



# Action Research 2015-2016

## Improving Boys Writing



## RESEARCHERS

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## ABSTRACT

**Rothesay Nursery School's research aims to improve the boys writing within our setting. It investigated barriers to boys choosing writing as an activity and examined opportunities to enhance and encourage boys to become confident writers. We trialled an Intervention Group to support boys who are reluctant writers and looked at the impact of this intervention. Both the attainment and progress data for this research year and the previous year were analysed. The progress of the individual children was also tracked. The interventions had a positive impact on the individual children and for boys as a whole. Additionally, we discussed and analysed how we improved our pedagogical approach regarding boys writing within our setting.**

## INTRODUCTION

Rothesay Nursery School is an established Early Years school which caters for children aged two to four years. Most of our children have English as an additional language. The school also caters for children with additional Special Needs. The research team was comprised of a variety of professionals including a Class Teacher, Early Years Educators and Early Years Support Staff. Most professionals have lots of experience working within Early Years with some working primarily with two years olds and others with the three and four year old children.

## WHY CONDUCT ACTION RESEARCH?

We are committed to raising standards within our school. We constantly strive for the best outcomes for our children. Action Research is a method which allows us to focus on a particular group of children, researching new ways to support them. It also enables us to analyse our practice and allows us to improve, learn, and reflect our pedagogy.

Confident, capable and creative: supporting boy's achievements states that: *When practitioners see themselves as co-researchers, working alongside the children to gain deeper insights into the learning process, they are modelling many key skills including enquiry, creativity, information processing, problem solving and communication. These metacognitive skills are the building blocks of lifelong learning.*

## CHOOSING THE FOCUS

The Action Research team decided that a vital area for research would be one which supports boys to engage with mark making activities, and how to make these activities more appealing. This is an area the team felt was an important aspect of developmental delay within our setting. Multiple anecdotal observations indicated that boys did not choose mark making activities independently and did not appear to enjoy them.

The themes from this discussion were:

- Many boys were reticent to write or choose mark making activities independently.
- Boys did not enjoy aspects of squiggle wiggle (a program designed to enhance gross and fine motor skills for young emergent writers).

- Boys require a purpose for writing.
- Could development of fine motor skills be a barrier to boys accessing mark making?
- What encourages boys to write?

Rothesay Nursery School's data for 2014-2015 confirmed that there was a writing gender gap. Attainment for the girls showed that 90% were at expected levels, compared to 82% for the boys. 42% of girls were working above expectations, compared to 18% of boys.

## WHY ARE BOYS RELUCTANT WRITERS?

Boys may be reluctant writers due to their physiology. Boyd D & Bee H (2014) suggests that the rate the bones in the hand develop is different between boys and girls. They state the bones in girls hands develop at approximately four years and two months and boys hand bones develop at five years and six months. This could make holding a pencil uncomfortable for young children, especially boys, and may account for their reluctance to choose writing activities. Within our setting we already acknowledge the need to strengthen hand muscles and provide opportunities to strengthen muscles for writing such as play dough and threading activities.

It is not just writing where boys are under-achieving nationally, data from the 2004–2006 Early Years Profile suggested that *boys are achieving less well than girls across all areas of learning and that more girls are working securely within the Early Learning Goals than boys.* (Confident, capable and creative, supporting boys' achievements). This research also states that *'these early gender differences in achievement reflect a pattern that can continue into Key Stage 4.'*

Since then the government commissioned further research:- What is the Research Evidence on writing? This research reinforced that this trend began in the Early Years and stressed the importance of creating effective early play opportunities.

*Evidence suggests that boys perform less well than girls in writing. Research evidence has identified a range of factors behind their underperformance (Daly, 2003; Estyn, 2008; DfES, 2007). This includes:*

*Not offering children an active and free-play environment which has been associated with more progress in reading and writing.*

Linda Tallent 2016 said *positive, supportive work by pre-school providers and Early Years practitioners can be absolutely vital in breaking down some barriers to boys' achievement at the very beginning of their educational journey.*

Leonard Sax said that the gender bias begins at birth. Empirical data suggests that young children, when given pen and paper, draw differently. Girls will draw animals or flowers and most boys will draw a point of action. We encourage both boys and girls to create a development picture termly. We encourage both boys and girls to draw 'Who they love' with an expectation that they draw a person.

