

3 Raising Boys' Achievements in Literacy

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Background

Concerns about boys' achievements in literacy, and in writing in particular, are not new. However, current government test results in England show a continuing gap between boys' and girls' achievements in literacy. The gap is widest in writing. Whilst the reasons for boys' lower test scores are complex and varied, influenced by factors out of school as well as within the classroom, nevertheless, the gap in attainment needs to be taken seriously. This paper draws on findings from two major research and intervention projects: one is a three-year project, funded by the Department for Education and Skills in England (Warrington & Younger, in press) and the other is a much smaller piece of focused research on writing carried out by the United Kingdom Literacy Association in partnership with the English Primary National Strategy (Bearne & Grainger, 2004). Whilst focusing on boys, however, neither of these two research projects takes a simplistic view. There are, of course, differences between boys as well as between boys and girls and the aim of both projects was to develop effective teaching approaches which will specifically address boys' achievements whilst also offering approaches appropriate to all learners.

Any underachievement is a proper concern for everyone involved in education - parents, teachers and children. However, it is wise not to take on generalised observations about boys, girls and literacy without asking a few questions or gathering first-hand information. Contexts differ and pupils' attitudes, motivation and achievements will be influenced by a variety of home, classroom and school-based factors. Careful observation and monitoring are essential so that teaching approaches can be developed which will support boys' achievements.

Teaching Reading or Developing Readers?

Surveys used as a basis for developing approaches to raising boys' achievements in reading often indicate a high 'fear factor': boys often said

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that they were embarrassed to read aloud in class. Typical comments from 10-year-old boys are:

... sometimes people would laugh at me if I don't know some word.

Sometimes I get confused if I read it out. Some people laugh if you read out loud. It's out of order, it makes me upset.

People make fun. I don't like to read out loud.

In general, boys make greater progress where schools take a wider view of reading, with the emphasis on what is involved in 'being a reader', rather than 'learning to read'. This can involve:

- enhanced and extended provision of books and other texts which include boys' preferences;
- buddy systems, where older boys who have 'barriers to learning' mentor younger readers;
- reading groups led by members of the school community who are not teachers, where there is emphatically no overt 'teaching' but a general sharing of reading pleasures, based on all kinds of text;
- using reading journals on a regular but not routine basis as a reflective space to record, by choice, response to texts;
- explicit attention to teachers modelling ways of responding to the meaning and content of books, not just decoding the text;
- homework which specifically encourages pupils to read all kinds of texts.

The Buddy System has particular benefits for supporting boys' confidence and motivation in reading. Typically, in the schools in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) project in Britain, the younger boys' reading improved noticeably (Warrington & Younger, 2005 in press) and the older boys showed high motivation to work as mentors. When interviewed at the end of the project, the older boys were able to comment on reading strategies, using vocabulary which might be more associated with teacher language: initial sounds, picture clues, letter clusters, meaning, analogies with other words. For example:

Shane is more fluent now and used picture clues more. I might try to make it fun by putting it in pictures... and making it more physical to help him learn...

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They also noted the improved attitudes to reading and effects on reading behaviour:

If somebody doesn't like reading then they read more and more and they like to read.

I think reading buddies are good because there are more children in the community will learn to read and write and when you grow up you might see or hear from them saying 'Thank you for helping me in reading, and now I've got a great job because of your help.'

These gains have been replicated to a greater or lesser extent in other schools. However, it is worth noting that school organisation to support schemes like this needs to be carefully planned and supported.

The Primary National Strategy and United Kingdom Literacy Association research (PNS/UKLA), which focused on writing, generated some interesting findings about reading. Attentive reading of video texts meant that the pupils focused on the detail of both visual and verbal texts. There was increased awareness of the author's/director's point of view and greater ability to comment on authorial (and directorial) technique. There was evidence of pupils identifying characters' feelings and emotions from visual images but also closer reading of print text as more careful and attentive reading of visual text developed.

Getting Writing Right

Even in high achieving schools, writing can be a relative weakness and the low achievers are mostly boys. There is a tendency for boys to draw on visual sources for their writing and less successful writers are those who fail to translate these visual images into coherent written text (Bearne, 2002). Boys also often report dissatisfaction because they do not have time to generate ideas or to take a piece of writing through to a finished product to their own satisfaction. Those boys in both the PNS/UKLA (Bearne & Grainger, 2004) and DfES (Warrington & Younger, 2005 in press) projects who were identified as underachieving often liked writing but did not like redrafting texts or found the technical aspects of writing difficult.

As with reading, there are also factors associated with fear of failure or security more generally: This can mean that boys take fewer risks with their writing. The most successful strategies have been those which encourage a move from 'learning to write' towards 'becoming a writer' –

from an emphasis on technical skills towards a wider view of what writing can mean. This is best supported by an integrated approach to literacy teaching where reading, writing, speaking and listening contribute to the development of ideas for writing, and planning for literacy is based on longer-term units which specifically integrate the spoken (including drama) and the visual (PNS/UKLA, 2004).

Drama offers important opportunities for an integrated approach to literacy. In reading, drama helps develop understanding of the text, for example, through role-play activities to establish empathy with characters or improvisation to explore the themes of a text. These activities also support reading for inference. In writing, drama provides pupils with first-hand experiences, enabling them to write for real – or realistic – purposes. The drama process allows pupils to discuss texts with peers and teachers as well, giving them reflective opportunities before writing (Grainger et al., 2005 in press).

