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### Abstract

Teachers' perceptions of their changing practice in the context of the National Literacy Strategy have been well documented in recent years. However, few studies have collected pupils' views or voices. As part of a collaborative research and development project into the teaching and learning of writing, 390 primary pupils' views were collected. A marked difference in attitude to writing and self-esteem as writers was found between Key Stages 1 and 2, as well as a degree of indifference and disengagement from in-school writing for some KS2 writers. A strong desire for choice and greater autonomy as writers was expressed and a preference for narrative emerged. This part of the research project 'We're Writers' has underlined the importance of listening to pupils' views about literacy, in order to create a more open dialogue about language and learning, and to negotiate the content of the curriculum in response to their perspectives.

### Key words

Attitudes, autonomy, choice, motivation, self-esteem, writers' voices

### Introduction

In recent years, the teaching of writing has been profiled and prioritised in response to both political imperatives and professional concerns. The gap between reading and writing scores, as measured by the English Key Stage tests, has served to focus the primary profession and may have narrowed the mindset of teachers, trapped as they are in a high stakes accountability culture. In this standards discourse, pupils' perceptions of literacy and learning have been noticeably absent (Dufield *et al.*, 2000). Even in the evaluation reports on the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), no pupils' voices are heard (Earl *et al.*, 2000, 2001).

However, the literature on strategies for raising achievement constantly asserts that establishing pupils' views on school life can make a difference (e.g. Dobie and MacBeath, 1998; Macdonald *et al.*, 1999). Partnership projects have often sought learners' views in order to enhance learning and 'We're Writers', a collaborative research and development project between higher education and eight primary schools, continued this tradition. The project was initiated by schools which expressed concerns about the uninspired nature of their pupils' writing and their attitudes to writing. As one teacher explained:

*The children are simply playing the game called writing - like US I suppose, and the energy has gone out of their writing.*

Through surveys and follow-up interviews, the pupils' views of themselves as writers, and their preferences, attitudes and awareness of the source of their ideas were collected. Samples of their writing, with teacher commentaries, and their teachers' perceptions of current practice were also collected in the first phase of the research. The teachers' data indicated that their views of quality writing were almost entirely constructed around the level descriptors of the end of Key Stage assessment Tests and the accompanying Optional Tests. No awareness of audience, purpose, the engagement of the reader or the writer's voice was recorded. In addition, while these teachers, supported by published schemes, felt able to lean on literary extracts and non-fiction to teach writing, they lacked both the confidence and permission to inhabit other creative spaces to develop their pupils' authorial voices (Grainger *et al.*, 2002). They felt under pressure to achieve school targets in writing and believed this was influencing both their practice and their pupils' perceptions of themselves as writers. It is in this context that the pupils' views, which form the basis of this paper, are reported.

### The significance of pupil perspective

*To recognise the role of perspective and vantage point, to recognise at the same time that there are multiple perspectives and multiple vantage points, is to recognise that no accounting, disciplinary or otherwise, can ever be finished or complete. There is always more.* (Greene, 1995,p,128)

Acknowledging multiple positions, as Maxine Greene asserts, is to be open to alternatives. Teachers' perspectives about the NLS have been recorded and respected (Dadds, 1999; Fisher and Lewis, 1999; Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Fisher, 2001; English *et al.*, 2002). Understanding pupils' views is also important and, as Rudduck and Flutter (2000) argue, we need to do more to help pupils develop a language for talking about learning and

themselves as learners. This has the potential to create a sense of ownership by promoting more co-operative ways of working (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996). Some studies have encompassed surveys of pupils' attitudes to secondary school (e.g. MacBeath *et al.*, 1992; Harris *et al.*, 1996), while others have listened to the perspective of primary pupils about schooling and the curriculum (e.g. Wragg, 1993; Pollard, 1996; Tunstall and Gipps, 1996). In relation to literacy and in this case writing, it is clear that, whatever teaching approach is adopted, this will be filtered through pupils' perceptions of the process. The research project 'We're Writers' aimed to examine how teachers can foster the development of pupils' voices and verve in writing and, as part of this, sought to identify pupils' attitudes to writing and their sense of themselves as writers. The teachers were keen to listen to their learners and acknowledge their perspectives. They were concerned that their young writers, while possessing a wide repertoire of linguistic terms and a clear understanding of genre and level 4 requirements, expressed little or no desire to write. Had the 'game called writing' begun to influence their creative freedom, their communicative intent and voice?