Through discussion we decided to approach this research in a variety of ways such as creating Intervention Groups that capture boys' interests, assessing the environment and offering more writing opportunities for boys. The hypothesis of this research is that creating an Intervention Group and focusing on the environment will positively impact on boy's attainment in writing. It will increase the level of attainment and progress of boys within the whole school. The children who have been part of the Intervention Group will have a higher than expected rate of progress.

## METHOD

### Harnessing their interests

The environment is crucial in improving boys writing by encouraging and engaging boys in writing tasks.

*The types of play that boys and girls engage in is enhanced or diminished by the quality of the learning environment inside and out. (Confident, capable and creative: supporting boys' achievements) Discussion about our environment and watching how boys interacted with it enabled us to adapt the environment and the universal offer to entice boys into mark making activities.*

*“Children need sensitive, knowledgeable adults who know when and how to engage their interests and how to offer support at different times.” Practitioners must take responsibility for ensuring the learning environment is planned to inspire, challenge and intrigue every child. However, sometimes practitioners find the chosen play of boys more difficult to understand and value than that of girls. They may choose activities in which adults involve themselves least, or play that involves more action and a greater use of the available space, especially outdoors. “Some boys who are at risk of becoming disaffected at a very young age have shown significant improvements if their learning takes place outside. Opportunities which reflect all six areas of learning outdoors must be available.” (Bilton et al 2005.)*

During a staff meeting we discussed the environment we offer the boys and how this can be enhanced both inside and outside.

### Intervention Program

Discussion during a staff meeting decided that an intervention program could be implemented to particularly enhance boy's experience of writing. We would choose a cohort of children that currently had low attainment data in this area. The intervention group focused on the boys' interest in cars and started with boys washing a car. This supported their gross motor movements. The group was then given various car related activities to further stimulate their interest and encourage either, activities to support hand strength, or provide mark making opportunities. (The plans for these groups can be seen in the appendices.)

Aspects of the intervention program were filmed. The footage was used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention group and provide opportunity for debate. It was also used to look for any further improvements.

## CONCLUSION

The data from this research was collected from the end of the 2015-2016 academic year assessments. This was the year that the research was conducted. This data set was compared to that of the previous years.

Comparing a two whole year's data set can be influenced by a multitude of factors. Each year has a different set of children with differing interests and circumstances. However, this data is taken from the same school which services a similar demographic year after year.

The data from this year's cohort was compared to the same data set from the previous year.

<b>Attainment At or above expected attainment</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
2014-2015	82%	90%
2015-2016	86%	93%

This shows a positive attainment effect for both boys and girls.

<b>Progress At or above expected progress</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
2014-2015	73%	73%
2015-2016	81%	53%

This showed that the research had an impact on the boy's progress in writing. However, it appears it has come at the expense of the girls' progress. 68% of girls compared to 49% of boys were base lined at or above expected levels for writing.

<b>Above expected attainment</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
2014-2015	18%	42%
2015-2016	27%	50%

<b>Above expected progress</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
2014-2015	64%	52%
2015-2016	70%	46%

This confirmed that focus on a particular cohort does have a positive impact on this group, but ideally it should not have affected the progress of the girls.

Another measure to assess impact was on the individual children included in an intervention group.

The boys who were included in the 3-4yrs intervention group made an average of 4.4 levels of progress which is above the required three level rise and also above the schools desired 4 levels of progress. (These levels of progress are the levels recorded on the Luton Advanced Tracking System).

This research has also had an impact on how we encourage children to mark make during our termly assessment. Instead of asking "Who do you love?" as a starting point, we are going to ask "What do you want to draw? We will then use questions such as "tell me about your drawing" to further understand each child's drawing.

## **WHOLE SCHOOL IMPACT**

After viewing our Action Research footage of both enhanced environment and the Intervention Group the team felt the greatest impact was:

- Boys are more readily engaged in a writing task if there is something that they were interested in, particularly the cars and the car wash.
- They liked exploring different opportunities such as dark den writing (writing under a table) and mark making in the sand.

