Raising Boys’ Achievements in Writing

Joint research project

UKLA
The United Kingdom Literacy Association

supported by
Primary
National Strategy

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Section 1 Background to the research

Concerns about boys’ achievements in literacy, and in writing in particular, are not new. However, current government test results 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. The Primary National Strategy has identified boys’ achievements in writing as a key issue and this pilot project was aimed to tackle differences in attainment. Whilst focusing on boys, however, the research did not take a simplistic view. There are, of course, differences between boys as well as between boys and girls and the aim of the project was to develop effective teaching approaches which would specifically address boys’ achievements whilst offering a sound teaching model appropriate to all learners.

Any underachievement is a proper concern for everyone involved in education - parents, teachers and children – however, as the findings of the DfES Raising Boys’ Achievement Project suggest, (Bearne and Warrington, 2003) it is wise not to take on generalised observations about boys, girls and writing without asking a few questions or gathering first-hand information before starting specific activities. 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. Marsh and Millard (2000) identified the importance to many boys of the visual elements of literacy and the Essex Writing Project (2002; 2003) set out specifically to document approaches to teaching which acknowledge these preferences. At the same time, the DfES Project and Barrs and Cork (2001) have identified drama, and speaking and listening more generally, as important contributory features to boys’ achievements in writing. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education has similarly emphasised the role of speaking and listening in supporting boys’ literacy development (2004). In order to build on these recent findings, the PNS/UKLA project used a planning and teaching model which specifically addressed visual and oral approaches to teaching and learning.

1.1 Project design

This practitioner-based project was designed to provide a focused, but substantial and reliable evidence base drawn from activities designed to raise boys’ achievements in writing. The project work took the form of 3 week integrated teaching units for literacy (see Section 2). Teacher research groups of 8-10 teachers in three different areas: Birmingham, Essex and Medway, worked on teaching units designed to raise boys’ engagement, motivation and achievements in writing using either:

• visual stimuli including integrated technologies (Birmingham and Essex);

or

• drama and other speaking and listening activities (Medway).

The term ‘integrated technologies’ was used to denote the use of visual stimuli generated by different digital technologies: video and DVD and the associated use of remote control devices and computer texts of all kinds, alongside the more traditional ‘technology’ of writing, model making, artwork, puppetry. The teachers involved were all Leading Teachers (1) or were identified by the LEA Literacy Consultant as expert practitioners. Each selected a focus group of 5-6 underachieving boys (including those who were potentially high achievers) and kept writing samples and assessments as well as observations and their own reflections over the period of the project. The classes involved included a range of age groups from Foundation, KS 1 and KS 2.

The research was designed by UKLA colleagues in collaboration with PNS partners and Regional Directors and Local Consultants from the Strategy worked with the UKLA consultants to develop effective teaching approaches designed to support boys’ achievements in writing. Launch meetings of the project explored examples of the ways in which drama and visual approaches might be used to support reading and writing. The teachers involved also had opportunities to share examples of successful practice.

1.2 Analysis of data

There are potential disadvantages to such a relatively short-span project: shifts in performance in writing need to be carefully observed and other factors such as motivation, attitudes and changes in boys’ behaviours as writers need to be charted. Nevertheless, previous experience of similar short projects from the DfES and Essex projects suggested that there would be useful evidence to support the value of the teaching model being used. It has been important to ensure that there is a degree of comparability across the three areas working on the pilot, particularly since there is a difference in the focus of drama or visual approaches between the areas involved.

To ensure comparability and generalisability evidence across the three projects, different types of data were collected and analysed:

• survey data on children’s perceptions about themselves as writers;

• samples of children’s writing and teachers’ assessments and commentaries;

• contextual information about the schools/settings, classes and pupils involved;

• teacher observations and evaluations.

Pupil perceptions surveys were repeated at the end of the project and writing samples documented using National Curriculum level descriptors, QCA assessments and content analysis of samples. Teachers’/practitioners’ reflective observations have provided data for evaluations of the teaching model.

1.3 The teachers/practitioners and schools/settings (2)

The teachers involved were all leading teachers or expert practitioners so that their practice is recognised as of a high standard. They were already providing underachieving pupils with a supportive and stimulating writing climate so that any increases in pupils’ self-reported motivation or ability to talk about writing in a broader way, would become even more significant.

The research findings are based on responses from 105 pupils in 19 classes (7 in Birmingham, 6 from Essex and 6 from Medway) representing the full range of Reception to Year 6. Although in total 28 teachers were involved in the project (134 focus group pupils), pupil and teacher absence or incomplete recorded evidence reduced the pupil sample to 105 (37 pupils from Birmingham; 30 from Essex and 38 from Medway) and the class sample to 19. Since the teachers/practitioners involved in the research were selected from the leading teachers’ groups in each area or were identified as expert practitioners, it was not possible to ensure equal representation for every year group. Fig. 1 shows the numbers of classes included in the final analysis for each year group from the 3 areas. With the exception of years 3 and 5 (counting the Medway Reception/Year 1 class with the 2 other R classes) there were at least three classes in each year group. This allowed for comparability of response so that each set of responses would be balanced against the broader sample. The responses of the boys in the mixed R/Year 1 class were counted in with the appropriate year group – either R or Year 1.
1.4 Review and evaluation meetings

Since the research was, in part, intended as capacity building, each local area organised a series of twilight, whole or half-day meetings where the teachers met to review and evaluate the work. Two whole day meetings bringing all three areas together were held at the beginning, to launch the project, and midway through the work to help in evaluating and planning for the second unit of work. These meetings meant that the teachers involved could see their local work in a national perspective and provided an opportunity to share examples of good practice. The initial launch meeting also provided sessions about drama and visual approaches to literacy which were followed up with some supplementary activities in local areas.

Each local meeting focused on a specific aspect of the research. The first local meeting, held just after the national launch meeting, concentrated on the initial Perceptions Survey and the first writing sample. (For review and evaluation questions and recording sheets see Appendixes 1-4). The second meeting was designed for the teachers to review the first Unit of Work. After both Units of Work were completed and writing samples collated, a final review meeting was held in each area to summarise the teachers’ observations on the way that the project had impacted on:

- Classroom approaches to writing
- Attitudes to writing/writing behaviours
- Improved standards

All the data from the surveys, writing samples and reflective observations are presented in Section 3.

![Fig. 1.1 Numbers of classes from each year group by area](image-url)
The teachers carried out two 3-week units, one in the first half of the summer term and one in the second half, making decisions about the text types they wanted to teach according to their existing long-term plans. Before and after each 3-week unit they kept writing samples from their focus group of boys.

Section 3 of this report presents data based on the writing samples and the teachers’/practitioners’ evaluative reflections on the impact of the project on their teaching. Implications for future teaching are outlined in Section 4.

Section 3  Research findings

3.1  The writers

Each teacher/practitioner identified a focus group of underachieving boys. These included those who had obvious potential but were unmotivated as well as those who were anxious about writing. For this research it was decided not to include boys who had identified special educational needs. In general, then, the sample included a spread of ability. There were 105 boys in the final sample used for analysis, although more were involved in the project work. Inevitably there is sample wastage, and in analysing these data, the research team discounted as part of the final sample any boy who was absent for one of the perceptions surveys or for whom one of the writing samples was missing. However, teachers’/practitioners’ assessments over the research period and their observations and evaluations include a larger sample of boys (134). As outlined in Section 1.3 the sample represents all age groups from Reception to Year 6.

Much of the data presented in this section is based on the perceptions surveys taken at the beginning and end of the project. Other findings are drawn from the teachers’/practitioners’ end-of-project evaluations.

3.1.1 Pupils’ perceptions about themselves as writers

Any survey of perceptions is problematic in that it is just that: an intention to capture personal and necessarily subjective views. This raises questions of the reliability of the information gathered so that findings have to be balanced against other kinds of data. The sample was also not representative of the range of pupils in schools generally, since the focus groups were selected as boys who were underachieving. This included capable writers who were unmotivated as well as more hesitant or hasty writers. The sample did not include any boys who had statements of special educational needs. For these reasons, the perceptions data must be considered alongside the teachers’ observations (see Sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.4) and the writing scores (see Section 3.2.1). The initial Perceptions Survey (see Appendix 4) had a dual purpose, designed not only to provide data to measure shifts in opinion, but also to give the teachers/practitioners information to help them plan for their project work.

The survey data provided a snapshot of the focus group boys’ perceptions in three main areas:

- attitudes to writing and views of themselves as writers (qs 1-4);
- preferences for specific types of writing (qs 5-7);
- out-of-school writing practices and experiences (qs 8-10).

Questions 1-4 were intended to provide some starting-point data against which shifts in perceptions could be measured and these were repeated at the end of the project. Questions 5 - 10 were used to provide information about their focus group boys’ writing preferences and their experiences of writing at school and at home. The teachers/practitioners themselves analysed these responses.
3.1.2 Teachers'/practitioners’ comments on the initial perceptions surveys

The findings from the initial full Perceptions Survey were discussed at the first Twilight Meeting in each area. All of the teachers involved found the surveys informative and useful but some were surprised when their boys gave a more negative view of writing than they would have expected, they were particularly concerned about the higher than expected number of boys who seemed to think that ‘writing’ was restricted to spelling and handwriting. This allowed consideration of the point that often pupils will make apparently restricted or negative comments because they do not have an extensive vocabulary to talk about writing. If at the end of the project there was evidence of a more extensive use of a metalanguage, this would indicate pupils’ more secure grasp of concepts about writing.

