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# The impact of teacher and learner positioning in the writing classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Existing research shows that in South Africa, there are reasons for concern regarding the achievements of a large proportion of Grade 6 learners in language learning. The impact of this poor language achievement affects their success rates across learning areas and in higher grades. It has also been found that historically, Grade 6 boys have achieved and continue to achieve lower results than their female peers in national and international language assessments. However, boys' language learning in the Intermediate Phase in South African schools is surprisingly under-researched, particularly their writing skills development. This study uses positioning theory to understand Grade 6 boys' writing

development. A cycle of the Grade 6 writing programme, as prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2011), was observed and analysed. Although the teachers followed the same policy statement (the CAPS), it was found that their scaffolding approaches within the stages of the writing cycle differed significantly. It was concluded that there are significant links among three key elements: teacher knowledge, teachers' and learners' positioning in the writing process, and learners achieving the object of cognition in the stages of the writing cycle.

**Keywords:** boys' writing, CAPS, writing process, positioning theory, positioning, cognition, dialogue.

## 1. Introduction

It has been found that a gender gap that favours girls academically exists both nationally and internationally (Mather, 2022). International research into this situation has indicated that girls outperform boys in all subjects. This evident in the studies carried out in the Philippines Fontanos & Ocampo, 2019), Finland (Lahelma, 2021), Kenya (Muyaka, Omuse & Malenya, 2021), Pakistan (Ullah & Ullah, 2021) and Spain (Sáinz, Solé & Fàbregues, 2021). Sáinz *et al.* (2021) state that in countries like Spain, boys are more likely to fail in school than girls and that during the last decade boys show a higher disposition to drop out of school earlier than girls. In South Africa (SA), Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena and Palane (2017, n.p.) state the following based on the 2016 PIRLS assessment results:

- The SA gender gap in reading is the second highest in the world. Girls scored much higher than boys in reading across the board. In Grade 4, girls are a full year of learning ahead of boys. 84% of SA boys did not reach the low benchmark category.
- The gap between boys and girls is also growing over time and was larger than it was in 2011. The average Grade 4 girl in SA scored 341 points in 2011 and 347 points. On the other hand, the average Grade 4 boy in SA scored 307 points in 2011 and 295 points.

Both the Annual National Assessments (ANA) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) reports focus on monitoring learners' progress in reading (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). According to Read (2017), learners who write the ANA performed adequately in multiple-choice tasks but performed poorly in tasks that required them to produce written responses. In SA primary schools, reading rather than writing has been a dominant research focus possibly because reading is associated with literacy and is viewed as the primary medium for learning (Pretorius, 2002; Pretorius & Matchet, 2004). However, writing is also a skill that is central to all learning, as learners need to write answers to questions, essays, and other types of texts to demonstrate their understanding of concepts in all subjects. Learners' writing ability is a matter of concern internationally as learners do not write at the required level, thus there is a need for more research on writing instruction in elementary and middle school (Parr & Jesson, 2015). Gadd and Parr (2017) state that in both practice and research, writing remains the "neglected R" of literacy.

One South African study on teaching writing at primary school level, conducted by Navsaria, Pascoe and Kathard (2011) in the Western Cape, found that learners do not write at the required level, so teachers are concerned about the written language development of their learners as writing is integral to all learning. Other studies which focussed on learners' writing development in SA have confirmed that learners' writing instruction and development is a reason for concern and have suggested that writing be given more attention (Hoadley, 2012;

National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), 2012; Sailors, Hoffman & Mathee, 2007). Some studies concerned with learners' writing development foregrounded the performance of learners (see Navsaria *et al.*, 2011; Sailors *et al.*, 2007), and the beliefs, practices, and attitudes of teachers (see Julius, 2013) during writing lessons.

At the time of conducting this study, writing research about Intermediate Phase (IP) learners in SA remained relatively uncharted (Navsaria *et al.*, 2011; Julius, 2013; Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014, Blease & Condy, 2015; Olivier & Olivier, 2016). However, these researchers have stressed the importance of writing, teaching writing and researching writing. Tertiary writing, particularly of the academic essay, has received attention in studies conducted by Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) and Olivier and Olivier (2016). The focus of the study conducted by Blease and Condy (2015) was on writing in multigrade classes whilst Navsaria *et al.*, (2011) and Julius (2013) gave a voice to teachers in the writing classroom. Another area that has received attention in the South African writing classroom has been on assessing writing (Akinyeye & Pluddemann, 2016; Esambe, Mosito & Pather, 2016; Kasule & Langa, 2010). These researchers foreground the need for interventions in the writing classroom, particularly in terms of teacher development. Despite the contribution of the studies reviewed above on the area of teaching writing, more research into writing by boys in the Intermediate Phase (IP) is needed.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature regarding IP writing by boys by striving to gain insight into their development of this vital language skill, that is not only connected to other language skills such as listening, reading, and speaking, but also to all other learning in school. To achieve this, positioning theory was used to analyse the data and describe the approaches that the participating teachers took to scaffold the boys' writing, and how the boys responded to those approaches, during the stages of a writing cycle. These stages, as prescribed by the CAPS document are planning, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing (DBE, 2011). Understanding the positioning of learners and teachers during the writing process could contribute to our understanding of the writing classroom and will go some way towards improving the pedagogical choices that teachers make when developing their learners' writing skills. The paper begins by setting out the conceptual framework which is followed by a description of the research methodology. Four episodes from Grade 6 writing classrooms and an analysis of each episode is then presented. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the implications of using this positioning lens in the writing classroom.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Positioning theory was originally developed by a social psychologist, Harré (2004), to try to understand the dynamic, emergent nature of social interaction. He used the term 'position' rather than 'role', which was more fixed and stable. 'Position' could capture the fluid and changing nature of how people interact in a social situation. He was interested in how people

ascribed ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ to each other in discourse as social interaction (Harré, 2004). “Positioning theory is the study of the nature, formation, influence and ways of change of local systems of rights and duties, as shared assumptions of them influence small scale interactions” (Harré, 2004:5). It views positioning as a dynamic form of social role and aims to explain the relationship between discourse and psychological phenomena (Harré, 2004). Positioning theory offers a conceptual system within which the unfolding of episodes of everyday life can be followed in fresh and enlightening ways because it concerns conventions of speech that are easily altered (labile), can be contested (contestable) and last for a short time (ephemeral) (Harré, 2004).

