

**Boys on the Margin, Raising boys' achievement in  
literacy project 2003**

**Effective Teaching to Promote  
Boys' Literacy Learning  
and Achievement  
at Key Stage Two**

a summary research report for the Esmee Fairbairn  
Foundation

by Kimberly Safford, Olivia O'Sullivan and Myra Barrs

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education  
Webber Street, London, SE1 8QW

**CLPE would like to thank the main funders of this project, the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.**

**Additional funding came from The Mercers' Company and the Reuters Foundation.**

We would also like to thank the teachers, children and headteachers in the four project schools:

Sir James Barrie, Wandsworth  
Michael Faraday, Southwark  
Brunswick Park, Southwark  
Wormholt Park, Hammersmith & Fulham

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## **Section 1**

### **Introduction: The Project aims and the current context**

*Effective Teaching to Promote Boys' Literacy Learning and Achievement at Key Stage Two* was a research project in four inner London primary schools carried out by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. The project was prompted by the persistent underachievement of boys in primary school literacy (Ofsted 1993, 1996, 2000 and 2003) and the need to address this in ways that are practical for, and supportive of, class teachers. The research aim was to find out whether a number of specific teaching approaches could improve the motivation and performance of boys who are underachieving in literacy. The teaching approaches promoted all involved oral and interactive approaches to literacy, and included using drama and communicating through ICT.

This project followed from earlier CLPE investigations into gender differences in reading, writing and achievement in literacy. CLPE's publications in this field have included a book of essays on the subject, *Reading the Difference* (Barrs & Pidgeon 1993), and two books based on action research studies by teachers: *Boys & Reading* (Barrs & Pidgeon 1998) and *Boys and Writing* (Barrs & Pidgeon 2002). Building on this previous work, the research project examined the place of oracy and interaction in literacy development, and enquired into whether active and enactive approaches to learning literacy can successfully engage underachievers.

#### **Growing concerns, national responses**

Since the 1990s, the analysis of Key Stage literacy test results has precipitated what can only be described as a growing panic over boys' underachievement. In national Key Stage Two tests for English in 2003 (DfES 2003a), the percentage of boys achieving the expected attainment levels for writing (Level 4 and above) in was unchanged from 2002 at 52%, while attainment levels in reading increased only marginally, from 77% to 78%. The results were a continuation of earlier trends. Although of course statistics for LEAs and individual schools vary from the national picture, girls have consistently achieved higher results in these tests.

The National Literacy Strategy should theoretically support aspects of what the DfES, on its website for 'Gender and Achievement', has referred to as boys' "preferred learning styles": a brisk pace, explicit teaching objectives, coverage of a wide range of genres (including information texts which boys are thought to favour over narrative texts) and specific short- and long-term targets. However, despite five years of the National Literacy Strategy, boys' literacy scores persistently lag behind those of girls, especially in writing.

In researching and working with teachers and children, an underlying tendency of CLPE's work in gender and literacy has been to pose an alternative interpretation to what has often become an increasingly narrow view of how boys learn and what they are capable of learning. Whereas historically there has been a positive drive for inclusion and equal opportunities for girls in education, underachieving boys, particularly ethnic minority boys, are increasingly segregated – on low-ability tables, in bottom set streams and on special educational needs registers (Alloway et.al. 1996:4; Baxter 2001, Galt 2000, UK Audit Commission 2002).

Hardening stereotypes of boys as reluctant, resistant or weak readers and writers have shaped a range of policy responses to underachievement that risk pathologising boys as virtually un-teachable – or teachable only within narrow parameters - in "bite-sized chunks", as the DfES (2003b) 'Toolkit' for Raising Boys Achievement claims. In contrast, our project set out to involve boys in active and creative approaches to literacy, and to emphasise the value of extended work around texts. These approaches had proved successful in the previous action research studies coordinated by CLPE (Barrs and Cork 2001, Barrs & Pidgeon 2002).

## Section 2

### An overview of the project

#### Teachers, schools and children

Over two terms (January to July 2003), six inner London teachers and their Year 4 and 5 classes engaged in a range of interactive approaches to literacy, through:

- purposeful talk
- oral rehearsal for writing
- collaborative drafting and writing
- peer support
- forms of drama
- using ICT for email and web publishing
- interactive software to stimulate discussion

Three specific texts were used in order to compare experiences and outcomes from the six classrooms. Teachers were supported by CLPE staff through INSET and regular in-class support and observation. A CLPE research officer recorded teaching and learning, literacy processes and outcomes, and drew together the different strands and experiences from the six classrooms for analysis and evaluation.

Criteria for participation in the project were that schools should be in areas of socio-economic deprivation and that Key Stage literacy test scores should be below the national average. Accordingly, schools' intakes included high numbers of free school meals and children learning English as an additional language. One school had the highest number of asylum seekers in its education authority.

Key Stage Two (2002) tests in English for three of the schools showed a wide gap in attainment between girls and boys. In one school, boys did outperform girls, but writing attainment in the school overall is low and there is a large gap between reading and writing attainment for both boys and girls.

In the four Year 5 and two Year four classes, ethnic minority children were the overwhelming majority.

| Class | Total | Girls | Boys | EM girls | EM boys | total EM |
|-------|-------|-------|------|----------|---------|----------|
| K. Y5 | 29    | 15    | 14   | 11       | 9       | 20 of 29 |
| S. Y5 | 29    | 13    | 16   | 12       | 15      | 27 of 29 |
| L. Y5 | 26    | 14    | 12   | 7        | 13      | 19 of 26 |
| G. Y4 | 22    | 8     | 14   | 6        | 13      | 18 of 22 |
| P. Y5 | 22    | 10    | 12   | 7        | 9       | 16 of 22 |
| J. Y4 | 22    | 14    | 8    | 13       | 7       | 20 of 22 |

Class size ranged from 22 to 29 pupils. The Year 4 classes were particularly imbalanced (one had 8 girls and 14 boys, the other had 8 boys and 14 girls): the Year 5 classes were roughly equal in numbers of boys and girls.

Teachers ranged widely in experience, from those in their second and third years of teaching to those with 20 and 30 years of teaching experience. The six teachers included a deputy headteacher and a literacy coordinator. All had BA with QTS or PGCE qualifications, and two teachers had been on previous CLPE courses. Reasons for participating in the project ranged from furthering their own understanding of the issues to being involuntarily placed on the project by the headteacher for professional development.

### **Methodology and data collection**

This project synthesised elements of formal research and teacher action research. Goals were to add to generalisable understanding about gender differences in literacy, but also to add to practical knowledge and strategies that would be applicable to project classrooms. Teachers were asked to carry out specific pedagogic approaches which had been identified as being effective in other CLPE projects (Barrs and Cork 2001, Barrs & Pidgeon 2002) These included using drama, peer support and collaboration to support the writing process, creating units of work around whole texts and working with story-telling to enrich oral language and narrative experiences.

The project researcher took an active and participative role, working and liaising with teachers on a regular basis and observing teaching and learning. Methodology took as its starting point the naturalistic inquiry and purposeful sampling of Lincoln & Guba (1985), and Glaser & Strauss (1967), with the classroom as a prime example of how “realities are multiple, constructed and holistic, knower and known are interactive...all entities are in a state of mutual and simultaneous shaping.” (Lincoln & Guba, p 37). Each of the six classes was visited and teaching observed at least once and sometimes twice a week for two terms. As teachers carried out the interventions, a range of qualitative and quantitative data was collected, including:

Writing samples  
Reading observations and records  
Teachers' planning  
Year 4 and Year 5 QCA test papers  
Teacher interviews  
Pupil interviews  
Videoed observations

The project took place within a short, flexible time frame, with evolving relationships between teachers, the research team and children. The timeline of the project over two terms (see below) was demanding on all participants, with teachers carrying out a range of interventions often in addition to their school and year group schemes of work.

