Identity and the boy writer - a Case Study examining the relative roles of teacher pedagogical beliefs, pupil attitudes and provision for writing in the emergent writing experiences of boys and girls in an Early Years classroom

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Abstract

Practitioner beliefs regarding theories of emergent writing (Wearmouth et al., 2011), provision for writing (Watson and Kehler, 2012), and (increasingly of late) pupil attitudes towards writing (Gardner, 2014; Wearmouth et al., 2011) are seen as possible factors in the disparity between boys' and girls' performance in writing in primary schools. This case study sought to explore the interaction of gender and writing performance in a single Early Years classroom in a small rural primary school with the aim of gaining further insights into the writing experiences of the boys. Semi-structured interviews with three teachers explored teaching approaches and practitioner beliefs; twenty-six questionnaires investigated pupil attitudes towards writing; and fifty-five observations explored pupil writing behaviours. A provision audit and attainment data in writing and fine motor development provided triangulation.

Findings indicated that the boys of this cohort were atypically (according to the literature) committed writers, characterised by independence at the writing table and collaborative innovation during role play. A strong self-efficacy in writing premised a positive attitude towards writing activities in Reception that, surprisingly, co-existed with the boys' lower attainment in writing assessments. Practitioner misconceptions regarding a perceived superiority of the girls when it came to 'literate' role play was also disproved by observational data showing more boys than girls engaged in this endeavour. Despite this, practitioner preference for formal assessing methodologies appeared well-matched to the needs of the majority of writers and a creative approach to provision for writing was effective in fostering positive pupil attitudes. Possible reasons for the dis-junct between practitioner belief and pupil realities included institutional pressures to achieve curricular-defined performance targets, and the twin effects of political discourse presenting boys as the 'weaker' writers of the sexes and the appearance of this in attainment data.

Introduction

'Emergent' Literacy and the politics of assessment

The overall aim of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of the writing identities of the boys in the setting. While children at this age are still constructing a 'sense of self' (Ivanic, 2004:244), 'identity' for the purposes of this study was conceptualised as the early experiences and interactions of the learner which are socially and culturally situated (Gardner, 2014; Baren Cohen, 1995). These experiences shape the emerging uniqueness of learners as readers and writers (Meek Spencer, 2001; Brice-Heath, 1983; Holdaway, 1979). The unique way in which young children learn to 'become literates … before they can read' (Brice-Heath, 1983:256) needs to be considered in any debate on young children and writing. Clay (1991:12) introduced the term 'emergent literacy' to describe the behaviours of young pre-readers in which the reading and writing habits of their elders are mimicked through self-talk and 'literate play'. In the classroom this manifests itself chiefly through mark-

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making (Meek, 1988; Clay, 1975) through which children come to see writing as a symbolic form of communication (Kelly and Safford, 2008).
Some of these components are reflected in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, though to what degree is a subject for debate (Massey, 2013). Oral skills are enshrined in one of the seven areas of learning, 'Communication for Language' and are acknowledged implicitly in the remaining six areas as a 'characteristic of learning' (DfE, 2012: 8). In the Writing scales, however, oral skills form only three out of the nine scale points, while the remaining six points are notable for an emphasis on transcriptional ability. Fine motor skills are separated into a different area of learning entirely, that of 'Physical Development'. If one takes into account boys' perceived poorer fine motor skills and this apparent de-prioritising of oral prowess in assessment for writing in the Early Years, then the growing reservations amongst researchers about the role of assessment in the creation of assumptions about boy writers may have some weight. While it was not an explicit aim of this study to investigate the role of assessment in this regard, assessment data was used as another prism through which the writing experiences of both genders in Reception was explored. In particular, the assessing methodologies used in the setting were anticipated to serve as a litmus test for the efficacy of the current pedagogical regime, inspired in part by Maynard and Lowe's (1999) conceptualisation of assessing practices in emergent writing.

