

How do I improve my teaching of Literacy, motivating the underachieving boys in my class?

by

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How do I improve my teaching of Literacy, motivating the underachieving boys in my class to improve their writing and attain a level 4 in their Key Stage 2 English SATs?¹

The question for the teacher is not simply ‘What can I do towards the development of my students’ reading and writing?’ but ‘What can my active involvement in the process do for the better learning and teaching of my subject?’

At Fisherton Manor Middle School we have been aware that the results for Literacy within Key Stage 2 have not met the National average although they have been creeping closer each year². When we, as a staff, analysed results from previous years, and the Practice Papers that are done each year, it became noticeable that the papers that brought our results down were Spelling and Writing. We concentrated this year on spelling rules and allowed pupils access to a variety of stories (extracts and short stories) and authors to see if this would help with the story writing. We had time to interview each child and give him/her individual Literacy targets to help him/her understand what was required to reach a level higher. These targets were stuck in the front of their Literacy books so that they could be referred to whenever we were story writing.

Reading and comprehension in the class was improving but unfortunately their story writing did not match this improvement³. I had to find ways to help boys and low ability girls improve their technique in writing⁴. This module of the M.A. has really made me sit down and look very closely at what the children do when writing a story – from the planning to the end product.

What makes a good writer?

Writers are driven by a sense of audience and of purpose. They have the ability to order and express ideas effectively in language. They can write fluently and quickly and appreciate the

¹ It is the job of a school: to motivate the learner; to encourage her or him to want to learn; to help the learner understand how to learn and believe it is possible to do so. MacGilchrist, Myers, Reed 1997

² See appendix 1

³ See results table in appendix 2

⁴ Boys’ underachievement is a major concern. Nationally, boys fall behind girls in early literacy skills and this gap in attainment widens with age. Our prime concern is for literacy levels but we are also surveying all subject areas and including our colleagues across DfES in our consultations. Of course we recognise that many boys are doing well at school, while some girls, too, are underachieving.

importance of good presentation. Successful writers believe that the ideas that they write down are important⁵.

What makes a good teacher of writing?

Teachers need to encourage the development of good, meaningful writing. They need to give confidence to the children in their ability to write, to discuss writing and give the pupils a chance to try out writing in the way a professional would. They need to show how to write fluently, accurately and legibly by demonstrating to the class. Pupils need to be encouraged to write and take a pride in their writing and an interest in the work of others. A teacher needs to be sensitive to children's needs, recognising what is required and providing for it, and eventually teaching the children to articulate their own needs.

I had to try and use these factors in the next few weeks even though I felt that I had already covered a lot of them. I looked at the variety of planning sheets that the children already used as this is where the boys, in particular, fell down. Sometimes the planning is longer than the story being written and all the energy has gone into this and not into the story itself. This is where I needed to focus my attention.

⁵ 'Whatever stage children have reached they need to feel that their written efforts are valuable if they are to continue to write and to develop positive attitudes to writing'

Baseline testing pilot findings⁶

- Twice as many boys as girls fell into the bottom attainment category as ‘failing to reach accepted standards’.
- Girls outnumbered boys by about 30 per cent in the top group.
- In number work, 35 per cent of girls reached the higher level compared with 29 per cent of boys.
- In reading and letter knowledge, 25 per cent of girls reached the higher scores compared with 16 per cent of boys.

These findings are striking in their resemblance to those cited by Newbolt in 1921, related to the education of Victorian girls. He quotes from the report of the Schools enquiry Commission (1867) – one of the first occasions on which differences in boys’ and girls’ achievements were noted – to the effect that:

A cultivated young lady would read and write well, would be faultless in her spelling... she would possess a facility of expression and composition in her own language, greater than that possessed by most men of her class in life. (Board of Education, 1921, p.100)

White (1987) also recorded marked gender differences in the themes that were chosen for writing. She reported finding that given a free choice, boys wrote about such things as plane crashes, war exploits and murders, while girls continued to prefer writing which was self-reflective or empathetic (1987, pp.9, 12). Boys still remain most reluctant to engage willingly in writing of all kinds.

