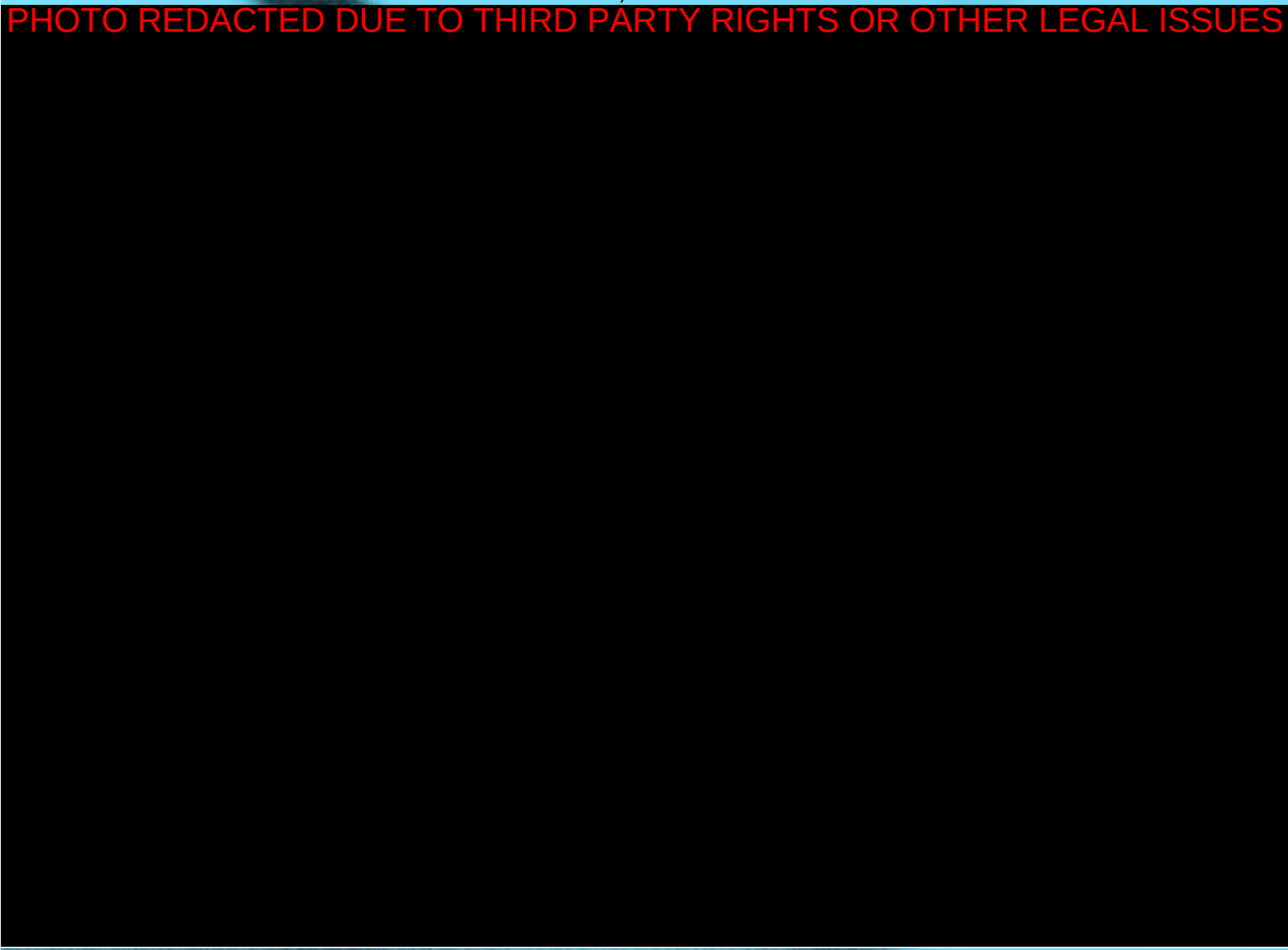
Office for Standards in Education

Yes he can

Schools where boys write well



HMI 505

Office for Standards
in Education

Yes he can

Schools where boys write well

July 2003

HMI 505

Document reference number: HMI 505

To obtain a copy please contact:

Ofsted Publications Centre

Telephone: 07002 637833

Fax: 07002 693274

E-mail: freepublications@ofsted.gov.uk

Web site: www.ofsted.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction

1 This report evaluates the factors contributing to the success of those schools where boys write well. These factors are examined in the context of the 'gap' in performance between boys and girls in writing, in particular where this gap is considerably smaller than in similar schools.

2 Between April 2002 and March 2003 Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) visited 7 primary and 8 secondary schools. They observed 84 lessons, scrutinised the writing of 259 boys and held discussions, either individually or in small groups, with 133 boys about their writing. A brief background to, and rationale for, the inspection is given in annex A.

3 The inspection focused on the identification of good practice. Schools were identified for visits on the basis of their test and examination results in writing, in English and across the wider curriculum, over a three-year period, corroborated by the most recent inspection report. In these schools the gap in the performance in writing between boys and girls was significantly smaller than that usually found. The schools selected also had good results overall, either by national standards or in relation to similar schools. This was to avoid selecting schools where the gap was smaller than usual because of poor performance by girls. In identifying factors that promote boys' achievement as writers it was vital to ensure that these were not having a negative effect on the girls.

4 A range of other inspection evidence was examined, including script analysis and some follow-up interviews with boys. A literature search and some preliminary analysis of existing inspection evidence were used to identify the factors to be evaluated on inspection visits. A fuller account of the evidence base and inspection methodology is given in annex B and the schools visited are listed in annex C.

Main findings

Factors that most strongly characterise the work of schools in which boys write well include the following:

- there is a culture in the school and classroom where intellectual, cultural and aesthetic accomplishment by boys as well as girls is valued by all
- in responding to written work, value is placed on diversity of style and approach, succinctness as much as elaboration, and logical thought as much as expressiveness
- marking is prompt, detailed and indicates clearly both what has been done well and where improvements can be made
- many pupils, both boys and girls, read widely for pleasure and in this way absorb a range of models for their own writing
- teachers (of English and other subjects) are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about language and are able to link oral work, reading and writing skilfully and explicitly, thus developing pupils' vocabulary and understanding of style
- a good balance is maintained between support and independence, with pupils always expected to be as independent as possible
- pupils are often given choice as to the content of their writing, even when the form or genre is prescribed
- efforts are made to make writing tasks purposeful, through seeking 'real' audiences, through publication and display, and through the use of writing to support thought
- writing tasks are often tackled in stages, with feedback or review at each stage of planning and drafting
- pupils write frequently and at length (often as homework) and in this way develop stamina as writers, but they seldom rewrite long pieces unless for 'publication'.

The above characteristics interact in a complex way, but for sustained progress in writing to be achieved, it is essential that good planning and teaching are accompanied by:

- detailed and informed assessment that values boys' writing
- a culture that enables boys to take pride in writing well.

Commentary

5 Many of the factors that promote the success of schools in achieving good standards of boys' writing ought to have an equally strong effect on the performance of girls and, while raising standards overall, might not affect the gap in performance. This inspection concentrated on the attitudes and responses of boys rather than giving equal attention to those of girls, but there is strong evidence – from data on underperforming schools, from proportions of exclusions, from attendance figures and from the everyday experience of teachers and inspectors – that boys may be disproportionately affected in their attitude to learning and their performance in writing by mediocre or poor teaching and assessment. Many boys in particular seem to need to know that someone is watching over and caring about their efforts, to be able to see a clear purpose for their work, and to experience tangible progress in order to maintain motivation. This is explored at greater length in the report *Boys' achievement in secondary schools*, Ofsted, July 2003.