#### *Spring term 2003:*

- INSET 1: introduction of the project , teaching approaches, texts and materials, introduction of CLPE software, drama training with Susanna Steele of Greenwich University.

- Collection of baseline data, teacher and pupil interviews, initial interventions for talk; classes develop talk activities; teachers introduce and develop the poem through discussion and drama
- INSET 2: introducing the short story.
- A range of writing carried out; project website is live
- Weekly observations, video recordings

*Summer term 2003:*

- INSET 3: introduce the novel, feedback from teachers and writing analysis; teachers continue to develop oracy approaches to texts; weekly observations and video; web publishing
- QCA tests, teacher and pupil interviews, NC and CLPE assessments, writing conferences.

The project was guided by a steering committee of professionals and educators in the fields of literacy learning: Margaret Meek Spencer, Emeritus Reader of the London Institute of Education, Gemma Moss, also of the London Institute of Education, Sue Pidgeon of the National Primary Strategy, and CLPE co-director Myra Barrs. This group met regularly to assess the project's progress and outcomes.

### **Research questions**

Initial research questions were to inquire into the processes of oral rehearsal and interactivity in teaching and learning, and whether and how these approaches could make a positive difference in targeted boys' literacy learning and achievement.

- How does oral rehearsal - reading aloud, a range of discussion opportunities, and forms of drama - encourage underachieving boys to respond to texts and prepare for writing?
- How does creating a visible audience (through performance) or a virtual audience (using ICT) for reading and writing affect boys' perceptions of literacy and their achievement?
- How does collaboration and peer support help boys' literacy development?

The research team was interested in what would happen when teachers expanded the pre-writing phase of literacy teaching and learning. Would more time spent in discussion and text enactment help underachievers, particularly boys, and would this expanded time enable teachers to find out more about underachievers' particular difficulties? What kinds of talk around texts would develop in classrooms? How would teachers manage talk for literacy and integrate ICT for discussion? When children got out of their chairs for drama, would this create disruption? As the project developed, secondary questions emerged:

- What is appropriate assessment for oral work (speaking and listening, and drama)?
- What is appropriate assessment for children in early, developmental stages of literacy?

Teachers and the research team would reflect on and try to answer these questions through two strands of intervention: texts and approaches.

### **Texts and approaches**

Three texts were selected as a range of very different but powerful narratives that would lend themselves to discussion, reflective reading and creative responses (Barrs & Cork, 2001):

*What Has Happened to Lulu?* - a poem by Charles Causley

*The Seal Wife* - a traditional tale

*There's A Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* - a contemporary novel by Louis Sachar

Teachers would be able to work with progressively longer texts over two terms, and using three common texts allowed experiences and outcomes from classrooms to be usefully compared.

Through these texts, teachers would:

- Develop writing through oral rehearsal activities, including drama, in a range of settings
- Use ICT for interaction and communication, with CLPE software linked to the intervention texts
- Publish children's work on a project website (<http://www.clpe-project.ik.org>)

Through the three specific texts, teachers were asked to consider the ideas of Neil Mercer (Dawes, Mercer & Wegerif 2000) and Aidan Chambers (1993) and how these might be used in developing strategies for talk around texts in the classroom.

In the first INSET, teachers looked at Neil Mercer's interactive software "Kate's Choice", which children use to discuss the moral options and actions open to a girl who has caught her friend stealing. The research team was interested in extending this concept to discussions of texts, using 'Kate's Choice' as a loose model of interactive software. They planned to develop software which would allow children to discuss the dilemmas and choices that fictional characters in stories or poems might face. In conjunction with the software, Mercer's "rules for talk", which encourage children to reflect upon and justify their ideas in discussions, would also be used in the more specific context of literacy, for talk about texts, collaborative reading and writing.

Teachers were also introduced to Chambers (1993) "Tell Me" questions about children's reading. These move from concrete to more abstract questioning and thinking about books. The research team was interested in the extent to which teachers could make literacy a more social activity by engaging in "Book Talk", and whether boys would become more involved in school literacy through these discussions of reading.

Linked to the idea of Book Talk was an observation by Gemma Moss (1999) that girls often 'network' socially around books, reading and recommending texts to each other. Teachers were asked to consider how boys might be engaged in the kind of informal, peer group socialising around literacy that appears to help many girls become confident readers and writers.

The research team was also interested in how teachers could develop drama as an effective oral approach to literacy. What kinds of drama were already taking place in classrooms and how were they linked to literacy? What did children think about drama, particularly boys?

All the intervention texts and approaches were well within the framework of the National Curriculum for English and the objectives of the National Literacy Strategy for the appropriate terms and year groups. The research team looked at commonalities and differences in teaching and learning across the six classrooms, tracked individual boys and drew together the different experiences, responses and results from the interventions in order to evaluate:

- Boys' responses to different types of narrative texts
- How far oral, interactive and collaborative approaches to literacy could support boys' interest in school literacy
- Any changes in boys' attitude and performance in literacy tasks as a result of the interventions

### **A group of focus boys for observation**

Each teacher identified four boys in each class for observation. Originally all of these were West African and Caribbean Heritage boys. These choices reflected the schools' intakes to some extent, but teachers were asked to identify a wider range of focus boys for particular study. The project interventions were aimed at hard-to-reach boys, and these included:

- Boys who can read and write but choose not to
- Boys who read but choose not to write
- Boys with low literacy levels in comparison to their peers
- Boys who are active non-participants in school literacy

Of the 24 case study Year 4 and 5 boys targeted by teachers, 12 were at National Curriculum Attainment Levels 2c-2a for reading and 18 were Level 2 or below for writing. 18 received free school meals and 21 were ethnic minority boys.

The 24 boys were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the project, with National Curriculum attainment levels for reading and writing, and also with CLPE reading and writing scales for ages 8-12. These were compared to levels and scales for the whole class. Boys and teachers were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the project. The project researcher focused closely on a smaller group of Year 4 and Year 5 boys, to gain deeper insights into their apparent disinterest or underachievement in school literacy.

The evidence from this project is predominantly qualitative, and the numbers are relatively small, but the project did find evidence of clear improvement in most focus boys' writing in the course of the project. The research team was able to relate this improvement to boys' increased involvement in literacy activities and to increased confidence and interest. The project interventions, and in particular the oral activities and ICT work, engaged boys who were hard to reach and provided them with experiences and support which in some cases made a fundamental difference to their achievement in writing, especially when they were engaged in extended writing around a known text.

## Section 3

### Background information: Children and teachers

#### Interviews with boys

##### Home and school literacies

Boys were asked to describe their preferences in, and attitudes to, reading and writing. They were also asked about their home literacy practices. 23 of the 24 boys said it was their mothers who helped with their homework; one boy said his father helped him because his mother, who is Somali, has no English. Boys also reported their mothers as being engaged in a range of reading, including:

*Magazines*

*Newspapers*

*Library books*

*“Books about stress”*

*Harry Potter*

*The Bible*

*The Koran*

*“College” books*

*“Homework” for nursing, midwifery and accounting qualifications.*

But they typically reported about their fathers:

*“My dad, he just works, I don’t see him read.”*

(J., Year 5)

##### Using computers at home

21 out of the 24 boys have computers at home, which they use between one and three hours every day for

*writing letters and stories*

*using art programmes such as ‘Paint’*

*word processing homework (Year 5s only)*

*surfing the internet*

*going to websites*

*playing games*

Boys who have home computers use them overwhelmingly for playing games and visiting a wide range of websites, mainly for entertainment, but also to look at authors' pages and educational sites such as the BBC's Revisewise, Megamaths, and Spycatcher.

