

Raising Boys' Achievements in Literacy

This paper outlines some of the issues about boys and literacy which have informed recent debates (1). It then describes approaches taken by primary school teachers involved in the Raising Boys' Achievement Project in several local authorities and identifies some key findings. In particular, the role of speaking and listening emerge as a significant factor in raising boys' achievements in literacy.

Introduction

The 1993 Ofsted report identified boys' lack of engagement with literacy as one of the most significant factors in accounting for their lower attainment in relation to girls. Research carried out by the Centre for Language in Primary Education (now the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) into reading (Barrs and Pidgeon 1993 and Barrs, 1998) writing (Barrs and Pidgeon, 2001-2) and literacy more generally (Safford, O'Sullivan and Barrs, 2004) also reported problems of boys' motivation and a reluctance to engage with extended reading or redrafting written work. However, as the 1998 Ofsted report into gender and school performance noted, blanket statements about boys' and girls' attitudes or attainment do not help in unpicking the complexities of underachievement in certain curriculum areas (Arnot et al, 1998). Research carried out by Moss (2000) takes a rather more carefully defined look at boys' reading, suggesting the need to acknowledge that some boys do not present problems in their approaches to literacy, and the most recent Ofsted report (2003) focuses on schools where boys perform well in writing. Clearly there have been shifts in the kinds of approaches taken by researchers over the last ten years, but nonetheless, gaps remain in national scores for boys' and girls' reading – and particularly in writing.

Boys' underachievement in literacy has been described and analysed in terms of different perspectives: personal factors, such as motivation, or lack of it (Ofsted 1993 and 2003); the lack of strong male literacy models (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993); teachers' perceptions of behaviour (Myhill 2000); classroom approaches (Frater, 2000; PNS/UKLA, forthcoming 2004); the content of the literacy curriculum (Marsh and Millard, 2000) and class and ethnicity (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). The complexity of the area is matched by the range of different types of evidence which inform debate: some is based on national testing data; some on teacher research or action research; some on observational data. Alongside this variation, literacy itself is a shifting concept in the different research perspectives and evidence of achievement in literacy can be differently conceived. The products of literacy – scores on SAT reading and writing tests, for example – offer different kinds of evidence from teachers' observations of the processes of literacy and the behaviours which children have to take on if they are to become confidently literate.

The primary schools in the Raising Boys' Achievements project have provided several kinds of evidence, for example: SAT scores and trends within the schools involved; teacher assessments; pupil perceptions; classroom observations; analyses of writing and evaluative data from teachers and pupils. The research takes 'literacy' to

mean both the products of reading and writing (as evidenced by scores) and the processes of learning to become literate. In other words, it takes the dual perspective of 'teaching reading' and 'teaching writing' and a view of what is involved in 'becoming a reader' and 'becoming a writer'. Over the time schools have been working, it has become clear that local, even school-specific, situations vary greatly and have their effect on achievement and that issues about raising standards of literacy cannot be separated from wider socio-cultural issues. The diversity of the settings and circumstances of the schools involved in the project is matched by the diversity of the findings. However, the richness and variety of the work contributes to an overall picture which offers general principles as well as specific and detailed guidance.

Some surprises about reading

There were fewer schools working on reading than on writing, although in some of the project areas, early investigations showed that in contrast with national trends, boys' achievements in reading were lower than their writing scores. There are no clear explanations for this, although details from questionnaires to families suggest that male family members in these areas were less committed to school literacy than the women and girls, even though the men may enjoy home-based reading themselves. Certainly, as other research has shown, literacy is often more associated with women and girls and this may have a negative effect on boys' attitudes to school-based reading (Solsken, 1995). Another key factor arising from the early surveys indicated a high 'fear factor' where boys often said that they were embarrassed to read aloud in class. This is not in itself surprising, but the significant factor is that these responses were made by boys who had not been required to read aloud in class for several years. They seemed to be carrying deeply felt worries from early school experience. For underachieving boys, reading offered little or no satisfaction, even at key stage 1.