6 There is a question as to whether the 'gap' between boys and girls in writing or literacy achievement will ever be closed completely. It is beyond the scope of this inspection to explore this matter. Certainly international comparisons, the long-standing nature of this difference, and the fact that it emerges so early in the age range and remains so persistent through the compulsory school years, all suggest that part of the difference may be built into human development. Although the schools visited had a markedly smaller gap between boys and girls than is usual, almost all had a gap of some kind in most cohorts. In a high-performing grammar school, for example, the gap is found in the proportion of A* grades in English, but it is still there.

7 This inspection suggests that, even if it cannot be removed entirely, the gap in performance between boys and girls in writing can be significantly narrowed. By learning from the practice of those schools that obtain the best standards from their boys, the size of the gap in other schools and in national results can be reduced. If this can be achieved, there is no doubt that the educational opportunities of many boys will be greatly improved. Throughout this report there is evidence of the practical strategies teachers can adopt to achieve this. These include valuing the quality of thought in writing that may be brief or untidy; avoiding excessively negative responses that increase frustration, while still setting high expectations; making targets for improvement clear and manageable; tackling handwriting and spelling early and thoroughly to support the development of fluency; and ensuring that a rich diet of reading is providing models for writing.

Key factors identified in schools achieving good standards in boys' writing

8 These factors are mainly drawn from the visits to the schools selected for their high standards and include all those rated as of significance in explaining boys' success in half or more of these schools. However, a number of additional factors that emerged, both in these visits and from the wider evidence base, are included too. The factors are grouped under ethos and policies; curriculum planning; assessment, teaching and learning and pupils' response. The interaction of these factors is also considered.

Ethos and policies

The culture of the school, reflected in the classrooms, is 'non-macho', with intellectual, cultural and aesthetic accomplishment by boys expected and accepted

9 This characteristic, though realised in different ways in each school, was of immense importance, and was highly evident in almost all the successful schools. At a whole-school level it was often linked to flourishing extra-curricular activities, such as drama clubs, orchestras, debating clubs, and school productions. Even in primary schools it sometimes involved unusually successful school councils or homework clubs. In a few cases there was a clear link to the existence of powerful male role models, particularly teachers whose enthusiasm for literature, drama, music and the discussion of ideas set a standard in the school for pupils to aspire to. However, several of the most effective primary schools and English departments had no male teachers, or very few. Some of these primary schools did invite fathers, grandfathers or others into school to support reading or writing activities, however, to provide the missing role models.

10 An atmosphere of respect for aesthetic and intellectual effort permeated most classrooms in the sample schools. Classroom organisation varied between schools and phases, but a strong feature in many was the clear control exercised by teachers over the grouping of pupils. Grouping was fitted to the task and used flexibly, with groups changing regularly. In several cases the frequent use of boy–girl pairs in lessons had a beneficial effect on the classroom ethos and on the quality of boys' writing.

11 The atmosphere in these classrooms was not characterised by overt competition between pupils (although they were interested in comparative performance) but by a constant high level of demand. Boys responded well to the setting of challenges, sometimes framed as improving on a personal best and sometimes as a target for group or class achievement. This ethos can perhaps best be described as one of challenge to succeed independently, but in a context of support and collaboration. In such classes boys achieved well.

> *In a GCSE English lesson the teacher had asked all pupils to write their own poems alongside their study of the set anthology. The lesson began by three boys reading poems they had written. One was an ambitious, rather pretentious piece, but both teacher and fellow pupils discussed it seriously, suggesting ways it might be made more comprehensible, with no trace of mockery – rather a sense that the struggle to convey meaning in poetry was a common topic of discussion.*

In a primary school Year 6 pupils were rehearsing the school play, a version of A Christmas Carol *scripted by their (male) teacher. The standard of performance was remarkably high. All pupils sang with energy and enthusiasm – there was no question of girls dominating. Boys approached the 'romantic' scene, where they had to hold hands and sing with the girls, with maturity and sensitivity.*

There are strong links with parents in relation to literacy development in primary schools

12 This was a feature in all the primary schools achieving high standards. As in most primary schools the partnership with parents was particularly strong in respect of reading, with well-maintained home–school reading diaries or contact books that established a dialogue with parents over reading development. This helped to produce both early fluency in reading and an enthusiasm for reading that was characteristic of many pupils of both sexes. Several of these schools retain a strong emphasis on hearing individual pupils read or discussing books with individual pupils, to ensure that the link with parents is well informed. Teaching assistants and parent volunteers are used to support this in several cases, alongside regular group reading and use of whole-class shared texts.

13 Additionally, however, the successful schools took great pains to inform parents of the approach to literacy development and enlisted their support, helping them to understand how they might best do this. Some schools encouraged parents to join pupils at homework clubs, run by teachers or teaching assistants, and this gave parents additional insight into the tasks being set and the approach to writing development or the teaching of spelling.

In a primary school in an ethnically mixed area, the homework club was well attended by both boys and girls, many of whose parents stayed with them. Two well-trained and confident teaching assistants took the club, which often concentrated on literacy. Pupils were heard to read, and parents were shown how to support their children's writing too. Several mothers for whom English was an additional language valued the opportunity to learn idioms and vocabulary that were unfamiliar to them alongside their children and the atmosphere was one of shared enjoyment of reading and writing.

In another primary school, involvement by parents was considered crucial by the headteacher. Meetings were held regularly to explain the school's approach to literacy to parents, and many parents were involved in supporting reading in classrooms. There were also regular book fairs, which pupils attended with their parents, and they were clearly excited about owning their own books as a result of these events.

Strong leadership and vision

14 In establishing and maintaining the ethos that underpinned boys' progress, the personal leadership and clear vision of the headteacher were significant factors, often with strong support from key staff, such as deputy headteachers and subject leaders. All shared the same values of promoting excellence and securing the inclusion of all pupils in a culture of continuous improvement.

The headteacher of this primary school has a wide knowledge of children's literature and a commitment to the powerful impact on pupils of models of good writing. She has devised a whole-school programme to teach many of the objectives of the National Literacy Strategy through the study of whole works of fiction, which are carefully matched to pupils' ages and provide balance of genres over time. Out of the study of the books teachers were led to examine the writer's style, but also to set a wide range of written tasks. Teachers felt supported by the detailed plans and had come to share the headteacher's passion for placing high-quality fiction at the heart of the English curriculum. As a result, boys as well as girls read widely and wrote with confidence and flair.

The deputy headteacher of this secondary school, himself a mathematician, has a strong sense of the importance of writing in underpinning and recording thought in all subjects. He has provided a framework for all departments systematically to review pupils' writing and their schemes of work, which has led to the production of a school-wide policy that values conciseness and logic in written expression. This intellectual leadership has helped to create a culture in which boys as well as girls regularly succeed as writers.

Curriculum planning

A balance is maintained in the writing curriculum between the development of 'skills' (such as handwriting, spelling and grammatical accuracy) and a focus on content, meaning and effect

15 Although this balance takes different forms with pupils of different ages, it proved to be a major factor in boys' success in most of the primary and secondary schools visited. The direct teaching of handwriting in the primary years, so that boys develop efficient, presentable joined writing, was seen as important in these schools. Despite this, some older boys interviewed, who had made limited progress in writing, mentioned the physical effort and slow pace of writing as reasons for disliking it, and it was noticeable that their handwriting skills were usually poor. In several of the schools good access to computers for pupils to word-process their work helped boys' motivation and partly off-set their problems with handwriting, though poor keyboard skills and irregular access to computers remained a problem for many and meant quick, legible handwriting was still an important advantage to pupils.

16 Good teaching of phonics in the early years, combined with good word-level work that developed pupils' interest in word structure had led, in several schools, to confidence in spelling and early fluency in writing. Pupils consequently wrote independently and at some length rather earlier than in many schools. These skills of rapid, efficient composition led, in turn, to their being expected to produce extended writing, often across the full range of subjects, and as they got older (especially in secondary schools) much of this writing was being produced as homework.