B. in Year 5: *I go on it every night, as long as I can. I go on Foxkids, Nickleodeon, Cartoon Network, Shockwave, and I look at trailers for movies.*

J. in Year 5: *The games I like are violent games, shooting and racing.*

K. in Year 5: *I go on for as long as I can, until my sister kicks me off so she can do her college work.*

Although they may claim that their fathers don't read, the home computer is where many of these boys and their fathers are engaging together in literacy. The 21 boys with home computers reported playing on the computer with their fathers, and also with older brothers or sisters.

*(K, Year 5) My dad and me play on the computer, we look at websites.*

*(C, year 5) My dad makes his own computer games.*

*(B, Year 5) We look at movie trailers to see if we want to go or not.*

*(J, Year 5) We play the Shockwave games.*

The amount of computer use by boys was an unexpected finding, and interviews with teachers often revealed their different attitudes to and knowledge about ICT. Boys identified as underachieving were often articulate about their preferences, strengths and weaknesses in school literacy, but their strategies for learning were not always school-based. As O. in Year 5 said about his writing: *What I do when I get stuck is I think of a TV programme.*

### **Interviews with teachers**

#### **Poor behaviour**

The view that boys' behaviour is the root cause of their underachievement predominated in teacher interviews. Teachers gave as the reasons for boys' underachievement in literacy:

*Poor behaviour (5 teachers)*

*Playground fighting (3 teachers)*

*Can't sit still (4 teachers)*

*Lack of concentration (4 teachers)*

*They can't think for themselves (1 teacher)*

*They can't work independently (1 teacher)*

*Reading and writing are un-cool (2 teachers)*

*The range of resources still favours girls (1 teacher)*

*Physical immaturity (1 teacher)*

Teachers were often pessimistic about boys' ability in literacy:

Teacher K: *They're fussy, fickle readers. I have to be so sensitive about what I suggest for them to read. They can't write independently. We don't send home books and reading diaries because boys never bring them back. Boys don't read at home, no matter how many rewards and stars we offer. Parents don't read to them, they're too busy working.*

Teacher S: *They are unable to structure a coherent story, no matter how many frames and plans I give them. I'm at my wit's end about it. They never take it seriously.*

Teacher L: *They have no independent strategies for writing. Without constant scaffolding at every step they totally fall apart. They don't take it seriously, they get silly.*

Following the interviews, teachers were asked to evaluate their whole class using Gemma Moss' (1999) categories of:

- 1) children who are 'can-and-do' readers and writers, who read and write freely and in a self-motivated way
- 2) children who are 'can-but don't' readers and writers, who are technically capable but who don't voluntarily choose to read and write and may avoid literacy tasks
- 3) children who are "can't and don't" readers and writers, who cannot yet read and write independently and don't choose to

To this was added a fourth category –

- 4) children who "can't but do try". These are children who cannot yet read and write independently but will attempt reading and writing tasks

Teachers identified both boys and girls in categories 1, 3 and 4 – but placed only boys in category 2: 'can but don't'. No teacher identified any girl as a 'can-but-don't' reader or writer. Instead they attributed girls' underachievement to particular learning difficulties (eg. dyslexia, English as an additional language) and viewed underachieving girls as making an effort ('can't but do try') in spite of their difficulties.

Teachers often identified clear styles, patterns and preferences in boys' learning, but tended to view these as unhelpful:

Teacher P: *They talk for England. They talk forever but it never makes it to the page.*

### **Using ICT**

In interviews, four teachers agreed with the statement: '*boys know more about computers than I do*'. One said knowledge was '*about equal now*' and one (an ICT co-ordinator) disagreed with the statement. Two teachers used their class computers regularly for literacy, using a range of CD ROMs for literacy and maths drills or linked to history and geography topics.

All six teachers acknowledged that boys would like to use the computer more often, but some teachers felt unsure about managing boys' learning on computers.

Teacher S: *I'm never sure exactly what they're doing, what they are learning, when they are on the computer, they go clicking and navigating and they go off-task. I would use the class computer more, but I'm not sure how to make it fair so that everyone gets a chance.*

Teacher G: *They would stay on the computer all day if I let them. Personally, I don't use it that much. I know it's covered in papers right now.*

Teachers were on the whole uninterested in the cyber-culture that boys reported engaging with at home;

Teacher J: *I don't know that much about it. I think other things are more important. A lot of it is very stupid and violent. I feel school should offer something different.*

### **Curriculum constraints**

Four teachers felt under pressure to cover all the NLS objectives, and sometimes felt constrained in their planning by the school and their colleagues:

Teacher S: *“With the Literacy Strategy, you can never get carried away, you’re always aware that you have to be moving on to the next thing.”*

All six teachers read regularly from a class novel as an end-of-the-day winding down, pleasurable activity. However only two teachers regularly taught literacy using whole texts (ie not through extracts), and two routinely used drama approaches to literacy. Before the project, only one teacher had routinely planned for talk as a literacy activity. Three teachers grouped children by ability for literacy: (two in Year 5, one in Year 4) and three teachers organised mixed-ability groups for literacy (two in Year 5, one in Year 4).

These initial interviews often revealed significant differences between the attitudes and practices of teachers and the attitudes and practices of boys, particularly in the area of ICT. It was also striking that most of the boys said they *liked* reading and writing stories, and that they liked using their imaginations for writing. Since they said they enjoy these activities, why were their outcomes so poor? What kinds of texts and teaching would engage boys in literacy learning?

Over two terms, the research project would evaluate interventions to bridge these gaps. CLPE asked teachers to carry out some specific teaching: to teach literacy from whole texts, to engage children in forms of oral rehearsal (discussion, collaboration, role play, enactment), to use text-based ICT for discussion, reading and writing, and to create different types of audiences for children’s writing. For some teachers, these interventions involved considerable changes to their practice. As interventions were introduced and developed, the research looked at boys’ learning and behaviour. We also gathered evidence of teachers’ planning and analysed the different ‘teaching sequences’ which they used, and their interpretations of the interventions introduced by the project.

## Section 5 Pedagogies

### Rules for talk

Our first intervention, based on the work of Neil Mercer, was aimed at establishing some ground rules for talk which would facilitate the use of oral and interactive approaches in children's learning. Mercer's work recognises that children may not have enough experience of using talk in their learning to appreciate what is expected of them in class or group discussion and may need to be formally inducted into these more formal ways of talking which enable larger groups to work together. His ideas are developed in his work *Thinking Together* (Dawes, Mercer & Wegerif, 2000) and were shared with project teachers:

*Children may never have thought about how they talk together or considered whether different ways of communicating might make group activities more productive and enjoyable. They need help to learn how to use language effectively. As teachers, we may not have made our expectations sufficiently clear when we ask pupils to 'discuss' or 'talk together in a group'. (p. 5)*

At the beginning of the project, these approaches were formally introduced to each class by the project officer. She invited the classes to develop "rules for talk" with their teachers, and these ideas were then posted on the project internet site and made into posters or cards for the classroom. Children participated enthusiastically in these discussions and generated very positive sets of "rules". Part of the discussion involved deciding how these rules would be referred to. One class produced the following set of rules, which was then displayed in their class and referred to in classroom discussion sessions:

### ***Talk Rules by Year 5***

We Try Our Best To Carry These Out

1. We take turns to speak
2. We listen to each other
3. We look at the person talking
4. We respect each other and are polite
5. We may need to agree to disagree! We do this politely
6. We speak calmly and quietly and don't shout
7. We ask questions to encourage and show we have listened

Teachers' introduction and management of oral work varied considerably, with some teachers maintaining more control over the content and the direction of children's talk. Three teachers organised "Talk Tables" for Literacy. One teacher organized single sex tables for talk and reported that "it took nerves of steel" but that over time results were positive. Two teachers prepared written talk prompts to guide independent group discussions; others directed children to discuss issues, make notes and report back to the class.