Hermans (2001) drew on this theory in developing the Dialogical Self Theory, which looked at how people position themselves and others by adopting and ascribing ‘self-positions’ or ‘I-positions’. These are temporary stances which change as people interact. A person might have a coalition of several positions that he draws on, which might complement each other or be in conflict (e.g. teacher-as-disciplinarian; teacher-as-facilitator). More recently, scholars have begun to apply Herman’s ideas to education. Rule (2015) drew on both Harré and Hermans in using the notion of ‘position’ along with ‘dialogue’ and ‘cognition’ in his framework of ‘diacognition’ for understanding teaching and learning as knowing. Positioning theory was also used as a lens to explore teachers’ beliefs about literacy and culture and this study concluded that positioning can “provide researchers with a beneficial lens to frame discussions of learning and reflection around issues of culture and literacy (McVee, Baldassarre & Bailey, 2004:14). Further to this, in a study conducted by de Lange (2015), the Dialogical Self Theory was used as a theoretical lens to illustrate the nature and construction of multiple selves and positions within and as part of the greater cultural and social context of students with ‘hidden’ disabilities. This theory enabled De Lange to analyse the shifting identities of students with ‘hidden’ disabilities as a coping mechanism for their studies. The current study is different as it analyses how teachers position themselves and their learners, and how the boys who participated in this study position themselves, their peers, and teachers in the writing classroom.

According to Rule (2015:xvii), “dialogue refers to a conversation between two or more people”. In the classroom, this would involve how the teacher and learners use dialogue (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal). Through this dialogue, they position themselves and each other to reach the point where the learners know, or can do, what their teacher wants them to know, or wants them to do. In other words, the learners can acquire the object of cognition, that is, skill, meanings, or content (Rule, 2015:146). The notion of “miscognition” used to refer to instances where learners do not successfully cognise the skill, content or meanings which are instigated by their teacher, was added in a study conducted by Mather (2019). Rule (2015:146) states that during the process of activating the learners’ cognition, the teacher needs to know, not only what she/he is teaching, but also who she/he is teaching. According to Grossman (1990), teachers must have knowledge of context, which

means that they must understand the learners' backgrounds, their families, interests, strengths, and weaknesses, all of which they should consider in their classroom practice to make it more context-specific and relevant to their learners. Thus, the question that the teacher needs to ask is, "How can I get my learners to know this object of cognition?" To answer this question, the teacher needs to know her learners and their level of understanding to activate learning and get them to embrace the position that she creates for them. Thus, teachers need to know the learners so that they can know the object of cognition. Specifically, during the stages of a writing cycle, they can use their knowledge of their learners in the following way. Firstly, in the planning stage they can choose topics that suit learners' interests. Secondly, during the editing stage, they should know which learners need more support and give them more attention. Finally, during the drafting stage, this knowledge should enable the teachers to focus on the learners who generally do not accept the positioning assigned to them and work on tasks. Instead, these learners may position themselves as talkers, daydreamers, or disruptors and so, using their knowledge of their learners, teachers can reposition them as creative thinkers and writers to achieve the purpose of each phase.

Further to this, knowing how she can get her learners to cognise the object of cognition, she needs to know "what and whom will inform how she decides to teach it, all of which are underpinned by why she teaches" (Rule, 2015:146). Cognition assumes that the teacher who has a prior knowledge of the object of cognition (skills, concepts etc) intends to guide the learners to the cognition of that object by leading them through the process of teaching and learning (Freire, 2004). During this teaching and learning process, the teacher recognises the object of cognition (knows it again) as a teacher but also from the learners' perspective to best help the learners share the object of cognition (Rule, 2017). Within cognition are intercognition (when teachers and learners reach the point of sharing the object of cognition), metacognition (when they reflect on their teaching and learning) and decognition (when they realise that they do not actually know something that they thought they knew (Rule, 2017)). Intercognition refers to what the learners and teacher cognise together. It is the intersection that the learners and teacher come to during the teaching process and involves the teacher knowing what she is teaching, learning what the learners know about what she is teaching and modifying her teaching methods to accommodate what the learners do or do not understand (Rule, 2015:151). By the end of the process, if it is successful, the learners can cognise the object of cognition and the teacher might also learn something new about the object of cognition, her teaching methods, and her learners (Rule, 2015:151). Rule (2015) states that within the discursive role, temporary positions (positions are dynamic) are adopted in the classroom and these positions are expressed in the speaking-acting-believing-reading-writing discourse of the classroom. For example, during the writing process, the learners and teacher might position each other as listeners, speakers, readers, writers, editors, assessors and so on. Position might also involve affective states, such as 'I-as-anxious' or 'I-as-excited' (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) explain that there is a dominant position, with auxiliary positions to support that dominant position. When positions that do not support the dominant position are adopted, the result will be a conflict of positions. Rule (2015) states that within the discursive role, temporary positions (positions are dynamic) are adopted in the classroom. These are expressed in the speaking-acting- believing-reading-writing Discourse. For example, during the writing process, the teacher’s dominant position will be teacher of writing, using the writing cycle, while the learners’ dominant position will be learners of writing, using the writing cycle. They will position themselves and each other into auxiliary positions such as listeners, speakers, readers, writers, editors, assessors and so on. The following table illustrates the dominant position and some of the auxiliary positions that the teacher and learners ought to adopt during the writing process to cognise the object of cognition, which is to know how to write the selected genre using the stages of the writing cycle. The stages of the writing process are prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) which is the guiding document that SA teachers follow (DBE, 2011).

**Table 1:** Teacher and learner positions during the writing process

Stage of the writing process	Teacher	Learners
	<b>Dominant position:</b>	
	teacher of writing using the stages of the writing cycle	learner of writing using the stages of the writing cycle
	<b>Auxiliary positions:</b>	
Prewriting/planning	Facilitator, demonstrator	Thinker, reader, speaker
Drafting	Assistant/guide	Planner/writer
Revising	Assessor/critical thinker	Assessor/listener/speaker
Editing	Facilitator	Reader/critical thinker
Proofreading	Facilitator	Reader/editor
Publishing/ presenting	Assessor	Writer

Grossman (2009) states that the process approach to writing focuses on the process that the learners and teacher go through when writing. Each stage has a purpose with outcomes that learners need to achieve (DBE, 2011). For instance, during the planning stage, learners need to brainstorm ideas using a mind map. By the end of the drafting phase, learners need to have completed a rough draft which they will correct during the editing phase, using peer or teacher feedback. The writing process includes, “generating ideas, deciding which ideas are relevant to the message and then using the language available to communicate that message in a process that evolves and develops” (Grossman, 2009:7). Therefore, the teacher shifts from the position

of being only a linguistic judge to that of a reader responding to what the learners have written and the learners shift between the positions of thinker, planner, writer, and reader.

### 3. Methodology

In each school, a cycle of the Grade 6 writing programme, as prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE, 2011), was observed, and analysed to understand the role that positioning theory plays in each stage of the writing process. In conducting this research, I sought to gain insight into my participants' teaching and learning of writing by observing their behaviour during writing lessons and noting their positioning during the stages of writing. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm was appropriate for the study, as it allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' positioning during the stages of the writing cycle.

