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## Does Text Language Find its Way into Primary Classrooms?

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### Background

This study is a continuation of work presented at the 2008 BERA conference in Edinburgh (Author, 2008). In that paper I shared insights gained from examining the written task responses of 210 primary school children from four New Zealand schools. Patterns of text language use and familiarity with mobile phones and texting were explored, along with data about their sources of information and an initial indication of their parents' and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about texting.

### Research Questions

The ability to code-switch - using written language forms appropriate to situation and genre, with supporting strong teacher scaffolding - was viewed as a necessary adjunct to the acquisition of this new digital language. Room should be allowed for the new to flourish, whilst maintaining the strength and usefulness of the old. This led to a further important research question and focus of the current study: To what extent might nascent primary school-age writers habitually (and perhaps unintentionally) use textisms in contexts other than everyday informal communications? Do these appear in their schoolwork?

### Methods

Even since 2008, mounting evidence of the use of mobile phones and texting / messaging technology by increasingly younger children, has brought this area of literacy research into sharper focus as an indicator of new digital literacy use (Crystal, 2008). This appears to be a world-wide trend. In 2006 an Office of Communications report recorded that 49% of 8-11 year olds in the UK owned cell phones. Just a few years later, Naish (2009) cited a Mobile Youth survey which indicated a considerable drop in the age of children first acquiring this technology, with almost half of British children between 5 and 9 years old owning a cell phone. Clark and Dugdale (2009) surveyed over 3000 children from 8 to 16 years old, 81.9% of whom self-reported that they sent text messages at least once per month. The indications are that this technology is becoming entrenched and bound to a sense of identity for teens (Carrington, 2009) and perhaps now even younger children. The rite of passage of mobile phone ownership that was previously thought to belong to teenagers, is fast passing to their younger siblings and peers. Parents, teachers, learners, the media and the general public demonstrate a strong interest in the topic, as witnessed by the continual listing of blog entries, media reports and links to articles which appear daily in my Google-alert emails. New insights revealed by the current study about developing writers' use and knowledge of textisms, particularly within a school context, should be helpful to those involved in supporting their literacy acquisition in this digital age.

The current phase of the research employs a phenomenological focus on the writing behaviours of primary school children in their everyday school life. No intervention was introduced - the intention was to gather data surrounding current practice and beliefs about text language use. A mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach was used, through the analysis of existing written scripts (the children's exercise books), and through recorded semi-structured interviews with the children.

During 2009, the author gained access to a class of Year 6 children at a Christchurch primary school. Permission was obtained to review all their school exercise books for the 2009 school year. This included all subjects, not merely those with direct links to English and literacy learning.

### Frame

Scripts were examined for incidence of text language use, and coded using Plester et al's (2008) framework of textisms. A semi-structured interview was subsequently carried out at the end of the school year with 11 pupils to gauge their views on writing and the place of text language use within school contexts. Responses were transcribed and coded for collation and analysis. This data will be supplemented by similar data from additional NZ primary school classes, to be gathered and analysed throughout the first half of the 2010 NZ school year (February to July).

## Research findings

The paper will further discuss insights into primary children's early beliefs and understandings about the use of text language within the school context. It will describe how young English-speaking children of primary school age are starting to apply textisms within formal and informal contexts, and explore ways in which children can be encouraged to apply this new digital literacy skill appropriately and constructively, both within and outside the primary school setting. As with the earlier phase of the study, a relevant comparison can be made to the growing evidence emerging from the British studies, providing a useful contribution to the understanding of NZ and British educators and parents in an important emerging international literacy field which focuses on the impact and potentials of new digital technologies on existing and valued literacy practices.

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