



International Learning and Research Centre

## **Languages and Literacy English Strand**

### **The Writing Dilemma**

**An investigation into boys' apparent underachievement  
in developing skills and managing the organisation  
of sustained writing**



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2004**

# **The Writing Dilemma Phase 2**

An investigation carried out at The Sir Bernard Lovell School  
during 2003/2004

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# *The Writing Dilemma*

*The Writing Dilemma* is a report on the first phase of an investigation into aspects of boys' achievement in writing. It is one strand in a larger '**Languages and Literacy Project**', co-ordinated by the International Learning and Research Centre, set up to identify common approaches to the teaching and learning of first and second language.

## *School Context*

The Sir Bernard Lovell School is an 11-18 mixed comprehensive situated on the eastern edge of Bristol. Although located in a suburban setting, this is no 'leafy, middle-class school. The intake is fully comprehensive, covering all ability levels and drawing from families of varied socio-economic groups. It has its fair share of challenging students and youngsters who have special educational needs. It is, however, a predominantly white school. This lack of cultural mix may represent part of the local problem in widening understanding and ultimately heightening expectation and personal ambition.

## THE WRITING DILEMMA: PHASE 2

### Background

Phase 1 of this research project focussed on the apparent underachievement of boys at Key Stage 4 in terms of their writing skills and attitudes to writing tasks. The boys drawn from years 10 and 11 had been identified as within the C/D boundary in English. However, all these boys were regarded as potential C candidates when their performance was measured using speaking and listening criteria.

The negative attitudes towards writing which emerged from this first phase led to two areas of investigation in phase 2:

*How were the boys in the Year 10 data group faring in Year 11? How had their learning diet changed?*

*Was there evidence of boys in Year 7 becoming disaffected writers?*

The focus for phase 2, therefore, was to identify emerging patterns of disaffected attitudes towards writing, and to establish if the different approaches taken to improving literacy through the National Literacy Strategy were mediating the learning experiences of these boys.

The Year 11 sample consisted of the same ten boys selected in Year 10 whose data placed them on the C/D boundary for most subjects, including English. The Year 7 sample was selected using Key Stage 2 data. All the boys who had achieved level 4C in their end of Key Stage SATs were invited to join the study group. Of this group of 24, two boys declined to take part in the investigation and one further boy left the school within the first half of the Autumn term. This made the final number 21. The boys were fairly evenly distributed across the eight tutor groups in Year 7. Nine primary partner schools were represented in the sample (the schools are listed in Appendix 1). One major partner school was not represented; none of the boys from this school fell into the category for selection.

## **Main Findings from Phase 2 of the Investigation**

### **Year 7 study group**

- in Year 6 the writing focus appears to have been on outcome rather than process
- for these boys their assessments emphasised presentational skills
- parental pressure, especially from mothers, seems to be a key factor in how some of these boys perceive their work ie complaints about untidy work, yet the National Curriculum orders for handwriting and presentation at Key Stage 2 state: “use different forms of handwriting for different purposes”. None of the Year 7 boys seemed to be aware of this range of acceptable styles.
- in writing, the boys preferred the opportunity to use computers – to improve the look of work, rather than because of the discomfort of hand writing. This was an issue raised by the older boys in Phase 1 of this investigation.

### **Year 11 study group:**

- the boys have become negative about school and their learning
- a very tedious and repetitive learning diet for most of the time has led this group to feel disaffected
- there was evidence of little sense of ownership except in coursework
- these boys were certainly feeling the pressure of their exam year – from teachers and parents
- teachers who engage these boys make a difference to their learning

### **Teacher interviews (Year 7 English teachers) raised the following issues:**

- teacher focus will affect responses eg one teacher is an aspiring writer. He has therefore concentrated on form, purpose and audience in writing. This appeared to enlighten the students and has led to them thinking of themselves as writers
- shorter writing periods appear to be more successful in leading to focussed and organised responses
- however, writing is still weak at levels 3 and 4 despite modelling, scaffolding first attempts, shared writing, etc

## **The Research: process, data and analysis**

The successful manipulation of spoken and written language is fundamental to learning development. **The original research question was: What strategies can teachers employ to provide a rich language environment which builds on the narrative experience of children? How can the success in spoken communication be translated into success in written communication?**

The findings from the first phase of the investigation suggested that the students in the research group had found ways of coping with their apparent lack of writing skill and knowledge although they performed less well in their GCSE exams in subjects which required larger amounts of structured writing. In extending the study into Phase 2, it was important to identify any strategies which were clearly working with the students in Year 11. Students in the new Year 7 intake, on the other hand, have experienced several years of National Literacy Strategy (NLS). It was important, therefore, to investigate possible changes in levels of skill and knowledge and any discernible differences in attitudes to writing.

