

The Reader in the Writer

The links between the study of literature and children's writing development at Key Stage 2

This one year funded project took place in 1998 – 99 in five London primary schools. The aim of the project was to observe any changes that took place in children's writing when they studied challenging literary texts in the classroom. A further aim was to help teachers develop a literature programme for their classes (within the context of the National Literacy Strategy). The project was directed by Myra Barrs and coordinated by Val Cork. Margaret Meek Spencer was a valued consultant throughout the project. The project team reported to a research committee made up of the staff of CLPE.

Six Year 5 classes were involved in the project and teachers from these classes identified three pupils to be followed throughout the project. From these 18 pupils, six were selected for detailed case study. These pupils were interviewed about their reading and writing and samples of their writing were analysed in depth. In addition to observations in schools, interviews and questionnaires, analysis of writing samples, and case studies, the project introduced two 'standard' texts to be studied across all six classes. These were *The Green Children* by Kevin Crossley Holland (which was introduced through a drama workshop) and *Fire, Bed and Bone* by Henrietta Branford. The 'standard' texts enabled the project team to study common patterns across classrooms in the study.

In the first term of the project the project team collected baseline data and analysed the results of the questionnaires and interviews that were carried out in the schools. This evidence informed the account of classroom contexts that forms Chapter 4 (Teachers, Children and Texts) of the book *The Reader in the Writer*. This term's work involved the project team in observing the effect on classrooms of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, then in its first year. Although teachers mainly welcomed the guidance in the NLS they felt that it focused too tightly on forms of writing and that content and meaning were in some danger of getting lost. They also found that the Literacy Hour gave insufficient time for older children to write at length and adapted the Literacy Hour in different ways to allow more time for this.

The project observed teachers teaching and children learning. Studies of children are reported in Chapter 6 (Case Studies) which gives a detailed picture of the progress of six pupils (including two bilingual children) in the course of the project year. Studies of teachers inform Chapter 5 (Pedagogies). Among the key findings about teaching were:

- Reading aloud and rereading were features of effective classrooms and helped children to take on the language and style of texts. 'The teachers' skilful reading aloud made these authors' voices resonate in the classrooms'
- Indirect planning prepared children for writing more effectively than planning with a writing frame or an invariable planning model

- Teachers' interventions were especially effective when they responded to children's writing between drafts, often demonstrating to children how their texts 'sounded' through reading aloud
- Effective teaching encouraged extensive use of response partners/ writing partners in writing sessions

In the course of the project all of the children improved measurably as writers, but the two bilingual children both made exceptional progress. This finding underlines the importance to EAL pupils of working with good quality literary texts.

A further research question involved identifying those texts which were particularly supportive to children learning to write. These included:

- Traditional tales with clear narrative structures
- Texts which have a strong musical quality and make use of 'poeticised speech'
- Emotionally powerful texts which deal with important human situations and strong feelings

One outcome of the project was the book *The Reader in the Writer* by Myra Barrs and Valerie Cork, with a preface by Margaret Meek Spencer, which was published in 2001. This research has since inspired year-long INSET projects on the relationship between literature and writing in two London LEAs.

[The Reader in the Writer publication](#)