17 Underpinning the best skills development was a clear sense of pupils' expected progress, not only through spelling and phonics checklists, but also in relation to grammatical complexity and style, awareness of audience, and sense of genre. Teachers' subject knowledge was important here, but it was often supported by detailed guidance from co-ordinators or headteachers in primary schools, making use of the materials from the National Literacy Strategy but also supplementing them. In the secondary schools there was a high level of subject expertise in English departments that spanned literary and stylistic effects and a grasp of grammar, text structure and cohesion. In some schools this expertise was being spread to teachers of other subjects, who discussed text structures appropriate to writing in their subjects as a planned part of their scheme of work.

18 Good teaching of skills went hand in hand with a sense of purpose in writing tasks and a sense of the effect of language choices on the reader. Boys were helped by early fluency to maintain motivation, but they also gained from this purposefulness.

> *In this primary school progression in writing was very carefully monitored. The school has used the National Curriculum, National Literacy Strategy objectives and the experience of staff to produce a hierarchy of 'target statements' for phonics, spelling, handwriting, sentence construction, punctuation, language effects and text purpose and organisation. Each pupil's progress in meeting these targets was charted and the result was a very balanced overall view of their competence in writing.*

> *Throughout this primary school the balance between writing skills and the place of choice and inventiveness is marked. In a Year 2 lesson the effect of systematic phonics, spelling and handwriting instruction was clear in pupils' early fluency and speed of composition, and pupils were offered the structure of Roger McGough's 'Down behind the dustbin' to support their poetry writing. However, the stress in the lesson was on creating original and striking new ideas and it was the quality of these that was discussed in the plenary session at the end.*

Schemes of work in English and across the curriculum ensure breadth and balance in the types of writing undertaken, and include reading and analysing examples of each new type

19 The schools achieving success with boys in writing did not depend on schemes of work which especially emphasised 'boy-friendly' literature, media texts, drama and ICT, although these have often been cited as stimulating boys' interest and were seen to do so where used well. Neither did they concentrate on non-literary texts to the exclusion of literature in their English curriculum. Indeed, several of the schools visited in both primary and secondary phases had a strong emphasis on the whole-class study of high-quality literature, to which many boys responded well. Rather, the curriculum planning in most of the schools featured the careful inclusion of all major genres and text-types, and direct teaching of the characteristics of each, through good models, shared analysis and planned practice.

20 In most of the primary schools the writing curriculum spanned the full range of subjects and was planned accordingly. Several of the secondary schools also ensured that literacy objectives were included in schemes of work across the full curriculum, and some had identified particular genres to be reinforced, if not actually introduced, in subjects, as appropriate.

21 Boys responded well to the direct teaching of structure and form and to the variety of the writing curriculum. Although some boys showed a clear preference for non-literary texts, such as persuasive and argumentative writing or information texts, a considerable proportion were enthusiastic about poetry and narrative, both as readers and writers.

> *Time was set aside each week, outside the literacy hour, for extended writing in this primary school. What was striking was from how many subjects of the curriculum the topics for writing were derived. During the visit, for example, pupils in different years were engaged in writing up practical investigations from science, describing the process of embalming as part of a history topic on Ancient Egypt and writing up research into the Bermuda Triangle for English. In all these cases boys showed interest in the topics and determination to write well, sometimes supported by a suggested structure.*

> *In a Year 7 science lesson pupils were invited to consider the range of ways the same information about a microbiology experiment to grow different bacteria could be written up, depending on purpose and audience. The teacher presented a semi-narrative piece she had composed and the class discussed its inappropriateness for the task. Individual pupils then selected their own form for the write-up, and this led to the interesting use of diagrams, flow-charts and pictures as well as continuous prose. Each choice had to be justified, however, in terms of clarity and impact. In this school many subject departments consider writing choices explicitly with pupils in this way, so that subject differences in writing genres and styles are made explicit and seen by pupils as related to purpose.*

Emphasis is placed on encouraging voluntary, independent reading, beyond class-studied texts, so that a good number of boys read for pleasure, particularly in Key Stages 2 and 3

22 The directness of the link between reading habits and the quality of writing was most starkly revealed when pupils making good progress in writing at Key Stages 2 and 3 were compared with those doing less well. There is a direct correlation, in many cases, between the range and quality of independent reading and the development of style, awareness of readers' needs, and control of tone, viewpoint and genre in writing. The wider and more ambitious a pupil's reading, the more models are available to the writer from which to draw in crafting a personal style.

23 The promotion of a reading culture in primary schools has already been mentioned. The careful monitoring of reading, accompanied by timely recommendations, in several cases led both boys and girls to undertake increasingly challenging personal reading, including the substantial books of Tolkien and J K Rowling (interest in which was clearly linked to recent film versions). In several of the secondary schools pupils were introduced effectively to the range of fiction in the school library, and regular opportunities both to exchange books and to discuss and write about their reading for pleasure (either in English lessons or tutor time) kept many boys reading fiction.

24 Not all boys in the sample schools enjoyed fiction and some showed a marked preference for reading information material, often linked to their hobbies and interests. Such reading supports some aspects of writing effectively. However, the reading of literature was seen to have a particularly beneficial effect on writing. It usually constitutes the most extensive reading pupils do (especially in the case of novels) and develops stamina in reading, which, in turn, is often reflected in the willingness and ability to write at length. It also contributes to the absorption of a wide range of both general vocabulary and sentence structure (as opposed to the often very specialised terms and more uniform style of information texts or magazines on hobbies). Also, the text of a work of literature lends itself to reflection, it is not a conduit for information that is of limited interest once that information has been gleaned from it. Thus the process of reading literature has a qualitatively different and a more forceful effect on writing than many other types of reading. Interestingly, in the recent international reading literacy study, Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) (see annex A), it is in literary reading rather than in reading for information that boys lag behind girls in this country and in others.

25 Clearly one of the main routes to better writing by boys lies in improving the range and quality of their reading.

> *The English staff in this secondary school saw one of their main tasks as to introduce pupils to sustained reading and writing. Enthusiasm for the subject, and for literature in particular, was the most obvious characteristic of the staff here, and they* ***expected*** *pupils to share this enthusiasm. As a result, many boys (as well as girls) did.*
>
> *In this Year 6 class pupils' writing was unusually rich in texture, showing a very strong direct influence from pupils' reading of children's literature classics, such as* The Secret Garden, Tom's Midnight Garden, *and* The Hobbit. *Pupils were able to draw effectively on vocabulary, settings and plot when creating their own stories, often in quite different genres, in a re-creative not a merely imitative way.*

Assessment

26 The central importance of assessment to boys' progress is indicated by the fact that it appears as a key factor in almost all of the successful schools. Assessment and the ethos and culture of the school emerge as the strongest common elements linking these schools. The particular systems and strengths in the assessment of writing vary somewhat between schools and phases, but the overriding similarity is that **boys in these schools know that their writing and their progress as writers are valued by teachers, since this is signalled in the way teachers respond to their work.**

> **High-quality, close and responsive marking of written work (at different stages of drafting) offers clear advice on how to improve – even to high attainers – and always offers feedback on content as well as skills**

27 Good assessment involves a great deal of time and effort on the part of staff in marking and commenting on pupils' work in detail. This includes oral feedback as pupils are writing in shared and guided writing lessons, and always involves written comments on completed

pieces of writing that give pupils (and sometimes parents) a permanent record of the evaluation that has been made. Most of these schools have clear policies that guide staff as to how to indicate errors and to approach feedback and, in the best cases, this leads to consistency across different subjects. How many errors were corrected in any given script was seen as dependent on the developmental stage of the pupil, in both age and attainment, with a balance struck between the discouragement caused by excessive correction and the need for pupils to have correctable errors indicated clearly. In the case of higher-attaining pupils most errors were usually shown in marking and the pupils appreciated such thoroughness.