In response to these findings, schools have adopted a range of ways to raise boys' engagement with reading:

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

In general, the thrust has been to encourage a wider view of reading with the emphasis on what is involved in 'being a reader'. These approaches have been highly effective

in raising boys' achievements and their attitudes towards reading. There were remarkable individual improvements, but generally, the rate of progress of boys involved in the project was greater than the expected average and the gap between the boys' and girls' reading scores was significantly narrowed or eliminated.

Getting writing right

Even in high achieving schools in the project, writing was a relative weakness and the low achievers were often boys. Preliminary investigations in project schools indicated some factors which can hinder the development of boys' writing. There is a tendency for boys to draw on visual sources for their writing and less successful writers are those who fail to translate these visual images to coherent written text. Those boys who were identified as underachieving often liked writing but did not like redrafting texts or found the technical aspects of writing difficult. As with reading, there were also factors associated with fear of failure or security more generally: this can mean that boys take fewer risks with their writing. Just as significant were those responses from boys who were always dissatisfied because they never had time to generate ideas or to take a piece of writing through to a finished product to their own satisfaction.

The overall approach in project schools using strategies to improve writing has involved moving from 'learning to write' towards 'becoming a writer' – from an emphasis on technical skills towards a wider view of what writing can mean. Underlying specific strategies is an integrated approach to literacy teaching where reading, writing, speaking and listening are seen as contributing to the development of ideas for writing. As a whole, the emphasis has been on cutting into a vicious circle of boys' negative perceptions of themselves as writers and learners. Boys are all too aware of public views and are affected by media representations of them.

From the three years' work, there are indications of a good rate of improvement in boys' writing, showing similar gains to those shown in reading. Some significant factors in promoting achievements in writing can be categorised in terms of principles and organisation, the processes of writing and the teacher's role.

Principles and organisation:

- not engaging in purposeless writing – less writing, but writing which matters and which is relevant to the learners;
- the importance of 'companionable' writing through using response partners and group work;
- a move away from commercial schemes for teaching writing;
- a specifically genre-based approach across all curriculum areas where work in literacy sessions is consolidated in another subject in a systematic way;
- incorporating speaking and listening and, in some schools, ICT into literacy sessions; covering a range of writing types but also teaching (and allowing choice of) different ways to approach writing.

The processes of writing:

- enabling boys to experience writing without the initial constraints of attention to the secretarial features, for example, through using writing journals and opportunities for sustained writing, with time to generate ideas, time to improve text and ‘get it right’;
- an emphasis on talk and time to reflect - finding ways to talk about learning and literacy; more oral preparation for writing, with explicit attention to the structures of texts and opportunities to tell stories, give explanations or instructions, debate issues, before having to write narrative, procedural or persuasive texts;
- deliberate use of visual texts and visual approaches to writing and explicit discussion of how these relate to writing.

The teacher’s role

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

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

Significant classroom factors

Throughout the project’s main approaches, but perhaps most significantly in the literacy strand, key themes are: the importance of integrated, planned, systematic management and organisation – at whole school level as well as in classroom literacy teaching and learning; the valuable role of creative arts in the school curriculum and the effects of increasing confidence in learning. In terms of classroom teaching this is shown through:

- **Clarity of teaching aims and processes:** pupils knowing what they have to do at all times during a lesson where the processes of learning discussed as much as the content of lessons and connections constantly made between elements of past learning, other curriculum areas and current activities.
- **Expectations and structures:** developing a culture both by explicit discussion and implicit expectations, which gives a secure structure for learning but also allows flexibility within the structure. Pupils are expected to be responsible partners in learning.
- **Strong emphasis on group work:** where there is discussion and guidance on ways of working well in a group setting, including acknowledgement that this does not always mean agreeing, although it does mean negotiation and courtesy.
- **No unnecessary writing:** writing only required where it is central to learning. This may be formative, being used for notes, early drafts or at times revised and proofed on the way towards a polished final product.
- **Integrated planning:** literacy work which combines reading, writing, speaking and listening, including drama, and reaches out to other areas of the curriculum including the creative arts.
- **Providing for diversity:** planning for, and teaching with awareness of, pupils' different learning preferences and strengths.
- **Knowledge of pupils' abilities:** giving teachers a basis for challenging high achievers and supporting less assured learners and for varying groupings to support learning.

