

When we read a page of text, fiction or non-fiction, by a published author all we see is the finished product. What we do not see are the thought processes or the decisions that have been made about what is to be included in the final piece of writing. Often children are asked to write in English and across the curriculum, without sufficient preparation for writing. They haven't had the experience of the text type in order to be able to write it themselves. They have not been given the opportunity of reading with a 'writer's eye' and analysing how different effects are created. They do not necessarily have the experiences, the ideas or the imagination to know what it is they could write. They need to be able to be shown how a text has been 'created' and how and why it has been put together as it has.

'Our ability to see behind an image or text, to appreciate its constructedness, is vital in helping us to understand and engage with the worlds of the imagination and poetry...' Look Again! A teaching guide to using film and television with three to eleven year olds.

The learning which took place during this project was based around the writing process and getting beyond the literal words of the text on the page ... to see behind the text... to appreciate its constructedness. Research has also shown that motivational techniques have a positive impact on boys' learning, whilst not at the expense of girls'. These informed approaches 'opened-up' writing for children:

children wrote for a purpose and an audience, encouraging ownership and a pride in their work through publishing the finished product in some form – book making was a firm favourite

pupils 'captured ideas' for writing through using a range of drama techniques

teachers stimulated ideas for writing through the use of visual images, ICT and film and the moving image

pupils used speaking and listening to explore texts, fiction and non-fiction, to articulate ideas that could be used in their writing, to justify their writing decisions and to rehearse their ideas before committing them to paper

teachers planned systematic sequences of work that systematically build on children's prior knowledge, makes sense for children, gives thinking time, outlines a purpose, audience for writing and an outcome for a unit of literacy

teachers used the 'Shared Writing Model' as outlined in the Literacy Strategy publications 'Developing Early Writing' and 'Grammar for Writing', to demonstrate how they would make writing choices and to model the thoughts and decisions of a writer

teachers provided concrete experiences on which children based their writing.

To summarise, the main techniques were:

- Book making
- Drama
- Film and the moving image ICT
- Speaking and listening
- Visual image

Teachers selected from this 'menu' those approaches that they were comfortable with and felt they were resourced for. Teachers did not feel that they had to trial every strategy, however, some teachers took calculated risks and trialled different methods and approaches. In some cases this led to significant changes in teachers' perceptions, expectations of themselves and their pupils and their enthusiasm for teaching literacy.

Christine Cork

What evidence is there to show that the approaches we have used can make a difference to boys' achievement in writing?

The following outline of the project demonstrates the results of the project.

"I hated doing literacy – now I love it and am thinking about doing an MA in literacy and learning. I feel I have been freed up to be more imaginative and creative." (a teacher's evaluation of the project.)

"Can we start writing now?" (a child involved in the project, now desperate to write.)

The project

The project aimed to help teachers consider ways to support boys in their classes who were underachieving in writing and in particular to raise standards in writing. The focus was very much at classroom level and teachers were updated with research findings and possible ways forward.

The development of strategies to support underachieving boys in particular is a priority for many schools. There is a wealth of information, publications, resources and advice available, so much so that it can be difficult to know where to start. A significant point is that there is no one way to deal with the issue of boys' underachievement in writing. There is much debate and some agreement over the possible causes of the problem and consequently on the strategies that schools might use to counter it. However, research findings suggest common strands and areas where those working in the field have reached general agreement.

Teachers found that it was not just the types of strategies that were used in teaching but also how they were planned that had an impact. They also found that working in the ways outlined in

this publication led to improved attitudes and motivation as well as raised standards amongst both boys and girls.

Previous research

Nationally

There is no shortage in the amount of research that has been undertaken into the ways in which boys' can be supported with their writing. In fact it can be quite bewildering to know where to start when presented with this wealth of advice. A good place to start is the Primary National Strategy website (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/) where there is an area devoted to 'gender' and a list of current research which is regularly updated.

Excellence and Enjoyment, produced by the DfES in 2003, put many of the strategies that the teachers have been using in this project firmly on the map, especially such aspects as 'making learning vivid and real, making learning an enjoyable and challenging experience and enriching the learning experience'. (Excellence and Enjoyment, page 29.)