Although there were specific features noted by individual teachers when they analysed questions 5 -10 of the surveys, there were several recurrent points:

• the persistence of memory of successful pieces of writing, some from several years before the survey;
• the large number of boys who wrote and drew at home;
• the larger than expected number who mentioned parents and family members writing at home;
• boys’ commenting on wanting greater choice, for example, of topics for writing or a variety of writing materials and implements;
• security factors, for example working with friends, having teacher approval or being sure about what they have to do;
• the range of kinds of advice the boys were able to give about improving writing.

These observations were common across all classes and each area. The teachers prepared their project work with these matters in mind.

3.1.3 Pre- and post-project perceptions

The data presented here are based on questions 1-4 of the Perceptions Survey:

1. Do you enjoy writing?
2. Is there anything you don’t like about writing?
3. Are you a good writer?
4. What advice would you give to a younger writer to help them improve?

These questions were asked at the start and at the end of the project so provide pre- and post-project comparative data. Questions 1 and 3 seem to be asking for similar responses, but were designed to probe the distinction between pupils liking writing and perceiving themselves as being good at it, for example, seeing themselves as being good at writing at home, but not liking it at school. Although the results seem to be quite close there are important differences in the patterns of response to each question. Since responses to both these questions were likely to be yes, no or sometimes, it was possible to quantify them. Figs 3.1 and 3.2 show responses to question 1 expressed as percentages of each year groups’ responses and of the total sample.
As already mentioned, the sample of pupils, although described as underachieving, were in classes where the teachers are good practitioners so that the pre-project percentages in each year responding Yes may be considered higher than usual. This makes the post-project percentages perhaps even more salient. The total increase of 26% in Yes responses pre- and post-project and the accompanying 23% decrease in No responses represent significant shifts. The decrease in Sometimes responses suggests that these boys had a more secure view of themselves as writers after the project.

Three other points should be noted:

a) The figures for Year 5 should perhaps be considered separately from the rest of the data, since these represent only one class and one where pre-project responses do not reflect the sample as a whole. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to exclude any data so that the figures for Year 5 must be seen as contributing to the whole picture.

b) The apparently low Year 3 pre-project Yes responses need to be considered in relation to the higher Sometimes responses for this year.

c) There is a noticeable decrease from Reception to Year 6 in the percentage of boys who said that they enjoyed writing before the project. However, the post-project percentages are much closer throughout the age range.

Figures 3.2 and 3.2a show the total figures in numerical and graph form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>pre 67</td>
<td>post 93</td>
<td>pre 27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3.2** Question 1 Do you enjoy writing? - pre- and post-project percentages for the whole sample

These indicate the overall substantial shift in self-reported enjoyment of writing.

Figures 3.3, 3.3a, 3.3b, 3.4 and 3.4a give pre- and post-project responses by year group to the question Are you a good writer?
The differences between the percentages for Year 3 pre-project Yes responses for the two questions are worth notice. Whilst only 50% of the Year 3 boys said that they enjoyed writing, 80% of them considered themselves to be good writers. Similarly, the nil response to the same question from the Year 5 boys is not replicated in their views of themselves as good writers. There is an overall more positive view in response to question 3. It is not surprising that these responses differ, since it is possible to enjoy writing yet acknowledge that you may not be ‘good’ at it. Also, since many of the project boys were fearful writers, it is to be expected that the Perceptions Surveys would indicate this.

Figures 3.4 and 3.4a show the totals in numerical and graph form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Fig. 3.4 Question 3 Are you a good writer? - pre- and post-project percentages for the whole sample**

![Graph showing pre and post-project percentages](image)

Although there is an equal shift of 26% in the pre and post project Yes responses, the totals for each year group are lower than for question 1. Do you enjoy writing? Examination of the detail in the boys’ post-project responses indicates that this is accounted for by their awareness of ways in which they might improve their writing. Even those who thought that they were good writers showed that they were able to qualify their positive – and negative – responses:

- Sometimes I think I am because I try to make sense so people can understand. I have ideas and just think of them in my head. (dictated - Reception)
- Yes, now I know what I’m doing. (Y3)
- Yes, I’ve got good questions and ideas. No, I’m not good at punctuation and spellings. (Y4)
- I don’t think so. No. I think I must make some adjustments to my writing for e.g. I must make it more interesting and exciting so the reader won’t then get bored. (Y6)

(Spelling has been regularised for all quotations.)

Three other points are worth noting:

a) Once again, the responses for Year 5 deserve to be viewed separately.
b) The comparatively higher pre- and post-project Sometimes responses for question 3 in relation to question 1 suggests that some boys had greater self-awareness about their capacity to improve as writers.
c) Reception and Year 6 pre-project Yes responses to question 3 Are you a good writer? show a large downward trend in positive self-perception as writers grow older (Fig. 3.3). The very high post-project Yes responses suggest that the project work had a significant effect on self-perceptions.

Question 2 Is there anything you don’t like about writing? allowed pupils to comment on specific aspects of writing. Analysis showed that the responses fell into the following categories:

- Nothing specific: those who didn’t dislike anything about writing.
- Technical: spelling, handwriting, use of specific grammatical devices, particular text types.
- Physical: timing, hands or arms hurting or inability to sustain effort.
- Emotional factors: fear/dislike/boredom.
- Other: for example, copying from the board, parental pressure.

Before the project, only 9 boys said that there was nothing to dislike in writing. After the project, this number doubled to 18, showing a much more positive response. Other factors which the boys disliked are represented in Fig. 3.5. These are raw numbers since some boys gave more than one response.

![Table showing post-project responses](image)

The overall halving of the responses suggests a more secure view of writing as a whole. Particularly noticeable is the reduction in the physical and emotional factors which the boys associated with aspects of writing they disliked. Anxiety can be closely related to hurting hands and wrists and the reduction in both as a result of the project work is noteworthy.

There was similar diversity of response to question 4 What advice would you give to a younger writer to help them improve? This question was designed to gauge the pupils’ use of a metalinguage about writing. Pre-project responses fell very largely into the ‘technical’ category with 77 suggestions about paying attention to spelling, punctuation, handwriting, the use of vocabulary. There were also a few comments about behaviour, for example, paying attention and listening to the teacher and 4 mentions of practising at home. 11 boys said that they did not know what advice they could give. In all, pre-project, there were 95 different responses (some boys gave more than one response whilst others did not proffer any advice). By the end of the project, the number of solely technical responses had more than halved (reduced to 30 comments), there was a wider range of advice, much of it about the processes of writing and all but four boys gave advice.
In the post-project responses, after technical advice (30 mentions) and a few more about behaviour, particularly paying attention (4), there were two main categories: taking care with writing, planning and checking work, and the process of generating, capturing and communicating ideas.

Taking care
Try/concentrate/write slowly 19 mentions
Plan/think about what to write 12 mentions
Keep writing, keep reading it and check 11 mentions
Total 42 mentions

The process
Talk things through 11 mentions
Get good ideas from films, DVDs, books 9 mentions
Act it out or picture the scene in your head 8 mentions
Do it on the computer 5 mentions
Total 33 mentions

There were other suggestions which indicate some important learning:

I would say ‘what would you like to write?’ (R)
Be confident, don’t think you’re rubbish (Year 4)
Tell them how to draw the reader in. (Year 6)

In all, there were 112 responses (4 no advice).

The numbers of mentions give some idea of the kinds of shifts in concepts about writing and the use of a wider metalanguage to talk about writing evident in the boys’ advice to younger writers. However, whilst a numerical summary can give one kind of information, comparative comments from individual boys, taken from throughout the age range, give a qualitative indication of the kinds of shifts that took place during the project. As noted earlier, these classes were all being taught by very good practitioners and the pupils’ comments give us a flavour of particular classrooms. All comments have been regularised for spelling.

In Reception, (scribed comments) there was a move from the technical to issues of content and detail to interest the reader:

Tommy
Pre- Use the letters on the chart to see how to spell and sound out words and make it interesting by doing coloured pictures. Do little writing because teachers don’t like big writing.
Post- I would say do it nice and neat and if you can’t do it get some help. Make it interesting put in ideas and describe things like ‘spider’ put ‘big spider’.

Chris
Pre- I’d say watch me I’m a good writer because I think about words.
Post- You need to think about your setting and your characters - choose some good characters and some bad characters and make it interesting by thinking what they might do.

In this Year 2 class, after the project there was a distinct flavour of self-improvement:

Jemal
Pre- Draw pictures and copy sentences.
Post- If you write more you will improve and be able to read your work to the class. Use videos and DVDs to get ideas from.

Callum
Pre- Remember your punctuation. Make up funny stories.
Post- Keep writing lots of different things and check your work.

