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O'Brien, Angelique and Neal, Ian (2007) Boys' Writing: A 'Hot Topic' ... but what are the strategies? Education-Today.net.

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Boys' Writing: A 'Hot Topic' ... but what are the strategies?

Education-Today (www.education-today.net/obrien/boyswriting.pdf) March 2007

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Abstract

This research was undertaken to investigate the validity of specific current research into Boys' Writing, especially in the English National Curriculum's Key Stage 1. A single-subject case study approach was carried out in an English International School in Egypt. The findings show that although most aspects of the research proved valid, an integration of the studies is suggested in order to evaluate the most effective approach to boys' writing. In particular, a focus on gender issues may have led to the impact of handwriting instruction being overlooked in intervening and helping boys' writing. In addition, it is suggested that journal writing may need to be more thoroughly integrated into the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) framework in order adequately to address the needs of younger writers.

Introduction

The introduction of the English National Literacy Strategy and the national assessment of attainment targets has made schools and government agencies in England, such as Her Majesty's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), more aware (and indeed accountable) for those areas where the standards are perceived as not being met. In recent years a rising sense of alarm has been experienced in regard to the national standard of writing and is especially concerned with boys' writing.

In 1993 the then newly formed Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) released one of its earliest publications, *Boys and English* (OFSTED, 1993). The report proved very influential in highlighting the gap in performance between boys and girls in English. There followed a series of studies into the issue, including in recent years with a focus on National Curriculum test results that show that "*boys are further behind girls in writing than in other English attainment targets*" (OFSTED 2003, p.25).

In the search for good practice, a series of inspections resulted in reports such as *Yes he can: schools where boys write well* (OFSTED, 2003). And although a number of key factors were

identified in schools where boys achieve a good standard of writing, the ‘concern’ still exists. In 2005, when OFSTED commissioned a review of recent national and international research in the field of literacy and English teaching, the authors dedicated two sections relating to boys’ (under) achievement in literacy, and the current pedagogic initiatives to raise standards in writing to meet national targets (Myhill and Fisher, 2005). Was this inclusion a genuine reflection of the degree of research into the topics, or was it merely a response to the political concern about national standards in literacy, and the perceived concern about gender differences in UK schools?

Boys’ writing has now achieved a status of its own, with special sections in many teaching and education websites dedicated to the issue. Indeed, it now seems to be a ‘given’ in teaching pedagogy that boys need help with writing. The colourful and attractive *Boys Writing* flyers released by the DfES have to some extent diluted the topic into four catch-phrases (DfES, 2005). Although all four strategies produced by the DfES brochures are valid, and give good guidelines for practicing teachers to help boys produce a higher standard of written work, current research suggests that a number of other issues should also be considered, such as:

- Which variables affecting children’s progress in literacy, and their attainment in writing specifically not linked to gender at all?
- Are there some practical and feasible classroom strategies, which divert from the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), that have impacted positively on Key Stage 1 writing performance for both boys and girls?
- Is it possible that handwriting may have been overlooked, or under-appreciated, in the rôle it has in developing young writer's skills?

Literacy and Writing: Is it just about gender?

Many researchers have re-conceptualised the subject of English into the more socially constructed notion of literacy that moves beyond just reading, writing and talking. As such, Nixon and Comber (2006) argue that teachers’ recognition of children’s cultural practices is an important step in the positive development of children’s school literacy, especially for those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. A child’s “home literacy environment” is just as crucial as their school experience (van Steensel, 2006). Sociocultural variation in literacy achievement is also described by Verhoeven and Vermeer (2006). Moreover, what constitutes achievement in literacy, and writing in particular, may need to be re-assessed according to Vincent (2006) who argues that given the prevalence of multimedia in the lives, and therefore literacy awareness of children, pupils should be given the opportunity to produce and interpret text in a multimodal format. He states that multimedia is under-represented in the literacy pedagogies of many schools: “*Some children need multimodal scaffolding in order to communicate ideas effectively.*” (p.51)

Such research suggests that the factors which influence pupils’ progress in literacy are as varied as the children themselves. Therefore, if teachers cannot control the variables which may influence their pupils’ literacy attainment, we need to identify what is ‘effective’ in teaching literacy.