Literature Review

Pedagogical tensions

The debates regarding the contribution of pupil gender to differences in writing performance between boys and girls are complex and expose tensions in pedagogical thinking. Evidence polarising boys as 'weaker writers' and girls as 'more industrious' is problematic (Ofsted, 2012b:16; Gardner, 2011; Jones, 2007; Van Waes and Schellens, 2003). This is partly because these 'hegemonic gender categorisations' (Epstein et al., 1998:7) are founded largely on analyses of writers' products rather than the contexts in which writing is produced. Millard (1997:154) points out that formal rather than child-initiated contexts for writing can have a detrimental effect, particularly on boys whose lower self-efficacy (that is, self-judgement of ability - see Bandura, 1994) makes them more vulnerable to 'intimidating teacherly direction'. The method of assessment itself is also only as reliable as its criteria (Black and William, 2012:245). Ofsted's (2012b) noting of the flaws of current standardised testing in writing appears a partial admission of this, and poses a key question: are some boys not *seen* 'as successful writers' because current testing methodologies 'do not allow them to show off their skills'? (Ofsted, 2012b:6). This possibly hints at previous research suggesting boys prefer to write analytical non-fiction in social contexts (Millard, 1997; Graves, 1983), as opposed to the alleged prevailing current trends in schools for fiction narrative writing (Gardner, 2014). However, this is, arguably, redolent of further stereotyping, and fails to take into account studies which refute gender-bias in written genres (such as Jones, 2007), leading some to caution that 'gender is a poor predictor' of pupil preference or performance in writing (Watson and Kehler, 2012:45).

One of Ofsted's (2008) solutions to the perceived 'feminised classroom' (Millard, 1997:159), to increase the number of 'action-packed narratives' in the reading corner, crystallizes another tension: practitioners are told not to form 'gendered assumptions' about children's writing performance (Ofsted, 2003:22) yet, arguably, much advice as to how to organise their classrooms and plan their lessons reinforces such stereotypes. The challenge is for practitioners to ensure all needs are met without falling prey to these kinds of assumptions. Ofsted (2012b:5) suggest that any decisions of provision relating to 'meeting an assumed gender preference' (for example, 'more books about monsters for boys') are offered with personalised monitoring via pupil tracking to counter possible stereotyping. Equity of expectations, regardless not just of gender but of any other criteria, is also key, with teachers taking care to 'recognise and value particular qualities in boys' *and* girls' writing' and create an ethos where curricula, resources and assessments are personalised to meet the needs of the pupil 'as an individual' (Ofsted, 2012b:7). Siraj-Blatchford (1995:43) refers to this as the 'teacher as "critical pedagogue"', who takes care not to present any one group as 'having an homogenous experience with others of their "type"'. This almost 'anti-gendered' approach (my phrase) is perhaps a strategy to avoid what Maynard and Lowe (1999:8) describe as the cautionary tale of the 'passive girl writer': the time-pressed teacher who is more likely to accept inferior but independent writing from the girls so she can focus on the boys. Again, however, this has overtones of female-stereotyping, and current evidence refutes it, with girls continuing to out-perform boys in writing 'across the key stages' (Ofsted, 2012b:40). Either way, the argument that the teacher is a potential 'shaper … of writing identities in the classroom', whether those identities are positive or negative for each gender, is compelling (Wearmouth et al., 2011:92).

Provision and the need to interrogate it

The practitioner's stance regarding writing and gender is refracted through the provision she devises for her setting. Wearmouth et al. (2011:93) suggest this environment can help pupils 'to develop a sense of their literary selves', but can it also 'shape gender gaps in literacy performance' as Watson and Kehler (2012:45) advocate? Certainly it can transmit compelling messages regarding how writing is valued by the adults in the setting, through pupil displays, instructional scaffolds and the types of opportunities given to the pupils to participate in mark-making in play contexts (Jones, 2007). Dialogue is crucial, and reading practices such as 'Read-Alouds' (Zucker et al., 2009) and talking partners allow 'teachers to model' and 'pupils to use' the language associated with writing (Bruner, 1966:32). The home corner too is seen as 'literate', offering 'rich opportunities for mark-making' (Ofsted, 2012a:2) and privileging compositional over secretarial aspects, in the initial stages, in order to avoid 'triggering resistance' in boys especially (Hirschheimer, 2002:64). Ideally this applies to all learning in a classroom (Johnson and Sulzby, 1999). The 'maps of play' (Meek Spencer, 2001:10) children produce in these contexts, are therefore not 'scribbles' but 'painstakingly constructed communications' (Kelly, 2010:141) – or at least signs that meaning is being attached to mark-making in a developmental process conforming to the emergent writing model (Clay, 2000).