Can this trend be changed or is it too well established? Should we just accept the differences and the long ‘tail’ of boys underachieving? We can’t afford to ignore this trend. The DfES suggest that by 2006 there will be 1.3 million new jobs in the U.K. and they predict that women will fill three-quarters of them. Jobs for underachieving boys are getting scarce. To give them a chance they must gain higher qualifications and develop skills to enable them to gain employment and ‘lifetime learning’.

We have been aware of, and tried to reverse the trend of, boys underachieving for a few years and are slowly making progress, especially in Maths. We have still to see any significant gains in English (Literacy). We have been given a list of options, to see if any of the following suggestions succeed.

⁶ Taken from ‘Topic’ Croner head’s sheet on Briefing Spring 2000, appendix 3

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear and agreed discipline system which is consistently applied. A safe environment for all pupils stops the reptilian brain restricting higher brain functions. It helps keep boys on task with their short attention spans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A whole-school policy on differentiation, so that all pupils have access to learning in all classrooms. This enables all types of learners to gain access to the curriculum, and thus succeed. It also leads to subject-specific target setting when teachers assess pupils effectively, differentiate by response and set clear 'SMART' targets for improvement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An anti-bullying policy that deals firmly with the 'boff' and 'swot' syndrome as with other forms of bullying. Again, a safe environment allows the child's brain to function at all levels rather than preparing the body for 'fight or flight'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For mixed-gender schools, a clear policy on pupil grouping to meet the differing needs of boys and girls, while recognising and building on their strengths. This could be separating the boys and girls for all or part of the curriculum and adjusting teaching and learning as appropriate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A whole-school literacy improvement policy that is applied across the whole school and engages parental support. Many boys learn that they are not very good at literacy work and find various ways of avoiding it. We must show them that it is important and that there is a supportive programme in place to raise their attainment in this area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent, fair and informative feedback given to the pupils and parents with clear, negotiated improvement targets, along with strategies to help ensure attainment. Boys need more short-term targets than girls do and it is important for all learners to know that they are on target.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A corporate expectation of success and high standards. This is a key factor inputting individual success in the framework of a successful culture. There is the expectation that everyone succeeds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal and informal rewards systems that are consistently applied have something in them for everyone, and are part of a conscious effort to raise the self-esteem of the school, groups within it and the individuals. Low self-esteem is often cited as a reason for under-performance of many groups within schools and it is seen as an important factor in causing the low attainment of boys.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear teaching and learning goals in place. The 'big picture' should be clear for global learners, so that they know where they are heading. Many linear learners, including a majority of boys, need clear, short-term goals – not just at the start of the lesson, but at regular intervals through it. This also supports boys in their learning, in that they have shorter attention spans than the majority of girls. 	

Other thoughts

I have always been aware that boys do not contribute as much to a Literacy lesson as girls. They tend to sit back and allow others to answer open questions, or call out without waiting to be asked to speak. When asked to read or answer (if picked on) they do. So why don't they like to wait and volunteer an answer? If they shout out an answer they know I am going to get angry about the shouting out and not about the answer.

Maybe I can use a 'no hands' strategy, that requires all pupils to be involved in the education process, by asking pupils both to discuss and come up with a number of responses. The pupils are then asked by name to give their views. Boys are encouraged to use language before they are allowed to risk-take by giving their answers. Girls use their preferred learning style through language before safely risk-taking. All pupils are part of the lesson and not just the more confident boys.

Just as the reasons for the underachievement of boys are numerous, so are the possibilities of countering it. As so many of the initiatives have shown, underachievement by boys is a problem to be overcome, not an inevitability.