‘Effective’ literacy teaching... does it exist?

The question of what constitutes good practice in terms of Literacy teaching is also, unsurprisingly, the subject of much review. If we are to take the work of Hall and Harding (2003) as a reference, then:

The ‘effective’ teacher of literacy uses an unashamedly eclectic collection of methods which represents a balance between the direct teaching of skills and more holistic methods ... they avoid the partisan adherence to any one sure-fire approach or method. (p.3)

However, even in this comprehensive 100-page review, methods to increase children’s attainment in literacy, and writing specifically, are not identified or described:

There simply is no one single critical variable that defines outstanding literacy instruction... however, there is a cluster of beliefs and practices like scaffolding, the encouragement of self-regulation, high teacher expectations, and expert classroom management. (p.4)

In a similar study, Topping and Ferguson (2005), although describing what they classify as positive practice in much more detail, concede that:

It cannot be assumed that similar teaching behaviours would characterize effective literacy teaching in other geographical, pedagogical, cultural or socio-economic contexts. Causal linkage between the teaching behaviours described and the high standards achieved cannot be assumed. (p.140)

It is important, therefore, when reviewing the literature into children’s writing, and indeed applying it to a case study, that these underlying variables in both learning and teaching not be overlooked.

What is imperative in boys’ writing?

Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) identified the various factors that affect the development of writing skills in children below the age of seven. They investigated the effects of socio-economic status, and found that the only aspect of home background which significantly linked to pupils’ writing attainment in Year 1 and 2 was whether or not the children wrote at home. However, the most significant and perhaps surprising results of their research are described below:

The study did not find links between writing attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 and either the way the curriculum was organized, how often children attempted different writing tasks or the range of writing tasks offered to them during the Key Stage. Nor did it find any links between gender and writing attainment. (p.4)

Of course it must be stressed that these findings were for Key Stage 1 children and are not intended to predict outcomes for older children. Two findings in this research were also noted but not explored in depth:

1. There is a significant link between pupils' attitudes to writing (as assessed by teachers) and their competence in writing.
2. A child's handwriting ability can strongly affect later attainment in writing.

Both of these factors agree with other literature and will be discussed further.

Raising achievement in Writing through Action Research: The Croydon Writing Project 1999-2000

Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) posed the question:

In view of the positive link between pupils' attitudes to writing and their attainment in it, what can you (teachers) do to engage pupils' interest in, and increase their enjoyment of, writing? (p.7)

To a great extent, the results of the Croydon Writing Project provide some answers. This teacher-led action research project developed due to concern with the under-achievement in writing in the LEA of Croydon, in addition to which the under-achievement of boys was a major concern. The project focused on raising the standard of writing at Key Stages 0, 1 and 2. By using observations of their case study children, talking and writing about their research at INSET sessions and trialling new ways of teaching writing in light of these reflections, the 22 teachers involved were able to move 72% of children up one level on their assessment writing scales. Of key importance was the fact that the changes made to teaching had a positive impact on boys as well as girls. The case studies all involved children who were reluctant writers. Changes to teaching made during the Project enabled these children and others in their classes to develop enthusiasm for writing, and to become better at writing.

At Key Stage 0¹ and 1 the changes which had the most significant impact on the children's writing, leading them to achieve higher levels were:

- Children writing from a position of expertise: making sure that they knew a great deal about the subject before being invited to write.
- Boys being allowed and encouraged to write with other boys
- Children writing about things that matter to them, especially in the form of journal writing.
- Children experiencing a genuine response to their writing; be it from other children, or verbal/written feedback from the teacher.

¹ Although the term "Key Stage 0" does not formally exist, we are using it here in its widely accept meaning as "pre Key Stage 1"

This research has been crucial in pinpointing actual classroom practice which increases success in writing for both boys and girls. The findings are also echoed in the work of the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE, 2004).

