

I N E X P E R I E N C E D W R I T E R S
A N D P R I V A T E S P E E C H

How Talk-to-Self Helps Six and
Seven Year Olds Write Independently

Beverly Feather

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

University of London, Institute of Education

April 1993 4



ABSTRACT

INEXPERIENCED WRITERS AND PRIVATE SPEECH

In this thesis I develop the argument that children's talk to themselves, or private speech, signals their understanding how to transform a thought into the alphabetic spelling code and is critical to their success in learning to write. At early stages of writing a child needs an experienced literate with whom to collaborate when composing and transcribing a readable text. This support performs the same functions as private speech does when a newly successful writer begins to compose and transcribe independently. Private speech in association with spelling emerges because it has an important function for children beginning to gain control of the conventions of spelling, helping to coordinate the various subtasks of the writing process.

From 1987 to 1989 I worked full-time as the class teacher of six and seven year old Year Two children and researched their writing development, focusing on the stage where they began to write independently a readable text by spelling phonetically and reproducing from memory some conventional spellings. From analysis of field observations and videofilms of children writing, I devised a typology of beginning writers which includes a category not previously considered in the research literature: "perplexed" writers. These are children who have much of the knowledge and many of the skills needed to write but who cannot coordinate all the elements to compose and transcribe a text without help. Case studies of children in my classes track writing development over a year and show how and why perplexity develops and how children's writing behaviours change as they move towards writing successfully. From this understanding of the ontogenesis and resolution of perplexity I devised a pedagogy which supports beginning writers and helps eliminate perplexity.