Some aspects of 'best' practice require closer scrutiny. The mismatch between boys' natural learning behaviours – apparently characterised by physicality – and the perceived sedentary nature of 'the writing table' is highlighted (Browne, 2011; Maynard and Lowe, 1999), but is this evidence of further stereotyping? While Ofsted's (2009:43) lauding of an 'active, energetic approach' as a cornerstone of outstanding writing provision could be interpreted as the 'endless march to raise the perceived standard' (Alexander, 2011:271), boy pupils themselves seem to favour the active lessons: in a discussion on 'what makes a great English lesson' a majority of Year One boy pupils sampled in 2011 mentioned 'moving around' and 'not just sitting at a desk' (Ofsted, 2011:6), though the omission of the girls' opinions on this point perhaps limits the study's validity. Hirschheimer (2002) takes this further by suggesting a complete democratisation of writing in Reception, with opportunities for writing available in *all* areas of the classroom including (crucially for the boys?) the construction and ICT areas, yet again, this is dependent on time and resources (Wyse, 1998) and has hints of gender bias in assuming 'all boys like the construction activities' (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995:57).

A new role for the emergent writer?

Although a study of writing development is inevitably going to use the written product as a key source of evidence, the perceptions and attitudes of the actual writer have an important part to play (Gardner, 2014; Wearmouth et al., 2011). In the Early Years, this could be termed the writer's 'intention'. The *intention* of the child who has produced a piece of mark making, communicated via the crucial 'meaningful' teacher-pupil dialogue (Mercer, 1995:12), is an essential tool for the teacher to distinguish between whether their work is a picture or the start of formal writing. Yet few studies seem to probe the perceptions of young writers. Daly (2002:5) noted how too often 'boys ... feature as the objects of research' rather than a source of participant perception. Despite the efforts of some to address this (such as Clark and Dugdale (2009), whose study confirmed the low self efficacy of primary age boy writers) the dearth of studies capturing pupil perceptions of the writing process is acknowledged as a key limitation in current educational discourse (Browne, 2011). Does failing to hear the 'creative voice' of children as research participants (Mukherji and Albon, 2010:20) mean something is lost in research into this key area? Certainly, the only way in which pupil attitudes towards writing can be obtained in the early years is through the teacher creating a 'responsive social context' with her writers, eliciting meaning from a child whose language skills are still developing (Glynn et al., 2006:97). This predicates both a participatory role for the teacher in pupil play and a key communicative role for the pupil, though there is some suggestion that girls are more amenable to this than boys (Glynn et al., 2006).

In studies where Foundation Stage pupils' perceptions have been sought, some alleged 'truths' about gender differences in writing appear to have been challenged. In Rowe and Neitzel's (2010:193) study observing the play and emergent writing behaviours of 11 nursery children during the course of a year, researchers played the part of 'subcontractors' who discussed and scribed pupils' communications in play situations. It was discovered that the children's play interests were key determiners of the type of writing they produced, not their gender. Indeed, most of the boys of the study were observed to be 'creative players', spending most of their time engaged in fantasy play: as writers they were equally 'creative ... experimenting with innovative materials and uses' independently from adults or peers (Rowe and Neitzel, 2010:187). This would appear to challenge the notion of emergent boy writers as 'bland, predictable' authors dependent on social interaction (Maynard and Lowe, 1999:8). In Hirscheimer's (2002) discussions with a group of mixed-gender Reception children, the so-called gender-bias of the 'transcriptional strain' (Wyse, 1998:53) (often cited as a reason for the gender gap in literacy performance due to boys' perceived slower fine motor development (Baker, 2002)) was also debunked, and found to be an experience of both sexes. While the evidence of these few studies precludes generalisation, they do raise important questions concerning the contributions of 'pupil voice', teacher beliefs and writing provision in the gender debates into early writing (Brooker, 1996:15). With that in mind, the following research questions were devised:

What are the relative roles/impact of the following on the emergent writing experiences of boys and girls in a Reception class:

1. Practitioner pedagogical beliefs?
2. Pupil attitudes and perceptions?
3. Provision for writing?

Methodology

The case study paradigm

The case study method was chosen because it is considered 'most likely to be appropriate for 'how' and 'why' questions' (Yin, 2009:27), and fitted my purpose of evaluating what was already in place in the setting rather than implementing change (Cohen et al, 2000). The naturalistic environment of a case study also allows a researcher to observe 'real people in real settings' (Sharp, 2012:54), surely apt for the Early Years where a contrived environment might intimidate participants and/or produce inauthentic responses from them. Common limitations of the case study, such as the limited value of 'single events' (Bell, 2010:10) and the dangers of selective reporting (Denscombe, 2010) were offset by a clear purpose in the research and the range of participants used in the data-gathering process. Elements of survey research were used to support the case study but the overall paradigm was one of ‘mixed methods design’ as the initial plan formed a skeleton for the research as it evolved (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007:12).