The Quality of Learning

'An HMI inspection of *Boys and English* (1993) pointed out that secondary age boys tend to have more negative attitudes towards reading and writing than girls. They often have narrower experiences of fiction, write more predictably, and have difficulty with the affective aspects of English. Their learning improves when the teaching convinces them of the value of what they are doing, and gives them a clearer understanding of the variety of language use. The use of information technology can benefit the quality of their work.'

The Gender Divide p. 16 Ofsted 1996

This comment could also be directed at primary age boys. Whenever the boys take a book from the Library it is invariably non-fiction, and whenever they are asked to read they are usually just looking at the pictures and occasionally reading the caption underneath. The only pieces of fiction writing that they come across are when we read an extract to work on comprehension. I am not sure that the use of Information Technology benefits boys, except the script is easier to read. They are very good at getting ideas from others and downloading from the Internet.

'Inspectors often note that girls and boys have different approaches to planning and organising their work. Girls are more likely to remember to bring the right equipment to lessons. They are more likely to respond to comments on their work. These differences, however, become less apparent among high achieving pupils.'

'Schools can encourage boys to understand the good management of their work is part of the learning task. They can teach boys to maintain their written work coherently and useably, and to meet deadlines.'

The Gender Divide p. 17 Ofsted 1996

Previous work involving Boys and English

I approached the English co-ordinator as she had already researched the topic of 'Boys and English' a few years previously with the English Team at SCAA⁷ and had produced, with a group of teachers, a paper on their findings. I read through the report, as I didn't want to duplicate work already completed, and this gave me some starting points to consider for action and tackling the issues of achievement and not attitude.

One of the sections was a series of articles taken from newspapers about how boys were falling behind girls in all subjects, even ones that were traditionally thought to be male subjects. Another was entitled 'Single-sex classes raise boys' grades' by Rajeev Syal and Simon Trump.⁸ This caught my imagination and I put forward the idea to several members of staff who would also be interested in my results of segregating the class for Literacy. I had the opportunity to do this as I had another member of staff to support me in teaching Literacy on a Friday afternoon. The comments made by the pupils of The Cotswold School were very similar the comments made in the diaries that the children were writing for me.

'I enjoyed the lesson. It was cool.'

'I did enjoy being separated from the boys. I got more work done.'

'I liked being separated because it was quieter.'

I felt that the boys were much more on task when the girls were not there to answer. The boys had to give something to the lesson rather than sit back and let the girls volunteer to read or even to think aloud. Several questions then came to me about boys producing work when they had to.

1. Was the class size an issue? I was certainly able to talk to each boy that I was teaching, and give some feedback immediately on how to improve his finished piece of work.
2. Did the girls intimidate the boys? Boys behave differently when there are no girls around.
3. Did they not mind looking silly if they got the answer wrong if there were just boys in the room? They laughed more if a mistake was made whereas if the girls were around then they giggled embarrassingly.
4. Do the boys feel they have to show-off by acting in silly ways in front of the girls? Is this a cover-up for not being able to answer in class?
5. Because of the smaller numbers in the class, was I more aware of those pupils who were not on task? The boys certainly seemed to produce more. This could be because I could spend more time talking and focussing their ideas to the task in hand.
6. Was I quicker at picking up on those who were not contributing to the lessons? I did have to ask specific boys to answer so that the lessons had pace and the questions asked were very much more specific and not answers that could be inferred.

⁷ Boys and English. A collection of articles and information to help teachers start to think about boys' achievement in English in their schools and some ideas for practical approaches in the classroom.

SCAA's Boys and English Working Group 1995

⁸ See photocopy of article in appendix 4.

Another pamphlet that the English co-ordinator passed across for me to read was 'Raising Levels of Achievement in Boys' by Ronald Arnold, published by National Foundation for Educational Research 1997.