The Year 4 class whose comments follow, had certainly got to grips with the language of sentence grammar but moved towards a sense of how that knowledge fitted in with the process of writing for communication:

Amandeep
Pre- Join up handwriting
Post- I will let them know their spelling. I will let them know the vocab, openers, punctuation and connectives.

Osmur
Pre- Openers, connectives, verbs, adverbs, time connectives, words for said, handwriting.
Post- Keep on trying, writing at home, listening and talking of your ideas.

By Year 6, as might be expected, there was greater emphasis on whole text structure, but in this class the boys came to see themselves as writers who had something to say:

Owen
Pre- Have a very good opening and good middle and a good way to finish off what has just happened for the end.
Post- Always remember your punctuation, try your best at spelling, use paragraphs, neat handwriting and most of all just try your best. Enjoy it.

Carey
Pre- Write about the things that suit you and you like to write about.
Post- In writing it doesn’t matter if you are not the best but if you try your hardest and your best then that is fine. Believe in what you write.

It is noticeable that by the end of the project both of these boys (and the others in the sample) had a clearer sense of writing to address a reader directly as indicated by the more secure tone of their comments after the project.
3.1.4 Teachers’/practitioners’ observations of the writers after the project

Observations at the end of the project on the boys’ attitudes to writing emphasised their willingness to sustain commitment to writing and development of greater independence, enthusiasm, confidence and motivation. In addition, improvements were noticed in reading and, more strikingly, in speaking and listening. Overall, the teachers/practitioners continually commented on the boys’ greater pride in themselves and their work, their increased belief in their own ability and a sense of feeling valued. Physical signs of these changes were evident in the boys’ body language, with reports of less fidgeting or ‘lolling’ and generally more alert posture. The Perceptions Surveys bear out these kinds of observations in the boys’ self-reporting of pre-project aching arms and hands, which were only mentioned by one boy at the end of the project. There was a very strong sense that the boys had developed much more readiness to be adventurous in their ideas and to take risks with the technical features of writing.

Sustaining commitment

This was a key feature of improvement throughout the age range. In analysing the teachers’/practitioners’ observations, the following key areas were apparent:

- being on task for long (or longer) periods of time;
- seeing work through to the end;
- readiness to check work, review and improve it;
- asking questions about future work.

Greater independence

The boys were described as generally feeling more in control of the process of their own writing. Markers of greater independence were:

- settling more readily to tasks;
- not needing reminders;
- working more harmoniously with others;
- readiness to make mistakes and learn from them;
- making choices about what and how to write.

Enthusiasm, confidence and motivation

This was perhaps the most reported area of improvement in the writers’ attitudes, indicated by:

- wanting to write;
- volunteering to take part in discussion and advance ideas;
- greater readiness to share work with others;
- the ability to talk about their own writing;
- bringing work from home to show to the class;
- articulating their feelings in front of others.

The observations were analysed in age-groups in order to ascertain whether there were any significant differences in the ways that commitment, independence and enthusiasm were shown by younger and older pupils. There were few discernible differences according to age, but it was noticeable that even in Reception, the practitioners noted significant increases in readiness to sustain efforts and in greater motivation and confidence.

Reception

Concentration and fluency were greatly improved, even in the very early years. There was evidence of more continuous sustained work, greater motivation and more readiness to take risks with writing and generally more independence in making choices about writing.

Years 1&2

Increased efforts were evident in greater quantity and length as well as improved fluency and overall quality in the writing. The pupils were much more motivated, enthusiastic and confident with greater awareness of their own ability, indicated by more assured body language.

Years 3&4

An overall more positive attitude to writing was shown by greater readiness to refine and edit work, wanting to produce the best and taking great pride in the work. The writing was generally more fluent, much more was completed and ideas were sustained because the writers felt they had something to say. There was noticeable improvement in confidence and motivation.

Years 5&6

There was much greater energy and enthusiasm and interest and output increased markedly. Teachers commented on pupils ‘enjoying the fresh air’ of a new approach, and being committed because they had no problems about what to write. Confidence and motivation – and so fluency in writing – were much improved.

Effects on reading

This was one of the pleasing side-effects of the project. With hindsight it would have been useful to keep records of reading levels but some comments give a sense of the ways in which reading was seen to improve. Overall, the pupils focused much more closely on the detail of both visual and verbal texts. There was a increased, and increasing, awareness of the author’s/director’s point of view and greater ability to comment on authorial (and directional) technique. In terms of age differences, at Reception, children paid careful attention to reading visual images where later in Key Stage 1 they showed much more attention to reading their own writing, particularly checking punctuation. At Key Stage 2, 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.

Effects on speaking and listening

The project emphasised the importance of speaking and listening as part of the writing process and, of course, used drama and role play as central themes in developing writing. The features noted here, therefore, are about some unexpected aspects of speaking and listening. The general sense of a greater readiness to share ideas, express opinions and speak in front of others has already been noted as indicating growing confidence and assurance. When these general observations are analysed in terms of age groups, some interesting features emerge. In Reception, previously insecure boys began to ask questions – of the practitioner and each other. This was also a feature in Key Stage 1 where the boys were more willing to talk about and share work with others – both with the teacher and the class as a whole. They were also more prepared to express opinions. At Key Stage 2 there was equally a greater readiness to ask questions, share work, keenness to give opinions and volunteer ideas in class discussion. Throughout the age range there was noticeable evidence of the ability to use evaluative metalanguage in discussion.
3.1.5 Summary

The Perceptions Surveys were useful both in enabling shifts in attitudes to be measured and described but also in aiding more effective planning for writing in the light of the information gathered about the focus groups of boys. In some cases the initial surveys were carried out with the whole class, which provided valuable insights into all the pupils’ writing experiences.

The analyses of the initial Perceptions Surveys showed greater incidence of writing at home and family involvement in writing than had been expected. The surveys also revealed a high anxiety factor about writing in this sample of underachieving boys. They also noted a desire for greater choice about writing and the boys’ ability to make a range of comments about writing.

The comparative analysis of questions pre- and post-project indicated the success of the project work in all three areas. Although the projects began from a high level of professional expertise, there were significant gains made in attitudes to writing and to the boys’ perceptions of themselves as writers. Before the project began, there was a noticeable decline in positive responses to the question Do you enjoy writing? from 81% at Reception to 54% in Year 6. In response to the question Are you a good writer? the decline was even greater: 81% in Reception to only 36% in Year 6. Whilst part of this low response can be accounted for by a reflective and balanced sense of self as a writer, particularly amongst older pupils, the post-project figures suggest that this was only part of the picture. After the project, positive responses to Do you enjoy writing? shifted to 93% at Reception and 91 1/4% in year 6 (an increase at Year 6 of 37%). Positive responses to Are you a good writer? shifted to 100% at Reception and 86% at year 6 (an increase at Year 6 of 50%).

At the start of the project, the focus groups of boys reported a range of negative factors about writing. These were often related to frustrations about technical accuracy but were also linked with physical tension, time pressure, lack of ideas or emotional factors related to anxiety. After the project, negative comments were cut by half and issues of anxiety and physical tension were almost entirely eradicated.

One question: What advice would you give to a younger reader to help them improve their writing? was designed to probe the boys’ available metalanguage about writing before and after the project. Pre-project responses were again largely related to technical features and ‘good behaviour’. After the project there was a noticeably wider range of comments. There were still a good number giving advice about technical features, but also much more assured sense of taking care over work and a view of the whole process of getting and communicating ideas through talk, drama, visual and media texts. Overall, there was a sense that the boys had grasped a fuller sense of writing serving their own communicative intentions.

Observations at the end of the project added to the sense of greater engagement with writing. There were overwhelming observational evidence of improvements in the boys’ attitudes to writing and to themselves as writers. There were general, and striking individual shifts in the boys’ readiness and ability to sustain commitment to writing, to see it through to the end and be prepared to improve it. There were also noticeable developments in enthusiasm, motivation and self-esteem as well as concomitant developments in independence as writers. Whilst there were no large differences in these behaviours according to age, it was possible to identify some age-related factors. In addition to improvements in attitudes to writing (and in standards of writing) there were also noticeable improvements in reading and speaking and listening as a result of the project.

Section 3.2 The writing

In order to achieve a measure of comparability of progress during the course of the project, analysis of the writing samples used the two modes of assessment currently used in schools. Firstly participants were asked to track pupils’ progress using local assessment practices, which in these LEAs were statements relating to National Curriculum level descriptions expressed as broad sub-level statements (see Section 3.2.1 below) in line with their regular classroom assessment practice (3). As a result they were able to compare data with the pupils’ predicted levels of achievement and note the impact of the stimulus material and the three week teaching units. This also provided useful pre- and post-project data measured by assessment of progress across writing as a whole, irrespective of text type. Section 3.2.1 presents the teachers’/practitioners’ assessment data. As a separate measure of the pupils’ progress over the course of the term’s project, the research team also analysed the pupils’ work according to the QCA strands of assessment. Again, there were issues of comparability, but it has been possible to present an overall analysis based on the QCA strands. Section 3.2.3 below presents the data drawn from an analysis based on the three assessment strands and the eight assessment focuses for writing in line with National Curriculum tests.

