

Oxfordshire Boys' Writing Project Report

September 2011 – March 2012



“Writing and mark making is natural, it’s a part of life.”

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1. Introduction

The Boys' Writing Project was set up in response to concerns about boys' underachievement. Gender differences in achievement are evident in the Early Years nationally and locally, and continue through to Key stage 4. The project gave a group of practitioners the opportunity to engage in action research in their classrooms – to ask some important questions about why boys are underachieving, and to explore what works best for boys. This was the third project run in Oxfordshire, following the success of the projects run in 2009 – 10 and 2010 -11.

1.1. Aim of the project

“The qualities and skills that are most valued by schools, the ability to communicate orally and represent ideas on paper, are often the very aspects of learning that boys find most difficult.” Confident, capable and creative: supporting boys' achievements
DCSF 2007

We know that boys are as capable as girls but, in a female-dominated profession, are practitioners recognizing and responding to the boys' interests and learning styles as readily as they respond to girls?

In the EYFS *Language for Communication and Thinking* is recognized as underpinning all aspects of language and literacy. The *Writing* strand focuses on spelling, punctuation and letter formation as well as writing for different purposes, and the strand *Linking Sounds and Letters* requires children to have substantial knowledge of phonics by the end of the EYFS. There has been a lot of emotionally charged debate concerning the developmental appropriateness of some of the Early Learning Goals, specifically the ones relating to Writing. The project used classroom research to find out if carefully planned developmentally appropriate provision, based on observation and listening to boys, could raise the boys' attainment in Writing. Can we raise attainment by motivating boys to write in their play, in contexts that have meaning for them? Can we enhance practitioners' ability to teach the skills of writing to boys while maintaining the ethos of the EYFS, which is play-based and observation-led?

The project set out to explore these questions and to research:

‘How can we improve boys' motivation and attainment as writers?’

1.2 Project outline

Ten schools were invited to take part in the project. In eight of the schools, the F1 and F2/3 classes worked together on the project in order to support transitions. In one school without a nursery, only the F1 class took part. In the final school, the F1 class and the Year 1 class took part together. The head teachers in each school supported the work of their teachers, and some attended the project launch and met with the project consultant during her visits to the school.

Each class had funding for a practitioner to attend an initial launch meeting and a training day, and then to undertake action research in their classroom. The practitioners had the support of the Early Years project consultant to plan and carry out their action research. All schools completed the project.

Participating schools:

All Saints, Didcot (F1 and F2/3 classes)

Church Cowley (F1 and F2/3 classes)

East Oxford (EYFSU)

Edward Fields, Kidlington (F1 and F2/3 classes)

Glory Farm, Bicester (FSU)

Grove (F1 and Y1 classes)

John Henry Newman, Oxford (F1 and F2/3 classes)

Stephen Freeman, Didcot (F1 and F2/3 classes)

West Kidlington (F1 and F2/3 classes)

William Fletcher, Yarnton (F1 class)

The action research involved:

- Making an audit of current provision
- Making observations of the boys, to find out where they chose to go, what they chose to do, the language they used in their play, and their styles of play and learning
- Reflecting on adult interactions with the boys, particularly in child-initiated play, and the way writing was taught
- Writing an action plan based on findings from their audits and observations
- Making and evaluating the changes that were made and planning next steps

1.3 Documenting the project

Portfolios

Each school created a portfolio documenting the action research, which included

- Action research documents: audits, action plans and an end of project summary
- Observations of the children
- Photographs of the children
- Photographs and evaluations of specific activities that worked well

Case studies

Each school also chose two boys to observe closely during the project, and to make interventions to improve the boys' motivation and attainment as writers.

This publication is a summary of the main findings of the Boys' Writing Project 2011-12.

2. Project report

'How can we improve boys' motivation and attainment as writers?'

2.1 Stage 1: Auditing provision and practice

At the beginning of the action research project, practitioners made an audit and evaluation of current provision and practice. The following summary points are taken from the project reports written by lead practitioners.

The Unique Child

Observations of the boys were made – all boys and the case study boys specifically - to get a better understanding of where boys chose to play, and their styles of play, needs and interests. When practitioners moved away from making simple 'tick list' observations for their assessments and started to make open observations of the boys in their self-directed play, they got to know the boys better and they learnt about the kinds of things that fascinated them - such as rocket man, blog stations, sinking sand and other things that are outside the experiences of most Early Years practitioners!