This gave the Reasons for Underachievement by Boys, the Extent of Underachievement by Boys, Initiatives for Raising Boys' Levels of Achievement and the Role of Language in Raising Boys' Levels of Achievement.⁹

In this piece of writing the section that interested me was the Role of Language and I decided that I could produce some work allowing the children to converse and co-operate to produce writing. The group work had to be well organised and the noise level within the class could not be too excessive. Some enjoyed this type of work whereas others were not so complimentary when they wrote about it in their diaries. Most of the boys seemed to enjoy the lesson.

'It was funny writing excuses'

'This lesson was good because it was fun'

'I liked this lesson because it was different'

'It was boring'

'All right but we did it for a long time'

'It was very good but not the best'

One of the criticisms of boys and English is the fact that boys very rarely have conversations with each other. They don't allow their imaginations to take over. Everything has to be factual. They will talk about football and who scored the best goal, but they don't put themselves into the player's mind and talk about the feelings as the goal is scored.¹⁰ Next term, I will have to use one of my lessons in the week allowing the children to collaborate, to talk, to imagine and to produce some work co-operatively. The children want to talk to each other, bounce ideas off each other and hopefully this will allow the boys to use more descriptive language and improve their standards of writing.

When asked about classroom learning young people say the most effective classroom activities are those that involve 'research, talking to other pupils, class discussions, demonstrations, practical work, group work and one to one help from the teacher. (Curtis, 2000:6, based on Hughes, 1997)

Advantages of collaborative work

Collaborative work is different. The child's ideas are always further inspired or modified by discussion with others; it is a dynamic process, in which children share, challenge and refine their ideas. The final piece of work may be a joint effort or several individual pieces, but the group discussion will have played a central, formative role in the end result.

Collaborative work usually increases a child's involvement, which in turn increases motivation. When the task is suitably structured, children can be given more control over their own work- and this they find exciting. The social side is important too. Through collaborative group work, children become more self-aware and more sensitive to others. Knowing how to collaborate effectively with others involves many sophisticated social skills, and without

⁹ See copy in appendix 5.

¹⁰ While boys would willingly and enthusiastically discuss the rights and wrongs of a particular political issue (for example, nuclear war) they were overwhelmingly unwilling to discuss their own behaviour, feeling or lives with each other. Furthermore even when working together on a shared or collaborative task, talk was often restricted to either a minimal utilitarian exchange or else about something totally external and unrelated. It seemed as if they were unable to or unwilling to use talk as a way of sharing experiences.

opportunities to practise these essential talking and listening skills, many of our children will grow up unable to operate in this crucial area. Also this critical discussion and sharing of ideas helps them to organise the writing into a more acceptable finished product.¹¹

Helping people learn

Opportunities

1. Change seating arrangements. More formal – rows instead of a horseshoe shape.
2. Mix boys and girls. Girls are better at keeping the lesson going and keeping the boys on task.
3. Direct children's conversations. Limited time to converse before moving on to the next part of the lesson keeps the momentum going.

Fun

1. Keeps children on-task.
2. Motivating

Content

1. Had to stick to the National Literacy Scheme.
2. Objectives - clear teaching and learning goals in place. The 'global picture' should be in place but short-term goals must also be available for those with shorter attention spans.
3. More monsters and gruesome beasts involved - that appealed to boys.
4. More discussion than writing. To start with this did not go down well with the boys. They felt that they had not done any work because there was nothing written on paper. But after the first week they soon settled into the discussion and because a lot of the work was collaborative they were keener to volunteer their answers and comments in a sensible way.¹²

¹¹ Inspectors frequently find that boys and girls choose to work and play separately. They seldom opt to do collaborative or group work in mixed sex groups, and sometimes show a marked reluctance to do so. Some teachers deliberately organise some mixed group working to broaden pupils' perspectives and experiences, though the outcomes appear to be variable. Inspection evidence suggests that teachers need to have very clear objectives for such work and have to organise the groups, work carefully if it is to be successful.