In addition to an overall analysis of the improvements in writing as a whole, section 3.2.4 analyses examples of writing from pupils in years 1, 2, 4 and 6 in more detail under the three QCA strands. The samples were chosen as representing the core findings of the project. For each pupil there is a pre-project sample of writing and the final sample of writing from their end of term assessment.

3.2.1 Teacher/practitioner assessments of improvement in writing

There were 19 classes and 124 pupils. These generated 625 writing samples representing the balance of year groups as shown in Figure 1.1. As a baseline assessment, pre-project levels for each boy’s writing were recorded, using thirds of a level judgements. It was important to gain agreement about these third of a level measures as a means of ensuring commensurability, so assessment was discussed at the whole project meeting with the three areas. In order to allay concerns about the relationship between levels and QCA bands, and to make sure that reasonably common measures were used, it was agreed that the three levels would be described as:

- just working within a level;
- working securely within a level;
- at the upper limit/on the brink of the next level.

This fitted with the group’s professional experience in record keeping. The pre-project levels were then compared with post-project levels. Figure 3.6 shows the improvement in writing levels measured in thirds of levels for each year group and expressed as percentages. Figure 3.7 shows the total improvement across the whole sample, again expressed as percentages.
Fig. 3.6 shows these percentages as a graph.

These figures must, of course, be viewed as only indicative, since it was not appropriate to carry out group levelling of writing. They reflect the teachers’/practitioners’ own assessments and do, indeed, show some interesting variation in the apparent rates of progress for each year group. There were, of course, some pupils who did not make progress in terms of a measurable level, or who seemed to slip back. However, even where there did not seem to be numerically measurable progress, the pupils had improved in most cases in terms of attitude and motivation, as indicated in Section 3.1.2 above and in Section 3.3 below. Despite all the cautions which must be advanced, since the National Curriculum level descriptors are written in the expectation of one level’s progress every two years, there is no doubt that in every year group in the project there was marked progress over the space of only one term. The time of year should also be taken into account.

3.2.2 Key features of pupils’ writing prior to the project

Analysis of initial samples of work prior to the use of visual approaches or drama as stimuli for writing identified specific common features. Pupils demonstrated sound understanding of the basic text types with evidence of some adventurous language. Sentences were mainly demarcated correctly using capital letters and full stops. At FS and KS 1 teachers commented that pupils were primarily concerned with writing individual words, rather than writing to communicate meaning. Writing samples were brief and to the point. Additional detail for the reader was not in evidence, often exemplified by the predominant use of simple or compound sentence structure. Pupils used a restricted range of sentence openings that did not aid the flow of text for the reader. The majority of texts used chronological order although some older pupils repeated key events and phrases or changed tense resulting in disjointed narratives. Authorial voice was absent in most of the sample, often as a result of limited manipulation of sentence structure, lack of detail and restricted vocabulary.
3.2.3 Elements of impact

Pupils’ writing samples from the final unit of work demonstrated evidence of impact on the three areas used in QCA mark schemes for the optional and statutory assessment tasks: composition and effect, structure and organisation of text, sentence structure and punctuation. Within these strands it is also possible to identify shifts in the boys’ writing according to the assessment focuses (AF1 – 8).

This section presents generalised findings which are followed by examples from the writing sample. Teachers/practitioners’ comments are included to give more detail of the observed changes. It should be noted that individual pieces of writing are not ascribed an individual level since this analysis is based on assessment of pupils’ work over time.

From the team’s analysis of the samples, it was clear that in the final writing task, almost all of the boys had made progress in AF1 write imaginative, interesting and thoughtful texts and AF2 produce texts which are appropriate to task, reader and purpose. Most boys had added relevant detail for the work from a year one pupil (Daniel):

really pleased with this piece. It related directly to his improvised drama. He had remembered that he, ‘smashed a lamp’, which he had told me at the time had made a noise and disturbed those in the castle. His solution was to sing, ‘to make the people sleep’ – again directly from his drama.

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The project work resulted in:

- Wider use of vocabulary
- Greater use of imagery
- Increased ability to describe setting/evoke atmosphere
- More effective handling of dialogue to move narrative on
- More subtle and secure handling of themes
- More evidence of writing with a viewpoint
- Development of pace and voice

It was noticeable that the increased quantity of writing was not at the expense of quality, indeed, the quality improved over the period of the project (See Hal’s writing Figures 3.10 and 3.11 below).

There was also evidence of the pupils’ developing awareness of:

- Readers’ needs
- The demands of the task
- The purpose of the task
- Seeing writing as a craft that you can control

Both film and drama were instrumental in providing material not only for what the pupils wanted to say but also how they wanted to say it. There was a great upsurge in the pupils’ willingness to write and the direct use of the stimulus material in writing. One teacher added a footnote to a final piece of work from a year one pupil (Daniel).

Really pleased with this piece. It related directly to his improvised drama. He had remembered that he, ‘smashed a lamp’, which he had told me at the time had made a noise and disturbed those in the castle. His solution was to sing, ‘to make the people sleep’ – again directly from his drama.

Other observations included how the clarity of writing developed with pupils knowing what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it. Daniel’s character work, then his adventure narrative, shown below as Figures 3.8 and 3.9 give a specific example of this change in viewpoint, voice and pace. There is a sense of urgency in the writing to reach a successful resolution. The pace is set at the outset of the writing as it leads the reader through imaginative, satisfying and practical resolutions to achieve the goal of the narrative.

Final samples of writing from the pupils demonstrated that they had written from a specific viewpoint as a result of their willingness to write.

Structure and organisation

In the final samples of work, pupils had written considerably more than previously.

Key areas of impact of the project included:

- Increased quantity
- Increased fluency
- Greater clarity of ideas
- Greater control of narrative structure
- Increased understanding patterns of text types
- Increased use of paragraphs to structure texts
- Decreased need for adult intervention or support during the writing process.

Sentence structure and punctuation

The key areas of impact included:

- More adventurous sentence structure and greater variation of sentence lengths
- Consistency of tense
- Clarity of demarcation through punctuation

There were also noticeable improvements in:

- Handwriting
- Spelling

There were significant changes in the pupils’ use and variation of sentence structure. Pupils’ desire to communicate was noted as being instrumental in these choices, as it had been in their desire to use exact vocabulary. Pupils’ own comments indicated that they felt it was important to maintain the flow of ideas in a cohesive structure in order to impact on the reader.

The analysis of the sample shows noticeable shifts in sentence starters, particularly in Key Stage 1. Where pupils had previously used pronouns or determiners, more complex connectives were in evidence. Words such as so or soon were used to signpost the reader. Complex sentences were used successfully to convey additional details often related to the aural/visual voice directly addressing the reader. For some pupils the shift to complex sentences was not always correctly demarcated, although basic demarcation of sentences was maintained and in some cases improved. This was as a direct consequence of the pupils moving from extended compound sentence construction, relying on the word, towards linking clauses and restructuring texts into a more formal style that had moved from oral structures.

In the sample as a whole, vocabulary is noticeably more precisely chosen as the writers manipulated words to give specific pictures to readers. All teachers/practitioners in the study noted such shifts in language usage and the pupils’ desire to use words that communicated their meaning exactly and effectively.
3.2.4 Examples of writing development

The following examples represent some of the shifts made in the writing sample as a whole. The QCA strands have been used to compare initial and final samples of writing.

Composition and effect: viewpoint, voice and pace

Daniel has written a literal interpretation of the task: to write a description of a character that others can guess the name from. He has kept the description brief and to the point with the most important references about porridge and the breaking of objects included. There are no additional clues given to support the reader through description or detail. Daniel has used precise vocabulary in the description through the word ‘clumsy’, which links to the clue about the character dropping the porridge.

Text Structure and Organisation

The main ideas about character are organised in one compound sentence.

Sentence Structure and Punctuation

Daniel has used one compound sentence that is correctly demarcated.

Composition and Effect

Daniel has written an interesting story that leads the reader through two problems and two plausible resolutions that are logical within the context of the adventure narrative. The ideas are structured logically towards a satisfactory conclusion. He has incorporated specific vocabulary that gives a clear picture of the events, the smashed lamp and the use of the word ‘found’ to gain the ladder and access to the treasure. The repeated use of ‘couldn’t’ emphasises the frustration of the central character so near to the goal of the treasure. By directly placing the central character in the dilemma of smashing the lamp readers are drawn into the tension of the narrative.

Text Structure and Organisation

The chronological narrative structure presents a sequence of problems and resolutions, leading towards the goal of finding treasure. The opening locates the reader in the setting of the castle. The reader is then immediately hooked in by the problem of being discovered and so tension is created.

Sentence Structure and Punctuation

Daniel has used simple and compound sentences to re-tell the narrative. He has used the connectives ‘and’, ‘and then’ and ‘because’ to link his ideas. There is no punctuation to demarcate the end of sentences but he has used capitalisation to demarcate the first sentence.
The Tale of Cottontail

One stormy windy midnight Flopsy Mopsy Peter Cottontail were having supper. Next when Flopsy Mopsy Peter went to bed, Cottontail went to the attic. Suddenly Mr McGregor's axe was chopping down the tree. Cottontail knew what to do. Wake Mum but boxes fell on the entrance so he couldn't get out!