An exploratory, inductive case study research design was used as it best suited this research in that it provided the opportunity to gain deeper insight into how boys are taught and how they learn writing. By focusing on a limited, defined instance of the writing cycle, the actions of teaching, learning, and writing were studied, which meant that as a single researcher, the researcher could collect and analyse the data. A case may be a programme, an event, an activity, or a set of individuals bound in place and time and is chosen to either illustrate an issue or because of its uniqueness (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001). The case in this study was the Grade 6 writing programme in two English HL classrooms, making it a multiple case study.

Structured observations were used for this study to record what transpired during a cycle of the writing process in each school. The first part of the schedule allowed the researcher to record general information such as the date, name of school etc. Next was a table which included specific areas of focus with questions for the researcher to respond to as a lesson unfolded, followed by a table for the researcher to tick the phase of the writing cycle. I also included a space to note the duration of a lesson and finally I allocated two large sections to make notes, guided by two questions. In School A, the teacher used three one-hour lessons and in School B this cycle was completed in four one-hour lessons. The reason for observing the lessons was to ascertain how the boys and teachers positioned themselves during different stages of the writing process. The clear intentions behind what needed to be observed made using a structured observation schedule work best and leaving blank spaces on the schedule for additional notes provided the opportunity to include aspects that were observed but not included in the schedule. Christiansen, Bertram, and Land (2010) state that a potential weakness of observations is that what the researcher chooses to write down and how the classroom interactions are interpreted depends on his or her view of the world, and that it is impossible to observe everything that is happening. To take account of this weakness, I also video recorded the lessons to ensure that information was not lost or omitted.

The data that were analysed for this study were video recordings from the observations (3 lessons were observed in School A and B), and notes from the structured observation schedule. The data analysis process began with the researcher listening to and watching the video recordings of the lesson observed several times. Next, the recordings were transcribed verbatim using two laptops: one for playing the videos and the other for typing, while also referring to the field notes. Even though it was a very time-consuming process, this was completed by the researcher, as doing so increased familiarity with the data and enabled her to note any emergent themes. The transcriptions, together with the observation schedule, were used to generate a list of codes. The codes and the key research questions were used to categorise the data into themes. This part of the process was recurring and was completed several times to allow for the organisation of the data into a comprehensible form. Using these themes, the findings were elaborated on, conclusions were drawn, and recommendations were suggested.

To enhance the validity of the study, the data (recordings, transcriptions, and observation schedules), findings and conclusions were reviewed by a peer. Consent was obtained from the DBE, the school, the learners, their parents, and the teachers. The schools and participants remained anonymous as pseudonyms have been used.

## 4. Findings

Presented here are four episodes of learning which took place in the schools during the different stages of the writing cycle. These stages include planning, drafting, and editing. The episodes are based on the themes that emerged during data analysis and were selected as each one provides insight into a stage of the writing cycle. The first two episodes highlight the role of intercognition during the planning phase, the second is an example of miscognition during the drafting phase and the final one highlights resistance to positioning during the editing phase.

In the episode that follows, Ms Chetty from School A was conducting the planning stage of the writing process to introduce her learners to the topic and type of text that they had to write. The topic was ‘My Nightmare’ and to prepare her learners to plan their own stories about nightmares using a mind map and then develop these stories, she modelled the text by engaging them in a discussion in which they co-created an imaginary nightmare. What follows is the beginning of the discussion. Here we see how Ms Chetty takes up ‘scenario-creator’ and ‘animator’ positions, and in turn positions learners as ‘co-creators’, to help them know ‘My Nightmare’ as the object of cognition.

**Key:**

T	Teacher
LB	Learner boy
LG	Learner girl
LBs	Learner boys
All	The entire class

**EPISODE 1**

*Ms Chetty from School A, positioning her learners during the planning phase of the writing process:*

1 2 3 4 5	T	Alright. Hmm, let's create the nightmare. You are standing at the beach. You are dreaming, right? You are standing at the beach, right? Okay, standing at the beach, mother called you and gave you ice cream, then there was KFC, you went, and you had lunch. Right, very happy, the waves were so calm. Suddenly you heard this thunderous sound.
6	LBs	Xai booom booom bah bah bah!
7 8 9 10	T	Good like that, a thunderous sound and what do you do when you hear the sound? What do you do, Diana? You get scared, you get shocked, you jump, you turn around, you want to see where the sound is coming from. Then what did you see? You saw this...
11	LB	Wave
12 13 14	T	Wave! You saw this wave coming towards you. You saw this huge wave coming towards you and then what happened? First let's talk about the motion.
15	LB	Mam, it's making a big noise.
16	T	It's making big noise and coming. Then what happened? Mr Osman?
17	LB	Mam they were screaming.
18	T	The wave knocked you over, you so thin.
19	All	<i>(laughing)</i>
20 21 22	T	The wave knocked you over. It carried you away. And then how do you feel? How are you feeling when that wave took you away? How do you feel? Let's talk about your feelings. How are you feeling, Lushen?

23	LB	Scared.
24	T	Feeling scared, try to think of more ...
25	LG	Frightened.
26	T	Frightened, you are frightened. Someone else. You are?
27	LG	Feeling suffocated.
28	T	OK, feeling suffocated. OK.
29	LG	You are panicking and running.
30 31 32	T	You are panicking, what else? Darian, how are you feeling in this nightmare. Darian? You supposed to be in this nightmare with me Darian. What's wrong with you? Are you sleeping?
33	LB	No mam.
34	LG	<i>(raises hand)</i> Full of tears.
35	T	<i>(repeats)</i> Full of tears.
36	LB	Terrified.
37	T	<i>(repeats)</i> Terrified.
38	LG	You dunno what horrible thing is coming next.
39 40 41	T	<i>(repeats)</i> You dunno what horrible thing is coming next. Right. OK, so all your feelings OK. Feelings right. Then suddenly now you see the shark fin coming towards you.
42	All	Ooooooh! Aaaaah!
43 44	T	What you gonna do? Njabulo? What you gonna do, the shark is coming for you, Njabulo?
45	LG	Mam? Mam? Mam?
46	LB	Start running.
47	T	Now you can't run on water!

Ms Chetty positioned her learners, using her knowledge of the topic and pedagogical knowledge of discussion techniques to get them excited and interested and start thinking about the topic. She began by using the word “let’s” (let us) (see line 1) which positioned her as part

of the class (Let you and me together). In so doing, the teacher assumed the position of discussion-guide to facilitate her learners' understanding of the topic and how to approach the writing so that they could successfully and independently complete their own writing. She set up an interpersonal dialogue with the whole class of learners to try and create a mind picture to stimulate the learners' imagination and thoughts to enable them to write their own stories. She used the plural *you* (see lines 1 and 2) unless she was speaking directly to a learner (see line 8). Although the setting was the classroom, the dialogue took the learners to another setting, the beach, by tapping into their imagination. Ms Chetty took them out of the classroom setting and into their imagination by stating: "Hmmm, let's create the nightmare. You are standing at the beach. You are dreaming this right. You are standing at the beach right." (see lines 1 and 2). Occasionally, they were brought back to the classroom setting if their teacher needed to regulate their behaviour or, for example, when she said things like: "Now you can't run on water" (see line 47).

