Department for Education

The research evidence on "writing"

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Contents

Key findings

- Pupils' profile of achievement in writing: at Key Stage 1, 83 per cent of children achieved the expected level in national tests in 2012, with 70 per cent of children eligible for Free School Meals and only 46 per cent of those with Special Educational Needs doing so. At Key Stage 2, 81 per cent achieved the expected level in teacher assessments in 2012.
- Effective teaching: approaches that have been found effective in the teaching of writing include teaching pupils the writing process; teaching them to write for a variety of purposes; setting specific goals to pupils and fostering inquiry skills; teaching pupils to become fluent with handwriting, spelling and sentence construction, typing and word processing; providing daily time to write; creating an engaged community of writers.
- Struggling writers and pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities can be taught by explicit, interactive and scaffolded approaches and cognitive instruction strategies such as Self-Regulated Strategy Development, in addition to approaches used in whole-class teaching.
- Gender gap: research has identified a range of factors related to boys' underperformance in writing including the quality of teaching, school-level, classroom-level, behavioural and social-level factors, and factors related to the way lessons are conducted.
- Pupils' views of writing in primary schools: evidence from a survey of Year 3 and 4 pupils found that most of them would like to get help with their writing at school, and they liked to choose what they write about.

Introduction

This paper synthesizes research evidence on writing, including domestic and international sources in pupils' achievement, effective teaching and gender gap.

The evidence base:

There is a general agreement in the literature that there is less evidence about writing than about reading (Myhill and Fisher, 2010). International studies such as the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) use indicators from reading as proxy measures for literacy and don't include writing in their assessments.

Definition of writing

Writing is a complex task. It requires the coordination of fine motor skills and cognitive skills, reflects the social and cultural patterns of the writer's time and is also linguistically complex (Myhill and Fisher, 2010; Fisher, 2012).

A summary of pupils' achievement in writing

Writing is the subject where pupils perform less well compared with reading, maths and science. In addition, there is a gender gap in pupils' performance in writing with girls outperforming boys.

- Results from the Foundation Stage Profile stage indicate that in 2012, 71 per cent of children were working securely within the early learning goals of the Communication, Language and Literacy – Writing learning area, the lowest percentage among all learning areas (DfE, 2012d).
- At Key Stage 1, 83 per cent of children achieved the expected level (level 2) in the 2012 national teacher assessments in writing. Only 70 per cent of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved the expected level compared to 86 per cent of all other pupils. Regarding Special Educational Needs (SEN) status, 46 per cent of all SEN children achieved the expected level in writing compared to 93 per cent of pupils with no identified SEN. This gap has remained consistently large over previous years but has narrowed by 2 percentage points in the last year. It is the largest attainment gap compared to the other elements, i.e. reading, mathematics and science (DfE, 2012a).
- At Key Stage 2, in 2012, 81 per cent of pupils achieved the expected level (level 4 or above) based on writing teacher assessments, compared to 75 per cent of pupils achieving the expected level in 2011, based on national tests. The gender gap still persists, with 76 per cent of boys achieving the expected level compared to 87 per cent of girls. The gender gap is less pronounced in reading, mathematics and science. Writing was the element with the lowest performance compared to reading, mathematics and science (DfE, 2012b).

- Writing is part of the English assessment at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. In 2012, 84 per cent of pupils achieved level 5 at the Key Stage 3 teacher assessments in English. At Key Stage 4, 568,600 pupils attempted a GCSE in English, and 69 per cent of those achieved a grade A*-C (DfE, 2012c).
- Overall, the evidence suggests that there is a gender gap in pupils' performance in writing with girls outperforming boys throughout Key Stages.

What are the predictors of pupils' attainment and progress in writing?

- Evidence found that preschool variables significantly associated with writing competence at school entry included mother's education, family size, parental assessment of the child's writing ability and a measure of home writing activities. The latter was still significant at the age of seven (Dunsmuir and Blatchford, 2004).

Teaching of writing

Approaches for effective, whole-class teaching

The following table lists approaches that have been found to be effective in the teaching of writing by research reviews of international evidence (What Works Clearinghouse, 2012; Gillespie and Graham, 2010; Andrews et al, 2009; Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009).