28 In primary and secondary schools teachers' knowledge about language and 'feel' for quality and style in writing were important in underpinning this high-quality marking. In addition the best markers had a clear sense of progression in writing, and understood what constituted points for development in a particular genre, for example. Teachers who had taught, or were currently teaching, older pupils often had a very well developed sense of progression, talking in terms of what qualities would need to be demonstrated by the end of the key stage, or in later examinations.

29 The best marking always gave pupils a clear indication of what they had done well (often by comments and ticks in the margin as well as in balanced, evaluative comment at the end of the piece). It showed where specific improvements were needed. This was sometimes done in the 'formal' language of targets, but was more often part of a 'dialogue' on paper with the pupil. The best such dialogue included clarity as to the particular objectives for the writing task, so that marking was focused sharply on what had been the intended learning. However, such concentration on 'skills' development did not replace the teacher's comment on the content of the writing, whatever the curriculum subject or genre of writing might be.

30 Expectations concerning the promptness and quality of marking were often explicit in school or departmental documentation. Policies as to the use of grades, marks or levels varied across these schools, but they had in common a commitment to showing pupils clearly and regularly what progress they were making and encouraging them to understand and monitor that progress for themselves.

> *Marking in this secondary school English department was selective, friendly and positive – and often personal (pupils' first name used). Yet it was frequently highly specific: in one Year 9 group clear advice was given on cohesion, on the length and nature of quotations and on sentence structure, for example. Boys liked the policy of marking for both effort and attainment here, feeling they were given credit where it was due, but were also shown how to improve.*
>
> *Marking was usually detailed and reflected strengths and needs. For example, a piece on* Animal Farm *in Year 9 received comment on the introduction, ways of presenting arguments clearly, use of link words and the nature of the conclusion. English staff had set themselves very demanding targets for marking 'turn round' time for homework and other writing. The speed of return had a positive impact on the boys.*
>
> *The marking of pupils' work was mostly of a standard rarely seen in primary schools. All teachers mark in great detail and provide a personal response to what pupils write. Comments*

have a positive tone, but areas for improvement are identified. Pupils confirmed how much they valued this response from their teachers.

A very able Year 6 boy had paid great attention to the detailed feedback he receives. When interviewed he said, ' My problem is with my endings. I don't extract enough from the beginning and development of my stories to make a convincing finish. This is my personal target. I have read a selection of endings and traced them through the stories. This is helping.'

Lesson objectives and pupils' personal targets were followed through in marking draft and finished work. For example, after a lesson on paragraphing, on a story plan the teacher had written 'A good plan. I can see what each of the paragraphs is to be about'. On the final work the comment is 'Well done. I am pleased to see you are writing in paragraphs. I think this is a well-told story, with lots of personal feelings. I liked both your introduction and conclusion this time.'

Marking and feedback comment values, as appropriate, diversity of response, style, succinctness, care and accuracy

31 A major factor in the best marking seen for pupils at all ages was the willingness to respond positively to certain characteristics of many boys' writing, and to try to build on them. Many boys show a preference for fast-paced, action-packed narrative, being impatient about descriptive detail or the inclusion of a character's thoughts and motivation. Several teachers in these schools responded to such writing initially in its own terms, commenting on the inventive plot or excitement, and then subtly suggesting how the writing might become 'richer' in detail. Similarly, boys often delight in humour, and will often include laconic comments and asides, or attempt to undercut the set task by taking an unusual or comic slant on it. Again, the best teachers were able to respond positively to what had been attempted, rather than merely dismiss it as inappropriate, while still indicating where improvement was needed. Boys interviewed were very sensitive to the tone and nature of the comments made on their writing and showed appreciation for teachers who tried to respond to their work by considering the writer's intentions, as well as using explicit external criteria.

32 Many boys write the shortest possible rather than the longest acceptable text. This can be mere idleness, but it also means that they can often write with commendable succinctness. Boys often complain that teachers are only interested in the length of their writing and dismiss short answers out of hand. In these schools, in contrast, there was evidence in marking and feedback of some conscious valuing of conciseness in writing and this occasionally found its way into stated policies or objectives. An emphasis placed on clear, logical, succinct writing often enabled boys in these schools to receive encouragement for work well done in several subjects, even though they were still less effective than other pupils (often girls) in producing description or extended narrative.

33 Most of the schools where boys wrote well had a balanced approach to neatness, presentation and accuracy. All were considered important when written work was submitted in final form, and especially when it was for publication, display or to be offered to any readership beyond the teacher. However, where writing was mainly used to support or record thought, such as in planning, note-taking or rough drafts, the emphasis was on the

quality of thought and the efficiency with which it had been captured, not on presentation or accuracy of transcription. Boys responded to this balance well, and in these schools many produced written work (often aided by the use of ICT) that was very carefully presented and in which they took great pride.

Humour was well used with a withdrawal group of 14 low-attaining Year 7 pupils, ten of whom were boys. Following discussion of Roald Dahl's descriptions of hideous characters, pupils enjoyed producing their own grotesque descriptions, using a framework provided by the teacher. Many were unoriginal or risqué but the teacher used a mixture of good-humoured response and steady cajoling to get them to refine their ideas. They became more confident and by the end of the lesson some striking images ('ears like a fly's wings') had been produced, with all pupils completing the task neatly and at some level of success.

The whole-school literacy priorities in this grammar school included:

- focus on sentence-level aspects of the strategy: making meaning clear and logical

- use of standard vocabulary and strategies for note-taking across subjects

- encourage precise and relevant explanation (that is, reduce waffle

- focus on concise, rigorous writing

- purpose – audience – form. Constantly reinforce these in every form of writing.

Boys interviewed in this secondary school were very aware of the differences between subjects in how language errors were dealt with in marking. They were clear that they wanted basic inaccuracies to be pointed out in all writing so that they knew what to put right. In the best practice this occurs already, as does helpful suggestion on improving the layout of writing produced using ICT.

Systems of assessment and recording are effective in promoting successful early intervention where it is needed to secure progress for all

34 All of the sample schools had a proportion of boys with special educational needs, although in several cases, especially in the selective schools, this proportion was significantly lower than is often the case. In general the progress of such boys was good, partly as a result of the positive ethos in the schools and partly because of the good teaching that is characterised below. Learning broken down into manageable stages, appropriate structuring and support, purposefulness in task-setting, and good use of speaking and listening and reading to support writing all helped such boys to progress. However, there are always some pupils who make less progress than expected despite these strengths in teaching. In several of these

schools assessment and monitoring were especially effective in picking up indications of such problems and intervening quickly and in a targeted way.

> *In this primary school intervention groups were created in each year group from Year 1 to Year 6 based on the detailed records of progress kept on all children for English. Typically about 15 pupils in each year had been selected and they experienced intensive small-group work led by teachers and teaching assistants working in partnership. In most years boys outnumbered girls in these groups, although there are notable exceptions. The pervasiveness and high quality of this intervention teaching, using National Literacy Strategy materials and school resources, contributed much to ensuring that the results attained by both boys and girls were very high.*

Teaching and learning

35 A considerable number of the factors identified from past research into teaching as likely to benefit boys were seen as important to the success of the survey schools. This is unsurprising as many are statements that apply to most effective teaching. Listed below are the particular factors that were noted in more than half of the schools as having a beneficial effect on boys' performance. Much good teaching was seen, but it resembled more closely practice usually seen than did the ethos and assessment features noted above. This is partly related to the emphasis that has been placed on high-quality teaching by the National Literacy Strategy and the Key Stage 3 National Strategy, which has led to many schools demonstrating, to varying degrees, the factors listed here. All these factors are of value to both boys and girls, but their presence was identified by inspectors with the particular success of boys in many of these schools.

