

2 | EXPLORATION OF METHODS TO MOTIVATE WHITE BRITISH BOYS TO WRITE



Isobel Apsey
Kidbrooke Park Primary School

1. | INTRODUCTION

I began my teaching career in the school in which my project took place and have taught across Key Stage 1 and 2 for four years. I am a year 2 class teacher of a class of 28 children. This research was carried out in larger than average primary school in South East London. In my classroom, the competency of the pupil's writing varies greatly. Part of my role as a teacher is to judge the attainment of the children according to the 2017 Key Stage 1 SATs criteria which is further moderated for accuracy by senior leaders. Throughout my teaching career, the skill of teaching children how to write has been a key part of my practice that I have continued to refine as I believe high quality writing should be incorporated in to all areas of the curriculum. When I started my teaching career I focussed closely on what aspects of punctuation and grammar the children had to demonstrate within their writing. Developing my initial curriculum knowledge was what led my practice in regards to the sequence and content of literacy lessons.

Later, when I had developed my curriculum knowledge of writing across key stage 1 and 2, I used feedback from observations and had opportunities to watch other teachers to develop my "modelled writing." Modelled writing is when the teacher demonstrates in front of the class the writing process while verbalising the choices of the writer and taking suggestions of pupils to involve them in the process. This reflects the explanation of Cremin and Myhill (Cremin and Myhill, 2012) who explain the role of the teacher as facilitating dialogue about the compositions of text, enabling the pupils to use the skills they already know. I refined my lesson plans to include detailed models ensuring that what I modelled to my class during a writing lesson was an extended paragraph with specific focus on how I had included the grammar, punctuation and vocabulary that had been explicitly taught during 20 minute SPaG lesson. Modelling writing is an accepted approach to teach writing as is it believed that a classroom with dialogue about the writing process establishes "a healthy environment in which writers can flourish," (Cremin and Myhill, 2012). Using this method of teaching was praised and I began to see more children using the aspects of writing I was assessing the children's writing against which meant more children were starting to make progress in writing. However, writing in the school had been raised as a key area where performance was not as strong across the key stages. The Key Stage 1 data in July 2016 demonstrated that the percentage of children writing at the age related standard was 72%. This was in contract to the Royal Borough of Greenwich where 76% of pupils were writing at the expected standard in the Key Stage 1 SATs. Furthermore, the pupils in school that were writing above the National Standard was 18% while in the Royal Borough of Greenwich this was 24%. This comparatively low data was despite the school making 3.5 points in progress in writing. This is "well above the national average" of 2.3 to 2.7. This data shows that while the children are not achieving the average expected standard they are making better progress. Rate of progress is measured because it recognises the achievements of schools, regardless of the attainment of the pupils, that may be in a more "challenging circumstance" (Department for Education, 2016).

2. | AREA OF CONCERN

This project aims to improve the writing by achieving higher writing levels for the White British Boys in my class. My action research project was trying to find methods of motivating these pupils to write. When I inherited my class of 28 pupils in September 2016, I identified that boys were not achieving as well in writing which is a strand of the national curriculum pupils are assessed in for the Key Stage 1 SATs. This directly correlates with the data collected by Cassen and Kingdon (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007) which shows that “nearly half of all low achievers are White British males.” Two of these fifteen boys in my class were EAL (English as an Additional language.) While they often spoke Russian and Lithuanian at home their understanding of English is generally fluent and the grammar mistakes in their writing were consistent with the issues presented by the monolingualistic boys. Another pupil who joined the class spoke no English and therefore his understanding of writing was delivered in a completely differentiated method. Through my assessment of their writing and while moderating with senior leaders at my school, we identified the gaps in these boy’s writing outcomes. The consistent issues were not writing at length, poor handwriting that did not match the criteria for the expected standard and they often could not form grammatically correct sentences with the correct spelling and punctuation that they are assessed against according to the Key Stage 1 SATS Writing criteria. Therefore, I thought that I would identify which methods are most effective motivating the boys to write at length and present grammatically correct work that would fit the expected level for their assessments.