Teaching practice	Examples of how it can be done
Teach pupils the writing process	Teach pupils strategies/tools for the various components of the writing process such as : planning; drafting; sharing; evaluating; revising and editing; summarising; sentence combining Gradually shift responsibility from the teacher to the pupils so that they become independent writers Guide pupils to choose and use suitable writing strategies Encourage pupils to be flexible when using the different writing components Engage them in pre-writing activities where they can assess what they already know, research an unfamiliar topic, or arrange their ideas visually
Teach pupils to write for a variety of purposes	Help pupils understand the different purposes of writing e.g. ‘describe’; ‘narrate’; ‘inform’; ‘persuade’/’analyse’ Develop pupils’ concept of what is ‘audience’ Teach pupils explicitly how to use the features of good writing and provide them with models of good writing Teach pupils techniques for writing effectively for different purposes: for example, for ‘describe’, use the ‘sensory details’ technique: what did you see? How did it look? What sounds did you hear? What did you touch? How did it feel? What could you smell? What did you taste?
Teach pupils to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing and word processing	Teach very young pupils how to hold a pencil correctly and form letters fluently and efficiently When teaching spelling, connect it with writing Teach pupils to construct sentences for fluency, meaning and style Teach pupils to type fluently and to use a word processor to compose

Set specific goals to pupils and foster inquiry skills	The goals can be created by the teacher or the pupils themselves (and reviewed by the teacher) and can include adding more ideas to a paper or including specific features of a writing genre Encourage self-motivation e.g. by personal target-setting Give pupils a writing task which involves the use of inquiry skills e.g. establish a clear goal for writing or researching/exploring concrete data on a topic
Provide daily time to write	Pupils should be given at least 30 minutes per day to write in their first year in primary school Teachers can make links with other subjects e.g. ask pupils to write a paragraph explaining a maths graph
Create an engaged community of writers	Teachers could model their writing in front of pupils, and share real examples with them such as a letter or email Give pupils opportunities to choose the topics they write about Encourage collaborative writing Use oral work to inform writing work Ensure that pupils give and receive constructive feedback throughout the writing process Publish pupils' writing and reach for external audiences

In addition, the evidence indicates that the above strategies should not be used as a writing curriculum per se. Teachers should tailor these practices to meet the needs of their individual pupils as well as the whole class, use them in conjunction and monitor or adjust them as necessary (Gillespie and Graham, 2010).

The teaching of grammar, spelling and handwriting

- A randomised controlled study was conducted in UK and aimed to explore the effect of contextualised[1] grammar teaching on pupils' writing development. The study showed a significant positive effect for pupils in the intervention group, taught in lessons using the above principles. They scored higher in the writing tests compared with pupils in the comparison group. An interesting finding was that the embedded grammar suited most the more able writers but the design of the study couldn't explain why (Myhill et al, 2011).
- The evidence suggests that therapeutic[2] teaching practices can be more effective than sensorimotor teaching practices in teaching pupils to improve poor handwriting (Denton et al, 2006). Multisensory approaches to teaching handwriting may be more effective for pupils in their second year of school than cognitive approaches (Zwicker and Hadwin, 2009).
- Very little evidence exists on effective ways to teach spelling. The one study identified suggests that the use of ICT to teach spelling may be more effective than 'conventional' forms of spelling teaching but the effect size is not significant (Torgerson and Elbourne, 2002).

Approaches for struggling writers and pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Evidence suggests that children with literacy difficulties need coordinated help in order to catch up with their peers (Brooks, 2007). Pupils with writing difficulties, many of whom have also specific learning difficulties, often struggle with the planning, composing and revising skills which are needed for good writing (Mason et al, 2011). Most of the whole-class approaches can also be used for struggling writers (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009). Research has identified the following approaches as being effective in the teaching of writing:

- Use explicit, interactive, scaffolded instruction in planning, composing and revising strategies: a good example is the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) instruction which is effective for both primary and secondary school pupils with learning difficulties. Pupils should be encouraged to develop background knowledge, discuss, model and memorize the strategies taught. In addition, pupils should be guided and explicitly taught to set goals, monitor their performance and self-instruct (Mason et al, 2011; Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009).
- Cognitive strategy instruction which addresses how a pupil is taught, in addition to what is taught. It includes explicit and systematic instruction, direct instruction, scaffolding and modelling and has been used in several curriculum areas. Pupils

[1] By contextualised grammar teaching the researchers referred to: (i) introducing grammatical constructions and terminology at a point which is relevant to the focus of learning; (ii) the emphasis is on effects and constructing meanings, not on the feature or terminology itself; (iii) the learning objective is to open up a '*repertoire of possibilities*', not to teach about correct ways of writing.

