



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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The Writing Dilemma Phase 1 Report

An investigation carried out at The Sir Bernard Lovell School during 2002/2003.

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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**', coordinated 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.

Background

Boys' under-achievement is seen as a national problem but I suspect it is only at local level that we will find solutions. The causal factors are likely to be many and varied. Prevailing attitudes amongst students, parental and other adult role models, friendship groupings, limited aspirations, environment, norms and ambitions will necessarily affect educational experience and ultimately outcomes. Within the context of this small scale research task it was only possible to investigate one aspect – writing. Within education we normally demonstrate knowledge and skill through a system of formal examination. The written examination is still accepted as the most economical, practical and legitimate method of assessment. But it may also be the most inappropriate method for many boys who can often express themselves confidently and convincingly in discussion, debate or presentation, but cannot find that same level of articulacy in their writing.

I was concerned with the boys at Key Stage 4 who too often achieve grade D when all they have contributed orally to lessons suggests they are performing at grade C. What processes break down or simply do not exist between the spoken display of evident knowledge and skills, and the transfer to a written form? This is a particularly important question for a school where the percentage of English A – C grades currently runs at around the mid-fifties. It is the lower grades of boys which prevent us breaking the magical 60% barrier. Nor can we allow half the school population to continue to under-perform.

Introduction

What then appeals to boys as learners and how can we provide an educational experience that will motivate and excite? We know that boys respond better to short-term goals, hands-on learning and bursts of activity. They find protracted tasks requiring quiet periods of concentration much less attractive. The boys in this sample certainly affirmed those suppositions. But what happens to turn off boys who once enjoyed reading and writing? To

find out it was necessary to look at the learning histories of the boys and then to attempt to trace where interest began to decline. The intention was to answer the questions.

What strategies can teachers employ to provide a rich language environment?

How can success in spoken language be translated into success in writing?

Young children often enjoy a rich language diet through narrative ie being read to by parents, other adults and teachers. Later teachers often use narrative to promote understanding

- the history teacher interweaves many narratives about the past
- the art teacher uses pictorial narratives to reveal events, emotions, relationships, etc
- the geography teacher can give life to other cultures through the stories of individuals and groups
- the English teacher survives on narrative

And, of course, narrative draws heavily on oral tradition – we tell stories before we read them; we listen to stories before we write them.

In doing so we share language, extending experience and building confidence.

How then can teaching capitalise on these early experiences whilst meeting the demands of a highly literate technocracy? How can we teach writing? But firstly, what did this piece of research show about boys' attitudes towards reading and writing?

Main Findings from Phase 1 of the Investigation

- Early recall was universally more favourable towards reading which was remembered with pleasure.
- Early experiences of writing appeared focussed on the mechanical aspects of writing – handwriting and spelling in particular.
- By the secondary phase reading has become a chore and too demanding.
- Writing is not seen as potentially pleasurable – only as a chore.
- Writing was universally acknowledged as “boring”.
- Creative writing was preferred.
- Every respondent expressed concern about their presentation skills and preferred to word-process.
- All felt more confident about writing using a frame or with LSA support.
- There was no evidence for developing independent writing skills.
- Only in English did this group experience extended writing.
- All found blocks of writing time very difficult to manage and sustain, particularly in exams.
- All linked writing to discomfort.
- None of the respondents claimed to plan and organise – this only prolongs the agony!
- The least favoured times for writing at school were the last period of the day as one might expect but also the first period.

The Research: process, data and analysis

The research question was:

The successful manipulation of spoken and written language is fundamental to learning development. 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 aims of the research were to:

- investigate boys' under-achievement in writing at Key Stage 4, through working with a target group of twenty boys in years 10 and 11 whose data showed they were working at the C/D boundary
- to explore the language learning histories of the cohort to establish common experiences
- to examine strategies used in the teaching of writing
- to examine the apparent gap between patterns and structures of spoken English and transference to written structures appropriate to task.

Data collection:

- the students were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine attitudes to writing and the amount of writing being asked of them (see Appendix 1)
- the boys were then interviewed (see Appendix 2). The interviews were conducted in small groups of two or three to allow the boys to speak in a supported atmosphere. The questions were designed to focus on memories of early literacy learning initially so that early attitudes could be elicited. The questions progressed to current learning and attitudes
- evaluation of data and exam results (Year 11 students)
- observations of Year 10 students as they progress through the key stage, logging amount and nature of talk. In particular, looking for utterances which reflect the structures of narrative and anecdotal experiences.