### **Methodology**

The eight schools in the survey comprised five through primaries, two infant and one junior school. Four schools were in relatively affluent areas and the remainder were in economically deprived contexts. While the pupils' attitudes were inevitably influenced by the context and culture of each school, there were relatively few differences between the schools and inter-school comparisons were not sought. It is worth noting that three of the schools had achieved very high writing standards in the previous year, as measured by the end of Key Stage results. The remainder experienced more mixed results. No school was preparing for OFSTED when the data was collected, nor were the summative Assessments imminent. The pupils' perspectives were collected in spring 2001, by means of a writing survey ( $n = 390$ ) and a sample of follow-up interviews. The first three girls and first three boys on the register of each class took part in the survey. In the early years, learning support assistants helped with the reading and, in some cases, scribed the young children's responses; prompting was avoided. In order to build a picture of the pupils' thoughts about writing, the initial question asked was:

*When your teacher says 'Now we are going to do some writing', what goes through your head? (Talley, 2000)*

Later questions invited comments on likes and dislikes in writing, and asked pupils to evaluate themselves as writers, as well as record others' perceptions of them as writers. Each pupil was also asked to describe one piece of writing of which they were proud and to explain their choice. The last section of the survey focused on their confidence in generating ideas for writing and the perceived source of these ideas. The follow-up interviews were semi-structured and sought to elicit more detail about individual responses and the emerging themes. The themes and issues that arose from the data included the following, only the first three of which are examined in this paper:

- a difference in attitude and self-perception across Key Stages 1 and 2
- some indifference to writing in Years 5/6
- a marked desire for more autonomy and choice
- a preference for narrative writing
- a growing awareness of the source of ideas for writing.

### **Attitudes to writing**

A wide spectrum of attitudes to writing were expressed in the pupils' responses. These were categorised in the following manner:

- *Enthusiasm*: e.g. 'Oh good, I love writing', 'Yippee, this will be exciting', 'Hurray writing', 'I hope it'll be story, I love story'.
- *Concern*: e.g. 'Oh dear, I'm not good at writing', 'I hope it's not timed, I'm no good at that', 'I bet it'll be verbs, I can't do verbs', 'I bet I can't do it'.
- *Indifference*: e.g. 'Here we go again', 'I don't think, I just get on with &', 'I'll just wait and then get on with it', 'I don't think I just wait till she tells us what to do'.
- *Negativity*: e.g. 'I wish I was dead', 'Oh no, not more of it, I hate it', 'Not again, I hate it', 'Boring'.

Overall, the Foundation and Key Stage 1 learners were markedly more enthusiastic than the older pupils and had more positive views of themselves as writers. In Reception and Year 1, the young learners frequently mentioned writing that had both purpose and audience, e.g. sending Mothers' Day cards, writing notes and letters to friends and fictional characters, leaving post-its for their teacher and making their own books. The Year 2 writers indicated they were particularly proud of their story writing and showed considerable self-confidence and high levels of self-esteem as writers. They commented positively about joined-up writing, learning to spell, making stories their own and sharing them with others. The majority of Year 2 writers viewed writing with enthusiasm, interest and commitment.

In contrast, the pupils in Years 3/4 expressed predominantly negative attitudes to writing and voiced concerns about their competence. Typical responses to the initial question at this age included 'Not more boring writing', 'Please, not more writing'. Their likes were diverse and few, their dislikes focused mostly on punctuation, spelling, aching hands and the commonly ascribed perception that writing was 'boring'. This word was used so frequently that the research team checked whether the surveys had been undertaken independently; this was confirmed. This disposition was also reflected in response to later questions, e.g. 'I like nothing about writing, it's boring, I prefer maths', 'There is nothing I like, it's just boring', 'I dislike all writing, it's so boring'. In Reception and Key Stage 1, 50 per cent plus of the survey rated themselves as 'good writers', yet only 27 per cent of Year 3 and 17 per cent of Year 4 assessed themselves in this category. This climbed in Years 5 and 6 to 34 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.