### **Book Talk**

The second intervention made by the project related to talk about texts. We drew on the long-term experience of teachers at CLPE who had made extensive use of Aidan Chambers' approaches to discussion described in *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*

(1993). In this book Chambers describes ways in which classes can learn to talk about books together, drawing on all the resources of the group:

*In Book Talk we all, as a community of readers, cooperate to draw out of each other what we think we know about a text and our reading of it. (p.75).*

Teachers were introduced to this approach in an INSET session and discussed how they could apply it in their classrooms. Some teachers were already familiar with Chambers basic Book Talk questions, e.g.:

*Was there anything that you liked about this book?  
Was there anything that you disliked?  
Was there anything that puzzled you?  
Were there any patterns – any connections – that you noticed?*

In the course of the project some teachers became more confident about conducting Book Talk with large groups, and found that the "Tell Me" approach, which invites children to share their responses, helped to engage the class more fully and to generate more extensive discussion around texts.

### **Drama**

The project set out to use drama as part of the oral and interactive approaches to literacy which it was promoting. We referred back to a previous CLPE project, published as *The Reader in the Writer* (Barrs & Cork 2001) for evidence that drama could provide a strikingly immediate route into a fictional situation. We promoted the use of drama as a way of exploring some of the texts introduced in the course of the project.

We hoped that the use of more active, affective and enactive approaches to texts would enable children to enter the world of a text more fully. As part of the preparation for this aspect of the work, we invited a drama consultant to conduct a drama workshop for the project teachers during the first INSET, using one of the intervention texts, the Charles Causley poem *What Has Happened to Lulu?*

Drama was an area where teachers varied considerably in experience and in comfort levels. It was important that teachers used drama in ways that were comfortable for them, and they developed different techniques for managing drama. Teacher P did this by taking a strong participatory and managerial role in drama sessions. For Teacher L, teaching children about "freeze framing" a moment in their enactment of a text was effective as a way of maintaining control and focus.

### **Planning and assessment**

The amount of time teachers devoted to the interventions varied according to what they felt they could take on within the parameters dictated by their school, their year group and the literacy curriculum. One teacher opted out of her school's planning to carry out the interventions. For three teachers who did not strictly follow the NLS, the interventions were easily integrated into their medium term plans. For two teachers, the interventions were carried out in addition to their school and year group literacy plans.

Some teachers felt unclear about the learning outcomes of the interventions involving oracy because drama, speaking and listening often have no immediate, 'markable'

outcomes. Whilst teachers felt secure in assessing reading and writing, they often felt less sure about how to assess oral work and drama in their own right.

Teachers found that oral approaches to literacy demand a focus on the whole text, rather than on the word and sentence levels, and for some teachers this was a departure from how they had been organizing the teaching of literacy. However, a focus on the whole text did begin to generate its own word and sentence level work. Most importantly, these oral approaches led to literacy work which in some cases, and especially for the boys whose learning we focused on, was a significant advance on what they had done before.

## Section 6

### Writing: patterns of teaching that made a difference

Although this was not purely a 'writing' project, the interventions made by the project – which included the use of specific texts for discussion, drama and ICT work – were intended to engage targeted boys in literacy and improve the quality of their writing. The amount of time that was spent in different classrooms on these interventions varied. These differences were reflected in the extent of the improvement which was perceived in boys' writing.

The interventions introduced by CLPE emphasised approaches to literacy which made writing a social rather than a solitary activity. Drama and performance around texts highlighted the importance of audience and of communication. Collaboration, peer support, discussion and different forms of planning made the writing process more explicit to underachievers. Using ICT for imaginative and factual writing engaged boys' interest and expertise. In classrooms where writing was developed as a form of 'engagement in social action' (Applebee 2000), boys began to change their writing behaviour spontaneously. Patterns of improvement in writing emerged across all six Key Stage 2 classrooms.

#### **Parts to whole: the power of collaboration**

Where teachers created frequent and sustained opportunities for children to write collaboratively, underachievers' participation in this collaborative process supported their development as writers. This collaborative process modeled cohesive, whole-text writing to underachievers, who would otherwise struggle alone to generate and sustain their writing.

One area of improvement is seen in the paragraphs of visualisation children in Teacher L's class wrote from the Seal Wife story. These short pieces showed some aspects of increasing sophistication and experience in writing, as described in Barrs & Cork (2001:189). These indicators include the appearance of mental state verbs that take readers into characters' thoughts and emotions, and of echoes of the original story and of written language structures.

*The waves crashed dangerously close to her. I was terrified she might do something silly. I was wondering what she was doing. There was a man in the water, I don't know who he was but he had seal skin like my mum. He was trying to pull her in the water. The weather was very corrupt, there was lightening and it stopped me because it was very loud. My mum jumped in the water. I was in despair. I went up to my bed and never forgot her again.*

(A., Year 5: an ending to the Seal Wife story)

However, the writing in this and in other classrooms tended to be fragmentary: beginnings, endings, pivotal moments, or writing briefly in role. There was no attempt at making a whole, cohesive text or at writing beyond the single paragraph. In some cases, teachers felt driven by timetables to move on to other literacy work; others felt unsure how to develop these fragments into longer pieces of writing. Developing writers had no experience of moving towards writing sustained, whole texts.

The same indicators of growing experience and sophistication in writing were seen in the collaborative seal stories in Teacher G's Year 4 class. These texts were subsequently performed to the class and videotaped. Unlike the weaker writers in other classes who were working independently, these groups of writers are able - sometimes imperfectly - to create whole texts. These writers achieved much more together than they would on their own. They also saw the writing process 'in action' as they crossed out, changed or inserted words on the large paper.

In negotiating and building these texts, children's writing developed in vocabulary and in complexity. The writers echoed their reading in words and phrases. Often one writer continued when another ran out of ideas, so sentences became more complex. In independent writing, ideas in the writer's head become words on paper. Collaboration made this process explicit. Writers working together had to articulate their ideas and words before writing them down. As they did so, they continuously evaluated and reflected on their developing text.

The teachers' management of this process, and children's ability to negotiate and collaborate, required skills which were emphasised by the intervention made at the very beginning of the project, when each class devised its own "Talk Rules". Without experience and practice in talk and negotiation *in the context of literacy*, these children would not have been able to collaborate so effectively as writers.

In the collaborative process, weaker writers who would otherwise struggle alone to generate, control and sustain their ideas on paper saw the big shape of a complete text as they contributed to it. Their understanding of how the text makes sense was reinforced in performance by reading aloud. They had a framework for moving on to independent writing. The research team observed that many children in Teacher P's classroom demonstrated stamina for writing independently and at length, and speculated that this had also been developed by the extensive collaborative writing experiences the previous year in Teacher G's class.

### **ICT as 'play' writing and real writing for underachievers**

Where teachers created opportunities for children to email the fictional characters Lulu or Bradley in response to Charles Causley's poem and Louis Sachar's novel, boys displayed perseverance and interest in this form of literacy. Teachers reported children's amazement and even disbelief at receiving responses (in role, from the project research officer) to their emails. In emailing fictional characters, boys would imaginatively and enthusiastically enter the world of the texts: it was both 'play' and 'real' writing, imaginary and yet linked to real world experiences of literacy (for instance, letter-writing or texting).