> **Writing tasks are often broken down into smaller steps, with feedback at different stages (for example brainstorming, planning, first draft, redraft, final edit)**

36 This staging of tasks has, for some time, been recognised as helpful to learners, and to some boys especially, and the lessons observed often showed this to be so. In particular, the opportunity to discuss and receive feedback from peers or teacher on plans or early drafts was characteristic of the 'writing workshop' atmosphere of several of the best primary and secondary English classes. The quality of the feedback from the teacher was often a determining factor in how far this approach produced very effective writing from the boys.

> *Year 8 pupils were studying Islam and the main assessment task involved designing a new mosque. Standards achieved by several boys were very high. The planning, and interviews with pupils and teacher, showed the careful stages by which the task had been approached. Role-play had explored how different characters might benefit from the project and short formal letters had been produced offering reasons why a mosque should be built in a multi-ethnic community. These small-scale tasks were used to clarify and deepen understanding and represented stages towards the final written outcome, contributing much to the quality of that outcome.*

Year 2 pupils were to write their own account of the experience of the shepherds in the Christmas story, as a literacy task arising from RE. The teacher began the lesson in role (including costume) as a shepherd and told the story in the first person, to model the writing task. Before they began their account pupils brainstormed useful words and similes (a recent focus of study) and these were written on the whiteboard. They were then given a first paragraph opening and expected to continue this and complete the narrative for themselves. All the boys made rapid progress with their writing as the preparatory stages had given them confidence in what to write and some cues as to words and phrases to use.

Some writing is directed to specific audiences beyond the teacher and to purposes beyond the mere exercise of skills

37 Much of the writing undertaken was essentially to support study and was read only by the teacher, as is the case in all schools. However, schemes of work and policies in several schools were explicit in their insistence on writing being directed, wherever feasible, to specific audiences or undertaken for wider communication. It was common to find stories being written for younger pupils, but more important for the extension of pupils' writing repertoire and skills were more 'formal' tasks, such as letters to governors, school newspapers, book reviews for display in the library or the school intranet, or school council minutes.

In this primary school all teachers must ensure that at least one piece of writing each half term is directed to a real communicative purpose outside the classroom. This can be for display or 'performance' in assembly, but in many cases has led to pupils writing letters of enquiry or persuasion to outside bodies. The best of this writing has been rewarded with a coveted 'Writer of the Week' award.

Some good examples of writing for 'real' audiences. Year 9 history classes have produced books on the Reformation for younger children; music students have regularly written reviews of concerts they have attended, while the school magazine included a great deal of very fine pupils' writing.

A balance is maintained between support and the challenge to write independently, with support always removed when it is no longer needed, and an expectation of regular sustained writing from all pupils

38 Good use was made in lessons of writing frames, planning grids, paragraph headings and the like, as well as collaboration between pupils in planning work. This offered support to younger and less confident writers in particular. Where standards from boys were highest, however, the fostering of independence was equally evident. This was seen in many different ways. Sometimes pupils ended a lesson where new concepts or knowledge had been taught and discussed by attempting a short written summary, definition or answer to a question on their own, partly to assess their learning. Sometimes a lesson would start with individual attempts to write in a particular tone or style and this would be followed by discussion and sharing of ideas. Timed, assessed writing tasks were often set at the end of a particular unit of work to ensure that the quick, efficient composition of a structured answer, as required in tests in many subjects, had been mastered.

39 Common writing tasks were usually set to all pupils in the lessons observed, with an expectation that all would complete them. However, in the best cases, in both ability-based and mixed-ability classes, the level of support offered was tailored to the needs of particular pupils, and was **the minimum required for them to complete the task successfully, not the most that could be devised.**

> *This high-attaining GCSE history class showed great interest in discussion of the conflicts between the white settlers in the American west and the indigenous tribes. A video was shown, which presented the narrative of events clearly and presented the viewpoints of both sides. After an absorbing hour the class was asked to write two short paragraphs in ten minutes, one on how consistent was the policy of the settlers towards the Indians and one on which side was more responsible for the breakdown of relations between them. This task required rapid analytical thought and writing. Almost all the boys in the group rose to this challenge very well.*

> *A lower-attaining Year 1 'intervention' group shared* The Owl Babies *as a big book. The teacher then modelled the writing of some sentences offered by the pupils to re-tell the story opening. Pupils then worked at producing their own sentences in teacher-produced workbooks. The level of support needed was carefully tailored to pupils' needs, with those who could writing largely independently, while others composed orally and were helped to construct sentences and use word-cards or 'sound out' spellings by the teacher as they wrote.*

Oral work is well used as a prelude to most writing tasks and vocabulary is explicitly taught and reviewed (both subject specialist terms and words and expressions in general use)

40 All pupils are helped as writers by opportunities to rehearse ideas orally, in whole-class discussion or in groups and pairs. This was a very common aspect of the teaching seen, with discussion taking place at any point in the writing process, from initial brainstorming of ideas to discussing editorial changes to redrafted work. Boys clearly valued this, as they did the opportunity for role-play, 'hot-seating' and other drama activities that helped them to 'enact' characters, feelings or ideas before being asked to write about them. In several sample schools a particular feature noted was the interest shown in words and phrases and their nuances by pupils and the way this was fostered by the enthusiasm and expertise of staff, who modelled just such an interest themselves.

Good links are constantly made between reading and writing, with models of good writing discussed in detail and seen to influence pupils' own writing

41 Such discussion of words and their meaning was often part of the analysis of a text that modelled good writing in the particular genre being studied. The text was also looked at in terms of sentence structure, paragraphing, cohesion and other features too, so that pupils became highly conscious of the **choices** made by writers and how or why they might be made. The key strength in this discussion, where standards were highest, was that choices were always considered in terms of the effect and purpose of the writing ('Does it make it clearer?' 'Is it logical?' 'Does that add to the sadness or irony?') rather than linguistic features

being analysed for their own sake. In general boys who were interviewed about their writing and observed in lessons were interested in such analysis in English literature lessons, often dominating the discussion of literary tropes or linguistic patterns. They were less likely to answer questions about personal response to texts than girls, though in the best teaching they were drawn skilfully from the analytical into this aspect of effect.

There are opportunities for writers to exercise choice as to content and expression, even though the form or structure is tightly constrained

42 The way such discussion of models influences pupils' own writing is complex. Sometimes it amounts to little more than imitation, with most pupils writing almost identical scripts. The best teaching avoided this by incorporating choice of content, often alongside tight constraints of form. Thus, following discussion of a persuasive editorial on one topic pupils would select an issue they felt strongly about, while trying to structure the argument like the model. The issue of choice was one on which many boys were particularly insistent. Those who had made limited progress often cited the lack of choice over topics as a major complaint against school writing generally. Boys who had made very good progress also mentioned choice as a key factor in the writing they enjoyed doing most. They wanted to be able to include their own ideas, whether in stories and poems or in persuasive and argumentative writing, and relished especially problem-solving and speculation. Almost all the boys, however, responded well to form and structure being imposed – for example writing a poem such as a sonnet or haiku, or writing an essay or story with tight formal constraints – seeing this as akin to solving a puzzle, and thus absorbing. In a similar way boys responded well to having freedom to choose how to convey particular information (that is, choice of form, but imposed content). This points to the need to limit the number of decisions many boys have to make in writing, to give them confidence to start, and to have some creative choices left to them in each piece of writing to motivate and develop them as writers.