In the last two years of primary school, the attitudes expressed by the nine to 11 year olds towards writing were more mixed and more consciously complex. The pupils were aware that their views depended on a number of issues, most notably the form of writing required and the degree of freedom offered. Other qualifying features that were frequently mentioned were the mood of the writer and whether the writing was timed. These more mature writers, many of whom clearly enjoyed writing, also reported that they found particular pleasure in narrative writing, in being able to generate ideas and create their own imaginary worlds in which they could make things happen. This preference for story writing was articulated by the majority of pupils across both Key Stages and their views are represented by the following examples: 'I love stories', 'As long as it's a story, I love it', 'I adore story writing', 'I like writing stories from scratch, then they're really mine', 'I like stories best, I can make them up', 'I hope it's total fiction'.

However an indifferent, somewhat detached disposition was also discerned in the responses of a number of boys and a few girls in Years 5/6 in all the schools, e.g. 'I don't think about it, I just do it', 'Well, let's get it over with', 'More writing - who cares?', 'I can't say I really mind - well, I don't care if we do or we don't', 'I don't have a view, I just do it'. Despite more positively appraising their competence than the Year 3/4 learners, these particular pupils could apparently see little relevance in writing and appeared rather detached from it. They expressed an arguably ambivalent attitude towards writing, e.g. 'There's nothing I like, nothing I dislike, I just get on with it', 'Nothing goes through my head, I just wait for her to tell us what to do', 'I don't care, I just do it', 'I don't think about it, I just wait and see what she says'. The teachers in the Project Focus Group (PFG) were concerned to realise that this minority of pupils seemed to see themselves as passive recipients, disengaged from the process of becoming writers and with little sense of their own agency or empowerment. In the interviews, several seemed genuinely surprised to be asked their views, e.g. 'Why do you ask, what difference does it make what I think?', 'We have to do it, it's part of school', 'I don't have a choice do I? The absence of a discourse of learning, and the sense that these young people viewed themselves as pupils rather than learners, is in line with previous research into attitudes to schooling (Duffield *et al.*, 2000) although this work was with KS3 learners. Had these nine to 11 year olds become schooled writers, products of the conventional 'game called writing' played out in their schools? Their teachers were understandably concerned about the consequences of these views, with regard to both writing and their pupils' future learning.

Previous studies have also observed a division between Key Stage 1 and 2 in attitudes to writing, suggesting that, with age, pupils express less positive views of writing (Hogan, 1980; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1980; Wray, 1993). In this research, too, pupils' interest in writing did appear to decline as they got older, although their perceptions of writing dipped most markedly in Years 3/4 becoming slightly more positive in the later years. This slight improvement was modified somewhat by the disengagement factor already noted. The contrasting attitudes and less positive self-perception expressed by the Year 3/4 pupils may well be linked to the pupils' growing meta-cognitive awareness of the complex and demanding nature of writing. This is clearly reflected in the NLS Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998). In this, the demands made between

Key Stage 1 and 2 differ considerably; 120 objectives are listed for Year 2, 163 are set for Year 3 and 145 are named for Year 4. Since 89 per cent of the Year 2/3 transitional increase relates to sentence- and word level objectives, it is possible that early KS2 teaching may become disproportionately focused on teaching the transcriptional skills. The PFG teachers voiced the view that, in Foundation and KS1, more space and time had been available to seize authentic writing opportunities and undertake complete stories. The KS2 teachers perceived their teaching of writing had foregrounded the demonstration and practice of sentence- and word-level features of different genres, in line with what they understood were NLS requirements. So it is entirely feasible that the pupils were responding to an emphasis on technical elements. However, as Wray's (1993) research suggests, pupils may themselves be focusing on aspects of writing at this stage in their development and their responses may thus reflect their immediate concerns and difficulties. This is one possible reading of this data since the children's perceptions of themselves as writers picked up slightly in Years 5/6 when perhaps these skills had become less of a problem. The PFG members also suggested that the pupils' views were partly a product of a more positively affirming stance adopted by teachers at KS1. They believed feedback about writing at this age was more likely to be personal and oral, in contrast to a more distant written comment, level or grade at KS2. In addition, the communicative intent and content of their children's writing was voiced as highly significant by the KS1 teachers, which contrasted with the KS2 teachers' perceptions of their practice and the priority they gave this in the teachers' questionnaire.