He thought he was going to get chopped. Soon his axe made just enough room for him to squeeze under then he fell to the front door then he travelled to Mum's room and told her about it.

Soon a whole tree full of rabbits were attacking Mr. McGregor. Next they were at Mr. McGregor including Flopsy Mopsy Peter Cottontail and Mother. They had a great time eating vegetables. Mr. McGregor was furious he wanted to kill them with his axe they were trying parsley radishes cabbages carrots cucumber and peppers they had great fun. Mr. McGregor learnt his lesson. And let them eat whatever they want.
how they may appear, though Sabir does extend the description of bombs and rocks by explaining why you would hear them. Sabir uses the pronoun ‘you’ consistently to address the reader.

Sentence Structure and Punctuation

Sabir has used compound sentences to list the features of the imaginary world he is describing. Demarcation of sentences, with capital letters and full stops, is used appropriately. Ideas are mostly linked through the use of the word ‘and’. There is a predominant use of simple noun phrases, for example ‘a robot’, ‘an alien’.

Development across all three strands

The two examples which follow show how, when writing begins to ring with the authentic voice of the writer, improvement is seen in all three strands.

Sabir’s writing indicates the links between structure and organisation, composition and effect and the use of sentence structure to create effects.

Composition and Effect

As the ideas/thoughts are listed, the reader is not really led through the landscape from a set viewpoint. The reader is given a statement of facts that are brief and un-sequenced. There is some detail added about the bombs blowing up and the rocks falling.

Text Structure and Organisation

The description is structured as a list of things you may see, hear, feel or smell rather than being in a chronological order of experiences. Each item is stated and there is little expansion or detail as to
Text Structure and Organisation

Sabir has organised the advert as a dialogue directly to the audience by well-known personalities and his friends. The information about the qualities of the car is communicated logically with the price, supplier and special offer located at the close of the advert. Here he shows his awareness of advertising when he indicates that the words ‘terms and conditions apply’ should be spoken ‘quick’ – just as they are when financial details are mentioned on radio or television. There is some evidence of Sabir linking ideas through the use of phrases such as, ‘This is no ordinary car...’ and ‘make sure you ...’ that are also in keeping with the voice of the text type.

Sentence Structure and Punctuation

Sentences are structured through the use of spoken style, with some variation. Punctuation is mostly accurate with commas used to demarcate lists. Clauses are linked through simple connectives such as ‘and’.

Constructing a longer narrative

Jack, in year 6, found sustaining writing difficult. His pre-project work shows that he has a sense of creating atmosphere, as Fig. 3.14 shows.

I was walking to the kitchen when I heard a tremendous smash! My Mum had dropped a glass of the door. ‘Stay back!’ she said to me as she weaved her way, though carefully, towards the hoover. She hovered up everything, apart from one bit of glass I trod on. My Mum took me to casualty and I had an x-ray, nothing was showing up on the screen.

A year past as quick as a flash and me and my Mum had noticed a lump on my foot. Dr Bradley operated on it and inside the centre of the lump has a piece of glass. It took six weeks for it to heal and I was on crutches and I made a diary of what happened, but me and my sister scribbled on it so I threw it away. My foot is healed now and I am back walking on both feet.

Text structure and organization

The events are presented in chronological order using the past tense. The facts of the events a year apart are separated appropriately into two paragraphs. Cohesion is maintained between the paragraphs by the phrase, ‘A year passed as quick as a flash...’ The last paragraph communicates the time it took Jack to recover and the distance between the events and the present.

Sentence structure and punctuation

Jack uses a range of sentence structures to recount the events, particularly in the first paragraph. Extra information is added through the use of complex sentences. The use of commas to demarcate complex sentences is inconsistent. The second paragraph uses a compound sentence structure with the word ‘and’ linking ideas.

Figs. 3.15a, b and c show extracts from Jack’s extended narrative, based on watching The Lord of the Rings. The class used digital cameras to make a photo story about a witch and two elves, then wrote the narrative to accompany the pictures. The first example shows Jack’s handwritten first version and the next two extracts are taken from his word processed version.

Figure 3.14 Jack, Year 6 - initial writing sample

“..."What are you thinking of?” whispered Dobby, sweating, as he took his fluffy hat off.

“Nothing, what are you thinking of,” he replied, and waited nervously.

“I was just thinking about Auntie Heather and that mean Witch of Pobbleton and where she might have hid her.”

“I know, lets go and find her.” Dobby panted and they both got up and stretched as they trotted out of the beautiful piece of shaded grass.

Figure 3.15a Jack, Year 6 - final writing sample - opening of the narrative
Composition and effect

Jack engages the reader in each scene through the use of conversations between the two elves. The dialogue gives extra information about the relationship between the two characters and links the action of the narrative. In the first extract, the description of the elves stretching then continuing their quest adds to the sense of stillness, clearly using the model of *The Lord of the Rings*. The verbs ‘sweating’ and ‘panting’ give the reader the feeling of heat and the length of journey being undertaken.

Jack hints that there may be more sinister events to come as he describes the way in which the elves undertake their discussion, ‘whispering’ and waiting ‘nervously’. His choices of verbs and adjectives throughout indicate that he knows how to deploy language to create and sustain the reader’s interest.

The following episodes use similar devices, creating a varied storytelling pace in the writing. The unresolved end of the story shows Jack’s sense of engaging the audience in a narrative which ends ambiguously. It shows knowledge of the use of cliffhangers at the ends of chapters or stories.

Text structure and organization

Jack has used dialogue to link events in the narrative time line and to allude to future happenings. The opening question in the first extract is used to revisit previous events in the narrative thus creating cohesion. He introduces the idea of the witch having kidnapped ‘Auntie’ by allusion rather than direct explanation, and the mystery of what has happened to her acts as another element of text structure, being resolved in the third extract as the elves realise that the witch has trapped Auntie in the cellar.

Jack’s choice of rhyming names, again echoing Tolkien’s hobbit names, creates humour and acts as a cohesive device through repetition. The characterisation is consistently sustained throughout the episodes and Jack increases tension from episode to episode.

Sentence structure and punctuation

Jack combines compound and complex sentences in the scene between the two elves, varying the sentence length to create narrative interest. In the opening section he uses complex sentences to provide further information about the characters economically and without lengthy description. In the middle section, ‘Ignoring Dobby’s advice, Bobby carried on walking’ and the two following sentences, the staccato nature of the syntax heightens the tension. Most of the sentences are correctly demarcated using commas, speech marks, full stops and ellipsis. Capitalisation of some nouns is inconsistent, though there is evidence in the first line of the handwritten extract that Jack has self-corrected on re-reading. The word processed text suggests that he is capable of redrafting successfully.

3.2.5 Summary

After what was effectively less than a term, almost three quarters of the pupils had made at least a third of a level progress in writing judged by teacher/practitioner assessments. The teachers’/practitioners’ observations also bore out this sense of noticeable rapid progress. They also noted that the pupils required less adult intervention/support when writing. Observations and analyses of the writing samples indicated that pupils’ willingness to write had impacted on the length and quality of the writing.

Improvements were noticeable across all QCA assessment focuses. Overall the writing samples analysed by the research team showed progress in writing imaginative, interesting and thoughtful texts which showed significantly greater awareness of writing for specific tasks, readership and purpose.

A striking improvement was in the way that pupils led the reader through the structure of the text using appropriate signposts and a wider range of cohesive devices. Stimulus from both video and drama was evident in the style and language choices made by the pupils, evidenced by the use of specific vocabulary, variety in sentence structure according to the style of writing required by the task and the use of complex sentences to add detail. Overall there was a high incidence of pupils being much more in control of viewpoint, voice and pace in their writing.
3.3 Classroom approaches to teaching writing

In this research, understanding of boys’ achievements in writing has been the result of extensive use of visual approaches and/or drama in the classroom. Consultancy and support from the PNS and UKLA has enabled the professionals in Medway, Birmingham and Essex LEAs to develop their classroom practice and feel their way forward into new ways of working, particularly with regard to planning and issues of speaking, listening, teaching, learning and pedagogy. Throughout the work, at twilight meetings, day conferences and half day sessions the participants shared their practice and having observed and documented the case study boys’ engagement, motivation and achievement, they also provided rich descriptions of these learners as developing writers. The interface between their enriched practice and the boys’ enhanced achievements and more positive attitudes was reflected upon by the professionals and a number of issues emerged, which are noted here.

3.3.1 Planning and pedagogy

As a result of having been involved in planning and undertaking two and three week units of work, a significant impact had been made to approaches to planning. For many, a three week block was a new way of working, which was challenging but was seen to reap considerable benefit. For example:

I hadn’t done 3 week blocks before but was able to carry ideas from one week to the next and this gave the children a more coherent learning experience and the slow build up to the writing objective really helped my young writers, particularly the boys who enjoyed the variety across time around one text.