During this interpersonal dialogue (communication between two or more people), the learners created an intrapersonal dialogue (communication within oneself) to negotiate how to respond and contribute to the interpersonal dialogue. An intrapersonal dialogue was created between the learners' writing and imagination—the role that imagination plays in writing. For example, when the teacher asked Njabulo what he would do as the shark was after him, Njabulo would have had an intrapersonal dialogue wherein he would have considered a few options, such as trying to fight the shark or swim as fast as he could, and then he would have evaluated which answer would be the most suitable to provide a response to the interpersonal dialogue taking place between the teacher and the class (see lines 43 to 47). Njabulo said that he would have run away, to which the teacher responded that he could not run on water. Perhaps in his eagerness to provide a response to the interpersonal dialogue, he had not carefully engaged in his intrapersonal dialogue. Another possibility could be that there was an interlanguage conflict in Njabulo's dialogue, as English is his second language, so he would also have had an interlanguage dialogue between English and IsiZulu before he was able to provide a response to his teacher's question in English. Ms Chetty positioned the learners as co-creators of the story by saying "let's" and did not just facilitate but also participated in the discussion by offering her ideas to further stimulate the learners. She positioned them in a new place, at the beach ("You are standing at the beach right."). The learners embraced and accepted this positioning by enthusiastically listening and contributing to the discussion. Next, she positioned them as listeners when she said, "Suddenly you heard this thunderous sound." Again, they accepted this position, as we can see in the episode above, when the boys made sounds that they imagined to be appropriate to the situation being described by their teacher (see line 6). Ms Chetty appealed to different senses like hearing, feeling, and seeing to engage and position her learners in a dream about an incident that occurred at the beach. She solicited sights ("wave"), sounds ("boom") and feelings ("terrified", "suffocated") from them as they

constructed this imaginary object together. The learners, in turn, adapted and responded to those positions, which she confirmed and responded to, so further developing the story.

Humour was also used to engage the learners and keep them actively interested in the progression of the nightmare, as when she said, “The wave knocked you over, you so thin.” and the learners responded by laughing. According to Latifi, Razavi and Parsa (2022), humour in the classroom could be appropriate or inappropriate. Appropriate humour means that humour is not offensive and suitable for the classroom whilst inappropriate humour is offensive or unsuitable for the classroom. Humour, if used appropriately in the classroom, could be a communication tool to make learning a reality for the learners (Latifi *et al.*, 2022). In Ms Chetty’s instance, the humour could be classified as appropriate as it did not cause offense or discomfort to anyone, including the boy that she was addressing, but instead made the story real because she used a fact about the physical appearance of the boy as part of the imaginative story. However, even though the learners were laughing and excited and speaking, they seemingly were familiar with the boundaries of a classroom discussion and positioned themselves accordingly, as they raised their hands if they wanted to speak, did not speak out of turn or whilst someone else was speaking and laughed at appropriate moments. Ms Chetty maintained the dominant position of the teacher of writing, with multiple auxiliary positions, and maintained control of the interpersonal dialogue, and to a large extent guided the learners’ intrapersonal dialogues. This all contributed to the success of this classroom discussion.

This episode is an example of successful intercognition if one considers its purpose, which was to carry the learners over the boundary to her expectation of the story that they needed to write. The object of cognition was “trying to know the nightmare”, where the teacher and learners co-created this imaginary object. In this instance, the teacher herself did not know what the outcome would be, as she led the interpersonal dialogue while at the same time following their lead. The intercognition happened in stages to build up the object of cognition: standing at the beach, hearing the thunderous sound, seeing the wave, feelings experienced. By the end of the dialogue, a very vivid imaginary experience full of sense perceptions was created, which the learners took with them to complete the writing process. Thus, being positioned as co-creators of the imaginary object became a springboard for their own writing, so they moved from the interpersonal dialogue of the discussion during the planning phase to the intrapersonal dialogue of writing their own stories during the drafting phase. It was found that the purpose of the lesson was achieved, as the analysis of the next lesson recording showed that most of the boys had understood what the teacher expected them to do and completed their mind maps for the planning stage.

## EPISODE 2

This episode is from the planning stage in School B. Ms Naidoo uses many positions and confusing explanations in her lengthy dialogues with the aim of helping her learners to achieve the object of cognition which is to plan a story by brainstorming using a mind map.

### *Miscognition in School B during the planning phase*

1	T	Alright! So now you have put your ideas on paper you have done your draft,
2		you have done your revising, you have done your editing by correcting all the
3		things that were wrong including your punctuation your spelling etc. etc. and the
4		final one is where you will now either type it out or write it out in your best
5		handwriting and that becomes your final copy. Your final VERSION! The...the
6		book says version I call it a copy right cause you already have pages where
7		you scratched on where you deleted where you added on sentences etc. etc.
8		now this becomes your final version where it is now ready for printing, ok boys
9		and girls, ready for publishing. Right, now what I want you to do is rule off after
10		your last word go to a clean page, actually ya go to a clean page write down
11		today's date. Now everything that we have learnt about planning, revising,
12		drafting, editing and...and publishing we going to put that into operation, in
13		other words we going to work with that but today I only want you to do a
14		brainstorm, remember your brainstorm has a...or sorry your mind map, you
15		going to have your topic there and I'm going to leave it as an open topic so in
16		other words you going to choose your own topic ok. And you going to mind map
17		it. You are going to sort out your paragraphs but for now I only want you to work
18		with your mind map where it where you going to plan using your characters you
19		going to brainstorm and you going to do your mind map looking at a topic and
20		I only want you to concentrate on your first paragraph, I want to see how you
21		do. Remember all drawings to be done in...?
22	All	Pencil
23	T	Pencil. I am giving you...yes?
24	LB1	Yes mam what can we do?