Analysis of the 110 writing samples and the contextual data that framed this reinforced the teachers' perceptions that KS2 practice in these schools was characterised by a focus on writing practice - practice of skills, forms and features and practice for tests, both optional and end of Key Stage. Frater (2000) has argued that, in recent years, the communicative act of composing has been displaced by the practice of discrete skills and this was clearly borne out in KS2 by the data in the wider research frame. At KS1, however, the teachers in this study believed they had created a better balance between developing knowledge about language and purposeful language use. Their pupils' motivation and self-esteem was high. Research has shown that effective teachers of literacy place a high value on composition and prioritise text-level work, embedding their teaching of linguistic features in whole-text activities that are meaningful and clearly explained to the reader (Medwell *et al.*, 1998). The KS1 teachers' emphasis on content and communication may well have influenced their pupils' views about writing and shaped their positive attitudes. It is a pity that in this earlier research, funded by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), no data about pupil perceptions was collected.

### **Desire for autonomy in writing**

Another key finding from the survey was the remarkable strength of feeling voiced about freedom and autonomy in writing. No question focused on this issue, but the children raised it constantly. The majority of KS2 learners and some KS1 pupils too, across all the schools, either described their pleasure in writing when some degree of choice was offered, or noted their dislike of set writing and its limitations. The nature of the restrictions recorded included: imposed content, having to follow a given theme, writing to a specific title, timed writing and completing worksheets on literacy skills. A sample of the children's comments indicate the strength of feelings about this issue, e.g. 'I don't like being told what to write', 'I hate it when it's timed as I panic', 'I don't like having to write about a particular subject', 'I dislike it when we have to follow on from her - I can't get my ideas in', 'I prefer to choose', 'I hate it when we are given a title or have to write about something I don't like', and 'I hate being told what to do and how to do it'. In Years 5/6, 74 per cent of the pupils, quite unprompted, raised the issue of autonomy in some form. As one Year 6 boy said:

*I hate it when we have to follow a theme in writing and you have to do what it says on the sheet. There's no freedom and my writing becomes narrow, I can't use my imagination then.*

Many voiced their enjoyment of writing when more creative space was offered, e.g. 'I love it when you can write what you want and do it in your own style', 'I like a story when I can make it all up and make it mine', 'I like it when I can use my own ideas', 'I like it when we have the chance to stretch our imaginations', 'I like it when I can control what's going to happen', 'I like it if we don't get told how to start', 'I like writing at home when I can write what I want', 'I like it when we can do anything we want in our stories', 'I like being able to express my thoughts in stories of my choice', and 'I like it when we don't get told how to do it'. These KS2 pupils appeared to be motivated by the relative freedom of writing opportunities in which they could employ their own ideas and where they felt they had more choice and control over how their writing developed. Imposed writing with a closed frame was recognised as limiting and was unpopular. This issue of the pupils' desire for autonomy resonates with Myhill's (2001) findings with KS3 learners who also asserted a preference for writing

that allowed both ‘voice and imaginative freedom’. As Myhill acknowledges, writing involves both crafting and creating, but, as already noted, the KS2 teachers in this study tended to profile the crafting elements, studying and analysing linguistic features at the relative expense of providing opportunities for creating and composing whole texts. This may also have shaped the pupils’ desire for more creative independence and their evident pleasure when this was occasionally offered.

The contextual data accompanying the 110 writing samples indicated that choice was a rare commodity in these schools; most frequently, the genre, topic and/or title were a given. In mirroring the features of the assessment tests and covering the NLS objectives assiduously, these teachers retained a fairly tight rein on writing opportunities. At the time, only one school offered an extended writing time, although all set aside regular time for structured test preparation. The requirements of standardised testing can result in a reduction of choice for pupils in subject, form and audience (Wiggins, 1993; Moss, 1994) and the 2003 KS2 assessment tests remove pupil choice entirely, with a choice of content but not of genre at KS1. The backwash of such test parameters has the potential to reduce pupils’ autonomy still further, and may curtail their sense of volition and shape their attitudes and motivation accordingly, unless we are professionally vigilant and avoid an instrumental approach to teaching writing (Messenheimer and Packwood, 2002).