To use action research methods to investigate how to accelerate the progress of White British Boys Writing in a Key Stage 1 class.

Objectives

- 1) To implement and observe which topics enthuse the pupils and encourage them to write: so they can “flourish” (Cremin and Myhill, 2012).
- 2) To explore methods of motivating pupils to write at length.
- 3) To use data from my project and wider literature to improve my practice.

3. | METHODOLOGY

I based my research on the action research model which involves a number of cyclical stages at illustrated in figure 1(Altrichter et al. 2007). This also illustrates the importance of the researcher’s reflections and how this must inform their actions. Carr and Kemmis (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) explain that action research improves the understanding of the practice by practitioners and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. The reflections I made were based on my readings and also the collaborative discussions I had which helped build the crucial actions in my project. These actions based on my research was situated within my classroom with the aim to understand and have a definite change on my teaching and the learning outcomes of the pupils. (Pine, 2009).

Action research addresses problems identified by the practitioner and are designed to fit a flexible, quick timeframe so that results have practical rather than theoretical significance and can be used to improve the immediate practice (Mertler & Charles, 2008). A difficulty I had carrying out my research was allocating specific time within my classroom to allow the pupils to write at length to an audience they chose which was outside the curriculum set by my school. However, through advice and creating a timetable with my peers based on a previous action research project I was able to facilitate this without affecting the quality of outcomes for writing which had been set previously.

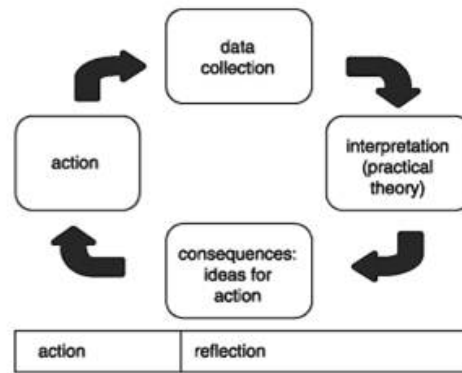


Figure 1 - The action research cycle (Altrichter et al, 2007, 12)

Action research has a contextual approach as it “tries to involve all affected parties.” (O’Brien, 1998 p. 7) I found this to be the case thanks to my project as, while the aim was to motivate groups of pupils in my class to write, it also provoked a change in my teaching practice and even when approaching methods of promoting progress in different subjects my actions are prompted by the action research cycle of research and action. This corresponds with the belief of Hine (Hine, 2013) who provided multiple reasons how action research carried out by teachers “has been directly linked to the professional growth and development of teachers.” (p. 152) Furthermore Bogdan (Bogdan et al. 1992) explains how an aim of action research is to develop the lives of everyday people by researching where improvements can be made. Through my research on the groups of White British Boys that were the focus of my project this was clearly a pertinent issue as while improving their motivation to write is clearly an issue that can build progress for this group, being literate without doubt the key aim of all primary school teachers for their students.

While action research suited my research as it had a direct impact on my teaching of writing, there are a range of criticisms. For example, some question qualitative data as “there is no clearly defined set of quality criteria available for judging it” (Hammersley, 2007, p 287) as it is interpreted principally by the practitioner who, in my context of observing pupils in my classroom, will base interpretations of the data taken from observations and therefore constructs their own sense of reality (Pine 2009). This can lead to a biased interpretation of the data which lack objectivity, a conclusion that could not be drawn from quantities data which presents conclusions drawn from outcomes which are no open to interpretation. This led to my choice to interpret the pupil’s motivation to write using a number of methods. I would observe their actions and measure their enthusiasm against a set of criteria. In order to ensure my observations were sound I shared these with peers. Furthermore, I asked pupils to raise their hands if they wanted to sue the letter writing corner which would present me with numerical data which could be tracked.