25	T	Any story, I, I just said that I am giving you an open topic, in other words you
26		are going to choose your own topic and people, if I were you, choose a story
27		that you know so that you can get going quicker and you will be able to put your
28		ideas on paper and it will also flow. Right I just want you to do, find a topic or a
29		story and then you are going to do your planning now. Remember what it says
30		about planning, decide on your topic. You are not going to talk to your group,
31		you are going to do this as an individual activity using a mind map to clarify your
32		ideas about the plot the characters and the setting. All of that should go in your
33		first paragraph. <i>(silence) (learners working)</i> . I said planning individually and I'm
34		only giving you 10 minutes.
35	LB1	So, mam we must write a story?
36	T	I just explained to you, but yes you gonna find a story a title put it in as your
37		mind map in the centre. And then you going to look at the plot, the characters
38		and the setting, that's all. In your first paragraph.
39	LB1	Plot?
40	T	Yes, your plot <i>(writing on board)</i> in other words what is your story all about, your
41		plot your setting and the characters. Only paragraph one. What you got in your
42		mind map you going to put it in writing as your first paragraph. Ok come you
43		are working for a newspaper now and you are writing up a story that you want

44		published so you are doing your planning first do not look into the book and
45		take a story think about something on your own.
46	LB2	How?
47	T	How! By using your imagination. And please don't twist the book like that you
48		are damaging it. ( <i>learners working</i> ). People while I am busy here does anybody
49		else have money for photos Zama? I am giving you 10 minutes! In the 10
50		minutes you should sort out your plot, the characters, and your setting. Anybody
51		else with photo money? Anybody else? No. Your 10 minutes is precious, you
52		should not waste it chatting to somebody else, and guys, don't let your neighbour
53		take your work. You know what I'm saying?
54	All	Yes ( <i>learners working</i> )
55	T	Uh people, please open one window on this side and that side I'm not going to
56		say that again. Open one window here and that one there. Right, which children
57		gave me photo money very quickly? ( <i>some learners talking</i> ). Haai, haai you
58		supposed to be brainstorming! Uh Zama R40 Nadia and who was the last one
59		Nthando? ( <i>some learners talking</i> ).
60		Hey, hey you supposed to be brainstorming in your head! ( <i>rowdy class</i> ) ( <i>phone</i>
61		<i>rings</i> ), hello ok goodbye! ( <i>class laughs</i> ). The call came again I wonder whose
62		that. Uh people does anyone change two 10's hello? Anybody with two 10's?

63		Right come, come 10 minutes!
64		Now remember people, when you are writing your plot you know the writing
65		pattern right you get your introduction your body and the conclusion. Right now
66		we not looking at the body and we not looking at the conclusion. We only
67		looking at how you are introducing your topic or your story or the plot. Alright?
68		<i>(learners shuffling)</i>
69		<i>(2 minutes later)</i> Right is everybody ready for me?
70	All	No
71	T	As I was saying earlier, stop writing! Cause I can see you are battling, you are
72		having a problem even thinking of a topic, how many of you started? <i>(6 hands</i>
73		<i>go up)</i> Read what you wrote for me.
74	LB3	You said 10 minutes

Ms Naidoo began by recapping the stages of the process approach to writing but did so by positioning the learners as having already been through the process when she said, “Alright so now you have put your ideas.” This may have been confusing because the learners had only been made familiar with the terms relating to the writing process and the writing of the narrative genre and were only at the planning stage. It is evident from the above that the teacher did not clearly communicate what she wanted her learners to do because, after she had given them the instruction, one learner asked “How?” She simply responded by saying “By using your imagination!” (see lines 46-47). In addition, she did not show that she knew her learners because she used terms like “plot”, assuming they understood the meaning, which they seemingly did not. The result was that the learners did not know what to do and they asked her questions about the instructions. After a few minutes she had to stop them because they had not succeeded in completing the assigned task. It was also evident that Ms Naidoo herself was not familiar with the terms associated with the writing process, as she confused the word mind map with brainstorm, and copy was used for version (see lines 5 and 14). Being consistent with the terminology associated with the writing process is important, particularly for second

language speakers who may not be familiar with the synonyms that their teacher uses, and their interlanguage dialogue between IsiZulu and English may be conflicted.

Adding to the problem of lack of clarity in the instructions, she told the learners that they had an “open topic”, meaning that they could choose any topic to write about. This created a gap in the object of cognition and did not activate the learners’ cognitive processes. She also told them to write a story that they already knew to expedite the process, so the object of cognition seemed to be learning the writing process to write a story that the learners had read previously. However, data from later in the lesson revealed that she reprimanded them for copying stories and instructed them to put “a nice, neat line” through their work and start afresh, writing original stories instead, making it seem like she was not clear about what the object of cognition was. There was a strong emphasis on the writing process in School B. The object of cognition seemed to be to know how to master the steps (planning, editing, etc.), with nothing on knowing the actual content of the story as an object of cognition (“Think about something on your own”; “How?”; “How? By using your imagination”). In School A in contrast, during the discussion, Ms Chetty engaged the learners’ imagination to develop an intercognition of the “nightmare” whereas Ms Naidoo simply told the learners to use their imaginations. The learners could not understand the procedure in the absence of content in School B, whereas Ms Chetty scaffolded the process of imaginary co-creation, and so started with the content. Her object of cognition was clear, the learners had to write a story about a nightmare. She did not teach learners directly the steps in the process, but instead developed their writing skills using the process approach to writing, whereas Ms Naidoo had no clear object of cognition. The aim was supposed to be writing a narrative, but her focus seemed to be more on teaching learners the process approach to writing, rather than using the approach to develop their writing skills, that is writing a story about a topic. It must also be mentioned that the learners ought to have been familiar with the positions involved in this process, as the CAPS prescribes that it should be used for writing from Grade 4 and was included as part of the assessment criteria used to assess the writing that they had completed previously.

With respect to positioning, Ms Naidoo again adopted multiple positions and positioned her learners in multiple positions during this episode. She began by positioning herself as the ‘more knowledgeable other’ (McLeod, 2007), explaining what the learners needed to do, and positioned them as the listeners of her instructions. She assumed that her learners understood words such as editing, revising, plot, characters and setting. A learner interrupted her monologue to seek clarity and she was positioned again as the ‘more knowledgeable other’ as she attempted to provide a response to his question. In her response she positioned them as selectors of a topic or story. By suggesting that they choose a story that they already know, she took away the original, creative element of story writing and positioned them as paraphrasers rather than imaginative, creative writers. According to Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010:51), generally, there are dominant and auxiliary positions within a coalition of positions.

These positions should not occur in isolation, instead they should work collaboratively. When positions do not collate, the result could be a conflict of positions. Seemingly, Ms Naidoo's positions were in conflict as there was little coherence among and between them. During the observed cycle of her teaching, when developing her learners' writing skills, the dominant position was supposed to be that of the 'more knowledgeable other' (McLeod, 2007) as a teacher who is developing her learners' writing skills using the writing process. In contrast, it seemed that her dominant position was teacher of the writing cycle, thus positioning her learners as learners of the writing cycle and writers of a story. Her auxiliary positions shifted between regulator, teacher of reading and drama, vocabulary, correct pronunciation of words, language structures and conventions, money collector, ventilation monitor and timekeeper, which did not always support her dominant position. For instance, in the episode above her dominant position was supposedly one of facilitator of the planning stage of the writing process. When she shifted into the positions of money collector and ventilation monitor, she disrupted the learners and changed their positions from planners of a story to debtors and window openers. Those positions did not support the dominant position, but conflicted with it, so the objective of the lesson was not achieved. This "cacophony" of positions disoriented her learners and made it difficult for them to identify their own dominant and auxiliary positions and may have contributed to their lack of understanding and incompleteness of the task.