Email was writing that underachievers could own at both the macro (text content) and micro (spelling, punctuation) levels. Where teachers wanted boys to take more responsibility for transcription, they would engage the Word programme's red line/green line so that boys could independently correct errors in spelling and punctuation.

Underachievers in this project benefited from experiences of literacy that allowed them to play at reading and writing without appearing 'babyish'. The interventions involving ICT, such as email, software to stimulate discussion, screen and web reading, email and web publishing on the project website, were high-status ways for underachievers to practise reading and writing. Boys who shunned literacy work were drawn into writing emails, e.g.:

*Teacher S: what are you two doing?*

*T & G: We're emailing [the character in the Sachar novel] Bradley. His worst subject is language. Our worst subject is literacy. We hate literacy.*

*Teacher S: But what you're doing is literacy.*

*T & G: No it's not.*

*Teacher: Yes it is – you're writing!*

*T & G: This is different writing*

Technology has changed the way children perceive and experience literacy (Goetze 2002) by making it more purposeful and, importantly, more playful. If email may be both 'real' and play writing, perhaps real and play *reading* for many children now involves multimedia, games and web reading. In classrooms where boys are rejecting the offered curriculum, but appear to respond positively to learning with computers, this may be because ICT offers opportunities for children to *play* in a real-world literacy context.

Merchant (2003) has argued that email 'promotes the culturally valued practices of reading and writing', and that ignoring this form of communication could increase the polarisation of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. The electronic interactions of reading, writing and responding around the Causley poem and the Sachar novel in this project enriched children's experiences of these texts. Using ICT to read, write and communicate beyond the classroom added a new dimension to literacy.

### **Generating enthusiasm with drama**

After they had physically entered the imaginary world of the text through role play or enactment, boys' independent writing would often begin to pick up on the registers of the text, recall its turns of phrase, and echo the voices of the characters themselves. In Teacher L's class, the impact texts made on children's writing was especially noticeable among those boys with English as an additional language.

*My son is a very nice and gentle boy but you just don't give him the chance to show that, because I know that inside of him he won't harm a fly. Bradley is a very good boy and if you give my Bradley a chance he'll show you what kind of person he is, and then you'll see the real Bradley my son, because I don't want my little baby Bradley to go to military school.*

*(Murad, Year 5, Arabic speaker, as Mrs. Chalkers)*

*Look what I draw: it's a nightmare. I am the best at drawing in the world. Last week I got an A in maths, literacy, art and spelling. I never lie. I'm the big boss. I'm rich like Beckham. I've got so many friends – everybody in the world loves me like a king.*

*(Jason, Year 5, Portuguese speaker, as Bradley)*

Boys wrote enthusiastically following drama or role play around the poem, the short story and the novel. Where teachers focused on characters and character development (as in Teacher L's class), writers were able to write more fully what characters would say and how they would say it. Where teachers focused on visualising and 'walking around' a scene or a setting (the Seal stories in Teacher S's class, or Lulu's Room in Teacher P's class), writers were able to imagine and write in detail about the world of their text.

For these underachievers, enthusiasm for drama was the first step in increasing the *quantity* of their writing. Where children were given opportunities to write at length and write complete texts, this enthusiasm led to increasing stamina for writing.

### **The presence of others**

Where teachers habitually brought children's writing together for a whole class reading or performance (such as teacher P's Seal Wife in Divorce Court), weaker writers could experience the overarching text and begin to understand how an extended text 'hangs together', even if they could not yet manage this independently. This model, another form of collaboration, somewhat like a patchwork quilt, supported developing writers who could add their embellishment to the fabric of the whole text.

Knowledge that writing would be performed or published motivated both groups and individuals to persevere with their writing. When the purpose of writing was to publish, perform or read it to an audience, the writing was better. As J. in Year 5 said of his Seal Story that he read to younger children in school:

*The things I've written and published it, not really published but read to people and get their opinion how it is I can improve stories, what they've said that's good about it, what they've said that bad about it, and the NEXT story that I do I can improve that bit about it and keep the good bits and make it even gooder.*

Arendt (1958) said that "For excellence, the presence of others is always required". These 'others' may be in cyberspace as well as in the classroom, and the virtual audience of the project website was equally as motivating to writers as the audience of school. Like ICT, performance can inject both play and purpose into to the English curriculum. On the evidence of boys' writing and behaviour in this project, a strong case can be made for teachers to use more audience-oriented strategies in literacy.

### **Time to talk, think and then write**

Children's writing showed increasing thought and imagination where teachers made time to approach writing through discussions of reading - with the whole class, in small groups, in the computer suite, at the class computer, with editing partners or in literature circles. The amount of time underachieving boys had to develop and revise their ideas had a direct impact on the quantity and quality of their writing.

In classes where children moved between discussion and writing over time in order to create and publish a complete 'product' (such as the Seal story books in Teacher S's class), children were able to grow and refine their ideas and address issues such as spelling and punctuation separately from composition. Where children had time to write complete texts, these texts were both coherent (in that they made sense) and cohesive (they showed linkage between paragraphs and within paragraphs). The writers in Teacher S's class were able to experience the whole writing process, from the initial germ of an idea to the public reading of a finished, designed story book.

### **Oral rehearsal and increasing control of standard English**

Where boys' writing developed from extended opportunities for re-telling, text enactment and role play, their written texts show increasing control of standard English forms as they gained confidence in using the literary language developed in oral rehearsal.

In the 1970s, research in inner London schools (The Vauxhall Talk Workshop 1974) looked at how standard English may be a second language for many native English speakers. The differences between standard forms and urban or ethnic vernaculars, such research suggested, could be made explicit to non-standard speakers through talk, drama and performance. Three decades on in the present project, boys' spoken language – their home dialect - continues to be a strong feature of their writing in school.

Many children's illustrated the difficulties that children faced in writing standard English. The problems in their writing arise from the tension between the spoken and the written language forms, as they struggle to control the myriad aspects of the writing process: ideas and coherence, genre and narrative structure, spelling and punctuation, grammar and sentence construction. As Warren & Gilborn (2003) have noted in their wider research, the National Strategies may be inadequate to address the needs of learners such as these, who are - it is important to note - not new arrivals to the English education system.

Oral language is a significant aspect of who we are. Research in secondary schools documents how boys much more than girls (Hewitt 1990) deliberately acquire and speak non-standard English as an act of adolescent identity. The observation that adult women tend to use more 'prestige' language forms than men is discussed in Gordon (1997) and Coates & Cameron (1988). In the years of upper primary school, boys' developing identity may also express itself through language and in a resistance to school literacy with its use of conventional standard English. Perhaps because girls are more experienced at taking on a variety of roles in imaginary play, they write more fluently in standard English as one of many 'roles' – and this impacts on their attainment scores.

Experienced teachers addressed these issues. Through talk, discussion, reading aloud, drama, role play and performance, they and the children were able to explore language differences and make them explicit. Teacher G talked frankly with children about the differences between "posh" and "normal" speech, both in whole class discussions and separately with groups of boys using the computer spell-check. In these classes, children showed increasing language awareness, and this influenced their choice of language in oral rehearsal and in writing. Through reading, enactment and discussion, they began to use written and literary language forms, in their own writing.