4. | DATA TO INFORM THE ACTION

Data tracking the progress of pupils was tracked throughout the year which led to the concern within my school was that the data showed that White British Boys were not attaining the expected level in writing, and furthermore, within Key Stage 2, their rate of progress was below average. Data in schools is categorised according to a range of factors because, while low achievers can come from a range of backgrounds, it can be traced according Cassen and Kingdon by “variety of outcomes by gender and ethnic group” (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). The issue within the context of my school which is mirrored throughout the borough of Greenwich is that White British Boys are not making progress in their writing. It is important to note what the possible reasons for this could be. One possible factor as explained by Cassen and Kingdon (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007) could be

that children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are more likely to not achieve in school. To be eligible for FSM means that the careers of the child receive income support which can indicate socio economic disadvantage. Asking for the breakdown of children in my class showed me that none of the White British Boys in my class were receiving FSM. This surprised me therefore I took steps to understand the reasons for this and through talking with colleagues and further reading I understand that children in KS1 are unlikely to be registered for FSM as they all already receive free meals. Possibly, even though the child could benefit from the additional money and resources that FSM provide, the carer will not apply for this support as they receive free meals regardless of socioeconomic status. This raised a concern for the school as it was discussed that we may not have a full understanding of the home environments of the pupils and what additional needs we may need to accommodate for in regards to their emotional care. Rodriguez (2012) found in their study that there are a significant number of children who are entitled to FSM who are not taking this up. It was measured in 2016 that Greenwich is ranked as the 14th most deprived borough of London with 26% of the children living in poverty. It is fair to assess then that it is likely that while some of the white British boys in my class are not receiving FSM (and therefore more likely have low academic achievement) they may be eligible for FSM or living in poverty while not receiving this support.

Cassen and Kingdon (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007) present a further reason that could explain the low achievement of boys academically. Highlighted were ways that more "boy friendly" features could be introduced to inspire a more literary culture for these pupils who may have low self-esteem in this area or have an "anti-education" stance. It is explained that as boys are disengaged with school it is the role of educators to find methods of allowing the boys to participate in their learning and giving them a voice.

My actions to change my practice around the teaching of writing and improve the progress in boys writing were based on the views of Williams and Williams (Williams and Williams, 2013) that "motivation is probably the most important factor that educators can target in order to improve learning." What followed was research as to how I could implement this in my classroom in order to motivate.

Following the work of Williams and Williams (Williams and Williams, 2011) I identified the importance of intrinsic motivation and a number of aspects that I could use to design actions in order to stimulate change in my classroom. When the project started the intrinsic motivation for pupils to write was lacking as they outcomes for topics were often set by the senior leadership team who had created a "curriculum map". This included intrinsically motivating the pupils by involving them in activities I prepared, using their curiosity as a reason to participate and encouraging in social interaction through the activity. The role of the teacher is recognised as a big influence on the motivation of pupils in managing the learning of students within a secure environment which must allow an understanding for any needs the pupils which are beyond the control of the school. For instance, if the pupil's hierarchy of needs as set out by Maslow (Maslow, 1943) regarding their regarding physical or emotional safety is not being met by their careers, this can make it more difficult for the pupil to learn. The relevance of the content as prepared by the teacher is a further factor in motivating students.

Williams and Williams (2011) go on to explain that a motivating factor for pupils is the relevance of the topic to their experience with the chance for the pupil to make choices which can influence the outcome of the work. Finally, the physical environment which the pupils are using must be safe and accessible. This should lead to the emotional environment within which the pupils are encouraged to learn from their mistakes while my role as the teacher is to build their self-esteem.

From this research on a range of factors which can intrinsically motivate pupils I implemented actions in my class room over the year with the intention to see if the progress of white British boy's writing would improve. Furthermore, I conducted semi structured interviews with pupils in my class to gain an understanding of their home literacies. I used this as inspiration for the interviews and as a method of discovering their experiences outside the classroom as I hoped to discover a starting point for motivational activities. Also, following an action research project I had completed in the previous academic year I found the home literacies of pupils to be a factor of paramount importance when identifying how your classroom practice can become more accommodating and therefore an environment for pupils to make progress. The data collection technique I used to collect this initial evidence for how to find life experiences to motivate the pupils were through semi-structured interviews.