In contrast, Ms Chetty managed to create a coalition of positions. Her dominant position was the 'more knowledgeable other' (McLeod, 2007) as teacher of writing an imaginative story using the writing cycle and her auxiliary positions included inspirer, co-creator, facilitator, editor and regulator. These positions worked in harmony and enabled her to position her learners coherently in relation to knowing the object of cognition. Most of her learners were thus able to complete their mind maps, write and edit a draft and present a final version for marking.

Ms Naidoo was not explicit as to the purpose of the mind map, what the learners needed to include in their mind maps, and she did not provide cues which would have assisted the learners to a large extent. This lack of subject matter knowledge on her part implies that she would find it difficult to position herself in the stages of the writing process and would thus not be able to position the learners accordingly. The learners positioned her as the 'more knowledgeable other' when they asked her questions, expecting her to lead them through the 'zone of proximal development' (McLeod, 2007) and explain how they ought to go about planning the story. However, she did not always accept this position. Instead, she disciplined them for twisting a book. The learners needed to be positioned as planners and creative writers, but she kept interrupting the position to collect money, open windows, among other activities. She also left her position as the 'MKO' to shift into a position that she was more familiar and comfortable with, that of regulator. Within this position, she was the authority figure and could not be questioned or challenged, so may have used this position to dominate the episode and reaffirm

her authority status, and possibly to avoid responding to a question for which she may not have had the subject matter knowledge. Miscognition is evident where the learners were not able to complete the task (most did not even know where to begin), the object of cognition was not clear and shifted somewhat, and when a learner asked her if they must write a story, she responded, “I just explained to you,” (see line 36), but she actually had not explained, perhaps as a result of limited subject pedagogical knowledge.

### **EPISODE 3**

A case of the teacher learning something new about her learners is presented in the episode below. As can be understood in this episode, there was a clear disconnect between Mrs Naidoo’s intended meaning of the word *write* and what the boy understood her to mean. She had completed determining who of the learners, particularly the boys, had not completed the assigned homework and was now asking individual boys to read out what they had written to the class. It is interesting to note that she focussed specifically on the boys in her class. Although this was not an expectation made as part of the research, she was aware that they were the focus of the research, so the approach that she took might have been different from her regular practice. This may have had an impact on the girls in the class who may have felt ignored during certain parts of the lesson such as the one described here, when her focus was solely on the boys. However, during the lesson observations, all the girls completed their drafts and final submissions, the quality of which cannot be commented on as this is not within the scope of this study. The first few boys commenced reading their stories aloud when instructed to do so, but each one was stopped by Ms Naidoo after a few lines because she accused them of copying the story that they had written from a published story.

#### *Miscognition in School B during the drafting stage of the writing process*

1	LB	Naughty little boy.
2	T	Sorry what’s that?
3	LB	The naughty little boy. There once was a leetle...
4	T	That’s not your writing.
5	LB	How, this is mine Mees.
6	T	I know the story.
7	LB	How Mees, it is mine, I write the story.
8	T	Carry on.
9 10	LB	There once was a little boy. He was very naughty and he went to the shop and he...
11	T	That is not your writing.

12	LB	Is mine Mees.
13	T	Next. Stand up for being disrespectful.
14	LB	( <i>inaudible</i> )
15	T	That's not your writing.
16	LB	I wrote it.
17	T	What's that?
18	LB	I write it.
19	T	Are you 100% sure? You did not copy it from a book?
20	LB	I copy it.
21	All	( <i>Laughing</i> )
22	T	Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for being honest. Next child?

The boy understood the word *write* to mean “use his own handwriting”, thus using the definition of *write* as being the “action of forming letters and characters” (Harper, 2014), so when Ms Naidoo asked him if he had written the story, he says that he had. For her, the word means to create an original story using imagination, thus using the definition of *write* as “the activity or occupation of composing a text...” (Oxford dictionaries online, 2010). There is a continuing struggle within language, even within words, and the way different people understand words (Bakhtin, 1984). The confusion surrounding the word *write* is surprising if one considers that the object of cognition should have been knowing how to write a story using the stages of the process approach to writing. Yet, this learner did not even understand *write* in this context, which means that there is no intercognition around the word. If this learner had not understood his teacher’s meaning of “write a story”, then he would not have been able to successfully complete the assigned homework to write a draft of an original, creative story using his imagination.

Through the process of dialogue, Ms Naidoo was able to cross the boundary and determine that the learner had miscognised her meaning of the word, and through the teaching process she had enabled him to cross the boundary and understand her meaning of “that’s not your own writing” when she asked him if he had copied the story from a book. However, instead of adopting the position of editor or corrector and clearly explaining the miscognition of the word *write*, she concluded her dialogue with the boy by praising him for his honesty. In so doing, she re-positioned him from being a reader to a respondent to a disrespectful boy and to an honest boy all in this short dialogue. The next boy who was instructed to read appeared to deliberately attempt to use the same misinterpretation to position Ms Naidoo, but this time she was aware and immediately corrected him.