### **Flexible planning formats to organise ideas**

Where teachers offered different ways for writers to think about and organise their ideas before writing, boys showed increased motivation for writing. During the two terms of the project, teachers worked successfully with different types of drafting and planning:

Visualisation and mind-mapping (Teacher S's class)

Overnight thinking time (Teacher L's class)

Large-scale draft to small-scale final copy (Teacher G, Teacher P)

Open-ended planning such as overnight thinking time, mind-mapping, collaborative editing and discussion helped many boys see a clear progression from their plan and their draft to their final product. These approaches encouraged note-taking, talking to others in and outside of school and big-shape thinking. They moved boys away from writing a draft and then copying it out, what O. in Year 4 called '*having to write it and write it again.*'

When children had the option of recording their initial ideas on A3 (or larger) paper using large felt-tip pens, making changes and additions using different colours, boys sustained their motivation to write simply because these drafts were so much easier to read and edit. Again, there was an element of 'play' in this kind of writing. This practice also addresses the physical act of freeing-up writing for boys whose fine motor skills are still in development. A. in Year 4 began to write more in the large format because *"I can see what I'm doing, it's easy to put things in and take things out, plus I can read my writing better."*

Opportunities to draw in their writing also increased motivation. Year 5 children expressed disbelief at Teacher S 'allowing' them to draw in their writing books. Underachievers at Key Stage Two may be continuing patterns of early stages in writing development by weaving drawing into their writing to convey meaning. (Dyson 1988). Bearne (2002) finds that boys like to make use of images to structure their writing. This was certainly true for J. in Year 5, who used a pictorial writing plan, whose illustrations mark each transition and new chapter, and who said his story reminded him of what he sees on television and in films.

Finally, improvements in boys' writing over two terms were usually triggered by enthusiasm - for a text, for story-telling, for drama, for using interactive ICT, for a new kind of planning. As teachers have observed in the Reading and Writing Projects in the LEA of Croydon (Graham 1999, 2003), putting 'fun' into literacy teaching inevitably engenders a positive response from children.

#### **From transmission to interaction**

Patterns of teaching that highlighted the active, social dimension of writing through discussion, communication, collaboration and performance created openings for boys to become more involved in school literacy. Oral rehearsal also created openings for teachers. Introducing the story of *The Seal Wife*, Teacher S reported that for the first time she told a story to her class without reading it from a book:

*It was the first time I ever just told a story to them without reading it. It was amazing - the eye contact with them. I had never done that before. So intense.*

Following oral story-telling of *The Seal Wife*, Teacher L asked children (after overnight thinking time) to come to class prepared to tell their own stories, about themselves:

*And I found out a lot of things about them, things I never knew before. It was the first time I just listened to them talking.*

One of the things Teacher L. found out was that 10-year-old V. had been living alone for some months while his parents made an extended visit abroad. In the drive to 'deliver' the literacy curriculum, this kind of contact with children may too easily be lost.

Susannah Steele expressed concern, in a keynote conference address (Steele 2004), that *'the only language children may hear and reproduce in the classroom is transactional and instructional language'*. In this project, where teachers made time for children's talk to flourish around a powerful text, children were able to use that talk in the service of their writing.

## Section 7 Individuals' progress

### Tools to track improvement

Individual boys were observed over two terms and a range of their writing was collected before, during and after the interventions. Written texts were very different in genre and context, including independent and collaborative writing, diaries, stories, letters, emails and performances.

CLPE Writing Scales for ages 8 to 12 (CLPE 1996, CLPE 1997) were used to assess boys' progress as writers. Teachers judged progress by looking at writing behaviour and a collection of writing over time. An additional framework emerged in the course of the project, based on writing samples themselves and from observations of children as writers. This framework examined the relationship between how focus boys were behaving as writers and what was happening in their writing over the two terms of the project.

Where boys showed changes in their behaviour as writers as a result of the interventions, these changes were characteristic of improving writers. These characteristics were conceptualised on a continuum, from increasing confidence and stamina for writing, to increasing independence and experience in writing. *Confidence* and *stamina* and *independence* and *experience* were seen to hinge upon *increasing involvement and engagement* in the writing process.

As a result of increasing involvement in literacy and increasing confidence to take risks in writing, boys were writing more, and their writing began to show features of written language forms and literary language. With increasing stamina, their writing became more sustained and controlled. With increasing independence and experience, their writing became more complex.

In this analysis of writing, it is important to take boys' behaviour into account as a factor in their improvement as writers. Where teachers actively created an environment that inspired children to write, boys began to change their behaviour as writers. By looking for evidence of changes in their behaviour as writers as a result of the interventions, and how these changes impacted on writing itself, it was possible to re-conceptualise 'failing' boys as 'improving' boys. Boys who wrote very little began to take risks and write more. Boys who were unenthusiastic about writing ('can-but-don't' writers) became more engaged in their writing.

| Characteristics of improving writers  | Characteristics of improving writing  |
|---|---|
| Increasing confidence<br>Less reluctant<br>More willing to take risks                           | Language shows evidence of texts that have been read<br><br>Language moves away from writing close to speech and uses written language forms and structures                                   |
| Increasing stamina<br>Writes more at length<br>Concentrating longer periods                     | Texts more coherent and make sense<br><br>Texts more fully imagined<br><br>Texts become longer, ideas more sustained  |
| Increasing independence<br>Needs less support<br>More self-starting                             | Evidence of attention to characterisation<br><br>Evidence of control of dialogue in narration<br><br>Texts show increasing syntactic complexity<br><br>Texts more cohesive between paragraphs |
| Increasing involvement<br>More engaged<br>More self-motivated<br>More satisfaction from writing | Texts show growing sense of reader and audience, language appropriate to genre and purpose<br><br>Texts marked for meaning with appropriate punctuation                                       |
| Increasing experience<br>Familiar with and able to tackle a wider range of texts                | Texts show range of spelling strategies and standard forms  |

### Conditions and criteria for good writing

In all but a few cases, National Curriculum writing levels and CLPE writing scales for boys in the project were lower than their levels and scales for reading. Reading abilities of boys in the project were generally good; yet only six of the 24 focus boys were above National Curriculum Attainment Level 2 in Writing. This was something that puzzled and frustrated teachers. Since many of these boys enjoyed reading, why did the connections that usually happen between reading and writing not seem to be working for them?

Low attainment in writing may be linked to an underdeveloped reading culture. The reading environment in most classrooms was limited, and most of the teachers had not been using whole texts as part of their teaching of literacy. In interviews, boys reported that when they were 'stuck' in their writing, they were encouraged to consult a friend on their table, the teacher, a dictionary or a thesaurus – but not further reading.

National Curriculum attainment levels in writing for both boys and girls lag behind their reading levels. This may derive from the fact that it is much more difficult to attain the expected Level 4 in Writing at the end of primary school than to attain a Level 4 in Reading. Careful comparison of the criteria (QCA 2000, DfEE 2000) reveals that there is a significant difference between what children have to produce, control and sustain in order to attain a Level 4 in Writing, and what they have to do to attain the same Level in Reading:

#### *Level 4 Reading*

*In responding to a range of texts, pupils show understanding of significant ideas, themes, events and characters, beginning to use inference and deduction. They refer to the text when explaining their views. They locate and use ideas and information.*

#### *Level 4 Writing*

*Pupils' writing in a range of forms is lively and thoughtful. Ideas are often sustained and developed in interesting ways and organised appropriately for the purpose of the reader. Vocabulary choices are often adventurous and words are used for effect. Pupils are beginning to use grammatically complex sentences, extending meaning. Spelling, including that of polysyllabic words that conform to regular patterns, is generally accurate. Full stops, capital letters and question marks are used correctly, and pupils are beginning to use punctuation within the sentence. Handwriting style is fluent, joined and legible.*

In the reading assessment framework, children may call on their own resources and experiences to deduce and infer in the reading test; their ideas and viewpoints matter. However, recent research has demonstrated that children may not need to deploy these skills in order to attain a Level 4 in reading. Mary Hilton's (2001) analysis found that the reading tests have become progressively easier for children. This is because the number of questions requiring higher-order thinking skills – such as inference and deduction – have decreased each year since 1998, while the number of questions requiring lower-order thinking skills, where children are asked to retrieve information from the text, have increased.