> *In a Year 6 English lesson the teacher began by reading an extract from Bel Mooney's* Stove Haunting *from a literacy course book. The class discussed the way the 'time-slip' from one historical age to another was handled by the writer. They were then led skilfully by the teacher to relate this to their previous work on* Tom's Midnight Garden*, comparing and contrasting the techniques used. Key points of similarity and difference were carefully logged. Pupils were then challenged to invent their own 'time-slip' story, which could involve any two historical periods, and to consider what object or place would be the point of transition from one time to the other. Time was given for silent individual thought and planning here – the moment of personal choice and creation was seen to be crucial to whatever success would follow.*
>
> *After this, pupils discussed their ideas in pairs, at some length, being urged to take a constructively critical stance. The teacher then asked several pairs to report on their discussions and say how the ideas had been developed by sharing them. At this point pupils were asked to write, again in silence, their opening paragraph(s) leading up to the point of the time-slip, with a couple of openings shared with the class in the final plenary. Most boys of all levels of attainment were intensely engaged by this lesson and the writing that resulted showed the positive impact of the models read but contained a wide range of*

historical settings and characters and some ingenious linking devices. The opportunity to be creative, but within a specified form, appealed particularly to the boys in this class.

One of the Year 9 boys interviewed had made limited progress in writing and professed to dislike most writing tasks set. He made two interesting exceptions. He liked writing in history because it was rooted in fact but you could have your own interpretation. He also liked attempting to write a sonnet. He took pride in having mastered the formal requirements of 14 lines, a set rhyme-scheme and regular rhythm, and explained how he had spent a long time producing a poem with which he was really pleased.

A good balance is maintained between writing used to aid thinking or study and the production of polished extended text

43 Pupils' fluency and speed of composition often reflected the amount that they wrote. Expectations were generally high as to the volume of writing. However, much of it was not writing to be evaluated primarily as polished text – it was writing that accompanied study across the curriculum. Typically, exercise books in science or humanities subjects were well kept, with a range of notes, short answers to tasks, and longer speculative and interpretative writing. Writing was used as the vehicle for crystallising or recording thought. The same was true of much writing in English lessons too. Written evaluations and plans were also scrupulously done in practical and aesthetic subjects, to support learning. However, alongside this effective use of writing as an adjunct to study, there were regular extended writing tasks in most subjects and, in the best primary and secondary practice, some overview of the range and balance of text types across the full curriculum was attempted. In this way endless repetition of the same types of writing across all subjects was avoided, but planned reinforcement was encouraged. Such repetition was criticised by boys, as were the practices of copying notes or excessive redrafting, where little change occurs between drafts and it is merely copying out again. Boys are quick to detect and condemn what looks like writing as a control mechanism or time-filler and where these occur in school to any significant degree they can engender negative attitudes to writing. In most of the survey schools writing was, conversely, regarded positively by many boys as it was usually purposeful.

44 Boys made the link between writing and intellectual challenge and several of the most successful writers in the secondary years expressed a preference for writing in subjects such as science and history over English, because of the anchoring of these subjects in fact rather than fiction or imagination. More strongly, though, they argued for the enjoyment of writing that used argument and evidence, and that concerned causation and logical proof. Interestingly, they did not equate writing about literature with these features, suggesting that a stronger emphasis on literary criticism, as opposed to more imaginative responses to texts, would suit such boys. The success of many of those boys who choose to continue English literature at advanced level seems to confirm that this preference, and skills in concise, analytical writing, are 'rewarded' better at this level. However, many high-attaining boys have dropped English entirely by this stage in all schools, including those visited.

The exercise books from Year 11 boys were characterised by the effective use of writing to maximise learning. Science projects were well researched, concise and lucid, with a clear line of argument. Humanities books had good extended writing, including imaginative and empathetic work, but also

good notes, diagrams, charts and tables, from which key concepts could be learned and revised efficiently. There was, above all, consistency of expectation about writing being carefully done but fit for purpose.

Pupils for whom English is an additional language

45 In most of the schools in this inspection there are a small number of pupils for whom English is an additional language. In only one school visited is the proportion well above that usually found. Hence limited evidence was collected which relates to the specific needs of such boys. In general, it was observed that the characteristics of teaching and learning, assessment and curriculum planning which helped the writing of all boys also supported those for whom English is an additional language. In particular, the strong and explicit links between spoken and written language, the deliberate teaching of general vocabulary, and the high-quality marking of written work that identifies systematic errors and misunderstandings, helped such pupils to progress. In the school with a high proportion of pupils for whom English is an additional language, the creation of a positive ethos that valued diversity of response extended to cultural differences as much as differences between boys and girls. Teachers showed particular skill in 'sweeping' the class with their eyes to detect any pupils who might not be following or concentrating, following this up by asking carefully differentiated questions and selecting reading materials and topics which would interest pupils from different backgrounds and enable them to share their particular knowledge and experience.

Pupils' response

Boys are enthusiastic writers, persevering with writing tasks to produce high-quality extended writing in a range of genres, showing pride in the quality of their writing. They are keen to share their writing with others in lessons, display it or publish it for a wider audience. They show respect for the writing of others and respond positively to feedback from both teachers and peers because they are keen to improve their writing

46 The response of pupils to writing activities is clearly a consequence of many of the factors already noted – they respond to good teaching, encouraging marking, or a positive ethos.

47 Clearly not all the boys in any of the schools or classrooms showed these attitudes, but they were sufficiently present in most for the atmosphere to be conducive to boys' performance as writers.

In this secondary school boys responded enthusiastically and thoughtfully to the tasks set. They were keen to engage in pair and group work to discuss writing and were unselfconscious about making contributions to whole-class discussion. They enjoyed the opportunity to work in the ICT suites and were extremely well motivated in this context. In discussion they said that the regularity with which they had to write helped to improve their writing. They also thought they had been given good models for writing from the literature and other texts they studied. They believed that regular reading helped

significantly with their writing and that opportunities to speak in lessons helped them sort and clarify ideas, which also improved their written work. Sixth form boys also felt that writing essays helped them to shape their ideas through the process of writing them down.

The Year 2 and Year 6 boys interviewed were all keen to talk about their writing. Even in Year 2 they saw the importance of thinking it through in advance, or 'planning writing in your head.' They knew their individual targets and valued the feedback that has given them these. The Year 6 boys were keen to share writing that had been successful, in lessons, through display and with the inspector. They had a clear idea of what they needed to improve, and spoke warmly of both the individual discussions they had with their teacher and the detailed written comments made on their work. All the boys saw the value of sharing ideas in the planning stages of writing. They also valued clear direction and support, speaking often of how you need to understand what you have to do for a particular task and of not wanting to start until you were sure you did.

Interaction of the major factors

48 From examining the factors that were judged to promote the writing standards of boys in a majority of the schools that achieve the most consistent success, it is clear that some have particular force, featuring in almost all the schools to a marked degree. These are:

- a school and classroom ethos that enables boys to feel positive about success in intellectual, aesthetic and cultural fields generally, and in wide reading and effective writing as part of this
- conscientious, detailed marking and feedback, informed by a good understanding of writing development, which recognises and values particular qualities in boys' writing, as well as suggesting specific areas for improvement.

49 In all these successful schools there is much good, interactive teaching. In each the writing curriculum is well planned, with English schemes of work covering a balanced range of genres and work in other subjects reinforcing or teaching the types of writing most common in those subjects. Writing is also corrected according to agreed marking policies. These provide a necessary basis for boys and girls to succeed as writers in any school. However, these factors are present, to varying degrees, in many schools in which boys do not make the same progress or achieve the writing standards that are evident in the survey schools. The evidence of this inspection is that it is the interaction of such good teaching and planning with the ethos and assessment factors that makes the crucial difference, and converts effective individual lessons on writing into sustained, rapid progress for boys.