[2] Therapeutic approaches to teaching handwriting use skill-based practice and specific motor learning strategies which include practiced, dictated and copied handwriting as well as writing from memory.

learn specific strategies for writing and also 'how a person thinks and acts when planning, executing and evaluating performance on a task and its outcomes'. With cognitive instruction, pupils should be able to engage more fully in the writing process and be independent writers (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009).

- In addition, research has shown that struggling writers can benefit from explicit and targeted instruction in word-, sentence-, and paragraph-level skills, handwriting, spelling, vocabulary and sentence construction skills. This is more effective when teachers use examples from a wide range of contexts (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009).
- An evaluation of Every Child a Reader (ECaR) and Reading Recovery, a reading intervention programme, found beneficial effects for writing as well: in the second year of its implementation, ECaR improved school level reading attainment at Key Stage 1 by between 2 and 6 percentage points. In the second and third year of operation it improved writing attainment by between 4 and 6 percentage points (Tanner et al, 2011).
- Qualitative evidence from the Every Child a Writer evaluation found that one-to-one tuition writing sessions had a positive effect on pupils' enjoyment and confidence in their skills (Fisher et al, 2011).
- An evaluation of the Achievement for All (AfA) pilot found that it had a positive effect on pupils with SEND, by raising their achievement in English and mathematics (Humphrey and Squires, 2011). The evaluation identified the following school characteristics, practices and approaches associated with improved pupil outcomes:
    - Schools with higher attendance and achievement, smaller pupil populations and stronger home-school relations before AfA started.
    - Schools viewing AfA as an opportunity to build on existing good practice, with teachers taking responsibility for teaching all children in the class, rather than allocating SEND children to teaching assistants or other staff.
    - Headteachers or members of the senior leadership team being the AfA lead.
    - Involving teachers and parents more frequently in reviewing individual pupil targets.
    - Communicating information to parents about pupils' progress using a range of methods.
    - Sharing information about pupils with a range of professionals.
    - Completing 2 or 3 structured conversations for a larger proportion of pupils: the conversations took part on the basis of forming a collaborative, trusting relationship, exchanging ideas, aspirations and concerns.

What are the reasons for the gender gap in writing?

Pupils' performance in writing is worse in comparison to reading, with girls outperforming boys throughout primary and secondary schooling. The underachievement of boys in English has been observed in many English-speaking countries. One way that research has looked at it is the relationship between male identity and achievement, suggesting that boys have been stereotyped as being not good at English and not seeing any value in literacy for success in life. Other research however has indicated that gender alone cannot explain underachievement and wider socio-economic factors should be considered (Ofsted, 2005b).

Possible causes behind boys' underperformance in writing include (Ofsted, 2005a; Ofsted,2005b; Younger et al, 2005; Estyn, 2008; Daly, 2003; DfES, 2007):

- Factors related to *the quality of teaching* such as teaching grammar separately from contextualised writing, inappropriate use of interventions, misuse of writing frames and a lack of connection between oral and writing work.
- *School-level factors* such as not offering children an active and free-play environment which has been associated with more progress in reading and writing.
- *Behavioural and social-level factors* as boys are more likely to be affected by negative peer pressure. Boys are also more likely to experience criticism and a sense of failure at school, whereas girls are more inclined to give high status to hard-working pupils. Boys are more likely to be deprived of a male adult role model, both at home and in school, and this has a negative effect on their achievement in general.
- *Classroom-level factors* such as ineffective use of ICT, setting and streaming.
- *Factors related to the way lessons are conducted* such as an emphasis on story writing, not giving boys ownership of their writing, a discrepancy between boys' reading preferences and writing topics, using 'counting down' time strategies and a dislike by boys of drafting and figurative language.