Colleagues found that in contrast to working to weekly sets of objectives, they were involved in identifying specific long term intentions for each unit. They perceived that this enabled them to work more flexibly and creatively as they travelled towards these intentions and prompted them to listen to the children more acutely in the process. In focusing on the writing end product, they explicitly ‘built in more time to develop thinking and imagination’ and ‘planned for more time for the children to enact and perform’. There was a general sense of satisfaction in being able to cover short-term objectives within a longer time frame. Some felt that in the past, in trying to cover a range of short-term objectives, their work had been fragmented; they enjoyed what they perceived as increased flexibility to respond to the needs and interests of the children, whilst still being guided by the overall intention of the unit. Several commented on making more use of assessment for learning during the units and noted that they took more account of the children’s ideas in planning, for example in one classroom ‘the children themselves decided the final direction of the unit’. As one teacher astutely commented ‘there is a fine line between keeping to the path of the plan and adapting the plans as we travel together as a class’.

Speaking and listening

In particular, teachers/practitioners became more aware of employing speaking and listening activities to scaffold children’s learning. For example, ‘there has been a huge increase in discussion’ and ‘the children have become much more involved in the texts that we’ve read’. Several commented on the fact that more children began to take part in whole class discussion with enthusiasm. It was easier to include more relevant speaking and listening activities alongside the use of visual texts and in the context of drama as part of the rehearsal and preparation for writing. One observed ‘I’ve realised that the drama needs to match the writing in order to get the maximum from both, this has challenged the planning process’. Others commented on the opportunities for conversation and discussion offered by precise and focused video reading. It was clear that those who used drama as part of their integrated planning were beginning to choose specific drama conventions suited to the overall learning intention and that those who used visual texts were choosing specific clips and extracts to serve their teaching objectives. All were moving away from an activity oriented planning frameworks towards sculpting their planning more consciously in line with their long term intentions. Creativity and oral work were seen to be crucial in the planning process as well as the ability to work beyond the chosen text with the children through role play, drama and the use of film. Literacy lessons were more varied than usual and more paired and mixed ability group work was instigated. In addition, they were interrogating texts more actively and investigating layers of meaning in text construction.

Integrating new approaches

The integration of visual approaches and drama into literacy work was another significant feature, with the most successful teachers/practitioners weaving this work into their unit planning, rather than perceiving it as an additional element to be taught separately. For example ‘my planning now incorporates more drama – I’ve adapted it into the main part of lessons as opposed to separate from literacy lessons’. Many also recorded linking writing, drama and visual texts across the curriculum and were evidently developing their ability to make more extensive use of film and drama in cross curricular contexts, such as history and RE. It was clear that in these cases the professionals saw drama, for example, as tool for learning not as separate subject domain and were making much fuller use of it, prompted by the opportunities and support structure that the research provided.

There was a commitment to plan for a slower pace in learning, and provide more space for reflection, allowing children more time to talk before writing and more choices about how to record their work. There was a critical issue, since the perceived pressure to ensure curriculum coverage alone appeared to have been put to one side, and their priorities were recorded as working towards new ways of planning and developing the curriculum in interaction with their learners. Critical to their own plans was a preparedness to spend more time developing both drama and visual approaches. ‘I’ll be using a more varied approach to teaching as a means of motivating the children’.

The following comments represent commonly held views about including more drama in the build-up to writing:

I want to allow for ideas to be worked out through drama: explored, refined, spoken through, and I’m going to use drama as a means to scaffold writing more frequently and I can’t wait for next year…. first half term will be predominantly drama and speaking and listening. I really believe this will enhance standards, confidence and team-building within my class.

The expectation of many was that drama would become a regular – at least weekly – feature of literacy work and that in particular more work needed to be planned to prompt adults to model drama in order to support the children.

In relation to film, again there was a clear commitment to integrate the visual into the curriculum. One teacher talked about planning to use one film chosen by the children as a focus for a medium term plan. Most referred to integrating the visual, whether film, DVD, still images or pupils’ own drawings into units of work and continuing to use 3D stimuli, music and videos alongside books in the classroom for both fiction and non-fiction writing:

I have seen the difference that using film makes to motivating and involving boys and I will work to make sure it becomes part of my practice. The ‘wow factor’ works as the films are so much part of what my children know, they are starting from a stronger knowledge base.
One of the key factors for those involved in the project was the powerful impact that using the visual had not only on the pupils’ writing but also on their reading. Learning to read and re-read visual text with attention and care provided a potent framework for paying close attention to print text, too. By the end of the project the teachers/practitioners were keen to develop their own expertise about visual texts and to integrate the visual into all aspects of writing across curriculum areas.

### 3.3.2 Professional development

The adoption of different practices with regard to planning and the more extensive use of visual approaches and drama in the classroom also impacted on personal and professional development.

**Motivation and enjoyment**

The teachers/practitioners expressed an increase in personal satisfaction and pleasure in their literacy teaching, and perceived they were both freer and more assured as they travelled alongside the children on the journey towards writing.

> I feel I am being more creative when planning because I am using a new technique which inspires me to think more creatively. I’ve noticed that I seem to find it easier to include relevant speaking and listening activities alongside the use of the visual texts.

> This approach has proved motivational both for myself and the children’

> I took risks and moved out of my ‘comfort zone’ in implementing drama approaches. The children became risk-takers too in the relative security of drama – they enjoyed not having to commit to paper at this stage.

The importance of enthusiasm for writing for all concerned, including the pupils, was recognised by many and was a key feature of this work. There was some indication that increased contact between home and school was prompted through the children’s highly motivated attitude to writing. There were examples in all three LEAs of individual boys who chose to take work home and wrote extensively, surprising both parents and teachers and prompting dialogue between them.

**Looking at learning**

Another significant aspect of personal and professional development was a common awareness of ‘doing less and observing more’. This apparent paradox suggests that teachers/practitioners were standing back more and intervening less, although simultaneously they were involving the children more imaginatively and effectively. Most felt they had stopped back to some degree and had also become more highly focused on the learners and their learning, for example ‘I have moved from instructor to facilitator’ and ‘I’m backing off, handing more responsibility to the children but focusing more closely’. It was clear that many were increasingly aware that they were listening to the children more attentively, following their lead and letting them take the initiative more. ‘The children are leading and shaping their own learning much more than they used to’ and ‘I’m allowing the children to use their own learning styles and take more of the initiative’. They were aware that observing the new involvement and interest of the boys through new lenses enabled them to listen more carefully and respond to the children’s learning. This connects closely to their enhanced pedagogical understanding. They also found that the extended unit of work model had enabled them to listen more carefully and respond to the children’s learning. This connects closely to their enhanced pedagogical understanding. They also found that through the use of visual texts and the openness of drama they were building on the children’s interests, ‘spoon feeding them less’ and involving them more in the learning process, ‘I took the children’s lead and their ideas … so as to sustain their interest and not limit them’.

### Providing time to journey

A core issue emerged of a focus on less literal time allocated to writing, but more generative thinking time in the form of an extended enquiry through drama and visual approaches. This time was energetically spent in imaginative and engaging explorations of texts. Such time was significant as it allowed the teachers/practitioners to feel less hurried and to listen and learn more about individuals. It also meant that when the children did undertake writing they were unusually focused and sustained their commitment, persisting and completing their work. Allowing time for the writing to develop and giving the learners space in which to develop their ideas and move slowly and gradually towards a final piece of writing, with notes, diagrams, whiteboard work and so forth along the way clearly influenced the quality of the final pieces and partly accounted for the raised standards in writing.

**Knowledge development**

It was clear that the teachers/practitioners developed considerable knowledge of various kinds during this work; in particular there was increased pedagogical knowledge with regard to listening to the children and letting them take the initiative more. Literacy and text knowledge also increased as they 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 build a work and make it mean in imagined contexts. Prior to this research project many of the Leading Literacy teachers reported having had relatively limited experience of drama or of focused use of visual texts. They tended to use one or two techniques prior to writing, but after more specifically planned work and support it was clear that their ability to flexibly deploy drama and visual approaches in support of writing was increased and was being integrated into their practice more extensively. Examining features of texts, such as settings, themes and character in the context of a film or of a drama activity, allowed connections to be made across media.

### 3.3.3 Summary

Despite some initial concerns, the professionals tackled new approaches to planning with good will, using a more extended process of composition across units of work, with visual approaches and drama playing a key role in this process. The important role of speaking and listening in learning as a whole, and for writing in particular, became more evident as the project work continued. As they became more assured in working in this extended way, they felt that they could adapt their plans more flexibly according to the children’s interests and needs whilst still bearing in mind their long-term intentions for the unit. Over the space of one term, by working on two- or three-week units of work, they have begun to integrate drama and visual approaches in their planning and teaching.