In the writing assessment framework, children must simultaneously generate and control content, genre, structure and transcription. Children's own views and experiences would seem to count for less in this context. The writing tests demand a great deal from developing writers who must demonstrate all knowledge and skill in a single piece of writing against a checklist of criteria, in timed conditions. Unlike the reading test, they cannot locate ideas or information from a text to help them with their writing.

#### **The teaching of writing genres**

This situation may be partly created by the rapid coverage of writing genres seen in writing folders in most classrooms. More than one Year 5 class learned the writing conventions of science fiction, metaphors, Greek myths, journalism, advertisements and instructions in the space of five months, as well as practicing for optional QCA tests. Weaker writers barely come to grips with one genre before they are faced with the next one. Teaching a wider range of genres beyond narrative is thought to favour the needs and interests of boys, but too fast a pace may be detrimental to underachievers.

A feature of the National Literacy Strategy is to introduce and teach each new writing genre with a new text or text fragment. This may not always be a supportive framework

for underachievers. In project classes where children wrote over a longer period in different voices and formats around the same text, such as Teacher P's Lulu writing (notes in role, emails, online bulletin board, letters to the author), children could draw together ideas and use these to develop longer pieces of writing. Writing around the same text enabled weaker writers to work within different genres (letter, description) without having to tackle new texts at the same time.

### **Teacher Assessment**

Ongoing, formative assessments do not come into play for statutory assessment. Teachers (G, K) who keep formative assessments use them to write end-of-year reports, for parents' conferences, or to inform other school professionals such as LSAs, SENCOs or EMAG teachers. This has created a situation in which teachers actually *know* what boys are capable of in literacy but are unable to make this count in statutory assessment.

*Teacher S: I know they can do so much better. It's so difficult when my opinion is so different to the score they get.*

It was interesting that Teacher S felt it was her 'opinion' that was different from the statutory assessment. She did not refer to her professional judgement. Teachers all felt that the QCA tests did not take account of what focus boys had actually achieved over time in the classroom. A more holistic assessment revealed that these boys were making progress in literacy, although not at the rate called for by the statutory assessment framework.

### **Differentiating 'underachievement'**

Many boys in the project wrote as little as possible but each one for different reasons. Some wrote just enough to comply with the teacher's requirements in order to maintain peer group leadership and status. Others were discouraged by what they perceived as the long and drawn-out process of writing. Some boys struggled with standard English spelling and sentence construction. Others were only beginning to write legibly. These were all, to varying degrees, factors in their underachievement. However these different underlying reasons were not seen in key stage literacy test scores, making 'boys' underachievement 'appear undifferentiated and monolithic. When texts were looked at individually, however, teachers could begin to respond to individual boys' needs.

In the case of one focus boy, Y in year 5, improvement was clearly linked to increased enthusiasm and confidence in relation to a particular novel. Y's interest in Louis Sachar's novel *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* was the factor behind his greatly increased enthusiasm for writing in the summer term. He began to write every day in the 'mini-journal' that was provided alongside the novel.

Writing daily developed his stamina; his spelling also improved as he wrote nearly every day in accessible language. Y. struggles with standard English spelling and sentence construction. An effective way to address these issues is through daily writing practice. One of the main ways in which children learn to spell is through reading and writing (O'Sullivan & Thomas 2000: 94). If children are unwilling to write, they do not take risks with their writing or learn new constructions and spellings. Their writing will be limited to what they already know and can perform without any mistakes.

Y's enthusiasm for writing was also generated and sustained by Teacher K's consistent use of drama (hot-seating, thought-tracking, discussions in role) after reading – and before writing. For the first time, Y. said he was reading a book about 'a real boy' like himself. No literacy experience can be more relevant.

Y. is widening his range of writing and beginning to consider appropriateness of language and style. He is learning to link and develop ideas coherently. He draws on his experiences of reading in his writing. He is learning to revise his writing. By the end of the summer term his spelling had undergone a major shift. It was now mainly correct and improving as he writes continuously, using familiar language. Y. is becoming more engaged and self-motivated as a writer. His stamina is increasing and he can concentrate on writing for longer periods. His writing shows growing evidence of attention to characterisation and dialogue. Y. did not practise for QCA tests in the Summer term, and made gains in both National Curriculum levels and on CLPE scales.

| Y.                 | January | July |
|--------------------|---------|------|
| NC Reading         | 2a      | 3a   |
| NC Writing         | 2c      | 3b   |
| CLPE Reading scale | 2       | 3    |
| CLPE Writing scale | 2       | 3    |

#### **How can we see real children in numerical assessment?**

Different forms of assessments tell us different things. Boys' writing arising from project interventions was the result of many opportunities to talk, to visualize, to act out, to plan and draft in an open ended way, and to write over days and weeks in different modes and formats. It was interesting – and frankly depressing for some teachers – to compare this writing to that done in the QCA writing tests which boys subsequently took in the summer term. This discrepancy may highlight the time it takes to become a writer. It could also indicate the pressure that some teachers may be under to get children to 'perform' to a high standard of writing in test conditions.

It was observable that there was no clear pattern in the National Curriculum Levels for the case study group. Most boys' results went up; however, some went backwards and others made no change. This made us question whether these kinds of tests are appropriate, and reliable, for the assessment of readers and writers whose work is developing slowly.

Writing during the two-term project from these boys, who have very low assessed levels of literacy, show what is possible in normal tasks in favourable contexts. The difference between these collections of writing and the QCA test papers is the difference between having experiences before, during and after writing – and having no experiences, preparation or feedback for a piece of high-stakes assessed writing. This observation may not be surprising, but in the current context of primary school children's assessment, it is perhaps worth making explicit.

Although project teachers recognise the value of creative approaches to literacy, they were in many instances hamstrung by the statutory assessment model. Five out of six classes did intensive preparation for the optional QCA tests; four out of the six classes

sat mock tests as well as the real tests. because of this intensive practice, weeks of teaching time were lost.

There were huge differences in how far individual teachers were able to exercise professional judgment in marking the QCA papers. In some cases, effective classroom practice appeared divorced from the assessment procedures. The very different marking practices observed in four schools hinted at unspoken issues around these supposedly objective assessments and called into question the reliability of summative literacy tests.

Overall, the focus group of 24 boys did improve in literacy, but by small increments compared to their peers. They are not where the government's assessment framework says they should be, and the gender gap remains. School literacy for many of these boys is a lengthy developmental process that will involve not just one teacher over two terms, but teachers working together across age phases and year groups. It is however important to see that they are improving, and that their improvements can only be reliably seen in a collection of work done over time.

## Section 8

### Conclusions and Reflections

#### Sharing good practice

Project teachers enjoyed coming together to share experiences and outcomes of the interventions. With support, they felt empowered to 'take ownership' of the Literacy Strategy and make it work in their own school contexts. They were keen to continue and develop the teaching approaches they had initiated during the project with new cohorts. Two teachers delivered whole-school INSET on the project texts and approaches.

*Teacher L: Word and Sentence work flow from the talking about the story or whatever they're reading and with their questions – it's building on what they know and it's linked to what they're reading and talking about. You can start teaching things that come out of the text. You're actually teaching them what they need to know at that moment and they can put it into their writing straightaway. I'm never going back to how I used to teach.. Before this, I was the teacher I never wanted to be.*

*Teacher K: I'm developing a new scheme of work for English now for the whole school. The targets [of the NLS] were inappropriate for them [EAL and asylum seeker pupils], it doesn't help them, it's not where they're at, at all. The word and sentence goals aren't right for them. They need so much more experience reading and talking before they write.*

#### Returning to the research questions

This project theorized that reading and writing as social activities were not being fully explored and exploited in the literacy curriculum, and that boys in particular were underachieving in this scenario. Interventions targeted boys within the context of whole class teaching to see whether increased opportunities for talk and interaction would create a more inclusive literacy curriculum.