50 It is no easy matter to create this 'non-macho' ethos that values writing and, although some of the schools serve areas of relative social and educational advantage, none found it easy to create or sustain such an ethos. The forces of popular culture and the values of society outside school exert powerful influences on all children and young people in an age of easy mass communication. Nevertheless, the challenge for schools differs according to the

particular communities they serve and some face formidable difficulties in asserting values that are at variance with the assumptions that some or most pupils bring with them. Some of the schools, however, do show that a school 'culture' can be created in these circumstances that promotes boys' performance. Partnership with parents and the provision of good role models in school feature particularly strongly in the work of these schools.

51 Achieving the quality of assessment of the best of these schools is also a challenge. Where recruitment of specialist teachers is difficult the need for good school-based or LEA training on assessment and writing development is that much greater. The materials produced by the national strategies and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have, however, provided a substantial basis for any such training and this support continues to grow. Providing high-quality feedback to pupils is always time-consuming, even where staff are well qualified and knowledgeable, and explicitness over criteria and good use of target-setting make pupils partners in the process of reviewing their progress. It was a noticeable feature of the work of several of the primary and secondary schools visited, however, that staff gave the highest priority in allocating their time to those tasks that most directly offered individual feedback to pupils. Of these tasks prompt, detailed marking was one and maintaining a close interest in pupils' personal reading, and so monitoring their reading development, was another. Through such day-to-day interaction, boys, just as much as girls, understood that their progress was important to someone and this had a major effect on their motivation to succeed as readers and writers.

Annexes

Annex A. Background to the inspection

Ten years ago, in 1993, one of the earliest publications by the newly formed Office for Standards in Education was *Boys and English* (1). This report proved very influential in highlighting the gap in performance between boys and girls in English and indicating some of the possible reasons for this. The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) followed up the report, seeking to find ways of raising boys' attainment in English in *Boys and English* (1996) (2) and publishing a number of case studies of effective practice. To this was added the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) publication *Can do better: raising boys' achievement in English* in 1998 (3). Several local education authorities (LEAs) mounted their own improvement projects aimed at improving boys' performance, in English or more widely, and the Basic Skills Agency used visits to some of these LEAs to produce their helpful booklet *Improving Boys' Literacy: a survey of effective practice in literacy* in 1997 (4). Many small-scale classroom research projects, as well as larger research studies in individual schools or across large numbers of schools, have followed. Some are specific to English but others take a wider approach, since the gap in performance between boys and girls is apparent across most of the curriculum, and especially in subjects where reading and writing are most prominent. The extent of this gender divide across the curriculum was further exposed in an Ofsted report in 1996 (5). Some longitudinal and comparative research studies, such as the Department for Education and Skills/Homerton College study of boys' achievement, are still in progress.

In the last few years attention has been particularly focused on writing, since the analysis of National Curriculum test results shows that it is in writing that boys lag further behind girls than in the other English attainment targets (reading and speaking and listening). Indeed, in 2002 there was a gap of around 15% in the proportion of boys reaching level 2b in the Key Stage 1 writing test (widely seen as a major threshold at age 7) compared to girls. This gap of 15% remained the same for pupils aged 11 in 2002 in the proportions of boys and girls reaching Level 4 in writing, an important indicator of readiness for the literacy demands of secondary school. At Key Stage 3 and at GCSE writing has not been separately reported from reading, but in English the gap at age 14 in those pupils attaining Level 5 and above was 17% in 2002 with only a slightly smaller gap in English and English literature at GCSE in the proportions reaching grade C and above.

So, despite the high profile given in recent years to the issue of boys' performance generally, and in writing in particular, and the best efforts of teacher educators, advisers and teachers themselves to improve boys' writing, the gender gap remains as wide as ever. Some have argued that the gap is caused by developmental differences between the sexes in relation to both language and fine motor control needed in writing, resulting from differences in brain structure or function. Others claim that there is no real cause for concern – the boys do catch up eventually and do well in later life compared with girls, by most indicators. There may be some truth in this. Certainly girls have long out-performed boys in verbal tests at age 11 and some gender difference in literacy performance seems to be common to nearly all countries in international tests of reading and literacy (6). Nevertheless, inspection and test evidence indicate clearly that some schools are far more successful than others in achieving standards in writing from boys that are closer to those of girls, or occasionally surpass them. Similarly, scrutiny of LEA results shows that the gap in performance between boys and girls in English, and in examination results more generally, is considerably wider in some LEAs than others. These statistics suggest that there is scope for improvement in boys' performance in many schools and LEAs, whether or not some gender gap in literacy will always remain.

The issue of school-by-school or area-by-area comparison is complex, in that it is clear from all the data that gender interacts with other social and cultural factors, not least the particular expectations of male and female roles that pertain in any particular culture. Social class, ethnicity and the social and economic history of an area can all be important factors here as is clear in the Ofsted report *Boys' achievement in secondary schools* (7). Schools serving some catchment areas, therefore, have a different or greater challenge in promoting the performance of boys in literacy than others. Again, however, it is evident that some schools are markedly more successful than others in apparently similar contexts in achieving good standards from their boys in writing, both in English and across the curriculum. Indeed, this inspection took this difference as its starting-point.

References

1. *Boys and English,* Office for Standards in Education, London, 1993.

2. *Boys and English*, School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, London, 1996.

3. *Can do better: raising boys' achievement in English*, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, London, 1998.

4. *Improving Boys' Literacy: a survey of effective practice in secondary schools*, G Frater, Basic Skills Agency, London, 1997.

5. *The Gender Divide,* Office for Standards in Education, London, 1996.

6. *Student Achievement in England*: *Results in Reading, Mathematical and Scientific Literacy among 15 year olds from OECD PISA 2000 Study*, B Gill, M Dunn and E Goddard, The Stationery Office, London, 2002. National Foundation for Educational Research/Department for Education and Skills, Reading all over the world: National Report for England of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), London, 2003.

7. *Boys' achievement in secondary schools*, Office for Standards in Education, London, 2003.

Annex B. Evidence base and inspection methodology

Since it was known that much evidence already existed in Ofsted databases, from section 10 school inspections and HMI surveys, the first inspection task was to summarise what was already held and what general findings had emerged from previous inspection. While much confirmation was found that boys were seen to be performing less well than girls as writers, it was clear that the gap between the sexes was accepted as the 'norm', and few reports or inspectors' notes had sought to explain in any detail the reasons for poorer performance or the comparative success of a minority of schools or teachers in the standards their boys achieved as writers.

Next, a literature review – Literature Search on Improving Boys' Writing – was commissioned, to summarise the findings of research and the most recent commentary on boys' writing. This was to be in two sections, the first indicating reasons that have been advanced to explain boys' poorer standards than those of girls in writing and the second to identify methods and approaches that have been found to be successful in raising boys' attainment in writing. The results of this literature search (conducted by Caroline Daly, University of London, Institute of Education) can be read in full on the Ofsted web site (www.ofsted.gov.uk). This search was completed before the school visits began, and was used to help draw up the list of issues to be investigated in schools.

Alongside this preliminary work the research and analysis team in Ofsted sought international comparative data to see how widespread the lower performance of boys in literacy was, and whether it was mainly a feature of English-speaking countries, from which a majority of the academic research in the literature search emanated. This analysis found evidence from many countries across Europe and beyond that the phenomenon was widespread, and certainly not confined to English-speaking cultures. Indeed, in the most recent PISA and PIRLS assessments involving over 30 countries each, every country had boys performing less well than girls in the literacy (mainly reading) tests, with the gap in the UK being around average.

The Ofsted research and analysis team also identified a group of primary and secondary schools in which the gap in performance between boys and girls in writing at Key Stages 1 and 2, in English at Key Stage 3, in English at GCSE and in the proportions gaining 5 or more grades A*–C at GCSE, was maintained at the lowest level over a three-year period. **This had to be in the context of good results overall by national expectations, or in comparison with similar schools, rather than being the result of low standards from the girls.** A separate list of single sex boys' schools was drawn up, where boys did better than in similar schools nationally. The most recent inspection report for each of these schools was then read, to narrow down the list of schools to six primary and six secondary, with a few reserves.