As a result of their thoughtful planning and teaching the group became more involved themselves in the children’s learning and found the use of the different techniques and strategies both pleasurable and stimulating. Their attention has been drawn to children’s learning and they have developed considerable subject and pedagogical knowledge through this research. In particular, they have seen the value of spending time in preparation for writing.
### 4.1 A model for development

There were discernible patterns in the teachers’/practitioners’ reflections, observations and evaluations, of the project. The abstracted model below (Fig.4) identifies the key features that were present in the most successful cases, when standards of boys’ engagement, motivation and achievements in writing rose markedly. The model is oriented around the child’s willingness to learn, which was quite clearly influenced by the physical, oral, visual and imaginative elements to the learning which drama and visual approaches engendered. In addition, the children’s cultural capital was honed and developed in the classroom and new cultural capital was generated in the community of the classroom through this work.

The model also applies to the teachers/practitioners. Those who made the most progress demonstrated a similar trajectory as they developed their professional knowledge and understanding and were able to put this into practice in the classroom context. The professional learning undertaken places them in a strong position to make full use of the Teaching and Learning professional development pack when it arrives in autumn, 2004.

#### Figure 4 A model for development: pupils and teachers/practitioners

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Pupils</strong></th>
<th><strong>Teachers/practitioners</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Willingness and openness: I’m prepared to learn</strong></td>
<td><strong>Willingness and openness: I’m prepared to learn</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempted in by the texts and contexts</td>
<td>Personal, professional and cultural capital</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A repertoire of experience: I know what I want to say</strong></td>
<td><strong>A repertoire of experience: I’ve something to offer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic and engaging experience in the classroom</td>
<td>Genuine endeavour, authenticity and engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A strategic repertoire: I know how to say it</strong></td>
<td><strong>A strategic repertoire: I know what it is</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of the oral and written genre</td>
<td>Teaching approaches, pedagogical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A craft repertoire: I know how to shape it</strong></td>
<td><strong>A craft repertoire: I know how to do it</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being focused and assured</td>
<td>Planning for learning, not planning for coverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A reflective repertoire: I know how I could improve it</strong></td>
<td><strong>A reflective repertoire: I know how to improve it</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment and willingness to review</td>
<td>Evaluating my planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 4

4.2 Future teaching and whole school approaches

The participants in this research and intervention project were either Leading Literacy teachers or expert practitioners. This raises some questions about the application of the teaching model with those who are less professionally experienced. The project group may have been more motivated and open to learning than others because of their sense of having professional status. When encouraging them to take on the planning and teaching model and integrate drama and visual approaches into their teaching, it may be worth considering their personal readiness to take risks in learning. Evidence from other initiatives (Beaune, 2002; Essex Writing Project 2000 – 2004; Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth 2004 forthcoming) suggest that where professionals feel some personal commitment, their classroom practice is more likely to grow and flourish. This can, however, be equally valid for less experienced teachers/practitioners.

The timing of the project is also worth consideration. The pupils were all familiar with their teachers/practitioners as the project began in the summer term of 2004. It would be interesting to see the effect of similar work with new cohorts of pupils, as yet unfamiliar with their teachers/practitioners, and in the autumn term where progress does not generally become marked until after a settling in period. It is also worth considering how the gains made by the boys might be sustained. Although it is beyond the scope of this research, a key to raising boys’ achievement in writing must be the extent to which their increased motivation and commitment to writing can be enhanced and extended.

It was clear that the professionals involved in the project were planning to extend the approaches they had developed when working with colleagues within their schools and embed these approaches to literacy learning into autumn term planning. Several observed they were now more confident about suggesting drama and/or visual approaches to writing to colleagues. They intended to run staff meetings on drama and the use of visual stimuli, as well as developing the approaches in their classrooms in a much more cross curricular way. One noted ‘I’ll be working alongside the Year 1 teacher to ease the transition from Reception to Year 1, making sure the children continue to learn and build on what they bring in from home’. In planning to support their colleagues in becoming informed guides to pupils’ learning, the teachers/practitioners intended to place more value on the children’s ideas and to highlight the importance of starting from what the children know and enjoy. Some of them worked in schools participating in the Primary Leadership Programme and plan next year to extend this approach more widely across year groups within their schools.

For some teachers/practitioners, however, there were concerns that their best intentions might not always be supported by headteachers. The more extended approach to planning had clearly helped the approach more widely across year groups within their schools.

Throughout the period. It is also worth considering how the gains made by the boys might be sustained. Although it is beyond the scope of this research, a key to raising boys’ achievement in writing must be the extent to which their increased motivation and commitment to writing can be enhanced and extended.

Key areas for the school’s Senior Management Team when considering developing a similar project might be:

- Fitting a longer-term planning and teaching model with current practice. What changes might have to be made?
- Identifying boys who are described as underachieving. What does ‘underachieving’ mean?
- Careful analysis of existing data about writing levels. What kinds of information are most helpful?
- How can the QCA strands, focuses and bands best support the analysis?
- Surveying pupils’ perceptions and discussing findings. How might homes and parents become involved?
- Making decisions about which staff will be involved. Year teams? Pairs?
- Deciding on time-scale. What time(s) of year would be most productive?
- Identifying necessary support structures. What staff development time will be needed to discuss and share the work? How can LEA support the work, for example, in drama/visual text expertise?
- The role of the Literacy Coordinator/Subject Manager: will the work be confined to literacy sessions or planned across the curriculum?
- Links with existing school initiatives: how might this be managed alongside other developments?

4.3 Local Authorities

In analysing the professionals’ reflective observations and the writing samples, and from feedback from local meetings, the research team has kept an eye on possible differences in outcomes according to the different local authorities.

Birmingham is a large and very mixed authority in terms of schools. Most of the teachers/practitioners involved in the project were Leading Literacy teachers, although very new to that role, most having begun only in autumn 2003. A previous cohort of Leading Literacy teachers had already developed website materials based on the 3-week model, so that there was a cultural history within the authority of using the approach. Some had experience of working with the planning and teaching model; others were very new to the idea. Very few had used visual approaches before, although some were very experienced at using drama. Some worked in inner city highly multilingual schools which could be said to be in areas of significant economic deprivation, others worked in more suburban settings.

Essex is a large and highly varied authority. All of the teachers/practitioners involved were Leading Literacy teachers and some had experience of using visual approaches to teaching writing through their work with the Essex Writing Project. For others this was a new way of working. Some came from large schools, others worked in small, rural settings. Most worked in challenging schools and some had experience of the Primary Leadership Programme.

Medway is a small unitary authority and the teachers/practitioners brought a variety of professional experience to the group. Some were Leading Literacy Teachers. Some were ex MA students from Canterbury Christ Church University College and thus knew Teresa Grainger and had worked with drama before; others were very new to teaching and to drama. All were in challenging schools.

It was difficult to detect any differences in the impact of the project across each local group. In terms of the two approaches, through drama or the visual, there were no discernible differences in the progress made by the pupils in each area. There were a few teachers/practitioners who did not complete the work, but there was no consistent pattern in any one authority. It seems as though the level of previous experience had no generalisable effect. One factor influencing this generally equivalent progress may have been the clear establishment of a team structure through meetings as well as through the shared understandings between PNS and UKLA colleagues.

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<th>Section 4</th>
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The research indicates that the approach used in this project clearly builds confidence and expertise in leading practitioners. However, the effectiveness of Leading Teachers to influence others depends on their management, development and deployment within the LEA. Consultants can draw on the Leading Teachers’ expertise and Local Authority Inspectors can support them more widely within the Local Authority.

Other possibilities for LEAs to take this work forward include:

- Continuing Professional Development to exemplify the impact on writing of flexible planning models and/or of drama and visual stimuli.
- Establishing best practice models through PNS Literacy and ICT Leading Teachers and providing web links to access resources and best practice.
- Offering sample pupil perception surveys and advice on how to act on the information gathered.
- Links with colleagues in other teams, for example, learning and teaching teams or ICT teams who can offer advice on funding for hard/software, (for example interactive whiteboards, multi media projectors and DVD laptops), and to underpin the cross curricular potential of ICT, drama and visual stimuli.
- Working with KS3 colleagues to link best practice primary schools with Leading English Departments.

Developing similar projects would offer focused opportunities for informative monitoring of: training on school policy and planning; how best practice has been embedded in leading teachers’ schools and local networks; the impact of teaching approaches on key cohorts of pupils.

4.4 Professional dialogue and capacity building

There have been significantly increased opportunities for professional dialogue and capacity building at several levels and in a number of diverse and subtle ways.

4.4.1 Leading Literacy teachers

The opportunity to become involved in nationally funded research and to join UKLA appealed to the Leading Literacy Teachers. They have valued the bottom up approach encompassing teacher enquiry and have undertaken their own observation of the case study boys assiduously. The teachers/practitioners themselves have been listened to throughout, and their voices, sharing insights and challenges, have been dominant in all meetings. Many commented that this teacher research based work challenged their view of the Primary National Strategy, which some had previously seen more as making impositions on teachers. This repositioning of the LLTs as researchers and potential change agents in the country is a significant move and one which gains credence allied as it is to both PNS and UKLA. It is possible in the next phase of the research that some of these LLTs will act as consultants in other LEAs and it is a significant move and one which gains credence allied as it is to both PNS and UKLA. It is possible in the next phase of the research that some of these LLTs will act as consultants in other LEAs and will build capacity.