Over two terms, a wide range of data was collected from teachers and boys in six Key Stage 2 classrooms. A significant part of this was the recorded talk between teachers and children and between children. Opportunities for talk generated many different outcomes in writing and created openings through which boys could more actively participate in school literacy learning. With these outcomes and openings in mind, we looked again at the research questions.

*How does oral rehearsal – reading aloud, a range of discussion opportunities, and forms of drama – encourage underachieving boys to respond to texts and prepare for writing?*

Effective oral rehearsal gives underachievers opportunities to formulate a response to what they are reading and to bring their own experiences into discussions of reading. Teachers are crucial models of how such discussions can go forward. Oral rehearsal highlights the social dimensions of literacy, and provides a stronger motive for children to become literate. It enables children to try out different forms of English and expand their language for writing.

Drama allows children to get up from their chairs in what is often a sedentary curriculum; it is physical and enjoyable. As one boy said, *It actually makes you WANT to come to*

*school.* Through role play and enactment, underachievers imagine and enter the world of the text and in the process acquire the language of authors, narrators and characters.

Over the two terms of the project, the more time underachievers spent in a pre-writing phase (developing ideas through discussion and drama, making notes and drawings, collecting ideas and images, collaborating to draft a fragment of a bigger narrative, reflecting with an editing partner, emailing and receiving a response) the greater was the positive impact on their writing.

*How does creating a visible audience (through performance) or a virtual audience (using ICT) for reading and writing affect boys' perceptions of literacy and their achievement?*

Boys were motivated to create high-quality texts when they knew these would be published or performed. Performance can take place in a range of settings but it always seems to give writing more context and purpose. In performance, underachievers take responsibility for their ideas and their texts. Children may literally hear their own voices in their performed writing.

Using ICT for communication builds on boys' engagement and expertise with this form of literacy, and encourages their ownership of writing both at the macro (whole text) and micro (spelling, punctuation) levels. Interactive uses of ICT (email, screen and web reading, web publishing) offer weaker readers and writers opportunities to "play" within literacy. But ICT also enables them to engaging in a "real" literacy that avoids the 'too easy, babyish' label which de-motivates many underachievers. With the project website in place, children knew that anyone anywhere – including parents - could see and read their literacy work.

*How does collaboration and peer support help boys' literacy development?*

Effective collaboration underpins literacy by integrating speaking, listening, reading and writing. Without collaboration there can be no oral rehearsal of writing. Collaboration can take many forms (discussing, editing, brainstorming, group reading and writing, performing) and can take place at any stage of the reading or writing process. The negotiating skills required by effective collaboration had a positive impact on boys' behaviour as readers and as writers.

Collaboration usually has the effect of extending writing and increasing syntactic complexity, creating spaces where writers can contribute and alter ideas, phrases and vocabulary. In this context, weaker writers are supported by taking part in the creation of a whole text and experiencing the process of developing it. Collaboration draws on informal networks of peer support and enlists them in the service of literacy learning.

*What is appropriate assessment for underachieving boys?*

Underachieving boys in this project are making progress, but at a slower pace than called for by the statutory assessment framework. Their improvements can only be reliably seen in a collection of their work over time, and by looking at changes in their long-term behaviour as readers and writers. Teacher assessment is often at odds with statutory assessment in this area.

The current summative testing framework may not be appropriate, or reliable, for developing readers and writers. The practices of teachers marking optional Year 4 and

Year 5 QCA literacy tests highlighted significant gaps between effective classroom practice, children's abilities and statutory assessment. These gaps may be occurring on a much wider scale, creating false layers of assessment data at the national level, in a way that masks children's real abilities and needs.

This project offers evidence to support a move away from a model of literacy based on teaching discrete skills, in order to match measurable targets, for one-off, high-stakes assessments. It outlines a model of literacy based on children's interests, needs and individual learning patterns. A framework of this kind reflects primary school children's progress and shows what they are actually capable of in normal tasks carried out in favourable contexts.

Speaking and Listening has been the Cinderella of the English curriculum. Primary school performance tables show attainment for "English", and individual schools and LEAs may show separate attainment scores for Reading and for Writing, but the third statutory section of the National Curriculum for English is virtually never shown – perhaps because it is teacher assessed. There are no standardized tests of speaking and listening, yet successive governments have viewed teacher assessment as unreliable.

In light of the latest QCA (2003) materials, *Speaking, Listening, Learning*, there needs to be a robust discussion about how something as ephemeral as *talk* may be reliably assessed. This would include a consideration of what kinds of evidence would be appropriate, and where and how these assessments would be integrated with assessments for reading and writing. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it should be possible to consider videotape, audiotape and CD-ROM as ways to record and assess a range of speaking and listening.

### **Boys 'can and do'**

This project demonstrates that underachieving boys, with time and preparation, 'can and do' engage with reading and writing in school. They 'can and do' imaginatively enter the world of a text, they 'can and do' enjoy a range of narrative fiction, they 'can and do' write with increasing independence, confidence and control.

In order to create a context for these experiences, project teachers retained Literacy Strategy objectives but moved away from the Literacy Strategy timetable. They included boys in whole class teaching that made time for children to talk, think, discuss, enact and interact around reading and writing. Project teachers did less 'transmission' teaching and created more opportunities to listen to and observe children in literacy work.

Not all interventions were successful in all project classrooms, and teachers often felt more comfortable with some approaches and texts than with others. However, in all cases, effective teaching was far removed from a 'teaching bite-size chunks' and 'memorizing abstract facts' approach to raising boys' achievement. The interventions made connections between children's social practices (talk, home and community experiences, play, role play and movement) and school literacy practices, between children's social texts (websites, games, media, email) and school literacy texts.

### **Interaction of the major factors; an inclusive pedagogy for boys**

In those classrooms where targeted boys improved within a context of whole class improvement, all children had opportunities to

- Develop ideas and language for writing through extensive, open-ended discussions
- Enact texts through forms of drama and role play
- Write at length over days and weeks in a range of collaborative and independent formats
- Write in different voices around the same text and bring these together for a whole class purpose or performance
- Collaborate for support and for enjoyment
- Regularly access ICT for discussion, independent and collaborative writing, and ownership of the writing and editing process
- Perform and publish their texts
- 'Play' at writing

These activities were promoted through:

- Planning which was open-ended and flexible
- Focusing on the process as well as the product aspects of literacy development, particularly in writing
- Teachers engaging with the resources and experiences children brought to writing

This research and intervention project offers evidence of the value of paying attention to the social and interactive aspects of becoming literate. It underlines the importance of the engagement of pupils in meaningful discussion and drama and role play. It demonstrates the power of collaboration for support and for enjoyment. It stresses *the time it takes for teachers to develop these approaches fully and effectively*. Through these oral approaches, literacy can be seen as a social as well as a cognitive process. It is above all a long-term developmental process for children who may be underachieving and, as a result, are at risk of becoming disaffected.

This was a small-scale project based in a few schools. However, the data from these urban, multiethnic classrooms may provide others with a picture of literacy teaching and learning that is real, and therefore useful. In looking at boys less as behaviour problems and more as challenges to the offered literacy curriculum, teachers may reflect on the extent to which changes to this curriculum could positively impact on boys' underachievement. They may also use these snapshots of classroom reality to consider how far school literacy is actively engaging underachievers, and what interventions and changes to teaching may be needed to alter that landscape.

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University of London, Institute of Education, Education Policy Research Unit