The aims of the Phase 2 research, were to:

- investigate how writing was being taught to the boys in the Year 11 research group
- look for changes in attitude
- examine the writing histories of a group of Year 7 boys who achieved level 4C in their end of Key Stage 2 SATs. To seek similarities in experience across this group and by comparison with the Year 11 group. *For example, were the Year 7 boys more aware of genre features in non-fiction writing? Did they have a clear understanding of the drafting process and its relevance to developing writing skill?*
- test attitudes to writing in order to identify emerging patterns
- examine teaching strategies employed in these two year groups, to look for consistency in approach

### **Data Collection:**

- the Year 7 students were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine the range and frequency of writing activity being undertaken, and to reveal attitudes to writing (Appendix 2)
- the boys were then interviewed in small groups (Appendix 2). The questions focused on writing completed during Year 6 and were designed to elicit the students' awareness of their writing levels
- Year 7 teachers of English were interviewed to further explore issues raised by the boys. In particular, they were asked to comment on attitudes and approaches to writing amongst the target group
- the Year 7 boys were observed in English lessons only
- written work completed in English was scrutinised
- three of the Year 7 target group had a further individual interview
- the Year 11 students were observed in lessons (Business Studies and Geography)
- English lessons were observed
- their work was scrutinised
- the boys were interviewed to determine if there were any changes in attitude and in the work offered to them since we last spoke when they were in year 10.

**Analysis:**

The interviews with Year 11 students produced a disturbing picture of disaffected students who seemed resigned to the monotonous diet of copying, revising and passive learning they were experiencing. All the early promise of GCSEs as dynamic and interesting courses had disappeared with very few exceptions. The boys clearly saw themselves as on the exam “treadmill” and were quite perceptive, if cynical, in their understanding of why teachers do this ie to improve the grade scores across the school. None of them, however, felt that this approach was being successful for them as individuals.

Writing, which had not been an enjoyable experience for these boys, was now even less appealing as it became yet further reduced to a mechanistic system. There did not seem to be much evidence of a link between writing and learning. Revision had more to do with listening for this group. Copying notes on which these boys spend much of their time, does not ensure absorption – the boys fully admitted they did not read or learn what was copied.

*Learning to write or writing to learn?*

Where writing was more demanding, particularly in coursework, there was clearly greater engagement and interest. This was borne out by the observations of the boys where they were working on coursework. There was a sense of ownership in the way each boy I had observed explained his work to me and a sense of achievement which generated the desire to re-work sections with a view to improving the potential grade. In Business Studies and Geography (two lessons observed in each subject) students appeared to have developed independent working practices and were able to explain precisely the sequence of their work. This was probably as a result of the very clear and precise linear approach to the projects which had been produced by the teachers of these subjects. The boys knew precisely the route to take through the writing process and so had the space to focus on the writing itself. The planning frames offered to the two groups in the sample were supportive rather than prescriptive; they allowed the students flexibility in how they approached their work. In the Business Studies lesson the confidence and ease with which the boys were able to manipulate the technology to meet their needs probably further contributed to their sense of success.

*The course work factor*

The only evidence of teaching writing skills appeared to be in English. In this subject the teachers observed (four teachers, each observed twice) used a range of strategies clearly derived from the Key Stage 3 Framework for English. The sequence for teaching writing taken from the English department training 2001 manual (Appendix 6) was demonstrated in each of the lessons I observed where writing was the focus. The support for writing in Geography and Business Studies took the form of written guidance relating to structure rather than stylistic features. There was no teaching of the genre features in the lessons I observed.

There was little evidence of extended writing in the Year 11 curriculum apart from coursework which are largely one-off pieces. The exception is

English where the critical essay and directed writing are still practised extensively. These types of writing have been practised throughout both key stages in the secondary phase but the daunting factors for all but the most fluent and confident writers, is the time factor. The English exams are certainly the area most feared by the study group in Year 11.