- They liked opportunities for writing outside using chalks and creating large movements.
- The larger chalk board outside and the water sprays encouraged their mark making. The sprays also developed the muscles in their hands for fine motor skills. (The action of squeezing the spray encountered resistance between the thumb and first finger.) This activity was accessed by all, and at all levels of development.
- The Interactive Whiteboard was a valuable tool and, with support, the children used this to write and they were proud to have their marks printed.

The team feel that they will continue to use the intervention program to target specific children and adapt it to encompass the children's interests. They will continue to use water sprays outside and to regularly include a focused writing activity both inside and outside.

## REFERENCES

Boyd D & Bee H (2014) Pearson Education

Bilton, H. et al (2005) Learning Outdoors: Improving the quality of children's play outdoors, David Fulton

Confident, capable and creative: supporting boys' achievements © Crown copyright 2007 Primary National Strategy

Education Standards Research Team (2012) What is the Research Evidence on writing? Department for Education

Sax L MD PHD (2006) Why Gender matters *Harmony*

Tallent L (2015) Breaking down barriers to boys' success *Nursery World*

Action Research Intervention group: Ages 3-4 years.

Class:

Staff:

Curriculum Area: Physical Development/ Literacy

Differentiated Objective:

- Draws lines and circles using gross motor movements. (30-50) PD
- Give meaning to marks drawn (40-60) L
- Persisting at an activity when challenges occur Showing a can do attitude. (CoEL)

Target Children

Session 1

Activity Washing a car.

Resources Bucket soapy water sponges aprons car camera video camera

Language wash car circles lines round. Can you make big circles can you make small circles? Can you follow the lines of the car?

Practice gross motor movements by washing a car.

Encourage the boys to wash the car using circular movements and up and down movements.

Session 2

Activity Spraying water on to pictures of cars then drawing cars from observation.

Resources Pictures of cars attached to the wall, water sprays.

Language Car hit the car with water? Can you spray the outline? Can you draw a car?

Strengthen fine motor skills by encouraging the boys to spray water at the cars.

### Session 3

Activity Creating a car using clay.

Resources Clay car books, toy cars

Language Car can you make a car? What do you need to do? Does your car have wheels?  
How does this look like a car?

Strengthen fine motor skills by encouraging the boys to model with clay. Using clay tools to make marks.

### Session 4

Activity Drawing cars.

Resources: Toy cars pens paper books about cars

Language can you draw a car? Can you draw the wheels? What is the sounds in the word car? What does that drawing mean?

Encourage mark making with meaning

## Action Research Intervention group: Ages 2 years.

Class:

Staff:

Curriculum Area: Physical Development/ Literacy

Differentiated Objective:

- Makes connections between their movement and the marks they make.( 16-26) PD
- Shows control in holding and using mark-making tools.(30-50) PD
- Draws lines and circles using gross motor movements. (30-50) PD
- Sometimes gives meaning to marks as they draw and paint(30-50) L
- Persisting at an activity when challenges occur Showing a can do attitude. (CoEL)

Target ChildrenSession 1Activity Washing a car.Resources Bucket soapy water sponges aprons car camera video cameraLanguage wash clean sponge car round circles lines

Practice gross motor movements by washing a car.

Encourage the boys to use two sponges to wash the car using circular movements

Session 2Activity Exploring clay.Resources Clay car books, toy carsLanguage make clay squeeze

Strengthen fine motor skills by encouraging the boys to explore clay

### Session 3

Activity Painting on a large drawing of a car

Resources Large drawing of a car paint and sponges aprons

Language paint sponge straight curved wheels windows.

Strengthen fine motor skills by encouraging the boys to paint on the paper. Explore lines and curves of the car.

### Session 4

Activity Drawing on a large chalk board.

Resources Chalk board chalks pictures and books of cars.

Language chalk draw car mark wheel round.

Encourage mark making using car toys and pictures as a stimulus. Model mark making and enjoy mark making together