They found that:

- *Boys often chose to play outside*
- *They engaged in a lot of action play*
- *They played 'on a large scale'*
- *Their play involved lots of instructions and negotiation*
- *They rarely chose to mark make or write in their play*
- *They often found it hard to concentrate during adult led activities*
- *Some boys liked to be in charge*
- *Some boys lacked confidence and needed a lot of reassurance*
- *Most boys were reluctant to mark make in their play*
- *Some of the boys had poor fine motor skills*
- *Some boys had some language delay*

"He's a classic boy: wriggling and jiggling!"

The Enabling Environment

Resources audit

Each school made an audit of their resources and areas of continuous provision, to see how effective the environment was in stimulating and motivating boys to write.

What did the audits show?

There were some positive findings. Some of the project schools had good resources. Some found that they had a good choice of resources inside but not outside. They all found areas of the continuous provision that could be developed. A common theme was lack of variety and flexibility and in some places resources weren't organised well or freely accessible.

Comments were made such as:

- *Our writing area needed re-invigorating and re-organising*
- *Many of our resources were not being used effectively for mark making*
- *Boys rarely went to the writing area – they chose computers, construction and model making*
- *Mark making was mainly at tables*

- *There wasn't much child-initiated mark making*
- *We needed to develop outside area*
- *We needed more dressing up clothes for boys*
- *Children's independent writing wasn't displayed enough*

"The project has made us consider the boys more, it comes naturally once you're in the habit."

Learning and Development

Practitioners used the findings from their audits and observations to reflect on their planning and the way adults interacted with the boys, especially in child-led play, to motivate them to write and help them to practice their newly learned skills. Findings included:

- *We limited the number of resources available to the children*
- *Activities were being chosen by adults*
- *Mark making needed to be encouraged and facilitated throughout the curriculum*
- *Routines break play up too much*

Jamie: "When I get really angry I turn into a dinosaur, when I'm angry and sometimes I chase people."

2.2 Stage 2: Action planning

The process of auditing provision and observing boys gave practitioners the chance to think in depth about their current provision and practice as a whole staff team. For many, there was a significant mismatch between what they were discovering about the boys' natural learning styles, and their provision, particularly in the Reception classes. For example, although they knew that boys (and girls) learn best when they can be active, when their learning has real purpose for them, when they can move from inside to outside and can initiate their own play, there was still a belief that children need to sit down on the carpet or at a table to be taught writing (usually seen

by teachers as letter formation and phonics) in a group. The fact that boys might be motivated by superhero play or gun play was acknowledged but this type of play was generally marginalized. It was tolerated, but not always used effectively to enhance learning. The findings motivated practitioners to buy new resources, move existing resources around, and come up with new and exciting ideas when they were planning activities. Some schools changed their timetable to free up an adult to observe and support children's play.

Action plans points included:

The Unique Child

- *Make time to track and to observe the boys inside and outside*
- *Plan with the children and from their interests*
- *Have more activities that will excite and sustain the interest of the boys*

Positive Relationships

- *Create a display board for children's independent writing eg' Star writers' board, so children can share their success with parents and peers*
- *Introduce a message board*
- *Give lots of praise for attempting independent writing*
- *Develop transitions between the F1 class and Y1, and the feeder pre-school*
- *Have workshops for parents on early writing and make writing packs*

The Enabling Environment

- *Regularly replenish the writing area*
- *Make the writing area more appealing, for example, developing a space theme around the writing table*
- *Make writing resources accessible in all areas*
- *Add 'writing on the move' resources*
- *Give children large sheets of paper, on and under tables, on the floor, on the walls, inside and outside*
- *Ensure unrestricted access to a variety of writing resources in all areas*
- *Change the timetable to allow more time for free flow play*

- *Introduce a role play area for Y1*
- *Develop the outside area and improve storage outside*
- *Create a writing station outside*
- *Incorporate a writing area into the role play area, rather than having it nearby*
- *Put mats outside where children can write,*
- *Put wallpaper up where children can draw design ideas, for example, for den building*
- *Have activities to develop fine motor skills in the creative area*

“Large pieces of paper have made a *massive, massive* difference.”