Other methodological approaches

Cohen et al. (2000:171) describe classic ‘survey research’ as the collation and scanning of ‘a wide field of issues … to measure, describe and generalise.’ As this was only small-scale research in a single school this method was not appropriate: findings would be highly context-specific and un-generalisable. Action research, where I would ‘identify a need for change’ and implement that change (Bell, 2010:6), was also inappropriate, given my limited pedagogical jurisdictions as a TA (teaching assistant) and the short time-frame of the research.

The research participants

Research participants originally comprised the female class teacher and her class of 18 boys and 12 girls of 4 to 5 years of age. Two female pupils had English as an Additional Language (EAL) and no pupil had Special Education Needs (SEN). Two boys had been identified by the teacher as having poor fine motor skills and one boy as ‘more able’ in reading. The rest of the class were achieving a range of levels in writing at the time of study from points one to eight on the EYFS Writing Scales. The female Early Years Co-ordinator and the remaining male Early Years teacher were also interviewed.

Sampling

This population was selected using purposive sampling in order for me to ‘capitalise’ on my role as a teacher in the class (Sharp, 2012:70). The sample class appeared to provide an effective example of differences in writing attainment between boys and girls in which both seemed to conform to national stereotypes.

Ethics

Due to the small-scale nature of the study and the multiple variables affecting pupil progress, I could not claim, should I find them, that the presence of research-informed factors affecting boys’ poor performance in writing was the cause of their actual lower attainment. However, should I find a congruence of these factors, I would draw this to the attention of the Head Teacher so that she could decide whether further investigation might be fruitful.

Informed Consent

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011:5) suggests the necessity of obtaining ‘voluntary informed consent’ from all participants is a cornerstone of ethical research. This involves detailed explanation of the purpose of the research being made available to all participants prior to data collection (Bell, 2010), and was achieved in the form of an Ethical Approval Form (EAF) approved by the Head Teacher and the University Ethics Panel. The twin need to allow children ‘to make authentic responses’ by offering them the ‘right to withdraw’ (BERA, 2011:7) resulted in four children abstaining from the project, taking the participant total to 15 boys and 11 girls. None of the four who withdrew were those with EAL, the boys with poor fine motor skills or the one boy identified as ‘more able’.

Triangulation

According to Verma and Mallick (1999:205), validity in educational research is the extent to which it measures ‘what it is supposed to measure’. Reliability is the likelihood of achieving similar results were the study to be repeated. A common method of achieving both is to explore a research focus from multiple perspectives in order to provide what is known as ‘triangulation’ (Bell, 2010). By utilising my model for triangulation (Fig.1) I also hoped to mitigate any potential unreliability of teacher responses and the ‘caprice of the very young’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2011:153).

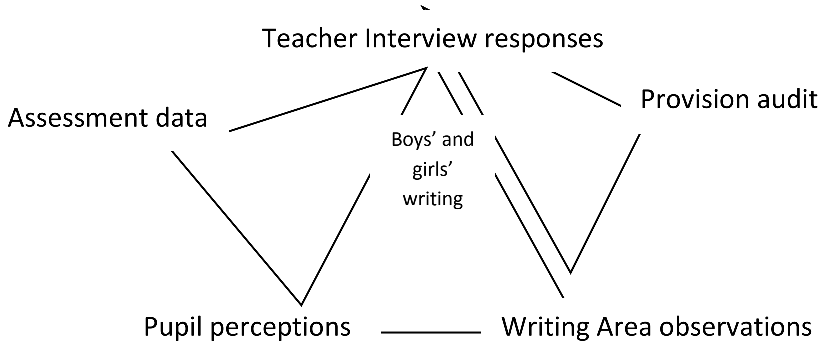

Figure 1 . The model for data triangulation

Piloting

In order to check that a researcher's methods are 'specific, ethical' and 'doable' piloting is essential and is linked to reliability (Roberts-Holmes, 2011:37; Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). In addition to testing the questionnaire and observations, my use of member-checking through the teacher's review of the interview and provision analysis questions was effective in clarifying any ambiguities in wording.