Their membership of the United Kingdom Literacy Association is important in this regard as it will help these individuals remain up to date and enable them to build networks and contacts.

The chance to meet and work with LLTs from other LEAs was also seen to be valuable, and a considerably wider understanding of diversity nationally has been engendered. The role of the LLTs within each of these LEAs is different and joint meetings have provided opportunities for professional dialogue around these differences.

4.4.2 LEA/PNS Consultants

The three consultants involved in the research have had to find time in their already busy diaries to fit this work in; they have done so with a willingness and professionalism that is much to their credit and have demonstrated a sound working knowledge of their LLTs. This has been markedly developed through the work, particularly since, through the use of UKLA research consultants, the PNS Consultants have unusually been able to take an occasional back seat and observe and listen to their own LLTs in action. This has been a real strength of the team teaching approach adopted within the project. The opportunity to work with other LEA/PNS consultants, to exchange LEA practice at a strategic level, and engage in professional dialogue about teaching has also been beneficial. One colleague has already been invited to speak at a UKLA regional conference and another is currently writing for the new UKLA professional magazine for teachers.

4.4.3 Regional Directors

All three Regional Directors involved in the project have reflected a deep commitment to the work and have listened closely to the teachers/practitioners as their voices have begun to reflect more confident and flexible positions. The work has been both strategic and pragmatic and the opportunity to work with LLTs and other regional and local consultants in this way has clearly been valued. The project has also created an opportunity for dialogue around a common focus with UKLA colleagues working in the academic world and has made stronger relationships between the Association and the PNS.

4.4.4 The Primary National Strategy

The project has provided important indicators of the powerful impact of collaborative initiatives, both at national and local level, between organisations established to promote literacy, institutions of higher education, Local Authorities and schools/settings and national strategic bodies. The willingness of the PNS to provide research funding has been strongly vindicated by the significant success of the project work. It has impacted not only on standards of boys’ achievements in writing but on teachers’ practitioners’ professional development and capacity; there is now a substantial body of developed professional expertise which can lead the way towards a realisation of some of the key aims of Excellence and Enjoyment through the involvement of drama and visual approaches in a planning and teaching model which demonstrably works.

The findings have implications for future PNS initiatives which might build on the established expertise and capacity of the professionals involved. In the dissemination phase it is worth considering:

- the role specification of the local organiser to ensure that there is sufficient time for the LEA organiser to support the teachers/practitioners;
- the LEA’s available finance since some LEAs have access to different pots of money according to locally and nationally identified needs;
- trying to ensure relatively close geographical trios/groups of LEAs since a joint day conference can help in the economy of the initiative;
- potential problems about analysis of writing samples since there may not be ready access to an experienced researcher, unless one of the local coordinators might be available to help analyse the writing samples.

In terms of the significant effects of this project, it is worth acknowledging the pro-active work of PNS leadership and RDs, all of whom were prepared to go the extra mile and learn from the teacher-researchers, not impose upon them. In all meetings, this was made clear and the Regional Directors and local Literacy Consultants supported the local PNS colleagues literally and through letters to head-teachers to maintain the impetus of the work and give weight and status to the project.
4.5 The research frame

The involvement of the United Kingdom Literacy Association as an external consultancy supported the work by providing alternative voices and views as well as through the research frame. The research frame gave a clear structure which allowed for comparability across the three different areas. For several reasons this project was undertaken at a breakneck speed and it is to the credit of all the teachers/practitioners and PNS colleagues involved that it was so successful. The planned dissemination will allow for a more measured planning stage for future projects.

There were concerns about the requirement to give third of level assessments about the pupils’ writing. This was partly related to the use of third of level assessments generally, but also to lack of extensive experience of the relatively new procedures of assessment using the QCA strands, focuses and bands. Another contributory factor was teachers’ general anxiety about making public judgements about pupils’ writing despite constant reinforcement of their ability to judge levels appropriately. A further concern was about the commensurability of assessments across the three areas involved. Whilst the project team attempted to allay these concerns and, in the end, appropriate level judgements were provided, future projects will need to take more account of this. On reflection, it would have been useful to ask teachers for ‘before’ and ‘after’ examples of the same text type so that the writing samples could offer numerical data according the QCA bands. However, this might have had a distorting effect on the work, since it was important not to disrupt plans for teaching a range of text types. A solution might be to ask for an across the board sample of a particular text type, probably narrative, to allow for such comparability.

Part of the Perceptions Survey undertaken at the beginning of the project showed high incidence of pupils writing by choice at home and a higher than expected level of family and parent involvement in writing at home. Future projects might usefully build in a greater focus on parents’ participation and home uses of writing.

4.6 Summary

Evaluation by the teachers/practitioners, PNS colleagues and the researchers, indicates markedly successful project outcomes. The model which formed the basis for this research has great potential for influencing approaches to teaching writing. The combination of an extended approach to teaching which required specific attention to drama and/or visual approaches has proved highly successful in raising boys’ achievements in writing. There have been significant gains in terms of professional development and the establishment of a strong core of local expertise. Although the focus was on underachieving boys, the work has also had beneficial effects on the rest of the pupils’ writing and attitudes to themselves as writers. The research findings and the model involved deserve wide dissemination. The Primary National Strategy can give significant weight to the findings and the model of teaching, and the planned website exposure will make a crucially important contribution. UKLA can equally play a key role in this process through its publications and conferences and through its wide network of membership. The collaborative nature of the research also offers a strong model for future national project work, giving status and validity for initiatives between professional associations and national institutions.

Notes

1. Leading teachers are practising classroom teachers/practitioners who have been identified as having exemplary practice. They support the work of the Local Authority in disseminating best practice.

2. There were two teachers who worked with Reception age children so that we use the terms ‘practitioner’ and ‘setting’ to describe these and ‘teacher’ and ‘classroom’ when those terms are appropriate. In more general areas we use teacher/practitioner.

3. Nursery practitioners applied the principles of the Curriculum Guidance of the Foundation Stage.
Appendix 1  Review and evaluation questions for meetings

Meeting 1

• Notes about Perceptions Survey of focus group boys
Please comment on what the survey showed. You might like to think about what you expected and whether there were any surprises. (Perceptions Survey Appendix 4)

• Notes about first writing sample
Please note any context details you’d like to record to accompany the first writing sample. You might like to let us know whether this shows the kind of writing achievement you might have expected of the focus group boys or if there are any untypical pieces. (Context sheet supplied Appendix 2)

Meeting 2

• Notes about the first Unit of Work
• Please give a brief outline of your first Unit of Work, noting any context details you’d like to record to describe your first unit of work.
• Please explain the visual texts/drama activities you involved the children in and any writing you undertook during the process of the Unit (not just at the end).

Final review meeting

Classroom approaches to writing
• What has been the effect of using drama/visual approaches to support writing?
• Have you made any (other) changes to your classroom approach to writing during your 3-week units? If so, what were they?
• Are there any aspects of the work which will influence your future teaching of writing?

Attitudes to writing/writing behaviours
• Have the focus group boys benefited from the use of drama to support writing? If so, in what ways?
• Have you noticed any changes in the boys’ attitudes to writing? What were they?
• What implications might this have for future teaching?

Improved standards
Please complete the summary sheet for your Focus Group of boys (Appendix 3).
• Has the focus group boys’ writing improved? In what ways?
• Has there been any noticeable improvement in a specific boy’s work (or more than one)? What has struck you as particularly significant?

References


Appendices

Appendixes
# Appendix 2  Context sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of writing</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Level</th>
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Comments:

Teacher/practitioner:
Year:
School:

# Appendix 3  Summary sheet for Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pre-start level</th>
<th>End of Unit 1</th>
<th>Mid-term</th>
<th>End of Unit 2</th>
<th>End of Term</th>
<th>Progress (as sub-levels)</th>
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Comments:

Teacher/practitioner:
Year:
School:
Appendix 4  Writing perceptions survey

You may need to adapt the questions for the younger classes, and decide whether you want to ask your class/focus group to fill this in as a questionnaire or respond orally.

• Do you enjoy writing? Why? Why not?
• Is there anything you don’t like about writing? (This may have been covered by responses to the above)
• Are you a good writer?
• Is there any particular kind of writing you enjoy more than others?
• Can you remember a piece of writing you did when you were younger that you were particularly proud of? Why was that?
• What’s the best piece of writing you’ve done recently? What was good about it?
• Do you ever write at home for your own pleasure? What?
• Do you ever draw at home? (This may be helpful for younger children)
• Does anyone else write or draw at home?
• What advice would you give to someone in the year below you to help them get better at writing?

At the end of the project, please ask the following:

• Do you enjoy writing? Why? Why not?
• Is there anything you don’t like about writing?
• Are you a good writer?
• What advice would you give to someone in the year below you to help them get better at writing?

UKLA

The United Kingdom Literacy Association was founded over 40 years ago. It is closely associated with the International Reading Association and with Reading Associations in many countries.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association aims to support and inform all those concerned with the development of language and literacy, to encourage them in reflection and dialogue, to challenge them in their practice and give public voice to their concerns.

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