I conducted 28 informal interviews with groups of two to three pupils that lasted up to ten minutes. I planned a short interview guide with a combination of open and closed question to guide the conversation while inviting open discussion. The interviews were conducted in the classroom at times when other pupils were engaged with independent learning. An advantage of holding these interviews as an initial act within my research was that I had the opportunity to discuss in detail and follow lines of enquiry with the pupils about their opinions and experiences of writing. This was a new experience for me so I was interested to hear their views and understand how I could use these. Furthermore, the pupils were keen to share and discuss their views. They were not answering in ways in which they thought they would please me as the teacher and therefore, as they were forthcoming and candid with their answers, my research was able to take on a strong direction once I had identified themes within their responses. Cassell and Symon (Cassell and Symon, 2004) recognise the advantage of participants in interviews being enthusiastic to share their views with interested outsiders. This mirrors how as well as being interested in learning more about the children for the first time, the pupils were keen to have their experiences and opinions heard even without necessarily understanding that their responses would have a direct impact on their future experiences.

There are disadvantages to this method of semi-structured interviews. A key issue regarding conducting interviews is that they require skill to be conducted thoroughly. Boyce and Neale (Boyce and Neale, 2006) explain how researchers should follow an interview protocol to ensure consistency between participants. This included, for example asking "factual questions before opinion questions" (Boyce and Neale, 2006) which while I did follow a general structure thanks to my interview guide, I did not allocate my questions according to this. Further to this recommendation, it is advised by Alshenqeeti (2014) that interviews should last at least half an hour in order to fully pursue lines of enquiry and allow the interviewee to respond fully to the questions. As described, earlier, my interviews with the pupils did not last this long. This is a constraint of being simultaneously the researcher and teacher of these pupils. Not interrupting the learning of pupils is of utmost importance to me in role as the teacher. Therefore, I knew I had to manage the learning of pupils in a crucial SATs year with my gathering data for a research project. Despite the limitations of conducting these semi structured interviews they were invaluable in leading me to take the action of creating an environment in the classroom where pupils would imitate their home literacies of writing letters.

I decided to use observations to evaluate the motivation of the pupils to write. I wanted to know that after being "chosen" to take part in the corner, a novelty in the classroom which may not maintain their enthusiasm, they were engaged in the activity for a prolonged period of time. The data collection method of observation is unobtrusive and would ensure I did not distract them from independent writing. (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Despite being able to use observation as a method of data collecting within the classroom and not distract the pupils from working, I was

aware that they provide a snapshot of the whole situation; as my role as a class teacher had to be balanced with leading the class during the guided reading session which also took place at this time meaning that key aspects of their behaviour may have been missed while attention was directed at other pupils. (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). My observations were based around a number of criterion. These observations were used to evaluate the effectiveness of my action, therefore were a crucial part of the action research project where the practitioner reflects on their action which in turn leads to further action.

Ethics

I had a discussion with the executive head teacher of my school to gain ethical approval for my research. I was conducting research on children which is a high risk group and would also be gathering information from them on their perceptions of their home literacies. For these reasons I was obliged to abide by higher ethical guidelines. Through my observations of advised classroom practice I did not cause and emotional harm on the children. Before asking questions of the children's writing habits outside school I asked for verbal consent that they wanted to respond to the questions. All responses are anonymised and confidential as explain by the Data Protection Act (Data Protection Act, 1998) by BERA (BERA, 2011). In reference to the ethical guidelines put forward by BERA (BERA, 2011) I undertook every recommendation in order to remove undue scrutiny on the pupil. I took specific caution when asking pupils about their home lives.

5. | ACTION

Letter Writing Corner

I collected a number of ideas from my readings to inform practice that would motivate White British Boys in my class to write using different methods throughout the year. This included an action I took which was informed by my reading of Williams and Williams (Williams and Williams, 2011) who provide examples of how novel experiences in the classroom can inspire pupils. This prompted me to create a 'Letter Writing Corner' of my classroom in the summer term. This required a restructure of the classroom to allow for a table and chairs, display board to ensure this was a distinct part of the classroom and space for the resources needed to post the letter, paper, envelopes, stamps and post boxes. The novelty of this new area in the classroom did bring about excitement in the pupils. No other classrooms in the school had this as part of their environment, nor had there been any space set aside in the classroom before for independent activities such as this. The children all went over to the corner when they first entered the room, asking lots of questions and interacting with the resources such as the stamps and the times on the post box. I believe that this distinct area can be compared to the book corner which is undoubtedly a main area of many primary classrooms. Lockwood (Lockwood, 2008) explains how an inviting and engaging book corner should be used to promote reading for pleasure and following my action research project I believe that creating a distinct book corner and writing area should be a priority for teachers who aim to create a literary rich classroom.