Data collection tools

(1) Provision Audit

The provision audit was the first of a two-pronged strategy to explore the perceived 'social contexts for writing identity' in the setting (Gardner, 2014:10). Viewing the materials of provision for writing as 'mute artefacts' of the children's literacy experiences (Mukerhji and Albon, 2010:153) which are inextricably linked to social relations (Hodder, 2000), an analysis of these materials might furnish insights into how the children experienced writing and the impact of teacher decisions for material selection. Aspects audited included: resources at the writing table and the frequency with which they were updated; non-writing area writing opportunities; differentiation and fine motor resources; utilisation of 'arty' materials such as gloop and sand for literacy purposes. This latter aspect was in recognition of the work of Malaguzzi (1993, 1945), and his conceptualisation of art and design as another part of the 'hundred languages of the child'.

(2) Observations of pupils writing in class

By objectively observing *where* pupils engaged in writing, the type of social interactions which accompanied it and the gender of the writer I hoped to gather data to compare to the interview and provision analysis findings. Observation is known to effectively investigate the dynamics of behaviours as they naturally occur (Sharp, 2012). Moreover, the suggestion of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) that researchers should work *with* rather than *for* children informed my choice of a participant observer approach.

The main risk to the validity of observations is that the researcher is tempted to make assumptions based on witnessed evidence only, leading to 'oversimplification … of complex situations' (Sharp, 2012:91). The format of my observations was designed for the capturing of objective information: the class was divided into a simple taxonomy of classroom 'areas' (and an 'other' category) and my role was to tick where writing was observed. Pupils were identified by name in order to observe 'multiple behaviours from single participants' (Sharp, 2012:93), and to prevent over-reporting of use. Pupil names were replaced by pseudonyms in the final report.

(3) Assessment data Analysis
The collection of data representing 'how the curriculum defines a writer' was the rationale for the use of pupil assessment data for writing. This was used to offset the subjectivity of the qualitative data generated by the other four research methods, a strategy endorsed by Mukherji and Albon (2010).

(4) Pupil Questionnaire
I hoped to learn from the pupils something of their perceptions regarding 'writing' in Reception. Due to the 'disparities in power and status between adults and children' (Roberts-Holmes, 2011:154), I delivered the questionnaires by sitting with pairs of children and reading the questions to them. The tendency in very young children to 'tell the teacher what they think she wants to hear' (Roberts-Holmes, 2011:124) was mitigated by my conducting the questionnaires in a naturalistic setting (the role play corner/place of their choosing). This endowed the process with what Tobin et al. (1989:190) have termed 'ecological validity' – the notion that a child's statements are as 'true' as the local environment in which they occur. A mixture of open questions to 'calm and reassure' (Wragg, 1999:70) and dichotomous questions ensured all oral abilities were catered for (Sapsford and Abbott, 1996). Pupils indicated their responses using an alternative Likert scale utilising happy, sad, or 'don't know' emoticons and their anonymity was secured by only the child's gender being recorded on the questionnaire.

(5) Teacher Interviews
Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with the male and female class teachers and the Early Years Co-ordinator took place during consecutive weeks. Given the small-scale nature of this research and its potentially sensitive content, the SSI offered 'the most scope' (Sharp, 2012: 74) and the shared interviewer-interviewee locus of control was 'reassuring' to the participants (Roberts-Holmes, 2011:29). Questions explored teachers' perceptions regarding the writing habits of both genders in Reception and strategies used in the teaching of emergent writing, and were informed by the reading undertaken in the literature review. Interviews took place after school at pre-arranged times convenient to each teacher. Anxieties on behalf of teachers as to the destination of the findings were mitigated by my assuring them (in a letter sent to all participating teachers prior to data collection) that their responses were confidential and no names would be used in the final report. This was likely to have a positive impact on reliability by allowing respondents the freedom to answer honestly (Sapsford and Abbot, 1996).

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the pupil questionnaires, the teacher interviews and the observations were triangulated against the pupil attainment data and provision audit, revealing the following main themes. Teachers will be referred to using the following pseudonyms: 'Nicki' (female class teacher); 'Carol' (EY Coordinator); 'Ollie' (male class teacher).