The HMI inspection team met to review the lists of schools and the preliminary evidence and identify all the possible factors that might account for the comparative success of these schools in achieving good standards of writing from boys. The team also decided to add to the list of schools for visits two schools that had made outstanding recent improvements in the performance of boys in writing or English, but where the proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals, and with special educational needs were higher than in most of the selected sample of schools, and in one case where English was an additional language for a significant proportion of pupils. This was done to make the range of schools visited more representative than it would otherwise have been, using the three years of results only.

A schedule was drawn up for the school visits, based on a list of possible factors. Each school was then visited for two days, usually by one inspector and sometimes by two inspectors together. During the visits:

- lessons were observed in English and other subjects of the curriculum, across the 5 to 16 age range
- relevant extra-curricular activities were observed (for example, writing clubs)
- samples of written work in English and other subjects from boys of different ages and levels of attainment were read
- discussions were held with the boys about their writing
- headteachers, heads of English and language co-ordinators, and a range of other teachers were interviewed
- policies, schemes of work and other relevant documents were scrutinised.

At the end of the visit observations as to the factors that seemed most salient to their boys' success in writing were discussed with key staff, to confirm the evidence collected.

After the visit the inspector(s) reviewed all the evidence and graded each of the factors for its importance in explaining the success of boys as writers in the particular school.

When all visits were complete the inspectors met again to review all the evidence. Those factors which were found to be present in a majority of the schools overall, or most schools in the primary or secondary phase, were each discussed in detail, with examples of practice compared. It is these factors and examples that appear in the main body of this report.

In addition to this main evidence base a number of other inspection activities took place. First, the same range of performance data by gender as had been used to select individual schools was looked at in terms of the performance of each LEA. A list of those LEAs which had maintained the lowest gender gap in results, or which had succeeded in narrowing the gap significantly, was drawn up. Officers or advisers in some of these LEAs were contacted and they were asked about the policies or initiatives they had put in place that might explain their comparative success. They were also asked to consider the evidence from their schools and identify the factors they thought characterised those that produced the best results in writing from boys. This evidence is summarised as **annex D**.

Second, two pieces of script analysis were undertaken, one at Key Stage 2 and the other at Key Stage 3. Writing test scripts from 30 pupils written in Years 3, 4 and 5 were taken from an archive at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), to examine progress by boys across Key Stage 2. The pupils attended schools used by Ofsted to monitor the early years of the National Literacy Strategy and, as part of this monitoring, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) commissioned tests for each year-group which were externally marked. The writing of 15 boys of differing levels of attainment who had made greater than expected progress between Year 3 and Year 5 was compared with that of 15 who had made less than expected progress. This was used to characterise the main indicators of progress at a linguistic level to inform inspectors undertaking school visits. At Key Stage 3 a school that is also participating in the Department for Education and Skills/Homerton College longitudinal study of boys' achievement was visited to look at progress across the key stage. Here 12 boys in Year 9 were selected by the school, half of whom had made very good progress as writers, from a range of starting points, between Years 7 and 9 and half of whom had made less progress than expected. Their files of written work in English from across the key stage were scrutinised, to identify the main features of progress, and these were shared with the inspection team. Some pupils were observed in lessons. Then each boy was interviewed individually to

draw out their attitudes to writing. They also brought along writing from other subjects and were encouraged to discuss the writing they did in different subjects.

Finally, all members of the inspection team collected interesting evidence from their routine inspection work during the year that shed light on boys' writing. This included teacher-training sessions on the subject, evidence of LEA projects, evidence from schools in exceptionally challenging circumstances, post-16 work, and material from section 10 school inspections. This provided an important baseline against which to judge the success of the sample schools that had been selected largely on the basis of their good results.

Annex C. Schools visited during the inspection

Primary schools

Coppetts Wood, Barnet

Grange Park, Enfield

Hook-with-Warsash, Hampshire

St Mary's RC, Studley, Warwickshire

St Patrick's C of E, Solihull

Walmsley C of E, Bolton

William Ransom, Hitchin, Hertfordshire

Secondary schools

Charlton, Telford

Colmers Farm, Birmingham

Colyton Grammar, Devon

The Cotswold, Gloucestershire

Kings Norton Boys, Birmingham

Pate's Grammar, Gloucestershire

St Augustine of Canterbury Catholic High, St Helens

St Edward's College, Liverpool

Annex D. LEAs where the gap between boys and girls in writing is smallest or is reducing most quickly

This annex is based on examining results over a three-year period at all key stages from all local education authorities (LEAs) in terms of the performance gap between boys and girls in writing, in English, and 5+ A* to C at GCSE. A number of those where the gap is smallest or is reducing more rapidly than elsewhere, were selected. The EDPs of these LEAs were examined and a number of officers and advisers were contacted to discuss the issue.

Features found in most or all of the sample LEAs are:

- LEA development plans have made explicit reference to the issue of boys' performance over several years, and set improvement in it as a priority
- actions taken have been well defined, often involve research by both teachers and consultants, and include dissemination of what works well, and why
- areas of focus most commonly include:
  - responsive marking
  - links between reading and writing
  - oral work and drama to stimulate and accompany writing
  - writing across the curriculum
  - effective re-drafting
- CPD/INSET has concentrated on the issue of boys' writing, especially on the characteristics of boys' writing, assessment and target-setting
- links have been made to other teaching and learning initiatives, especially concerned with active learning, classroom culture and ethos, and talk for learning
- data analysis has been detailed and extensive to pinpoint the issue and concentrate attention on particular schools or groups of pupils
- it has been linked also to a stress on the responsibility of senior and middle managers to monitor and improve teaching
- LEA support teams have worked together on the issue, for example primary and secondary or EAL and English/literacy teams.

LEA staff were asked to say to what they attributed progress in boys' performance in their LEA and the most frequently mentioned areas were:

- improved knowledge of teachers, particularly of the development and assessment of writing
- raised expectations and more energetic teaching, with a stress on active learning and interaction
- tackling classroom culture and ethos, and especially the role of talk in learning.

These outcomes offer useful corroboration of several of the findings of the inspection visits to successful schools.

Annex E. Checklist for school self-evaluation

Using the main points made in this report, the following checklist could be used to audit provision in any school:

Ten key areas for consideration

1 Could our school or classroom better promote a culture and ethos which values literacy, intellectual and aesthetic achievement more widely (including physical environment, teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interaction, curricular and extra-curricular offer, and links with parents over literacy)?

2 Is sufficient priority given to promoting and sustaining personal voluntary reading, in English lessons and beyond? Is reading of all kinds undertaken and discussed in sufficient detail for boys to absorb the models it provides?

3 Do we do enough to demonstrate to boys that we value their writing and their progress as writers (by marking comment, oral feedback, display or publication)?

4 What qualities in writing do we show that we value most? Do they include succinctness, wit, logic, depth of thought, as well as appropriate elaboration, detail and length?

5 Are our expectations high enough in terms of regular extended writing, the intellectual challenge of tasks, presentation and accuracy?

6 Do we give boys enough scope to exercise choice as writers and express their own ideas?

7 Is the balance well struck between the provision of clear structure to writing tasks (that is, they know what is expected and are offered any necessary scaffolding) and the push for maximum independence?

8 Do we do enough to give writing a 'real' communicative function (by considering audience, publication and display, but also writing to aid thought)?

9 Is talk being used appropriately at different stages of the writing process to support boys as writers (to enliven contexts through drama, for sharing of ideas, developing vocabulary or receiving feedback from readers)?

10 Do all teachers (of English and other subjects) have sufficient knowledge about writing and writing development to provide detailed feedback to pupils, or is more training needed?

Designed and produced by Matrix Print Consultants Ltd Tel: 01536 713811