*“I’m worried about the English exams .... You know – it has to come out of your head”*

The most significant factor affecting the writing development of Year 7 students should be the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The Year 11 cohort experienced only one or two years of this development at the end of the primary phase. By investigating the learning histories of this group, it was anticipated that attitudinal trends could be detected that would either match those of the older boys or show evidence of a more positive approach to writing ie evidence that NLS teaching methods are making a significant contribution to closing the gender gap.

The interviews conducted with the boys revealed some anxieties associated with writing. In particular, the boys had come to associate writing with the presentational skills. None of them was able to talk about content as the primary focus of writing nor was there recall of being taught to use writing to support learning. There seemed little understanding of planning and drafting or purpose and audience – yet all these things are features of teaching writing in the National Literacy Strategy.

*“My mum said (the writing) could not be level 5 – it was too untidy”*

Purpose and audience feature in the “writing composition” sections of the NLS document from Year 3. In Year 6 these boys will have encountered:

- WC18: to construct effective arguments harnessing the known views, interest and feelings of the audience (Y6, term 2)
- WC11: to write a brief helpful review tailored for real audiences (Y6, term 3)
- WC22: to select the appropriate style and form to suit a specific purpose and audience (Y6, term 3)

Similarly, planning is encountered in Year 3 and by Year 6 students are being taught to:

- WC7: plan quickly and effectively the plot, characters and structure of their own narrative writing (Y6, term 1)
- WC18: use IT to plan, revise, edit writing to improve accuracy and conciseness and to bring it to publication standard (Y6, term 1)

This group of boys will find spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting more challenging but what seems to be happening is that the preoccupation with these aspects of writing is dominating the boys’ understanding of and application to the processes of successful writing development. It would be wrong to assume that these boys lack the intelligence or the imagination to write well.

A great deal of effort goes into teaching writing in Year 7 in English. One of the key writing objectives is:

W1: plan, draft, edit, revise, proofread and present a text with readers and purpose in mind.

A further Year 7 objective focuses on writing as a means of exploring as well as recording:

W3: use writing to explore and develop ideas.

This variety in writing purposes and styles should be seen as part of the learning “tool kit” – useful, not arduous.

Like the Year 11 boys, the Year 7 group felt their writing improved when they were able to have access to computers. They particularly addressed the improvement in presentation and agreed that using a computer takes the pressure away from worrying about the “look” of their work. Grammar and spelling checkers further alleviate the need to focus on the secretarial aspects of their work. When they described work completed on computers, the greatest sense of success was connected to those pieces which required graphic as well as written content (leaflets, web pages, etc). When questioned the boys explained that if they could experiment with layout then the text seemed easier to compose to fit the spaces they had designed. Conversely, if they had to word process an essay or a story then writing could still feel tedious – there is nothing to break it down into smaller units of writing.

*Taking away  
the anxiety  
through ICT*

Some of these comments were further explored in more detailed individual interviews with three of the boys. They highlighted the problem of writing in the abstract where they needed to plan and compose from scratch. They felt it was much easier to write in response to a set of questions or where they could draw on a text. Writing about a practical activity they had completed was also cited as an easier task. All three liked clear objectives and outcomes to focus their writing tasks ie structure. This desire for structure seemed to be reflected in their choice of favoured subjects. Maths was particularly popular with these three where they appreciated the logical sequencing and the need to solve problems.

*Break down  
the task and  
give it a  
purpose*

Finally, these three boys, independently of each other, highlighted talk as a necessary precursor to writing. This included talking with the teacher and within groups of students. They cited shortening writing time and making the process easier as their reasons.

*The  
significance  
of student talk*

A particularly depressing aspect of this study was highlighted during the teacher interviews. Three Year 7 English teachers were interviewed and confirmed that the boys in the study group were making less progress in writing than girls of similar ability. The reasons offered for this were very different from the male teacher. He has worked actively to encourage the students in his group to see themselves as writers. He is himself an aspiring author (Appendix 4). His view of limited progress is associated with the apparent laziness of the boys rather than anything in their learning

experience to date. The female teachers were more focused on motivation and developing skill. However, in both cases the limited progress of the boys was acknowledged.

Without exception, the boys believed their writing improved and was more motivating when they had access to computers. They all preferred non-fiction writing, particularly if it involved graphic features. Their English teachers also acknowledged this feature. The weaker boys in one group had achieved a higher writing level when working on texts with a graphic element. The teacher felt this was probably due to the focus on layout and graphological aspects of presentation before needing to concentrate on text. Text in this context will be briefer, cover a range of types and with its purpose clearly defined.