Some significant factors in promoting achievements in writing are outlined below regarding the principles and organisation of writing and the processes of writing:

Principles and organisation:

- Not engaging in purposeless writing – less writing, but writing which matters and which is relevant to the learners;
- The importance of ‘companionable’ writing through using response partners and group work;
- A move away from commercial schemes for teaching writing;
- A specifically genre-based approach across all curriculum areas where work in literacy sessions is consolidated in another subject in a systematic way;
- Incorporating speaking and listening, drama and role play, and visual approaches including ICT into literacy sessions;
- Covering a range of writing types but also teaching (and allowing choice of) different ways to approach writing.

The processes of writing:

- Enabling boys to experience writing without the initial constraints of attention to the secretarial features, for example, through using writing journals and opportunities for sustained writing, with time to generate ideas, time to improve text and ‘get it right’;

- An emphasis on talk and time to reflect – finding ways to talk about learning and literacy; more oral preparation for writing, with explicit attention to the structures of texts and opportunities to tell stories, give explanations or instructions, debate issues, before having to write narrative, procedural or persuasive texts;
- Deliberate use of visual texts and visual approaches to writing and explicit discussion of how these relate to writing.

The Importance of Speaking and Listening

In a general way, speaking and listening have for some time been identified as important for writing (Corden, 2000; Alexander, 2003). However, except for Safford et al., (2004), Barrs and Pidgeon (2002), and Frater (2000), little has been written in any detail about the role of talk in specifically promoting boys' achievements in literacy. The role of talk in promoting reading improvement has been even less well documented. Whilst opportunities for speaking and listening, including drama, are recognised as useful in promoting increased confidence and fluency in literacy, there are dangers in over-generalising about the role of talk. It is not just the case that 'encouraging boys to talk more' will support their literacy. It is important to identify the different types of talk which can support confident literacy. In the first place, the teachers' use of language is essential in providing a model for pupils to extend their spoken repertoires. Specific approaches to speaking and listening in the classroom which contribute to improvements in boys' literacy include:

Modelling the language of texts and of learning: Teachers automatically using specific terminology about texts and language as well as offering ways of thinking through their use of language, for example, *Why has the author chosen to use those words?*; and *What might be a way forward for this group?*

Thinking aloud: Teachers sharing their thought processes and giving their own opinions, for example, *I feel that this is more effective because....* and *I can see that working....*

Asking questions – teachers: Questions from teachers which are work-focused (rather than behaviour-focused) and vary between those requiring a precise response and those inviting reflection or speculation. This can be enhanced by the expectation that not everyone will have to answer all the time and that there will be chances for extended expression of opinion.

Asking questions – pupils: This was observed as a significant contributor to boys' engagement with learning. There are gains in learning where

pupils are encouraged to formulate their own questions about learning and opportunities are created for pupils to ask questions of each other and the teacher. Teacher questioning acts as a model for pupils' questions.

Talk during literacy sessions: Deliberate planning for inclusion of all aspects of speaking and listening in each lesson.

The schools where boys are most successful as learners and in literacy are those where they have had consistent opportunities for different kinds of talk from very early in their schooling. This includes

- *Informative* talk where pupils are expected to explain their ideas, knowledge or opinions, which helps them to realise what they know and gives a structure for understanding and writing informational texts.
- *Formative* talk – reflective, exploratory and negotiatory talk helps shape and develop ideas – particularly in group work. Working and learning together are greatly enhanced when groups know the language of negotiation and cooperation.
- *Performative* or presentational talk is particularly important. Although at first some boys might feel exposed by the presentational element of lessons, in a supportive and challenging environment, a culture is established in which it is cool to be seen publicly as good at something, and where even if you might be feeling insecure inside, there can be satisfaction in taking on a challenge.

Teacher Development

In both projects, where there has been greater emphasis on integrated approaches to planning and a generally more creative approach, teachers note renewed personal satisfaction and pleasure in their literacy teaching. They increase their pedagogical knowledge, becoming more prepared to take a longer term, less immediately interventionist approach and listening more to what their pupils bring to their literacy learning. Literary and text knowledge also increased as teachers sought to examine more fully a variety of filmic texts and to construct new texts through a variety of drama conventions. Many developed the skill of weaving these together to make meaning in imagined contexts. Through examining features of texts, such as settings, themes and character in the context of a film or of a drama activity, some of the teachers as well as the children found they were able to extend their literary insights across visual, dramatic and print texts. These insights emphasise the importance of the teacher's role, specifically:

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- Teachers as readers, writers, speakers and listeners: Not only teachers modelling different forms of writing but also writing for pupils and alongside them in the classroom;
- Teachers being prepared to take risks in bringing more creativity to literacy sessions;
- Teachers having a clear sense of the levels and experience of all pupils and using this information to move learning forward;
- Teachers having some sense of how literacy is perceived and supported at home.

Conclusion

The success factors above are related to the coherent management of learning at whole school and classroom levels. They involve an emphasis on longer term learning, *not* teaching alone. This includes establishing a culture which values learners as individuals within an ordered learning environment with clear boundaries and high expectations. Such a culture involves – and creates – trust between children and adults. In the classroom, a key factor would be managing mixed ability teaching with a very clear view of pupils' achievements and progress and knowledge of how to move their learning on: in other words, informed differentiation.

In drawing together the different findings of the two projects it is clear that there are no easy answers. Although the schools involved in both projects are not offering quick fixes, their work does give some useful pointers for ways forward. They highlight the crucial importance of an integrated approach to literacy and learning and one which specifically includes speaking and listening as a central feature.

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