Some of these factors have already been discussed in research into effective literacy teaching (Wray et al, 2002; Bearne et al, 2003). However, the single most significant factor which has not previously been identified in work on effective literacy teaching to raise boys' achievements is the role of speaking and listening – in a range of different forms.

The importance of speaking and listening

In a general way, speaking and listening have for some time been identified as important for writing (Corden, 2000; Alexander, 2003). However, except for Barrs and Pidgeon (2002) and Frater (2000), little has been written in any detail about the role of talk in specifically promoting boys' achievements in literacy. The role of talk in promoting reading improvement has been even less well documented. Drama has, however, been acknowledged as useful in supporting boys' literacy (Barrs and Cork, 2001; PNS/UKLA, forthcoming 2004) and in this project, drama has been used to develop understanding of texts, for example, through role play activities to establish empathy with characters or improvisation to explore the themes of a narrative. In writing, drama has provided pupils with first-hand experiences, enabling them to write for real - or realistic – purposes.

Whilst opportunities for speaking and listening, including drama, are recognised as useful in promoting increased confidence and fluency in literacy, there are dangers in over-generalising about the role of talk. The Raising Boys' Achievement project has identified as critical both the teachers' use of language and the opportunities for pupils

to extend their spoken repertoires. It has provided detailed evidence of the importance of systematic and clearly conceptualised oral work and identified some specific approaches to speaking and listening which contribute to improvements in boys' literacy:

- ***Modelling the language of texts and of learning***: teachers automatically using specific terminology about texts and language as well as offering ways of thinking through their use of language, for example, *Why has the author chosen to use those words?*; and *What might be a way forward for this group?*
- ***Thinking aloud***: teachers sharing their thought processes and giving their own opinions, for example, *I feel that this is more effective because...* and *I can see that working....*
- ***Asking questions – teachers***: questions from teachers which are work-focused (rather than behaviour-focused) and vary between those requiring a precise response and those inviting reflection or speculation. This can be enhanced by the expectation that not everyone will have to answer all the time and that there will be chances for extended expression of opinion.
- ***Asking questions – pupils***: this was observed as a significant contributor to boys' engagement with learning. Where pupils are encouraged to formulate their own questions about learning and opportunities are created for pupils to ask questions of each other and the teacher there are gains in learning. Teacher questioning acts as a model for pupils' questions.
- ***Talk during literacy sessions***: deliberate planning for inclusion of all aspects of speaking and listening in each lesson.

The schools where boys are most successful as learners and in literacy are those where they have had consistent opportunities for different kinds of talk from very early in their schooling. This includes *informative* talk where pupils are expected to explain their ideas, knowledge or opinions, which helps them to realise what they know and gives a structure for understanding and writing informational texts. *Formative* talk - reflective, exploratory and negotiatory talk helps shape and develop ideas - particularly in group work. Working and learning together are greatly enhanced when groups know the language of negotiation and cooperation. *Performative* or presentational talk is particularly important. Although at first some boys might feel exposed by the presentational element of lessons, in a supportive and challenging environment a culture is established that it's cool to be seen publicly as good at something and that even if you might be feeling insecure inside, there can be satisfaction in taking on a challenge.

In drawing together the different findings of the project, it is clear that there are no easy answers. The schools involved are not offering quick fixes. However, their work has given some useful pointers for ways forward and raised some important issues about the crucial importance of an integrated approach to literacy and learning and one which specifically includes speaking and listening as a central feature.

Eve Bearne
University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

Notes

1. I am taking 'recent' to mean 'over the last ten years', marked by the first Ofsted report *Boys and English* which was presented in 1993

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