The project has also highlighted the use of journal writing as an effective tool for improving children's writing. Further research into the usefulness of journal writing specifically has been undertaken by the Croydon Project administrator herself, Lynda Graham (2003). Evidence has also been produced by Lambirth and Gooch (2006) and Hopkins (1999) that journal writing motivates and improves young writers' ability. So much so that Lambirth and Gooch even ask the question:

Why does this practice (journal writing) not form the central content of the writing curriculum but is instead confined to the margins of school writing experience? (p.148)

However, one issue not addressed in the Croydon Writing Project was that of handwriting. Dunsmuir's (2004) research suggested that there is a strong link between handwriting and later achievement in writing. Recent research and interest in handwriting seems to support that assertion.

Handwriting – a trivial skill or the key to literacy?

The link between poor handwriting skills and a lack of achievement in older children (11-16) has already been established by Barnett et al (1999). However some researchers have shown that handwriting difficulties can be just as detrimental to the development of writing in younger children. Indeed later difficulties can be predicted by underachievement in the early years.

Bowen (2003) argues that handwriting is the key to literacy. For boys in particular problems with handwriting can severely affect performance in literacy. She cites research which suggests that difficulties in the mechanics of letter formation can disrupt the composition process of young writers. Moreover, basic intervention in the handwriting of a first grade pupil can produce “*a measurable improvement in both speed and sentence structure*”. (2003 p.2)

Spear-Swerling (2006) also argues the importance of handwriting instruction and intervention stating that:

When handwriting is perceived as arduous or time consuming, motivation to write may be greatly reduced, leading to a lack of practice that may further compound difficulties with writing. (p.1)

Thomas (1997) describes the effects of investing more time in developing infants' fine and gross motor skills before attempting handwriting:

Once these are in place we see a new quality in our children's work, both in the communication of their thoughts and in their presentation – speed, spelling, punctuation and grammar. (p.44)

Her research also compared the French model of teaching writing and handwriting with the current approach in England, with persuasive results.

Arguments for an increased awareness of the rôle handwriting difficulties play in the level of achievement in writing have also been given weight by the just published review of Handwriting Policy and Practice in English Primary Schools by the University of London Institute of Education (2006). The report highlights a lack of consistency in the teaching of handwriting as well as a feeling of ill-preparedness on the part of many teachers to teach handwriting, despite its inclusion in the NLS Framework for Teaching.

The Case Study Student: Why Joseph?

Joseph (a pseudonym) was chosen for this case study for a number of reasons. First and foremost, his level of writing and his attitude to written tasks clearly reflected what the researchers of the Croydon Writing Project (Graham, 2001) would classify as a 'reluctant writer'. When he entered Year 2 (September 2006) his reading level was assessed as within his age range and was above that of most of the other boys in the class. However his writing did not reflect his reading ability. It was very slow, laboured and a task which obviously intimidated him and one he approached with trepidation. Moreover, his handwriting showed both a lack of control and difficulty in forming letters correctly which also impeded both the speed at which he wrote and the confidence he had in what he produced. Despite this, Joseph has a good awareness of phonics; the school implements the Jolly Phonics program from the Reception stage. All previous reports indicate that he performed soundly in Reception and Year 1 in terms of his word level ability and this was evident upon entry in Year 2. However, other factors were also considered as important both in terms of Joseph's writing ability and the validity of the research itself.

Joseph is described as a delightful child. He is a very bright, articulate boy who enjoys school. He gives meaningful insights during class discussions, and expresses himself with confidence. Like all the other children in the class, English is his second language, yet his ability in reading and speaking does not suggest that problems with English language attainment were a reason for his difficulties with writing, which is important given the nature of this research.

Moreover, Joseph is a very keen and motivated student. He is well liked by both his teaches and fellow classmates, and shows sensitivity and maturity in the classroom. His behaviour is excellent both in the classroom and on the playground. He is able to follow instructions and work independently in all areas.

