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Gender, language and literacy

Activities

Looking at samples of writing

Aim

- To identify gender differences in writing.
- To consider teacher strategies that enable boys and girls to write well.

What to do

Look at the two samples of writing and the teacher's commentary below then answer the following questions.

- How could you address the problems the teacher describes?
- How could you help the children to learn from each other?
- What teaching and organisational strategies would you use?
- What writing activity might you set as a follow-up to this one?
- How would you prepare the children?
- How would you organise the children?
- What role would you take as the children were writing?

These two stories were written collaboratively by mixed groups of boys and girls aged five working with the help of an adult scribe. As the starting point for the writing the children had been asked to use a stone or a rock from a display in the classroom. The stories had been discussed and planned before a final draft was written on the word processor.

The Dinosaur Discovery by Abigayle, Adam and Vanessa

Once upon a time there was a red rock and a dinosaur saw it and thought it was a piece of beef. He picked up the piece of red rock and he took it

back to Dinosaur Headland. He showed it to the other dinosaurs and they were fascinated. They all took a bite out of it and all their teeth fell out. A skeleton of a Brachiosaurus came along and it reminded them that it was a piece of red rock. A Europrofocepholus dinosaur took the rock back where it belonged. Every week the dinosaur went back to the museum to look at the red rock. It was put in the museum because it was a magic rock and it needed light so that it could glow.

The Stone and the Skeleton by Craig and Helen

There was once a stone in a cave and suddenly a skeleton popped out and we screamed. The skeleton was a magic skeleton. We picked up the stone and it changed colour. It changed from brown to blue to green and red. We threw the stone at the skeleton's head and his leg fell off. As he was a magic skeleton he used some of his magic to fix himself back together. He flew back into the stone and then we went home with the stone.

Teacher's commentary

Although the children had complete freedom in what they included in their story, both groups chose to write a fantasy with elements of magic, adventure, violence and fear. In both stories the characters are male and active. The two girls contributing to *The Dinosaur Discovery* never thought to question this decision. Again in *The Dinosaur Discovery* Adam insisted that the correct names and spellings for the types of dinosaurs were included in the story.

As Craig and Helen were planning the first draft of their story I asked them why they wanted to throw the stone at the skeleton and Craig replied that this was a good thing to do with a stone. I suggested that there might be other things that they could include in their story that were related to the stone, but Craig was adamant that he would throw the stone if he saw a skeleton and Helen agreed.

As I observed the children working together it was clear that, in both groups, the boys took the lead in the discussions and in organising the girls to make notes and plans.

It is possible that by participating in this activity the girls had the opportunity to write a story that was active and aggressive, was far removed from a domestic setting and did not deal with motives or emotions. It could be argued that this would widen the girls' experiences and the content of their writing. But the significance of this experience seemed limited. As the boys were dominant in the discussions and as the stories were about male characters it is hard to judge how much ownership the girls felt over this writing. The boys too seemed to have missed out on a valuable learning experience. They had not explored the world of feelings, positive motives and gentle values; the potential contribution that the girls might have made to the writing was overlooked in the interests of excitement and combat.

Websites

DCSF Gender and Achievement: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/understanding/faqs/>

This website brings together a number of the issues concerned with the achievement of boys and girls. It contains links to further reading.

Links to on-line reading

Banerjee, R. (2005) *Why Very Young Children Exhibit Stereotyped Ideas About Gender Roles*. Available from: http://www.open2.net/healtheducation/family_childdevelopment/2005/gender_development.html

This is an extract from the Open University Course ED209: Child Development which reveals how experts believe children's sense of gender identity develops.

Davies, J., Marsh, J. and Millard, E. (n.d.) *Differently Literate: Some Ways of Working in Schools to Promote Equal Access to the Language Curriculum for Boys and Girls*. Available at: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/education/research/oldtopics/23.html>

This article summarises the reasons currently given by the researchers for the differences between boys' and girls' achievements in literacy and suggests strategies for addressing the issue in schools. It is available from the University of Sheffield School of Education website.

DCSF (2007) *Confident, Capable and Creative: Supporting Boys' Achievements – Guidance for Practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: DCSF. Available from: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/foundation_stage/supporting_achievements/

This publication provides support for EYFS practitioners to create conditions which will help boys to achieve well.

DfES Primary National Strategy: Boys' Writing fliers available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/1128197

These sheets give practical advice about improving boys' writing.

Myhill, D. and Jones, S. (2004) 'Noisy boys and invisible girls?', *Literacy Today*. 41. Available from: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Pubs/myhill2.html>

This is a report on the findings from two studies concerning gender stereotypes and the implications for achievement among boys and girls. It contains suggestions for teaching practices.

Smith, T. (2007) *Engaging Boys in the Early Years*. London: Islington Primary Strategy Early Years Team. Available from: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/casestudies/foundation_stage/achievements/islington/islington_cs.pdf

This publication includes an article on improving boys' attitudes to writing

United Kingdom Literacy Association/Primary National Strategy (2004) *Raising Boys' Achievements in Writing*. London: DfES. Available from: <http://www.ttrb.ac.uk/viewarticle2.aspx?contentId=13026>

This UKLA/PNS publication presents the findings of a project designed to raise boys' engagement, motivation and achievements in writing.