

Gertie Bustard's development work
**Turning reluctant boys into
published writers**
at Edwinstree Middle School, Buntingford

Many boys in Gertie's class seemed to dislike writing. This had an impact not only on their enjoyment of school but also on their learning in general. When required to write for the purposes of assessments, these boys did not produce writing which accurately reflected their ability. This issue was not isolated to these particular pupils however. The development of boys' interest and attainment in writing had been identified as a development priority for the school as a whole. In staff meetings colleagues had agreed to collaborate to develop appropriate ways forward. Gertie was determined to find a strategy which would result in enhanced enthusiasm and interest in writing for the boys in her class and might also influence whole school policy and practice in supporting writing development.

She thought deeply about the reasons for this problem and was very influenced by her reading of the book, 'Toxic Childhood' (Palmer, 2009) which highlighted some of the features of modern childhood. For example, children in contemporary Britain are more likely to play on their own using technology rather than engaging in imaginative play with other children. Gertie wanted to create opportunities for the enhancement of children's imaginations through real experience and writing for a purpose.

She adopted a very student-centred approach. She formed a working group with six boys with varying writing abilities who would help her develop alternative approaches to supporting their writing. The boys thrived in the collaborative environment of this working group, providing exciting ideas which Gertie incorporated into her schemes of work. Gertie then supplemented these ideas with other suggestions from her reading (Palmer, 2006; Palmer, 2009). The working group members agreed that children need to have a purpose for their writing and this set the direction for the new activities. One suggestion was that they could write their own stories and then record them on to CDs which could be given to family members as Christmas presents.

The impact of this change in approach was considerable, with the boys now showing a much more positive response to writing activities and developing enhanced writing skills. Noticing the impact which a collaborative approach had on the pupils, Gertie continued to meet with the working group on a regular basis. They worked with her to evaluate lessons, to design activities for forthcoming lessons and to decide together how learning objectives could be achieved in exciting and innovative ways.

Gertie was amazed by the levels of maturity demonstrated by pupils, by their fantastic suggestions and by the dramatic impact which her new approach was having on pupils' attainment. The working group decided to ask all the other children for feedback about approaches to teaching writing. They gave out post-it notes and asked their peers to indicate the benefits of the new approach to developing writing.

At this stage in the project, a children's author and poet, Wes Magee, was visiting the school and he led a workshop with Gertie's class. Together they created a poem. The children asked if it could be published in Wes Magee's next book but the author explained it wasn't his poem, it belonged to the class. The class therefore decided to produce their own book in which to publish their writing. Gertie discussed this idea with the senior leaders in her school and got a very enthusiastic response. The previously reluctant-to-write boys set up a writing workshop to produce material for the book. This idea excited the pupils so much that they immediately began to write with publication in mind. Some of the previously reluctant writers even created stories at home in their spare time in the hope that they would be published in the class book.



Gertie's development work had immense impact in numerous ways, some of which she had not previously imagined. She has developed confidence in her students' abilities and is now able to give them the opportunity to shape their own learning experiences. The students are now not afraid to tell their teacher if a teaching strategy is not working well and will suggest alternatives. They are developing

their love of writing, with some of them now writing for the sheer joy of it. They are constantly exploring a variety of ways in which to plan, discuss and execute their writing which has resulted in a direct impact on their understanding, enjoyment and success as learners.

The impact of Gertie's development work has spread beyond her own classroom. The leader of literacy in her school took an active interest in this work and agreed to try some of Gertie's approaches in her own classroom. Gertie also discussed her work with teachers from other schools at a HertsCam Network Event, during which teachers across Hertfordshire come together to share stories of their leadership of development work. She was delighted to find that teachers in other schools were very interested in her approach and wanted to experiment with it.

References

- Bell, H. (2009) *Independent writing activities*. Preston: Topical Resources.
Palmer, S. (2006) *Toxic Childhood*. London: Orion.
Palmer, S. (2009) *21st Century Boys*. London: Orion.