He is a responsible member of the class, and mature and thoughtful in activities and lessons. Therefore, behaviour and socialisation issues probably do not interfere with his progress. His home life is stable and happy. He comes from an affluent family where both parents are university-educated professionals and are supportive and active in his education and achievement. They read with him at home and are very happy with the school and his progress

since entering in Reception. Both his previous reports and parent-teacher meetings reflect this. Joseph also has an older brother at the school who is also a well liked and a successful member of the school.

These factors were crucial in terms of narrowing the variables which could be affecting his writing, such as those described by Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) and van Steesel (2006) above. Given his good relationships with his teachers and positive approach to his school environment, it was deemed that he would be both responsive and positive to any intervention in his writing. Moreover, no behavioural issues would have to be overcome in progressing his writing, and no learning difficulties have been identified. It was anticipated that all of these factors would help make the research more valid.

The Methodology

The following criteria were applied when designing the research:

1. Any investigation methods had to be integrated into daily literacy lessons and discreetly within the 'normal' school day.
2. The class teacher felt it imperative that any activities that Joseph undertook as part of the research would be beneficial to his learning and not interfere with other areas of the curriculum. In addition, he must not be made to feel 'singled out' from his peers by either doing activities which others were not, or receiving obvious one-on-one attention from the teacher; this may have affected his confidence and lead to confusion as to why he was receiving extra support.
3. It was neither possible nor appropriate to re-design literacy sessions in order to 'fit' the research objectives. Any observations or informal interviews with Joseph had to be undertaken within the normal running of lessons.

Therefore the following methodological tools were used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention strategies proposed by the current literature and research:

1. The classroom assistant gave Joseph and three other boys 10 minutes of daily handwriting instruction. They used the class handwriting text as a guide for practice. The classroom assistant was asked to note down any observations or comments Joseph made in these sessions.
2. For literacy lessons, class ability groups were re-organised so that Joseph was working (and writing) with a group of other boys of similar ability. Observations would be made in comparison to his previous work in a group where he was one of 3 boys and 5 girls.
3. Joseph's reading group, which already consisted of 4 boys and 2 girls, was given a free writing journal and one 40-minute session per week for journal writing. They could also write in their journals if they desired, during any free time they had.
4. Informal interviews with Joseph were held after each journal writing session for him to talk about his writing.

The Findings

At the end of the research period, data (mainly documentary evidence and observation notes) were collected to make an informed assessment of Joseph's progress in writing. The data were used to make:

- a direct comparison of Joseph's performance in weekly spelling tests before and after the intervention;
- a critique of his journal writing;
- an evaluation of his handwriting development;
- an analysis of his performance in sustained writing sessions in Literacy;
- a reflection on his personal attitude and approach to writing after the intervention.

Weekly spelling tests:

A comparison of Joseph's performance shows a dramatic improvement in both his spelling itself and his conformity to writing techniques such as writing the date and using a list format for writing. From observations of him during the tests he is quicker and more confident; i.e. he does not look around at others in his group and is one of the earliest finishers. He no longer needs support to conform to the format or encouragement to finish quickly in order to be ready for the next word. He is eager to find see his corrected work and often asking when the spelling test will be.

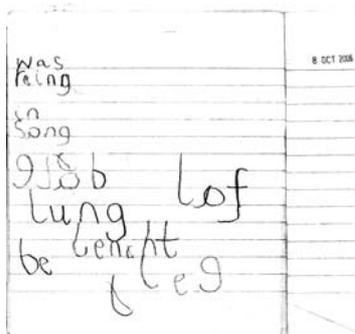


Fig 1: Joseph's spelling test
8th October, 2006.

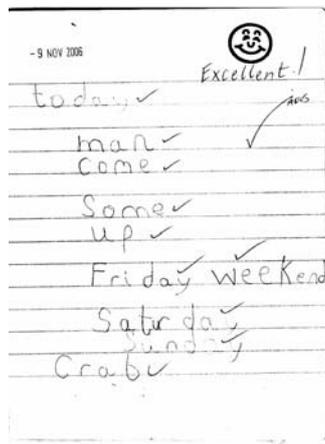


Fig 2: Joseph's spelling test
9th November, 2006.