Learning and Development

- *Give children plenty of reasons to write*
- *Have more flexible opportunities to write – a better range of reasons and in different spaces, for example on the floor*
- *Provide opportunities for writing in daily routines, for example self-registration, turn taking lists*
- *Develop writing in role play*
- *Develop links between oral and written language, with adults scribing for the children*
- *Develop the way adults support writing in play*
- *Free an adult to support children in their play*
- *Have more modelling of writing behaviour by adults*
- *Introduce ‘Have a go’ books and independent journals for all children, to use when and how the children want*
- *Do more storytelling to help children develop ideas for writing – introduce a storyteller’s chair*
- *Develop the role of adult by giving all staff responsibility for enhancing mark making and other learning in a specific area*
- *Have training for all staff on how children learn to write*

- *Find out more about movement and play “as movement is a child’s first language and is the building block to enable a child to physically write.”*

The impact of the training

The training day ‘*There’s a proper, real tarantula in the toilet!*’ Supporting boys’ learning in the EYFS helped practitioners to come up with thoughtful and creative ways to implement their action plans.

“Personally I stepped back and spent a lot more time watching and listening. This felt like a luxury but it’s integral to all of us as FS practitioners. Blocking out ‘external’ pressures was difficult but it has paid off, with boys becoming writers from the ‘inside out’ rather than the ‘outside in’.”

The training encouraged practitioners to:

- *Make more observations*
- *Collect evidence from children’s independent work*
- *Plan for the boys based on observations*
- *Put writing resources in role play areas to encourage writing in contexts that have meaning for the children*
- *Model writing in a range of contexts*
- *Have more fine motor skills activities and role play*
- *Establish an outdoor writing station*
- *Give a questionnaire to all FS staff asking about their confidence, knowledge and training needs*
- *Train all support staff*

2.3 Stage 3: Evaluation: what was the impact of the project? ‘How did we improve boys’ motivation and attainment as writers?’

“He is a much happier and more confident boy”

At the end of the project there was evidence in all of the schools to show that more boys engaged in mark making confidently, independently, spontaneously and in their play, not just in planned activities. The boys were using their writing skills at different levels – some were enjoying mark making and giving meaning to marks, some were making attempts at writing sentences, applying their phonic knowledge, others were starting to write CVC words, others were writing their names and letters from their names. There was a general agreement among the project practitioners that the boys now understood that they were writers, and were aware of what they could do. They were no longer afraid to ‘have a go’.

The Unique Child

- *More children are using role play areas, and their play is better after adults model writing behaviour*
- *Boys enjoy mark making outside on large cardboard boxes, sitting in unusual positions – not at a table!*
- *Two boys who showed no interest in mark making are now highly motivated, and now bring in writing they’ve done at home*
- *Boys enjoy labelling models*
- *Boys are more enthusiastic about writing and they take great pride in writing for a purpose*

Positive Relationships

- *Most children are motivated to put work on the ‘writers’ wall’*
- *Celebrating children’s writing was a great motivator – enjoying praise from their peers*
- *Children are bringing in writing from home*
- *The parents’ phonics workshops were well received. We had positive comments from parents who are now better informed*
- *Having a male role model (librarian) “was a real turning point” for some boys, seeing an adult male engaging with the learning environment in a positive way*

- *“Parents learnt about mark making and writing anytime any place.”*

The Enabling Environment

- *The outdoor writing box has been a success, particularly as the children were involved in planning what went into it. The children continually ask for it!*
- *Writing belts, clipboards and writing toolboxes are very popular and have ‘most impact on writing for boys and girls’*
- *Writing on whiteboards is popular because of the temporary nature of the writing*
- *Writing frames made it easier to introduce writing into play*
- *Resources outside are used well now*

Learning and Development

- *Adults are modelling writing and play more*
- *Adults are responding to children’s interests more and using them in planning*
- *Adults are more involved with children’s imaginative play, offering ideas and challenges*
- *Staff more flexible and aware of opportunities for introducing writing into play*
- *Scribing has helped children see purposes for writing and they know that their writing and comments are valued. Children are more inclined to talk to adults and children about their writing*
- *Children are motivated in phonics sessions because they see a purpose for learning sounds*
- *Training has helped all staff support children to write independently, rather than copy write*
- *All staff have a better understanding of how to support writing in play, so that opportunities aren’t lost*
- *There’s now lots of writing in role play themes*

Attainment

“Now the boys are confident with the majority of their sounds, they are beginning to use these in their writing.”