Analysis

The questionnaires confirmed that it is in English where students are expected to write at length across a range of styles. Subsequent interviews showed this amount of writing to be unpopular. If only one area makes high demands, it will appear that the subject rather than the system is at fault. So little writing elsewhere leads to fatigue and the boys complained that writing caused physical discomfort.

The early experiences of this group had led to a more favourable view of reading which had shown itself capable of engendering pleasure and security in the shared experiences of reading. There were no such memories of early writing. This was characterised by repetitive, mechanical operations ie perfecting handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Not one of the respondents recalled writing as a shared and creative experience. Writing is a sedentary occupation which further alienates this group who appeared to enjoy activity-based learning and sharing with their peers.

It was only possible to complete a small amount of observation in Year 10 but initial findings support the hypothesis that boys respond to teaching which uses narrative techniques but the good oral responses are not being translated into effective written responses. It will be necessary to look at this in greater detail during 2003-2004 where the teaching of writing will be examined. The introduction of the English Framework writing schedule is having a positive effect at Key Stage 3 in English, where it has been extended to Key Stage 4. This approach does not yet exist in other areas of the curriculum (see Appendix 3).

Summer examination results for the Year 11 boys in English were as follows:

5 boys performed to teacher expectation achieving 3 C grades, 1 B grade and 1 D grade; of the remaining 5, 1 underperformed by 1 grade and 3 achieved a grade higher than expectation. The fifth student underperformed by 2 grades. This is the same boy who claimed to detest writing under any circumstances or conditions.

Overall, this group performed reasonably well and clearly coped with their perceived problems in writing. Only 5 of the group achieved 5 or more A – C grades. The higher grades were largely in double science, maths and technology. English fared better than modern foreign languages and humanities. There may be additional issues linked to revision in these areas.

Next steps

Phase 2 of the study

To continue the research through 2003 – 2004 it will be necessary to observe Key Stage 4 students in lessons to look at how they perform in class under different conditions, and respond to different approaches. A key question is how is writing being taught and managed? To broaden the study, it is intended to select a group of boys from Year 7 to investigate their literacy development and their learning histories. I want to look at the impact of the National Literacy Strategy on these boys of similar abilities ie 4c/4b. Is the deliberate, planned and systematic teaching of writing leading to attitudinal change? Do these boys regard writing differently? Do they have greater writing “stamina” than there appeared to be in the Key Stage 4 study group? Most importantly, how are we building on the strengths students bring with them at the end of Key Stage?

**Barbara Woods
2003**

Writing Questionnaire

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

NAME: _____ TUTOR GROUP: _____

TMG: _____ Estimated grade: _____

1. How often are you asked to write in class in the following subjects?

	Often	Occasionally	Rarely
English			
Art			
History			

2. For each of these subjects, describe the types of writing you are asked to do e.g. creative, argumentative, descriptive, analytical, reviews, evaluations, notes, letters, answers

English:

Art:

History

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 that subject.

7. What do you find most difficult about writing?

8. What is your favourite lesson activity?

9. Describe any sort of writing you do out of school.

10. How important will writing be to you once you have left school?

11. How often do you read at home and what do you read?

Thank you for your time.

**Questions for target group to follow
up questionnaires**

1. Were you read to as a small child? (Yes) Did you enjoy this experience?
2. Have your attitudes to reading changed as you have got older?
3. Where do you like to read best now?
4. Do you concentrate on reading more successfully if it is quiet?
5. How do you choose what to read?
6. What types of reading do you do in school?
7. Does reading help you to improve your writing?
8. What do you remember about learning to write?
9. Was writing more enjoyable when you were younger – at primary school?
10. How has what you are required to write changed?
11. Does the writing you do now feel more pressured? (Time, types, accuracy)
12. Are there any ways writing is made easier for you?
13. What are the best times of day for writing?
14. What conditions do you prefer for writing?
15. What types of writing encountered at school seem most linked to the types you will do later in life?

A sequence for teaching writing

OHT 4.4

- 1 Establish clear aims**
- 2 Provide example(s)**
- 3 Explore the features of the text**
- 4 Define the conventions**
- 5 Demonstrate how it is written**
- 6 Compose together**
- 7 Scaffold the first attempts**
- 8 Independent writing**
- 9 Draw out key learning**
- 10 Review**