Practitioner beliefs

Disabusing the teachers' notion of the 'de-motivated, disinterested' boy writer
The observations revealed more boys than girls engaged in writing in class, with 72 incidences of writing for boys observed compared to 36 incidences for the girls. Although there were numerically more boys in the class (15 boys compared to 11 girls), the boys still wrote proportionately more than the girls, with each boy averaging 4.8 incidences of writing; each girl averaging 3.3 incidences. Of this writing for boys, 35 visits were to the writing table (compared to only 16 visits by girls) and in all but two categories more boys than girls were observed engaged in writing. Moreover, the majority

of male writing at the writing table occurred *independently* of either peer or teacher support (25 'independent' visits out of 35). Boy writers were also the most committed 'returners' (or 'frequent fliers') to writing activities, with the number of boys in this category twice that of the girls. This seems to contradict the overwhelming suggestion from all three teachers that the boys were severely de-motivated and in need of 'constant scaffolding' (Ollie) in order to produce written work. Indeed, all three teachers used language such as 'sabotage' (Ollie), 'they don't like it' (Nicki) and 'disinterested, de-motivated … reluctant' (Ollie, Carol) when describing the habits of their male writers. The indication that the boys in this cohort also appeared to favour independent writing also subverted the conviction of the teachers that their boy pupils needed more 'social' contexts for writing, such as 'buddying up' with friends (Nicki). Though the boys themselves reported a preference of working with a male friend whilst writing, this is possibly indicative of the unreliability of children self-reporting.

Why was there this disparity between teacher perception and pupil performance? Carol's comment of a general feeling of 'over-saturation' with 'the boy problem' and the pressure to 'get the child to the Good Level of Development' (GLD)' (the attainment level of 'expected' in all seven areas of the EYFS as required by the Government) is persuasive evidence of the 'competing aims' for practitioners promulgated by government and academic sources and highlighted in the literature review. Another possible reason for these behaviours, according to the teachers, was their perception of the 'more physical approach to early learning in general' of boys at this age (Nicki). This finds support in some research (Browne, 2011; Maynard and Lowe, 1999) but is also challenged by the data. Despite one teacher claiming 'boys hate 'sitting down and writing'', when boys had the freedom to choose this appeared to be very often their preferred writing experience, disputing Maynard and Lowe's (1999:8) assertion of boys' disdain for the 'sedentary' nature of the writing table. Even the writing observed in the outside area –traditionally seen as a key route to engaging boy writers in a more 'active' writing methodology (Hirscheimer, 2009) – was notable for its sedentary qualities. A vital ingredient in motivating *these* boys as writers, therefore, seemed *autonomy* of task, place and time.

Ambiguities over the perceived 'literate' qualities of girls' and boys' role play

There also seemed to exist some confusion between the teachers as to the literary affordances of the role play of the boys and the girls, with some suggestion that girls' role play was seen as the ideal. Carol described how the girls in her class 'are always in the role play area' and 'can be busy for ages' writing in the home corner whereas the boys will be 'haring around playing policemen'. Ollie too, lamented how when boys saw their friends 'going around making guns etc' their 'impetus to write is lost'. These comments seemed to point to a belief that boys' role play distracted them from writing whereas girls' role play employed it. This can be linked to the shared belief of the teachers that boys needed 'real direction' in order to write, predicating a central role for the teacher in the boys' role play - a role which, if the literature is correct (see Glynn et al., 2006) is often more acceptable to girls than boys.

These contentions of the teachers are not supported by the data. While this study did not observe the interactions of the teachers in pupils' role play, observation data directly refuted the notion that girls' role play was more 'literate' than the boys: 15 incidences (out of 72) showed boys writing in the book corner, in which the activity was 'making a puppet theatre', writing tickets and programmes, arguably the quintessence of Clay's (2000:11) description of 'literate play' in its innovation of resources and highly collaborative nature. Of the 36 observations of girls engaging in writing activities, only 3 of these occurred in either of the two role-play areas. Carol's notion that writing opportunities for either gender crystallized in the role play area was also challenged: of the 108 total incidences of writing observed, the most dominant areas for writing were the 'other' areas

(13 incidences for girls, 6 for boys), or the writing table (35 incidences for boys, 16 for girls). Role play area writing accounted for only 21 out of 108 writing incidences (17 book corner, 1 home corner, and 3 'office' incidences). The notion of the need for a central teacher role to make boys' role play 'literate' was also debunked: in the above puppet theatre example, teacher direction was absent, resonating with the findings of Rowe and Neitzel (2010:188) suggesting that when boys are engaged in a self-chosen 'play' activity, their 'independent' writing can be prolific, their use of materials 'innovative', and, crucially, they do not necessarily need teacher direction in order for this to occur.

