writing and the place of the intended curriculum in guiding teachers' implementation of writing practices and approaches would extend the current study.

Challenges students face with writing indicates a need for improved instruction in writing. We can learn techniques from one another, comparing and contrasting both successes and challenges among our different countries. Widening our perspective to utilise a more global lens enhances the variety of instructional practices adopted in classrooms around the world and possibly improves learner achievement in writing.

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