The Gender Divide p.20 Ofsted 1996

¹² There is a strong notion among boys of what constitutes 'real work' and what does not. 'Real work' is usually written work. It is *product*-orientated. It is instantly recognisable as being about a particular subject, especially if it is a 'real' subject such as science or mathematics. Furthermore, most boys do not seem to regard talk-related activities as 'real' work. Discussion methods are a good example of the sort of activity generally devalued among boys. There are other reasons why boys may find discussion difficult, which relate to the ways they are less able to behave supportively to each other. The degree of their competitiveness, inability to listen to one another, and lack of skill at verbal interaction (confined to a fundamental devaluing of discussion as a worthwhile process) can make it extremely difficult to have productive class discussions. Having said so, however, it is important to point out that this is very much affected by what sort of discussion is being set up. In classes where discussion is used regularly as a valued and established activity, boys may participate enthusiastically. Boys often do not communicate sufficiently to plan or organise what they intend to do, and may end up each doing his own separate work, or else with one boy taking total responsibility while the others opt out completely.

'Boys don't cry'. Sue Askew and Carol Ross p40 1988

Two boys were painting a joint picture (a road with shops behind it). One boy insisted on drawing the outline. Then each boy took charge of painting one half of the picture. When one boy, who was painting the road, came to the middle of the page, he painted a vertical line down the middle of the road and stopped. Talk between the boys was about an episode in the playground and the only time they discussed the painting was when one boy didn't like the way the other had painted the shops – then conflict arose and the second boy stopped painting.

5. Ideas to aid writing. Drawing the person next to them and then write a description – use of adjectives and adverbs. Draw a monster then write a description of another person's monster.

Memorable

1. Aide memoires to help with story planning - children made their own so that should help them remember.

Build-up, problem, conflict, complication, climax, resolution was simplified to build-up, problem, complication, resolution to make it easier to write a mnemonic.

Billie Piper Caught Evans

Belinda Parker Complicates Everything

These headings gave the pupils the help they needed for planning and it also allowed them to break their work into paragraphs¹³.

2. Spelling rules. These have been ongoing throughout the year

Behaviour

1. School's behaviour policy was in place – assertive discipline.
2. Fewer put-down comments like 'Boff' or 'duh!' when children were asked to read out their stories.
3. Learning goals broken down into smaller units. This allows pace and forces the boys to be on-task with their short attention spans.
4. In Curtis's study there was a consensus that pupils 'behaved' when 'we're given something interesting to do' and, 'teachers don't shout at us' (Curtis, 2000: 9).

¹³ See appendix 6 for structural analysis of story. Why can some children learn to write like this and others fail to? And how can teachers support such learning? The story seems to include appropriate vocabulary for describing the passage of time, Timmy's feelings and the little girl's actions. Words to do with time, feelings and actions are distributed within the text, which gives a feeling of unity. Teachers need to be explicit in their evaluations of texts and to appreciate the demands they are making

People learn – how?

'In an effort to combat under-achievement some schools are currently implementing measures to boost the achievement of boys in English, or girls in Physics, or are introducing specifically targeted extra-curricular activities. Some schools, including primaries; have introduced projects to improve pupils' self-esteem in order that the pupils can develop higher aspirations.'

The Gender Divide by Ofsted p 9 1996

Trainers

Identify needs

1. All pupils in Year 6 have to sit end of Key Stage 2 tests irrespective of ability or statements.
2. Boys have a poor reputation for story planning and writing.
3. Attitude.

Encourage

1. When given a suitable stimulus boys can produce some really good work.
2. Merit stickers
3. Praise
4. It's 'cool' to succeed.

