WORDS MATTER
Thinking and talking about writing in the classroom

Julia Flutter Homerton College Research Unit, Homerton College, Cambridge (UK)

Leighton Primary School, in Orton Malborne near Peterborough (UK) was one of 17 primary and secondary schools taking part in *Effective Learning—Thinking about Learning, Talking about Learning*, a school-based research initiative coordinated by Cambridgeshire Inspectorate and Homerton College, Cambridge. The partnership project brings together teachers and researchers to work on investigations into pupils' perspectives of teaching and learning. Malcolm Stevenson, head at Leighton, saw the project as an opportunity to encourage teachers and pupils to begin conversations about the learning process and the things which help children to learn.

The school decided to look at the project theme question: "What excites pupils about their learning and what switches them off?" As new approaches to creative writing had recently been introduced across the school, teachers felt this would be an interesting focal point to begin their research. Mary Neighbour, a Years 1 and 2 teacher, was responsible for coordinating the research and gathering data. The research required interviewing a sample of pupils across the age range and, in one Year 5 class, children became researchers themselves, using a computer software package (*Junior Pinpoint*) to gather and analyse their own data.

Interviewing and analysing data make heavy demands on teachers' most precious resource—time—so it was important to keep the research to a manageable workload. Mary focused on a small sample of six children from each year group (balanced by gender and ability) and interviews took 15 to 20 minutes, during which the children were asked to talk about a recent story-writing activity. The Homerton College research team worked with Mary on the data analysis which was carried out using a qualitative framework. The final analysis gave a fascinating picture of children's responses to creative writing, revealing some surprising differences between different groups and confirming the success of the school's new approach.

What children said about creative writing approaches

One of the key findings was the impact of presentation. Exciting, imaginative ways of presenting story-writing tasks had a strong bearing on children's responses. Children's comments gave firm evidence that the new styles of approach had sparked their interest and appeared to motivate them to put in extra effort. This comment from a boy in a Year 4 class shows how incorporating drama, in this instance, provided inspiration:

> It was good fun. You could write it in your own version and it was really good. We acted it out in drama and made it come to life. (boy)

His comment also suggests that having a sense of ownership is important to children: the fun and excitement of "making it your own" was a common theme.

Choice was another key theme which emerged from the data analysis. As well as choosing materials and resources, children liked making "creative decisions" and having opportunities to use their powers of imagination. Each year group focused on a particular book, selected by teachers, and chosen because of its strong, attractive story-line and lively characters. The framework of the story could then be used as a model structure for children to adapt and make their own. The success of the approach was apparent in pupils' comments such as these from Year 4 pupils:

> I liked it because you had to try and look in your own imagination and see what's there. (girl)
> It's good because you can have anything you want in it. (girl)

The data also gave some insights into differences in responses of different age groups to creative writing activities. For example, comments from Years 1 and 2 children showed their concern with presentational aspects of story writing and how much they enjoyed making their work look neat and attractive. Children particularly enjoyed making their work look like "real books" with their own, carefully designed covers.

Age also seemed to play a significant part in children's understanding of teachers' intentions in asking them to do these activities. Younger children's comments seem to indicate that many had somewhat limited ideas about the purpose of story-writing activities. Mary questioned children about the purposes of creative writing activities and these responses from Year 2 pupils suggest their understanding is quite narrow:

[Interviewer's question] *Why do you think you were asked to do this activity?*

Because it's a nice thing to do. (boy in Year 2)

It's for our mums and dads to look at when they come to parents' evening. (girl in Year 2)

So we could learn how to write really hard long words like "gingerbread". (girl in Year 2)

Andrew Pollard's research into primary pupils' perceptions of school found similar evidence that younger pupils' understanding about the purpose of classroom tasks is often limited.[1] However, by Year 3, the children's views seem to show a rising concern with "getting things right" and a feeling that this is why teachers ask them to write:

[Teachers] want to see how good we are at writing and if we make mistakes. (girl in Year 3)

Older pupils retain this concern with assessment, but generally their reasons show a more sophisticated understanding of the purposes of creative writing activities in the classroom. Some saw this type of work as a test of general ability:

So teachers know what we think so we can show how good we are doing things. (girl in Year 4)

Others appreciated that the activity they had just completed would, in some way, extend their skills and was part of a continuous and connected learning process:

Since every story is unique we can show that we know more difficult words. (girl in Year 4)

It helped us with spellings and more words. (boy in Year 4)

It was to help with our descriptions and our writing. (boy in Year 6)

Few pupils seemed to recognise the creative aspect of the writing as being important, their concerns with spelling and neatness very much to the fore. Year 6 pupils' comments about the purpose of creative writing tasks seem coloured by concern with SATs and the prospect of secondary school:

This teaches you to think quicker and get it done. (boy in Year 6)

It helps you with your SATs. (girl in Year 6)

It's probably so we can get our writing neater for when we go to secondary school. (boy in Year 6)

But, happily, some Year 6 pupils still enjoy the opportunity for creative expression:

We were asked to do it because it's a good activity and interesting. (boy, Year 6)

More confident writers also seemed to have a broader understanding of the purposes of writing stories, whereas those with a lower level of attainment showed rather limited views.

Children's responses to creative writing were not only determined by the nature of the activities and how they were presented. The interview data give evidence about how conditions in the classroom affect their attitudes and the quality of their work. In particular, social aspects of the classroom came to the fore, and it was interesting to note differences between younger and older children. For example, older children were more likely to prefer working alone and resented sharing ideas or having their work copied by someone else. These Year 2 pupils express their preference for working in groups, suggesting that working in this way offers a sense of security, allows ideas to be exchanged and is simply more fun:

I helped Hannah when I'd finished and gave her some ideas for the fox part then we read each other's work. (girl in Year 2)

[I prefer working] with a table of friends so they can help me. I don't want to be all alone — I don't like being alone. (girl in Year 2)

I like to work quietly but I like to work together with five people. (boy in Year 2)

These contrast with comments from the Year 6 class, which suggest that many older pupils prefer quieter and more independent working conditions:

Most of the time I like to work on my own so I don't get disturbed. (girl in Year 6)

I like to sit with a group of friends but I like to work on my own. Friends can sometimes distract you. Jenny makes me giggle but Anna is very quiet. (girl in Year 6)

When I'm story-writing I like to do it in the quiet with one sensible friend. Some people talk to you all the time. (boy in Year 6)

Teachers also wanted to see what would happen if they gave children a chance to do their own piece of research. Using Junior Pinpoint, a child-friendly database program for the Acorn computer system, the children in one Year 5 class compiled and analysed data about their writing preferences. The children took their roles as researchers very seriously and, although this part of the project

---

Figure 1. Questions for pupil interviews, stage 2

Name ☐ Girl   ☐ Boy

1. When the teacher tells the class to do some writing do you …
   - ☐ like a long explanation of what to do?
   - or
   - ☐ like a short, quick outline of what you have to do?

2. While you are writing a story, do you …
   - ☐ Like to work mostly by yourself?
   - or
   - ☐ work in a small group?

3. If you are busy writing a story and the class is making a lot of noise, do you …
   - ☐ find it hard to think about your work?
   - or
   - ☐ not notice if the class is being noisy?

4. Which type of writing do you like best? (please pick one)
   - ☐ A story you make up yourself
   - ☐ A 'news story' about something you've done
   - ☐ A write-up of a science experiment

5. When you write a story, do you think about who is going to look at it?
   - ☐ Yes   ☐ No

6. Do you like to have your writing put on the wall at school?
   - ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Thank you for helping us!