The use of this space by the pupils was facilitated during 25 minute Guided Reading sessions from 9.05 am where I would conduct a hands up survey to track who wanted to write a letter (See Table 1). I explained to the pupils that not everyone would be able to use this space every time they put up their hands as the majority of the class were keen to engage in this activity and the space did not facilitate more than six children writing at a time. However, even if not every child had the opportunity to write every time, I was still able to track their motivation and willingness to write unprompted by taking their names down each morning when they put up their hands. Lengnick-

Hall and Saunders (Lengnick-Hall et al. 1997) explain the importance of pupils becoming responsible for the outcome of the activity they are set and this prompted me to allow the pupils to choose to take part in this activity. If I set this up on the basis of a rota I was aware that some pupils may not have someone they wanted to write to or a topic in mind for that day and I wanted these to be part of what motivated them to write without adults promoting for up to 20 minutes. As this Letter Writing Corner was set up in the final term, the pupils already had a sound knowledge of the layout of features of a letter so I did not take time to explain these elements when explaining how the letter writing corner was to be used however the display did have some examples of letters as a non verbal prompt for including features such as an address or date which some children did include.

I allowed the pupils to choose who they wrote the letter to. This was in order for them to create their own connection with this letter writing activity. Frey and Fisher (Frey and Fisher, 2010) believe that including the lives of students can motivate them. This led me to explain to the pupils that they can choose who they write to “for example a friend in class, your family, another adult in school or someone in your head like a book character.”

6. | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

From my initial semi structured interviews with the class I identified that the White British Boys were unlikely to write at home. Any writing was most likely to be a card to a family member, friend or imaginary characters, for example Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy. I found this a stark difference to the writing that they are required to do in school which is almost often writing for the teacher to later mark in their literacy books with the varied outcome being sometimes the work would be displayed: an authentic outcome is rare. Furthermore, the outcomes across the curriculum are set by the senior leaders, removing any agency or personal experiences of the children being included. I wanted therefore to bring their home experience of writing to an audience and place this in an educational setting which is what led to the letter writing corner. This was where children could choose an audience to write a letter to about a topic of their choice. I was aware that often the letters or cards they were writing at home were prompted by an event, either a birthday or other life experiences however I chose not to give any direction to the pupils regarding the content of their letter as this may have removed the motivation to write their letters as a “source of self expression” (Williams and Williams, 2010, p12).

The children have had their writing ability judged according to 2017 Key Stage 1 SATs criteria which correlated with my teacher assessment at the end of the academic year and was moderated by senior leaders. Using the hands up survey asking “who wants to write in the letter writing corner this morning” I was able to map the trends in table 1.

| | Boys Below Age Related Expectations in writing | Boys At Age Related Expectations in writing | Boys Exceeding Age Related expectations in writing |
|---|--|--|--|
| Number of times pupils wanted to write a letter (out of 56) | 4 children: 45 49 35 (EAL) 0 | 10 children: 6 35 21(had a 15 day absence) 50 14 (EAL) 10 (EAL) 25 (had a 14 day absence) 50 37 47 | 1 child: 7 |

Table 1 - Number of times boys asked to write a letter (using initials)

This demonstrates how the combined methods of motivating the pupils through novelty and choice of audience and topic in their letter did have an effect in motivating the pupils to ask to write. What I found particularly interesting was that the children working below the age related standard were more likely to engage with this activity which is in stark contrast to the child who was writing above expectations who infrequently asked to write a letter. The letter corner for the pupils created a very different and unique writing experience for the children which was prompted by their home experiences and also removed my assessment of their writing from the activity. Once the letter was written the children would seal it in an envelope and post it through a pretend letter box. They extended this role play with the knowledge that I was looking at the letters so I would know who to deliver it to. This kept with any ethical concerns that the children knew these letters were not confidential and they all understood that I would be accessing their content but with a different purpose; to deliver not to assess. This may be a factor in explaining why the less able children were more willing to write in this setting than I often experienced in literacy lessons where they needed prompting from an adults and reinforcement of their plans for the content or vocabulary.