*Boys need clear structures to write in.*

During the interviews we looked together at the boys' exercise books to evaluate the types of comments and targets that they contained. One teacher, particularly, was struck by the number of references to presentational aspects of the work which she felt could take the focus of those students away from the quality of content and how successfully they are using writing genres.

*Review the writing "diet"*

During both years of the investigation the frequency of writing in lessons was checked via the questionnaire. There seems little variation between the two cohorts' perceptions of the writing demands made of them (Appendix 5). The graph would seem to suggest that the students are required to write regularly. However, on further investigation the amount and type seemed quite narrow with frequent short tasks. English and Religious Studies appear to make the greatest demands in terms of activities which require planning and development. The focus at Key Stage 2 has also been on shorter writing tasks and so it may be the case that students who are not "natural" writers most need the opportunity to develop writing "stamina".

In terms of teaching writing, English is again the only subject pursuing deliberate and planned strategies. This subject has the benefit of three years' experience of the National Key Stage 3 English Strategy which has certainly dominated development in this key stage at The Sir Bernard Lovell School. Much of the team's development work has centred on embedding framework strategies for the teaching of all the attainment targets in English. There was a wealth of evidence both in lessons, and in the students' work of these strategies in use. Yet this group of boys appeared vague about the writing skills they were being taught. Their teachers felt that shared and guided activities are enhancing writing skill. In particular, guided writing is proving successful. However, students who find writing challenging need constant support to make progress through this strategy. There is simply not enough LSA support to make that a possibility.

*Weaker boys need stronger support*

## **Conclusion**

It would appear that the negative attitudes to writing amongst boys at the C/D boundary in Years 10 and 11 have their beginnings much earlier. The original investigation suggested that the older boys perceived themselves as poor writers from quite an early age and over the years, therefore, their negative feelings about writing had hardened. They all accepted that writing was necessary, even important, but to them it was a chore – even an uncomfortable one at times.

These views were confirmed by the current Year 11 study group. Their attitudes are further confirmed by an uninspiring writing diet during Year 11. It may be difficult to completely alleviate the tedium of much of their writing activity because of the nature of Year 11 work where it is linked almost exclusively to revision. However, a healthier attitude to writing could have been fostered in the years leading up to GCSE. Students need to use writing to support their learning in many different ways. Extended writing is only a small part of the writing repertoire. Using writing to aid memory and to develop understanding are key skills for the successful student to develop.

The boys in the Year 7 group also perceived themselves as weak writers. This perception seemed to stem from their concerns over the presentational skills of writing. It would appear that the stress placed on handwriting, spelling and punctuation has prevented these boys from focussing on the content and organisation of their writing. How then can progress be made in improving boys writing at those boundaries that suggest they should and could do better? What are the questions these findings raise for practitioners in the classroom?

Firstly, we need to look at the skills needed at Key Stage 2 and beyond.

***Do we need children to have developed a neat, concise style of handwriting at the expense of using writing as part of the learning tool kit?***

***Who are children writing for and what is the range of their purposes in writing?***

***How do we train children to see writing as useful in their learning?***

At Key Stages 3 and 4 writing becomes even more fragmented.

***How can we, as subject-bound teachers, combine to offer real and frequent opportunities to develop writing as a means of worthwhile and desirable communication?***

***How can we compete with word processing?***

Schools are still a long way from full computer use in every lesson – children still need to write.

There was not the scope within this investigation to look at the place of speaking and listening within the writing agenda. It would seem fairly obvious that oracy is fundamental to learning – it is the means by which we explore our world and respond to it.

***Do good oral skills lead to better writing skills?***

The link between oracy and writing is one deserving of our attention.

***How much opportunity do we give children to explore concepts through talk?***

This will raise issues of effective grouping and classroom management. We need to empower all teachers through staff development programmes to become confident in establishing speaking and listening activities in their classrooms.

*What do we need to know about the skills levels of children transferring from the primary phase?*

*What knowledge, skill and understanding do they bring with them?*

*Are we de-skilling students in Year 7?*

Certainly, in my observations, there did appear to be a high level of dependency not seen in Year 6 classrooms.