## EPISODE 4

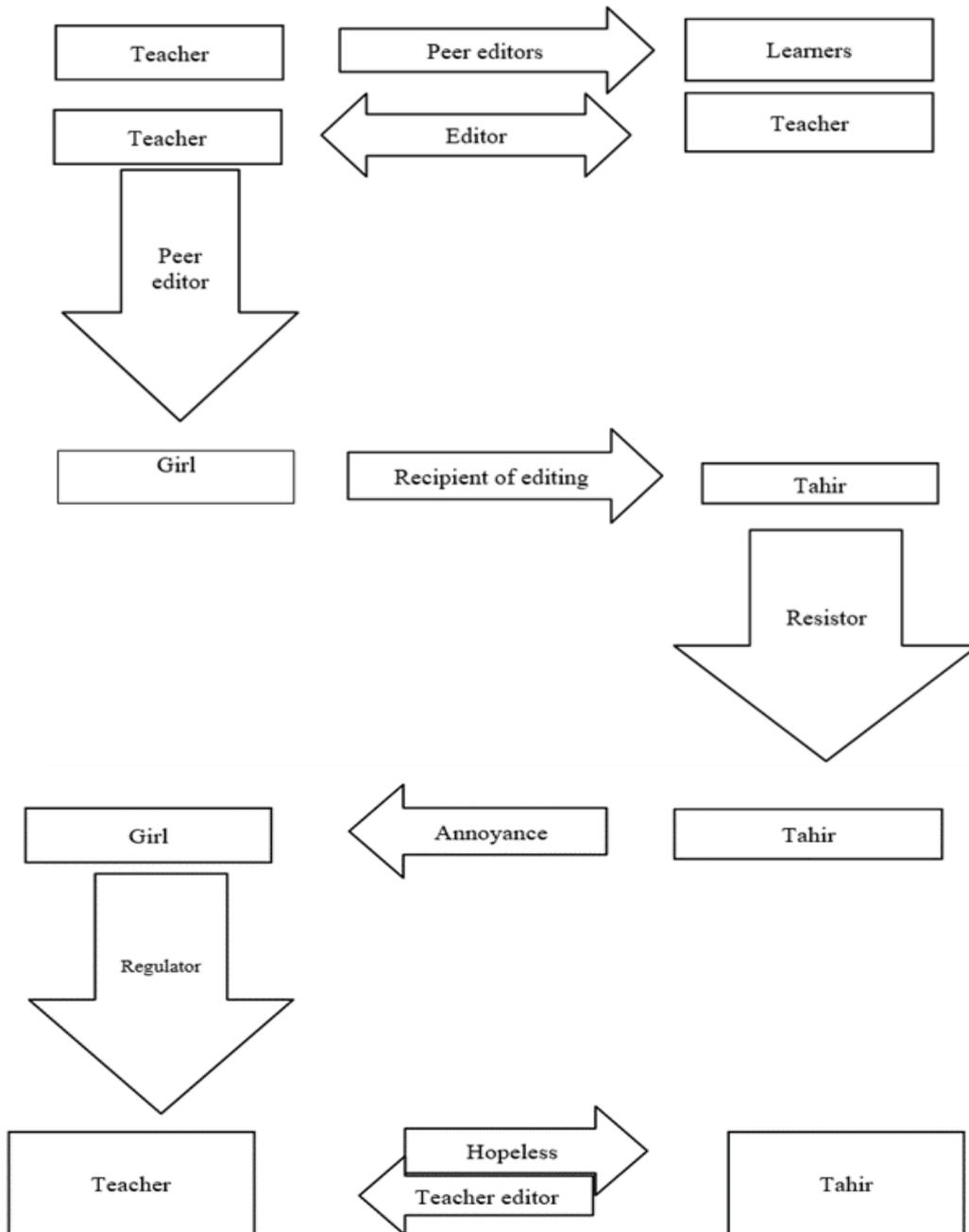
In the episode below, we see a learner from School A who was positioned by her teacher, Ms Chetty, as editor/teacher, but this position is rejected by her partner, thus the peer editing step of the process approach is not successful here.

### *Rejecting positions during the editing stage*

1	LB	Mam this girl is annoying.
2	T	Who?
3	LG	Mam, every time I help him, he says, “Leave me alone, leave me alone. I don’t want you to help me.”
4	T	I don’t know about Tahir. <i>(walks to LB)</i> He don’t like to listen. <i>(checks Tahir’s work at his desk; goes back to desk, Saleem comes with chair)</i> . Capital letter J, capital letter. <i>(checking Saleem’s work inaudible)</i> . I “noticed” not “noted”. Must use proper English when you are writing. Please, some of you are coming with your things for me to check and I am actually rewriting the entire thing for you. <i>(LB standing and waiting)</i> Please check your work before coming to me. Only those people who cannot understand it, come to me. Some of you are bringing your books and I am rewriting the entire thing for you. <i>(answers LB question, to LB partner)</i> You check his work. <i>(next LB comes)</i> How, where’s your chair? You gonna bend over me or what? <i>(Checks LB, inaudible)</i> . <i>(Siren wails, learners start moving around)</i> . You do not leave the classroom, the buzzer is for me. Only after you left your book here on the table can you leave.  <i>(Assists LB; most learners leave book and leave, some still writing)</i> .
5		
6		
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14		

The boy, Tahir, rejected the positioning of a girl as editor who has power to correct his work. It can be stated that positioning is largely about power; authority figures position those with less authority to do things that they want them to do in the way that they want them to. This is particularly evident in the classroom situation, where teachers are the authority figures and use their power to position their learners through dialogue during the learning and teaching process to activate their learners’ cognitive processes to help them achieve the object of cognition. Because the teacher is accepted as the authority figure and ‘more knowledgeable other’ (McLeod, 2007), the learners easily accept her position of editor to correct their work. However, in this episode, when Ms Chetty positions the learners as peer editors to correct each other’s work, because they are usually equals in the classroom situation, Tahir may not have easily accepted this shift in power. This may be a limitation of the peer editing stage of the writing process and might also reflect the boy’s socialisation regarding power relations and gender, as here we see him not wanting to accept the girl’s positioning as an editor of his work.

Alternately, writing is closely linked to identity (Ivanič, 1998), so he might be resistant to receiving criticism from his peer who he views as his equal. Either way, he rejected the position which consequently impacted on other positions in the classroom. The diagram below illustrates the positioning with Tahir in the above episode.



**Figure 1:** Resistance of positioning in School A (Source: own)

Illustrated in this figure is the positioning during the episode where Tahir resisted Ms Chetty's positioning of his peer as an editor, thus rejecting the position of recipient of the editing. The teacher positioned the learners as peer editors and herself as an editor. So, the girl sitting next to Tahir was positioned as his editor. At this time, Ms Chetty was editing another boy's draft, as his work required considerable attention. Tahir resisted the girl's position as editor and positioned her as an annoyance for telling him what to do. She had to leave editing the work and intervene to regulate the interaction between Tahir and his peer. When she said, "I don't know about Tahir. He don't [sic] like to listen", she positioned him as being unmanageable and unresponsive. She then had to check his work, so he imposed the position of teacher editor on her. The teacher needed the learners to accept the positions of editor and being edited because if they do not, then she must edit all their work to ensure that they present a polished final draft to her. Even though the other learners accepted these positions and edited each other's work, Ms Chetty still had to edit a few learners' drafts because they either made too many errors or their peers were not at the level to edit effectively.

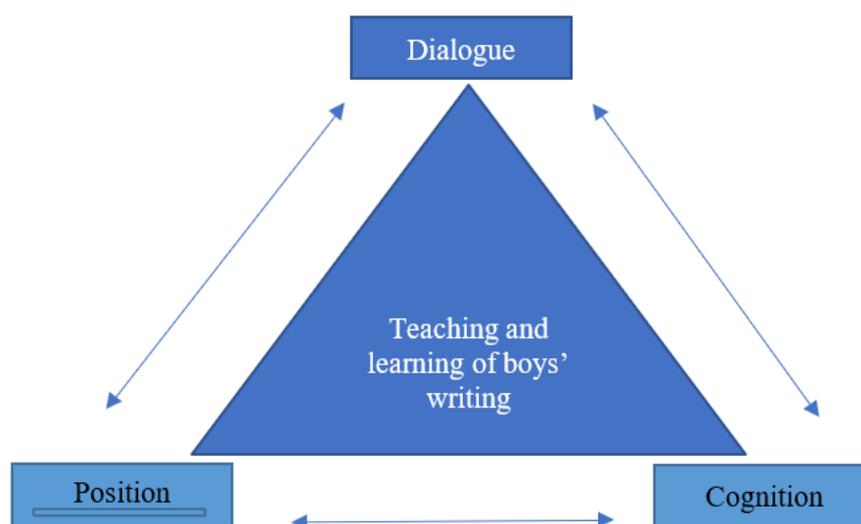
In SA, classrooms consist of a mix of learners in terms of academic performance and language competence. In a class, there may be gifted learners, learners with learning barriers, mother tongue English speakers and English first additional language speakers. This means that learners will not be at the same level and may not be able to correct and provide feedback on their peers' writing. Adding to this, Hyland (2003) cautions that learners may not use their feedback and may prefer teacher feedback. Peers may also focus on surface forms, may be too critical or due to cultural norms may not want to criticise or judge their peers (Hyland, 2003). A result of this could be that the learners submit inadequately edited products for marking which could increase the time needed for the teacher to mark.