Fig 3: Joseph's spelling test
20th December, 2006.

Journal Writing:

Joseph took full 'creative control' of his journal writing and produced a lot of imaginative work. Most of his writing centred on descriptions of monsters which he had invented himself. Although a majority of the writing needed to be read to the teacher to de-code it, it showed progression in terms of length, sentence structure and 'verve' (Graham, 2001, p.25)

At first Joseph often asked for direction in what to write, but after assurance that he could write whatever he liked, be it a story, a letter, or his personal news he wrote enthusiastically and even choose to finish off some of his work in his free time.



Fig 4: Joseph's journal writing 18th October, 2006

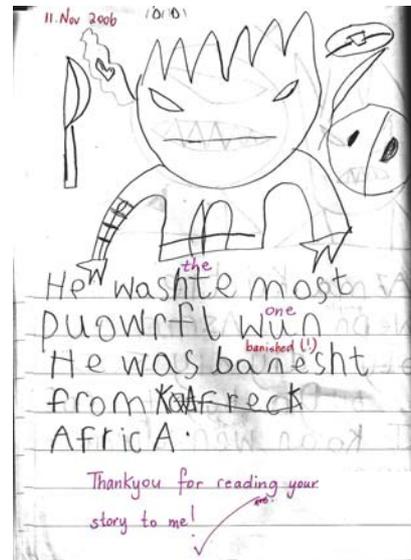
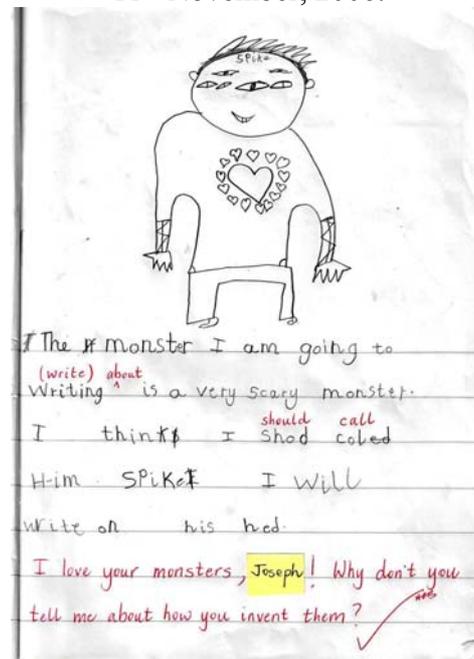


Fig 5: Joseph's journal writing 11th November, 2006.



Fig 6: Joseph's journal writing 20th December, 2006.



Joseph's handwriting development:

From the documentary evidence, it is apparent that Joseph has much more control over his handwriting. The size of his print, and awareness of spatial constraints, e.g. keeping his writing on the lines, has shown a great improvement. His letter formation has improved and the number of backward letters in his writing has also decreased substantially.

Joseph's performance in literacy lessons and tasks.

Data were taken from two aspects of literacy lessons:

1. 'Dictation' sessions performed weekly, in line with the Jolly Phonics program.
2. Sustained writing sessions from the literacy text of that week.

The data show a great improvement in Joseph's performance in dictation sessions. At the beginning of the term he was unable to finish writing the 6 words and 3 sentences dictated, by January he was writing them and correcting his own work:



Fig 7a and b: Samples of Joseph's writing performance in dictation sessions September 2006 and January 2007.

Sustained Writing Tasks:

The writing Joseph produced in sustained writing tasks also showed development in all areas:

'At the Seaside' 4 OCT 2006

When Jack and Tom
found the pearl that they
were excited about. I thought believe
their eyes! suddenly it shined
more than the other very
next day the pearl
Dad and Tom grew and grew.
Suddenly she woke up
(they) she saw the pearl was
very big. I put it
in the box.

😊 A great ending to our story. Well done!
Mrs.

Fig 8: Joseph's sustained writing task
4th October, 2006.