Use of Letters as a Method of Communication

A further interesting aspect of this project was that I could identify themes in the content and audience of the pupil's letters. The letters were revealing of the children's personalities and experiences. They wrote requests such as *"Will you be at Gamers house on Friday? If yes make sure you bring RED and BLUE cake on FRIDAY this week,"* and *"Can you Play with me later? ill make you the Leder because yor won ov my best frents."* Another example was one child listing up to five the positive qualities of his parents and explaining how he always listens to them ending with *"but please buy me a PS4 and Nintendo? If you would Id really appreciate that."* The negation skills the pupils are demonstrating are impressive and had not been part of the outcomes they created for work in their literacy lessons showing how the authentic experiences prompted them to write at length using skills that had been taught in contexts which were meaningful for them. Examining these letters which the pupils were moved to write demonstrates how they used the letters writing corner to *"exploit the opportunity offered by writing"* which Dombey (2013) also recognises as a function of writing that children develop.

While these quotes demonstrate how the children can use language to try and have an effect on their reader, they have spelling and grammar errors that would be below the expectations of Key Stage 1 SATs criteria for expected writing. Were these identified in their work in a literacy lesson, my marking would direct the children to the error and they would correct it. However this was not my role in this activity. Therefore, I would use the letters to find common errors which would then inform my SPaG lessons and I would ensure I emphasised the trends in my modelling in Literacy lessons which followed.

Use of Letters as a Method of Self-Expression

Further themes in the letters were the aspects of their personalities and emotional needs being communicated which I found to be a key consequence of the project. A group of children began a series of correspondence where they shared jokes with each other. While these started as short letters initially, they later grew as they praised each other's jokes and thought of more that they could include to entertain each other. Also, there was an example when one child, who did not often ask to use the corner, wrote letter to his mum apologising "*for being angry at the table. I made a card for you. Sometimes people get hungry.*" This demonstrated how it was important for this child to start the day in a way that meant he could move on from what he may have found a difficult morning and know that his relationships with others were resolved so he could focus on the academic requirements of school. This skill of personal expression is also noted by Dombey (2013).

Use of Letters as a Method of Recounting Experiences

A final theme which emerged in the letters was the pupils recounting experiences which I feel demonstrates the needs for exciting stimulus for children to motivate their writing which is part of the idea of novelty. While I took novelty as the context of where and what environment they wrote their letters in, it also relates to teachers attempting to create authentic and novel experiences for the pupils which can be used to motivate them to write. Examples, in their sports day results and feelings, outcomes in a nature club, or places they had been to at the weekend. Cremin and Myhill (2011) explain how writing is a social act; the children were willing to share their experiences with others, providing their reader with unknown information about them to build a relationship.

7. | CONCLUSION

Following my first successful action research project, cementing this process in my practice has had a significant effect on my teaching. I often now return to the approach of identifying the key groups who need support and reviewing academic literature to inform my action. Working in a supportive environment with colleagues is helpful however I find the most empowering action is often through my own research that I have identified as specific to the needs of pupils in my class, therefore having ownership over my day to day teaching and inevitably leading me to reflect on this action and what progress this has led to. This research project as led me to take further action on my role in responding to pupil's work. Specifically, how I use their errors in syntax to inform my teaching. A further project investigating the efficacy of next steps marking and create a dialogue which pupils about their work could have an effect on their written outcomes that could make progress as measured by the SATs 2017 criteria. Correct syntax is undoubtedly a crucial part of constructing meaning, and without a clear understanding of this, self expression is hindered.

8. | REFERENCES

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