Teacher colleagues in Essex have contributed to two publications, *More than Mulan: using video to improve boys' writing* and *Visually Speaking: using multimedia texts to improve boys' writing*. Both publications are stimulating, practical and easily accessible. The second publication draws on the work of Eve Bearne, *Making Progress in Writing*, and her idea of an expanded process for teaching writing.

The most significant publication for the work of the teachers in this project was *Raising Boys' Achievement in Writing*, a joint research project between The United Kingdom Literacy Association and the Primary National Strategy.

The notion of 'integrated teaching sequences' was one which helped teachers to plan units of work

in literacy that could then be used to share their practice with colleagues. The emphasis on using film and drama to stimulate writing gave them a starting point to extend their strategies in the classroom.

A bibliography is included in this document, which lists useful publications for those who wish to research further in this field.

Kent

The Schools Advisory Service, under its 'Different and Equal' programme, has endeavoured to clarify issues and research for teachers in Kent. The programme poster highlights several key messages.

Most schools manage to close the gap between boys and girls by trying a range of activities, not just one.

They also find that this approach tends to both raise the attainment of girls and boys, and reduce the gender divide.

The differences between boys and girls are often very different from person to person. So whilst we have to generalise, it is very dangerous to stereotype or assume that all girls or all boys will respond in the same way.

The Primary Strategy Team produced a document entitled 'Mind the Gap: Raising Achievement in Boys' Writing' (2002) and ran a series of courses which outlined key practical strategies within the classroom to motivate boys into wanting to write.

In 2004 the publication 'Boys can do better...' included case studies from primary and secondary schools. These outlined examples of practice from teachers who were attempting to raise the standards of boys' writing in their schools.

An early years publication 'Writing in the Air –

gender issues in the early years in Kent schools' was published in 2004

The people

The Raising Boys' Achievement Project was led by the Kent Primary National Strategy Team. Teachers from schools that had a three year history of a gender gap between boys and girls in writing were invited to join the group.

Teachers were asked to attend if they had an interest in gender issues and an enthusiasm for action research in the classroom. The project attracted a cross section of teachers. Teachers' experience spanned from newly qualified teachers to experienced teachers in middle management. The age range of children being taught covered Year 1 to Year 6, although there were more teachers from upper Key Stage 1. Twelve teachers from twelve schools participated in the project. The results of the project were based on evidence from monitoring fifty-eight children.

Summary of strategies

Teachers met monthly to consider an issue, undertake practical work and discuss implications for teaching.

Areas covered in these sessions included a range of teaching strategies and approaches: writing for a purpose and audience; use of drama and speaking and listening; use of the visual image, film and the moving image, and ICT to engage children in texts.

The strategies and motivational techniques were mapped into a systematic unit of work. This ensured progression from reading to writing and included analysis of text type. This planning process has given the teachers a platform to be able to compare their learning and share it with others. Some of these 'integrated teaching sequences' are included in this publication.

Tracking progress

Teachers were asked to focus on up to six children who were underachieving in writing, whether boy or girl. To narrow down the field further teachers looked at those children they felt had the potential to do better but didn't - 'the cans but don'ts' in the class. Data was collected from eleven girls and forty-seven boys.

It was important to track the progress of these children through both quantitative and qualitative means. Teachers were asked in December 2004 to take an example of each child's writing level and record the sub-level achieved. They were also asked to note motivation, attitude and writing behaviours at this point. A review of progress was undertaken six months later, in June 2005.

Teachers verified their data through 'triangulation' i.e. to compare their own perceptions of the progress children were making with the perceptions of the children themselves and with the views of other adults, and evaluated significant changes in their classroom practice as a result of the strategies, the challenges they faced and the resolutions they had achieved. This gave some further interesting insights and linked well with the new OfSTED focus on self-evaluation.

In order to be able to share literacy units with colleagues, teachers recorded their work along with photographs, samples of children's writing and an analysis of the main areas of progress and achievement.