was intended as only a small piece of the overall enquiry, it proved to be a worthwhile experience both for the children and the teachers. The process encouraged thinking and talking about learning as pupils, working in pairs and discussion about the answers to the on-screen questionnaire.
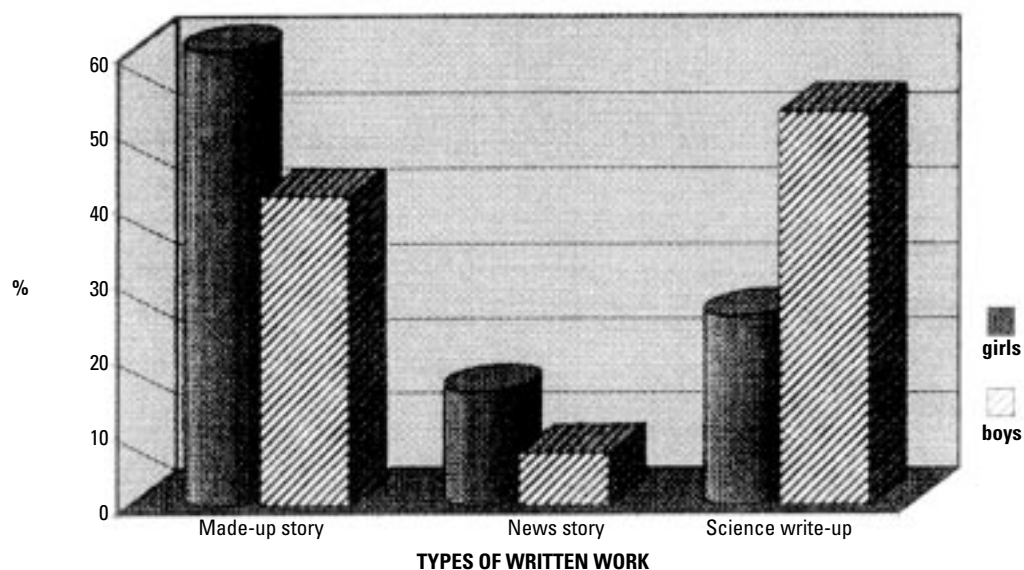
The data from this mini-project were analysed using a straightforward, quantified method and a total of 37 Year 4 children answered the simple, short questionnaire (*see* Figure 1). The results were interesting—for example, the question "Which type of writing do you like best?" highlighted a clear difference in girls' and boys' preferences (*see* Figure 2).

The project's outcomes

A research investigation can be rather like dropping a pebble in a pond and watching the ripples move outwards. In Leighton's project, the initial impact was in the classroom as teachers made use of the project's evidence to build on successful aspects of the new approaches. These successful "ingredients" can be applied to approaches used in other subjects; for example, children's comments highlighted the importance of using imaginative presentation and this would extend to other areas of the curriculum. Taking part in the project enabled teachers to test out new approaches and, as Professor Margaret Maden points out, research which gives teachers and learners participative roles has particular value: "... the experiences of teachers and learners, in classrooms, should be understood as an integral part of a research spiral— testing and developing new ideas".[2]

On a wider level, teachers at Leighton Primary School also found out more about the kinds of problems children experience with writing and the influence of factors such as age, gender and confidence. The school's research report points to the differences in responses given by children who are confident writers and those who are less confident.

Less confident writers seem to have difficulty in fully understanding the tasks they are given and often concentrate on presentation in their work. They also seem to prefer working in small groups and tend to give more limited evaluations of their work. More confident writers tend to evaluate their work in terms of creativity as well as accuracy and presentation. One of the most common problems they mention is levels of noise in the classroom, which they find distracting. They often express a preference for working in pairs.

These findings helped teachers to develop a clearer understanding of children's difficulties and the school is considering how children work in the classroom and ways of improving the learning environment.

The project's outcomes are continuing to take shape as the ripples move outwards and away from the end of Phase 1, but the process of research is continuing. The project has equipped the school with a technique of accessing the pupils' perspective in a structured, systematic way and this will continue to be used by the school. Malcolm Stevenson feels the value of the project for his school has been setting in motion an ongoing conversation between teachers and pupils, encouraging both to reflect on the learning process. Leighton Primary and the other schools taking part in the Effective Learning Project have discovered that listening to children's views offers a different and powerful basis for developing effective teaching and learning strategies because it returns attention to the true focal point of the learning endeavour—the child.

Copies of the Effective Learning Project Report Effective Learning — Thinking about Learning, Talking about Learning, by Julia Flutter, Ruth Kershner and Jean Rudduck, are available from: Mrs M. Clay, Cambridgeshire Inspectorate, Gazeley House, Princes Street, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE18 6NS, UK. Price £4.50.

Notes

1. Pollard, A., Thiessen, D., & Filer, A. (1997). *Children and their curriculum: perspectives of primary and elementary school children.* London: Falmer Press.
2. Maden, M. (1998). "Till the soil to get rich harvests", *Times Educational Supplement,* 23 January, pp. 20.

FIGURE 2. Children's preferences for writing tasks

JULIA FLUTTER is Project Coordinator, Homerton College Research Unit, Homerton College, Cambridge CB2 2PH, UK.
E-mail: JAED100@cam.ac.uk