- *There has been an improvement in EYFSP scores*
- *The F1 boys have made better progress in LSL than the girls between October 2011 and Jan 2012. In writing boys are closing the gap*
- *The FSP scores have increased, with some significant rises for focus children in Writing*

One Ofsted inspection took place during the project, in February 2012, making the following comment:

“The considerable focus given ... to developing children’s early reading and writing skills is ensuring that reception children are on course to meet national averages by the end of the academic year.” (John Henry Newman)

2.4 Stage 4: What next for the practitioners?

“Keep going! All of the staff felt that writing needed to be ‘everywhere’ – just part of what we do everyday with real purpose and the kind of writing where children are ‘in charge’ and not put under pressure of any kind to ‘produce.’”

- *Sustain the writing area*
- *Make books with the children*
- *Continue to plan ‘opportunities for boys’*
- *Continue to develop outside area*
- *Ongoing staff training*
- *Continue to develop the role of the adult in supporting learning in play*
- *Develop links with the Children’s Centre to develop parent partnership*

- *More parent workshops - to make capes!*
- *Make portable writing sets in lunchboxes*
- *Share knowledge and ideas with all staff*

3. What next for Oxfordshire?

The project has had a very real impact on provision, practice, children's positive dispositions, and attainment. Possible future developments could include:

- Dissemination of the project findings to the Early Years advisory team
- Dissemination of the project findings to practising teachers and EYPs at Oxford Brookes
- A Forum talk and Step into Training courses to reach a wider audience
- Area networks led by practitioners to disseminate their action research

4. Practitioners' last words - what worked well in getting boys writing?

Comments from practitioners show how the project had an impact on all aspect of EYFS provision and practice. The project had an impact on:

...practitioners

"It just really opens your eyes to good practice!"

"It's all about modelling!"

"It's planting the idea there!"

"Everybody is more aware of bringing mark making into the play."

"We take it a step further now."

...the enabling environment

"All the children enjoy discovering the resources in hidden areas of the garden (where they like to play). Staff are confident in going into these areas and the children have enjoyed explaining to staff about their play – there's a lot more talking about play now!"

"Mark making and writing resources are available everywhere, all the time."

"We're following their interests."

... on the children's learning and development

"The children are more engaged."

"Children's attitudes are changing already. They're more 'can do'."

"Constant celebration of his writing has given him confidence and something has just clicked."

He "demonstrates a stronger purpose for writing – he hardly ever puts his clipboard down!"

"He incorporates writing into his play."

"He's willing to have a go at activities and takes great pleasure in his accomplishments"

"The boys are heavily involved in Star Wars games, now they have moved on to making books about these games. They needed to spend weeks in role play before recording it!"

"We found that giving children time, not cluttered with too many group sessions, resulted in more independent writing."

"Adult modelling of writing behaviour gave children a purpose for their writing and the celebration and 'publishing' of children's work gave them the incentive to write."

And of course:

"The girls are also benefitting from this."

Let's teach the way children learn!

We learnt from the projects that boys in particular, but all children, learn better when we build our provision on an excellent understanding of how children develop and learn *typically* (from a knowledge of child development) and *as individuals* (from observations); and when we harness and channel their natural energy, exuberance and curiosity, rather than trying to suppress these powerful learning forces.

Many of the things that we learnt were obvious in hindsight, simple to implement, enjoyable for children and practitioners – *and* they resulted in significantly improved attainment for boys in writing!

Finally, ten top tips to get boys writing (and one extra!)

1. Adults who understand how children learn to write and can support children at all stages of their writing
2. Follow boys' interests
3. Male role models
4. Stimulating environments that children want to explore
5. Celebrate all kinds of mark making and writing
6. Engage the parents
7. Big paper!
8. Exciting and accessible resources
9. Real life experiences
10. Opportunities to talk first... then write
11. Extended time for activities