The National Curriculum (DEE, 1999) legal requirement that KS2 pupils should choose their own content, style, audience and purpose in writing had arguably bypassed these professionals, driven by assessment, accountability and a conscious concern to ensure curriculum coverage. In contrast to reading, where at KS2 pupils are encouraged to develop their preferences in terms of different genres and to authors, these young writers had very little freedom. As OFSTED (2002) comment, in an impoverished writing curriculum, pupils are given ‘little choice over what to write about and feel little involvement in their writing’. This was evident in this study, particularly in the later years of primary when coverage of NLS objectives and test preparation appeared to take precedence, reducing some children’s engagement in the process. The pupils’ marked desire for more control over the content and form of their writing ties in with previous research that has shown that pupils prefer not to be constantly controlled and directed (Pollard *et al.*, 1994). Autonomy also features highly in pupils’ views about the optimum conditions for learning (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996; Rudduck and Flutter, 1998). The data also suggested some differences between children’s perceptions of writing at home and at school in terms of ownership and freedom. For example, ‘I prefer writing at home – then it’s mine’, ‘I’m always writing and drawing at home, I write about what I want there’, ‘I love writing at home, it’s fun, I write loads there’, ‘I often make up my own cartoons at home, we don’t do cartoons in school’, ‘I write in bed but not in school - as we have to do what she says here’. At home, where children made more of their own choices and set their own purposes, they seemed to voice greater satisfaction in their writing. Some found little purpose or relevance in their writing in school and experienced little genuine independence. The balance between freedom and control appears to be a significant issue both in schooling in general and in writing in particular. If we want to take our learners with us and extend their writing competence and confidence, we cannot afford to ignore their demands for increasing independence and choice.

## **Conclusion**

This study endorses the views of McCallum *et al.* (2001), Rudduck and Flutter (2000) and Innes *et al.* (2001) in suggesting that the pupil’s voice is an increasingly important element in extending our understanding of teaching and learning, and in this case of writing. Young people’s development as writers should not be measured simply by a growing command of writing’s codes and conventions, without cognisance of the affective dimension. Understanding pupils’ dispositions, attitudes and motivation is an essential element of effective practice, since emotion and self-esteem are crucial catalysts in the process of becoming a writer and believing oneself to be a writer.

The 390 pupils in this study differed considerably in their attitudes towards writing. Many were enthusiastic and self-confident writers, especially at KS1. At early KS2, as they became more aware of the myriad of skills, knowledge and understanding needed to write, the pupils’ positive perceptions dipped and declined. The attitudes, views, motivation and self perceptions were also influenced by the lack of choice, ownership and freedom that the KS2 pupils perceived they were allowed to exercise as writers. The importance of motivation and self-esteem in learning is widely recognised (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1996; McGilchrist *et al.*, 1997), but deserves still greater attention and response from the profession.

The teachers in this study have become alert to their pupils' feelings about choice and autonomy, their varied self-perceptions and attitudes towards writing, as well as their pleasure in the imaginative freedom of narrative. As a consequence, choices have been profiled in practice and writing journals have been established, providing pupils with the opportunity to exercise more autonomy as writers (Graham, 2003). Now, over a year later, many pupils are regularly choosing to revise and redraft earlier journal entries, and are realising a sense of authorship as well as developing their writers' voices through the use of more creative approaches and increased choice about content, genre and audience. A more negotiated curriculum is gradually developing in these schools in an attempt to 'link the concerns and consciousness of the learners with the world of systematic knowledge and learning' (Meighan, 1988). This research has indicated that pupils can be cast in marginal and disaffected roles by the pressure of imposed curricula if they are not consulted and involved in the process of shaping the curriculum in action.

Attention needs to be paid to the literacy curriculum as experienced and perceived by the pupils, since they are 'expert witnesses' in the process of school improvement (Rudduck, 1999). In the 'We're Writers' project, in an interim evaluation and after two years of research and development work, pupils' views will again be sought. It will be interesting to ascertain whether the documented changes in the teachers' practice, and the explicit project focus on children's and teachers' creative engagement in literacy will have influenced pupils' attitudes to and competence in writing. The 'game' of schooled writing needs to be responsive to the pupils themselves - their voices and views deserve to be heard.

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