Possible practitioner reliance on 'formal' methodologies as source of pupil attitudes
The suggestion in the data that 'formal writing tasks' constituted the principal method used by the teachers to gauge pupil approaches to writing is persuasive: Ollie spoke frequently about offering 'task breakdowns' for the boys (suggestive of teacher direction); all three teachers agreed on the efficacy of dictated and whole class writing as teaching strategies; and the encouragement of independent writing cited in the Provision Audit was observed only twice out of 55 classroom observations. Whilst this is speculative without further research, if present it might explain how, if most of the teachers' evidence of boys' attitudes towards writing was gathered via more 'formal' writing tasks (which boys appear to dislike more than girls, according to Millard, 1997 and Gardner, 2014) then this would be more likely to furnish negative responses from the boys than if the teaching had occurred in a less formal situation. The boys' own apparent preference for the 'formal' written experience (in their tendency to perform most of their writing at the 'writing table') might therefore be the product of both a reactive response to the nature of prevailing assessing methodologies, and a genuine preference of venue which emerged when the boys were given autonomy to choose. The fact that the teachers themselves seemed also to prefer these contexts for the teaching and assessing of writing could therefore be viewed two ways: a synchrony of assessing methodology with the preferences of most writers, *or* (as suggested by the existence of some misconceptions about pupil writing habits on the behalf of the teachers), a case of pedagogical serendipity?

Either way, assessment data sheds further light on whether the boys were performing well under this regime: although the average writing score for the boys was 3 out of 9 (the girls' average was 4.6, still not high), most boys (13 out of 15) believed they were 'good' at writing, challenging literature suggesting poor boys' attainment in writing is premised on low self-efficacy (Clark and Dugdale, 2009). Equally, not all the girls were strong writers, with 2 (out of 11) achieving less than 3 points in the Writing scales, though all felt they were 'good' at writing. And whilst the boys' performance in actual writing was more in line with national trends, their fine motor attainment was not: there was a difference of only 0.1 points in average fine motor scores between the boys and the girls. This is consistent with divisions in literature pointing at the disparity between beliefs about boys' fine motor abilities and the boys' actual achievement in it (Hirscheimer, 2002).

What can be concluded from the data is that there was an apparent mis-match between what the teachers believed and what was actually occurring in their cohort. While the impact of teacher *actions* is inconclusive without further research into their interactions with the pupils during play, their misconceptions regarding the writing 'identities' of both genders has possible implications for their responses to pupils' writing and role play and consequently the kind of provision they devise. This can ultimately affect pupils' performance and as such is in line with the cautions of Wearmouth et al. (2011) and Watson and Kehler (2012) regarding the role of the teacher as a 'shaper' of pupils' identities as writers.

Pupil attitudes towards writing

Boys were more discriminating players and writers?
There was some suggestion that the boys seemed to distinguish more clearly between areas to play and areas to write than the girls. Boys awarded the writing area a medium preference score for *playing* of 26, but as an area for writing gave it a score of 32. The girls, however, awarded similar scores to the writing table (a difference of 1 point only) as both an area to play and an area to write. The girls' responses to these questions appeared generally less discriminating, with the highest disparity between scores relating to the book corner (a difference of 8 points between its usage as a play or writing area, with play usage favoured). The boys' responses were more varied with the exception of their preferences relating to the construction and garage areas. Here, the smaller difference in their preferences for either writing or playing in these areas suggests their perception of these areas as places for 'writing' was not particularly strong. This is supported by the observations which show that most of their writing occurred at the writing table and specifically not at either the garage or construction areas. Whether this is because opportunities were not provided for writing in these two areas is not clear. Staff were unanimous in agreeing the need for writing in Reception to be 'democratised' and made available 'in every area of the classroom, not just the 'Writing Station'' (Nicki), echoing the calls of Hirscheimer (2002) for early writing to transcend any one class location. It is possible that staff believed the task of continually replenishing the garage and construction areas with resources to be onerous: frequent mention was made of 'time pressures' during the interviews, particularly with regard to maintaining 'exciting' provision. While this small sample cannot be overstated it does point to teacher workload issues as a possible constraint on creative provision for writing in Reception, echoing Wyse's (1998) concerns over pedagogical constraints on early writing practices.

These data seem to suggest that the positive attitudes the boys had towards emergent writing presented them as atypical according to the literature: moreover, these attitudes were maintained even when their curriculum-defined attainment in writing was comparatively low. This 'atypical' enthusiasm manifested sedentary and independent qualities at the writing table and collaborative qualities in role play. It also motivated boys to return to writing at a higher rate than the girls and suggested they had strong perceptions of certain areas as 'for writing'. The girls' comparatively ambivalent attitudes towards either writing or playing were refracted through largely collaborative writing at the writing table but a more imaginative seeking of places for independent writing, with 13 self-chosen areas for writing falling in the 'other' category.