Strategies for helping boys with writing

Evidence has identified the following strategies that can help boys with writing (Daly, 2003; Ofsted, 2005b):

Type of strategies	Details of the practice
School and classroom-level	▪ Use of active learning tasks, including drama strategies e.g. thought-tapping[3] or hot-seating[4] ▪ Use appropriate, non-confrontational approaches to discipline ▪ Target-setting, monitoring and mentoring ▪ Use older pupils as male role models for example as 'reading buddies' or to publish their work for younger classes ▪ Schools as learning organisations which foster and support teachers
Strategies about teaching in general	▪ Teachers having confidence in their abilities and having high expectations from pupils ▪ Support independent pupil awareness and encourage pupils to be responsible for their work ▪ Lesson planning and organisation, as boys can benefit from tightly structured and well-organised lessons with clear learning goals
A range of specific strategies for writing	▪ Explicit teaching about language, for example subordination and co-ordination. In addition, boys (and girls) can benefit from a range of diverse interventions such as stepped instructions using mini plenaries and task cards; using visual organisers and frames to scaffold text structure; the use of drama conventions to explore aspects of character, setting or plot; incorporation of 'talk for writing' time into literacy lessons so that pupils can talk about their text before start writing it ▪ Topic selection in narrative writing ▪ Medium term planning using frameworks which are adapted to meet pupils' diverse needs ▪ Planning writing using mnemonics as boys often have difficulties with timed writing and the process of 'beginning, middle and end' ▪ Effective drafting should be an integral part of pair, group

[3] A drama strategy where individuals are invited to speak their thoughts or feelings aloud - just a few words. This can be done by tapping each person on the shoulder.
[4] In this strategy a character is questioned by the group about his or her background, behaviour and motivation.

	and whole-class teaching. Explicit teaching of drafting skills should include the use of photocopied scripts for editing exercises, reading transcripts, hearing the drafts of other pupils and drafting targeted sections ▪ Writing frames which are most effective when they are modified to meet the specific needs of pupils ▪ Make writing tasks purposeful and give pupils opportunities to write frequently and at length
Literacy-specific activities	▪ Effective use of oral work and poetry ▪ Let boys hear and read emotionally powerful texts with strong narrative structure and poems ▪ Teachers' knowledge and 'belief systems' about literacy are also important
Use of resources	▪ Effective use of visual media such as cartoons, television, video and computer games ▪ Use of ICT facilities such as spell checkers, alterability of text on screen, use of composition features (e.g. highlight and font) to focus on cohesion, vocabulary chains and excessive coordination.

The role of new technology in literacy outcomes

A small-scale study found no evidence that children's written language development is being disrupted by the use of text abbreviations (textisms). On the contrary, the study found evidence of a positive relationship between use of textisms and word reading ability. As the authors note, this may be explained by the fact that use of textisms requires a certain degree of phonological awareness (Plester et al, 2009).

International evidence suggests that even though teenagers engage in technology-based writing, they do not think of it as 'writing'. The same study found that some 'technology-influenced' features appear on teenagers' writing for school (Pew Internet, 2008).

Pupils' views of writing in primary schools

An evaluation of the Every Child a Writer programme included a pupil survey, which was administered in both the intervention and comparison group of pupils twice: Phase 1 took place in the autumn term of 2009/10 and Phase 2 in the summer term. The pupil survey explored pupils' attitudes to writing, mainly covering writing in school (based on tables from Fisher and Twist, 2011):

- The majority of pupils had paper and pens or pencils to write at home. Around 57 per cent of pupils in both groups in Phase 1 reported that at home a grown-up helped them with their writing when they asked for help.
- Around seven in ten pupils in both groups in Phase 1 said that they liked to get help with their writing at school. The vast majority of them agreed with the statement 'I like it when we all share our ideas for writing and the teacher writes them on the board'. Just over eight in ten pupils also reported that they liked it when their teacher helped them write in a small group.
- A significant proportion of pupils reported that sometimes they can't think of what to write (around 71 per cent in the intervention and 75 per cent in the comparison group, both in Phase 1). Around 86 per cent of pupils in both groups of Phase 1 said that they liked to choose what they write about. Similar proportions of pupils reported that they wrote more slowly than other children in their class (56 per cent in the intervention and 58 per cent in the comparison group).
- Around seven in ten pupils reported that they liked writing in a group, and around six in ten would like to do more writing in class.

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