15.12.06

"How Josie made an Angel"
Her Mum gave her some paper
she folded it in half. And
into a cone. And then (she)
made a small cone for the
head she cut a strip for
the hands out of cardboard (and)
sprinkled glitter.

Fig 9: Joseph's sustained writing task
15th December, 2006.

11th December, 2006

I "walked" the whale's
journal

I saw Slippy the seal
and little penguin was playing
together and letting
me fall left out!
the very next day
I was playing with Slippy the
seal.

Fig 10: Joseph's sustained writing
11th December, 2006.

Joseph's attitude toward writing:

From observation notes, Joseph has enjoyed and is enthusiastic about, all aspects of the intervention. He chooses to write in his journal when he has free time and is aware of the progress he has made in his handwriting, often commenting on it and being proud of the work he produces. He is also aware of the success he has made in his spelling tests, and takes his achievement in them very seriously. He talks about his journal writing keenly, anxious for his teacher to appreciate what he has written. He is not intimidated by literacy written tasks and is aware that it is a chance for him to 'show off' what he can do.

Analysis of the Findings

It is conceded that case study research is limited in its ability to make generalizations beyond the specific case. However from this case study the findings suggest that:

- As Bowen (2003) argues, an intervention in a child's handwriting skills can impact on his/her performance in writing. In Joseph's case, minimal intervention (10 minutes per day) not only improved the aesthetics of his written work, it helped him recognize an improvement in his writing which gave him the confidence to write with more speed, and express himself in writing more freely. In spelling tests he was able to 'look back' on his performance and see that his work had improved, simply because it "looked better". It also suggests that brief, daily instruction may produce more positive results than weekly, longer lessons.
- Journal writing is an essential tool in giving the 'reluctant writer' the freedom and space to experiment with their written skills. His class teacher had no idea that Joseph has such an imaginative mind until he was given his journal to express it; nor did she anticipate that he would be willing/able to produce it in writing. To that degree it has proved Lambirth & Goouch's assertion (2006) that journal writing gives young writers the freedom to express themselves beyond the parameters of the NLS. Indeed without this journal, Joseph would have never been given the opportunity to write about 'monsters' or the chance to revisit his work and develop it on a weekly basis. Journal writing also personalized the experience for him. He was not writing something the teacher wanted; he was writing something he wanted the teacher to read.
- Graham's assertion (2001) that boys wrote more productively in the company of other boys is also valid. Joseph was very proud to show other boys in his reading group the description of monsters in his journal. Other boys also seemed very impressed with his work. This was not repeated in other literacy sessions. It reflected her research findings that boys need to write from a position of ownership and expertise.

Summary of the research project

- The nature of the research and intervention meant that an "ABAB" approach could not be undertaken; i.e. Joseph could not 'unlearn' the skills he had gained to see if he would revert back to his previous level. Nor could it be predicted what his progress may have been without this intervention.

- It must be acknowledged that the other boys who were given extra handwriting instruction and journal writing periods did not show the same results and improvement as Joseph did.
- No other boys in the class have progressed to the same degree as Joseph. This degree of progress before the research period began was certainly not expected.
- Given the findings of this research, it is believed valid to pursue more structured implementation of handwriting programs and more unstructured methods of free writing alongside the NLS in order to develop any child's writing skills, male or female. However, structured practice of writing such as spelling tests and dictation also gives a young writer a 'safety net' in knowing what is expected of them and what constitutes success; i.e. even a child of 7 can evaluate his performance on a spelling test, as Joseph showed.
- From the evaluation of this case study, it is suggested that the Croydon Writing Project did not incorporate handwriting sufficiently into its research, and it would have been interesting to see the results of more structured assessments, such as spelling tests, on their case sample.

Conclusion

From the results of this case study, improving boys' writing may need to incorporate more than simply having them write with other boys and writing about subjects they are interested in. The development of their handwriting, and a structured arena for them to practice their writing may also need to be considered, given the success this case study student had in incorporating both. However, journal writing has been found to be a valid and important tool in both assessing a child's writing and giving them an audience they might need in order to find their 'writing voice', and for teachers to see their true potential.

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