Alternatively, the teacher will be over-burdened with revising and editing and thus be unable to provide the attention and engagement needed for these stages. This teacher editing turned out to be time consuming and Ms Chetty expressed her exhaustion at the end of the lesson. She also did not have sufficient time to edit all the drafts that needed her specific attention, so this might be a limitation of the editing stage of the writing process. Also, Ms Chetty positioned the learners as self-editors when she said, "Please check your work before coming to me." Some learners may find it difficult to accept this position because of their limited knowledge of grammatical or spelling errors in need of correcting. Moreover, they also may not necessarily be capable of critically reading their own stories to make improvements to either the structure or the creativity of their stories.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, it was found that using positioning theory as a lens illuminated several aspects of teaching and learning during a cycle of the writing process in a Grade 6 classroom.

The diagram below summarises the relations between dialogue and position, dialogue and cognition and position and cognition:



**Figure 2:** Relations between position, dialogue and cognition when developing boys' writing skills. (Source: Own)

The relations between these elements are quite different in the two classrooms. In School A, Mrs Chetty instigated dialogue that positioned learners as co-creators and writers whereas in School B, Mrs Naidoo instigated dialogue that placed her learners in multiple positions, some confusing and unrelated to the task. This links to the relations between position and cognition. Mrs Chetty took up positions and positioned learners in ways that led them to cognition. Mrs Naidoo, however, did not, which resulted in unanticipated cognitions as shown in the Figure above. The difference between “getting writing right” and “getting the writing cycle right” was highlighted through positioning, dialogue, and cognition in these two schools. In School A, the teacher positioned herself (leader of the whole-class discussion, facilitator during the planning phase, editor and assessor) and correspondingly so did the learners (co-creators of an imaginative story, planners and critical thinkers, writers and editors) throughout the writing cycle to scaffold their writing skills, while in School B, the teacher foregrounded the stages of a writing cycle instead of using the writing cycle to position herself and her learners to scaffold their writing skills. This indicates that the teacher needs to know the object of cognition and

have a clear idea of what the object of cognition is to guide learners effectively in cognising this object. Subject matter knowledge must be sound so that they can “re-cognise” the object of cognition to enable their learners to know it.

Adding to this knowledge, the teacher needs to choose the most appropriate teaching technique to instigate learning and enable the learners to know the object of cognition. Appropriate techniques must be selected by using her knowledge of her learners. There must be a fit between the learners, the teaching technique, the level of the language and the positioning. Ms Chetty chose a whole-class discussion to introduce the topic and get her learners excited about their writing. Her level of language was appropriate to engage the learners in interpersonal dialogue, as they were able to understand her questions and respond accordingly. However, her knowledge of her learners might have been limited as she did not consider that learners might reject certain positions, as was seen in the episode with the boy refusing to accept his partner’s editing of his work. On the other hand, Ms Naidoo’s language was, at times, above her learners, as they were unable to fully understand her, and she had to repeat or rephrase questions.

With respect to positioning the learners appropriately, teachers must choose their positions and positions for their learners that will be best suited to helping them know the object of cognition. To do this, they need to maintain a dominant position, which will be linked to the object of cognition. If this is knowing how to write an imaginative story, the dominant position would be teacher of the story using the writing cycle. Auxiliary positions should be used to support the dominant position and position the learners appropriately. Their dominant position would be writers of an imaginative story using the writing cycle, and auxiliary positions would include planners, drafters, editors, critical thinkers, speakers, and listeners. If one compares the acts of teacher positioning in School A to those in School B, one can see how positioning has enabled achievement, and has not enabled the achievement of pedagogical goals, respectively. In School A, Ms Chetty’s dominant positions were appropriate to helping her learners cognise the object of cognition and the auxiliary positions that she chose supported the dominant positions. However, in School B, Ms Naidoo did not always choose positions that were linked to the object of cognition, nor were they always in support of the dominant position. Her frequent positional transitions of both herself and the learners disrupted and confused them. This may have been because of her not really having a clear understanding of what her object of cognition was supposed to be, not fully knowing the writing cycle, and not fully knowing how to develop her learners’ writing skills using the writing cycle.

When considering their identities as teacher and language learners in the context they situate themselves in, particularly to the public discourse that boys are known as poor achievers in literacy, the following was noted: Mrs Chetty seemed to read the context of the boys well by recognizing their need for stimulation that focuses on action, movement, excitement and by drawing on what they already knew (imagining the nightmare activity). Mrs Naidoo did not really engage with the boys’ context and needs. Mainly she treated them as passive recipients

of knowledge, but she misjudged what they knew. Although she did try to link to their prior knowledge of stories, this backfired when they reproduced the stories rather than develop their own imaginative writing.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper presented the findings from an analysis of four episodes from two Grade 6 writing lessons using positioning theory. In the first episode, the teacher successfully positioned her learners and engaged them in a discussion which supported them to plan their own version of a story, whilst in Episode 2 in School B, the teacher's lack of knowledge resulted in her inability to correctly position herself and her learners so they did not meet her expectations, the results of which can be seen in Episode 3. Also evident from Episode 3 was the use of positioning to reach shared understanding, which contributed to the teacher's knowledge of her learners and helped her respond appropriately when a similar incident occurred later in the lesson. Finally, Episode 4 highlighted the need for acceptance of positions during the stages of the writing cycle as in this episode, the boy rejected the positioning which resulted in his work not being peer edited, which then leads to an increase in the teacher's workload as she had to edit his work.

It can be concluded that positioning plays a key role during the stages of the writing process, and that if the teacher and learners fail to position each other and themselves correctly, the quality of the learners' engagement during each stage and the completion of tasks could be compromised. The importance of teacher knowledge was foregrounded because if she is limited in any area of knowledge, she will be unable to position herself and her learners adequately which will hinder the learners' learning process.

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### **About the author**

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