Material provision for writing

Transcriptional strain versus 'creative' materials for writing
Teacher comments pointed to a belief that boys' transcriptional anxieties constrained their practice of writing. This is challenged on two fronts. Firstly, the boys themselves did not say this: they gave their 'special writing pencils' (associated with 'formal writing') a preference score of 32 out of a maximum 45 (and only 5 points fewer than the girls). Secondly, just over half of the boys (9 out of 15) associated writing 'with letters', a connection occupying a later stage of the emergent writing continuum (Clay, 2000) and supposedly not one made by writers with a fear of writing (Clay, 1975). The boys did, however, indicate a strong preference for more 'creative' materials for writing (awarding fat pens, glitter and paint their highest scores, as did the girls), and this was supported by teacher responses overwhelmingly favouring these materials as key bridging tools between mark making and early writing for both genders. This latter behaviour of both the genders was more in line with literature suggesting children in general at this age are inclined towards more tactile, 'playful' materials for early written exploration (Browne, 2011; Malaguzzi, 1993). This suggests that the ready availability of these materials in the setting was a strong influence on the positive attitudes of both genders towards writing, but also that in fact this is an issue of early writing in general rather than gender preferences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The data revealed several key themes, discussed here in the order of the three research questions:

Pupil attitudes and perceptions

- The boys writers of the cohort confounded the literature in performance but not attainment:
    - Their writing behaviours included elements of collaborative literate role play, independence and enthusiasm for writing in a way surpassing that of the girls.
    - Their inferior attainment in writing assessments was conformist to national trends but co-existed with a strong self-efficacy as writers, which poses a challenge to some literature suggesting poor boys' achievement in writing assessments is premised on low self esteem.
- The boys' preference for the writing area as an area to write over other play-oriented areas may suggest that they identified themselves as writers in a way that conformed, or was reactive to, the provision that had been designed for them in the setting.
- The girls' experiences of emergent writing were harder to define, but key characteristics included a tendency also to favour the writing table as an area for writing (although in lower ratios), and a greater imagination in seeking out places for independent writing. This latter finding might suggest that, by having the confidence to take writing to less expected places, the girls were displaying signs of a stronger writing identity than the boys, a fact supported by the girls' higher attainment in writing assessments. This is premised, however, on the debatable assumption that identity and attainment are linked and would require further research.

Practitioner beliefs

- There was a slight dis-junct between teachers' aims and expectations and actual pupil experience, crystallizing around a practitioner conceptualisation of 'literate' role play and its implications for the teacher's role, and their beliefs concerning the attitudes of their boy writers. Institutional pressures to 'get the child to the GLD' and the persuasive effects on teacher perceptions of media and political forces were mooted as possible reasons for this disparity.
- Equally, teachers' perceptions could be based largely on experience with many cohorts and their judgements guided by attainment. The fact that the boys' behaviours did not match teachers' assumptions both in enthusiasm and frequency of practice points to possible limitations in the methods of assessment, as Ofsted, (2012b) and Millard (1997) have posited. The idea that the sort of writing produced by girls might be more congruent with teachers' and the Government's preconceived ideas of appropriateness or value (such as narrative/descriptive writing) has been highlighted by Gardner (2014) as a possible reason for this dis-junct and would merit further research in the setting.

Provision for writing

- The role of provision for writing in the experiences of the emergent writers centred on the effective use of 'creative' materials for writing in general classroom provision. The ready availability of materials such as paint, roller paints, gloop and 'fat pens' were favoured highly by both genders and as such conformed to the theories of Malaguzzi (1993) and others (such as Browne, 2011) of the centrality of these materials in early writing practices.

- This also pointed to characteristics of provision for emergent writing that transcended gender, and led to my final conclusion: the limitations of 'assuming homogeneity' of any set of learners according to a gender ''type'' (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995:43). The boys and girls of this particular cohort could not be said to conform to gendered stereotypes (other than in assessed attainment), yet it is perhaps against any pre-determined developmental categorisation that pupils rebel. As Carol articulated, pupil variance 'transcends age, social background … any category imposed by us or society', a pertinent reminder in any discussion on pupil performance in the Early Years and beyond.

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