Feedback

1. Time spent with each pupil to give story-writing targets for the year.
2. Past papers set and marked to allow pupils to see what is required to achieve a level 4.
3. Pips results to predict possible level in KS 2 SATs.
4. Parents' evenings

Assistance

1. Head of English
2. Deputy Head
3. Teaching assistants
4. Members of staff
5. Members of the Westwood group including Stuart Jones and Jack Whitehead
6. Use of the video camera
7. Analysis of results by all members of staff

Using a video camera in the lessons

This has been the part of this module that caused me a lot of tension as I felt that I had to experience what others on the course had experienced when they had watched themselves teaching. I don't particularly like others in the room when I am teaching anyway, although this feeling of being observed has decreased over the years (with teaching assistants in a lot of classes now, Ofsted inspections, NQTs, appraisal and more able observations). One of the Westwood group suggested that I set the camera running when I was also being observed because I would either forget about the camera or the observer. I decided to take the plunge when the English co-ordinator was observing me for a project that she was doing on 'Reading within a Literacy lesson – Focus on English'.

I felt that the lesson went well and the feedback was complimentary. Because the lesson was going well the co-ordinator decided to observe one pupil who was giving trouble in a few classes. She noted down how often he stopped others from working, so from her observations and the feedback to the whole staff he was made to sit on his own in most classes.

I then looked at the video and it absolutely horrified me. The thing I noticed was how much I waved my hands and arms about. I talked this through with my Teaching Assistant and she had never noticed any of these idiosyncrasies. In the next lesson I tried very hard to keep my hands still. As a result, unfortunately, the lesson was flat, had no pace, the children looked bored and I felt this was an awful lesson because I could not inject life into it – it was not my natural way of teaching. Obviously, the movement of my hands and arms is my way of enthusing the class, so that I can get the best from them. The second time I videoed the lesson I was much more at ease, but the camera got knocked and was focussed on a small group of boys. However this was interesting to watch because whenever I was near them they were on task but when I moved away they were chatting, poking each other and not working. After I watched that I decided to move the chairs in a more formal setting in the class and mix up the boys and girls so that there was less opportunity to be off-task. I have felt that watching myself on video has been beneficial and something that I intend to continue with, not just in Literacy but other subjects too. Other members of staff have said how brave it was, and the Deputy Head commented that she wished others would also video their own teaching, as so much can be learned from self-evaluation.

Conclusion

The aim of the New Literacy Strategy is to improve the educational outcomes for all pupils and to do away with the 'tail' of underachievement. Its aim is to flatten out the bell curve, so that all children (with the exception of those with severe learning difficulties) reach the standards of literacy to be expected for their age group. It offers a challenge to the concept of the teacher as a provider of resources, a monitor of learning. Children and parents are aware of and take part in the setting of targets for Literacy. These shared goals empower learners in the assessment of their own learning and progress – a change for English schools.

An 'ideal' scenario for the implementation of the NLS is for expectations to be high. Teachers need to focus on small group tuition, seek to access valued types of texts and ways to read and interpret them, and extend children's repertoire in written, spoken and visual communication. Be wary of setting up fixed 'ability' groups based on test results.

To understand writing development, we need to not only know about the writer's behaviour and the cognitive abilities of learners, but also about the social interactive processes by which children and teachers construct literacy. Children do not learn to write through some sort of spontaneous creative force; they learn what their culture and their school have constructed them to learn.

The aims of the project were to:

1. give both boys and girls the experience of working in a single sex group;
2. give boys increased access to teacher time;
3. encourage the use of mnemonic to aid story writing;
4. develop listening and discussion skills;
5. enable the class to operate more collaboratively.

Perhaps the most striking point is the student activity in the case study is linked with the knowledge gained in activity of day-to-day experience (Barnes, 1986). Learning is happening because learners are doing something for themselves; they are participating, taking initiative, arguing and challenging (Salmon, 1998). The situation is less formal than the boys' other classroom experiences. Some argue that informal environments are more relevant to the needs of today's learners (Gardner, 1991).

Imaginative writing is frequently expected from pupils without the 'ground rules' of what is wanted having been sufficiently explained to them, boys are placed at a disadvantage because their models for narrative are less literary than those of the girls. Boys' understanding is focused on action and the factual information provided by the texts they read or the narratives they watch.

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