### **Recommendations**

In my own school the following measures could easily be implemented

- **A closer liaison between English and primary teachers to agree priorities in developing writing skills could lead to some fruitful discussion and ultimately to a clear understanding of what a successful writer needs in his/her tool kit. It would also allow Year 7 teachers to develop a more realistic picture of the abilities of their new students.**
- **Strengthen literacy across the Year 7 curriculum initially to ensure a wide range of writing opportunities.**
- **Strengthen the teaching of speaking and listening through literacy in the curriculum as a pre-cursor to writing, making effective use of recording speaking for later reference.**
- **Include more opportunities throughout the school to write for real audiences and real purposes. *For example: in working across History and English on the Norman invasion of 1066, the students are asked to design a wall chart outlining the reasons for the invasion and the sequence of events. English teachers can take the opportunity to work alongside students in teaching the writing skills necessary for this genre. The students are experiencing personalised learning where they are able to have access to the skills they have identified as necessary to their success.***
- **Link teaching writing to study skills in Year 7. Children need to learn that different styles of writing are required for different purposes and that a range of handwriting styles can be used ie not all written work needs to be neat and tidy!**
- **Investigate the possibility of using ICT extensively to support writing practice.**
- **Investigate the Year 11 curriculum to open up opportunities for more independent work and flexible approaches. Could subjects combine to cover common skills and needs?**

- **As a 14–19 Pathfinder project school, The Sir Bernard Lovell School is well-placed to develop approaches to personalised learning in line with the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report<sup>1</sup>. Improving writing could easily become one of the strands to be incorporated into these developments.**

Many of these recommendations could be adopted in other schools but certainly there is a need for a dialogue to be opened up on the purposes and requirements of writing. Teaching should then match those needs.

### **Next Steps**

In the immediate future there needs to be a programme for developing dialogue within the English team at The Sir Bernard Lovell School and across the primary/secondary phase. The following model will be adopted:

- dissemination of this report to the English and senior management teams within The Sir Bernard Lovell School
- enlisting the support of the school's literacy co-ordinator to identify and establish training needs in other areas of the curriculum
- liaise with literacy co-ordinators at Key Stage 2 (major partner primaries) to identify key writing skills to be taught or reinforced in Year 6 – links to the transition units
- train all participating teachers to use English framework approaches to teaching writing (enlist the help of the Key Stage 3 English and Foundation subjects consultants)
- implement the teaching strategies through subject – specific schemes of work in Year 7
- key personnel will observe and monitor this programme
- review and amend the programme after the first year

This is effectively phase 3 of the research and it will extend beyond the life of the *Languages and Literacy* project. Its purpose will be to measure how far this model of intervention affects progress amongst boys of the same level as the current cohort ie level 4C on entry to Year 7.

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<sup>1</sup> 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform. Interim Report February 2004

**Partner Primary Schools**

Cherry Garden Primary School  
Redfield Edge Primary School  
St Anne's CE Primary School  
Longwell Green Primary School  
Parkwall Primary School  
St Barnabas CE Primary School  
Cadbury Heath Primary School  
The Meadows Primary School

## Writing Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to find out what you feel about the writing you do in some of your lessons. Please be as open and honest as you can. Your answers will be kept confidential.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ TUTOR GROUP: \_\_\_\_\_

TML: \_\_\_\_\_ Estimated level: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Below is a list of your subjects. How often are you asked to write in each them?

Subject	Every lesson	Most lessons	Very few lessons
English			
Maths			
Science			
Technology			
French/German			
History			
Geography			
R.S.			
Drama			
Music			
Art			
P.E			

2. What types of writing do you do in your lessons?

Subject	Types of writing eg essays, notes, creative writing, answers, descriptions, reviews, evaluations, other types
English	
Maths	
Science	
Technology	
French/German	

History	
Geography	
R.S.	
Drama	
Music	
Art	
P.E	

3. How would you assess your writing?

	Above average	Average	Below average
Handwriting			
Spelling			
Punctuation			
Paragraphing			
Matching style to purpose and audience			
Vocabulary			

4. What type of writing do you most enjoy? Try to explain why.

5. What type of writing do you least enjoy? Try to explain why.

6. In which subject do you get your best marks? Describe the work you do in this subject.



## Interview Questions for Year 7 Boys

Describe a piece of writing you completed in year 6 which you are really proud of.

What kind of mark or comment did this work receive?

What do you think was so good about this piece?

How do you know how well you did?

What has improved in your writing this year?

How do you know this aspect of your writing has got better?

What are you enjoying/not enjoying about your transfer to year 7?

How different does the work seem?

Do you do more or less writing this year?

What different types of writing do you do?

How are you taught to write in these different styles?

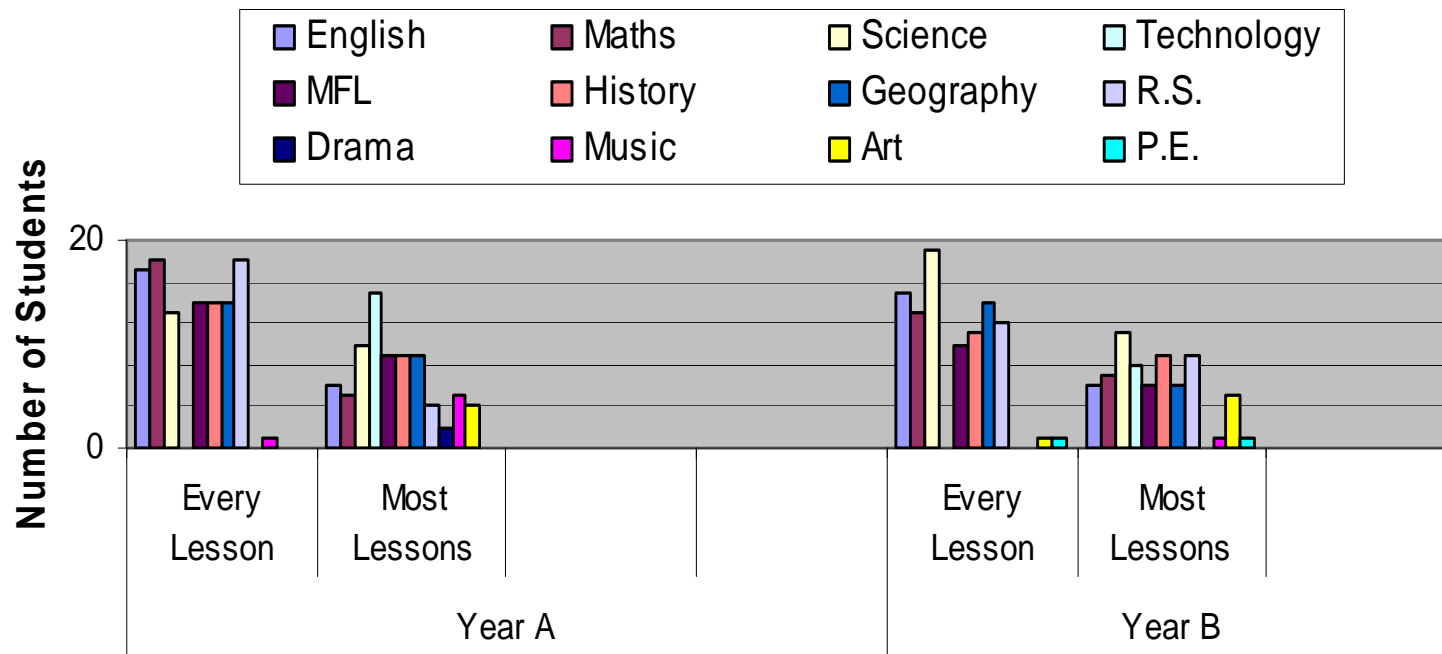
What happens if you don't understand?

**Interview with Matthew Davey re Year 7 boys' writing  
16<sup>th</sup> January 2004**

The purpose of the interview was to test some of the information gained from interviewing the boys in the research group during the autumn term. In particular, I wanted to explore the perception the boys have of themselves as poor writers, and their preoccupation with the secretarial aspects of writing. A further area to investigate is how far the strategy approaches to teaching writing are having an impact on writing at levels 3 and 4.

It is worth noting that Matthew is working towards a career in writing having already won the Guardian short story competition. His work has been favourably reviewed by Carol Ann Duffy and both publishers and literary agents have expressed interest in his work. He is currently preparing his first novel for possible publication. The short story with which he won the competition is the first chapter of the novel. This information is significant in that Matthew clearly approaches his work with students as a writer. As one of only two men in the team, he is also a role model for the boys

## The Frequency of Writing in the Year Seven Curriculum over a Two Year Period



### Frequency of Writing Activity



### **About the International Learning and Research Centre**

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