



Notes from Governor Visit

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Purpose of visit:

- to tour the school to make contact with staff;
- to observe the teaching of writing across all age groups, with particular regard to able boys' writing

Governor observations and comments

This was my first school visit as a governor and it was a great opportunity to see the whole school in action. We were made very welcome and the visit was well organised and planned. In discussions with Jenny at the beginning of the morning we were shown how each child's literacy is tracked throughout their time at the school – how data is gathered and statistics are monitored to inform teaching and learning. We were also able to study some examples of written work produced by a large number of the children throughout their school careers. We reviewed a number of SAT papers and had interesting discussions about the types of writing skill which result in higher SAT gradings. We also discussed more generally the differences between boys' and girls' approaches to writing and the great importance of reading widely and speaking and listening skills.

1. Phonics group – classes 1 and 2

We observed a group of twelve pupils from years 1 and 2 working with Serena Wells (teaching assistant) in the library on a regular phonics session. All of the children were actively engaged – the learning covered a group of 6 words displayed at the front of the group all of which had the "ou" sound as in "would". Led by Mrs Wells' coaxing and prompting, the group discussed the fact that "ou" could sometimes make the sound "ow" as in "how". The children clearly followed terms such as "phoneme", "long vowel" and "alternative" and seemed to understand that these spelling/sound differences sometime simply had to be learned. The group went on to discuss the "j" sound in "bridge". It was suggested that "badger" was a similar word and Mrs Wells referred back to artwork involving badgers which the children had been doing. Each child then used a white board to practice writing what they had learned. The white boards enabled the children to experiment without making a permanent mark which must be very liberating for them!

2. Class 1 – emergent writing

We next observed Miss Waterson working with Class 1 in her classroom on emergent writing. All of the children were engaged in writing postcards to each other or to family members. The atmosphere was very industrious and each child had a

blank postcard mock-up to work on. Miss Waterson explained that the purpose was to reinforce in the children the concept that ideas could be captured in writing. Miss Waterson was encouraging the children to talk about what they might say in the postcard. Some children were writing to their grandparent and others to their “best friends”. They were also filling in the addressees names in the appropriate place. The children I chatted with all understood what they were working on and were working hard to come up with ideas which they could transpose into writing. I had not heard of emergent writing before but could see that this task would help the children begin to understand one of the things that writing is used for and to make that connection for themselves.

3. Class 2 – pizza recipes

We observed Class 2 as a whole led by Caro Hollway assisted by Serena Wells, recording in writing the recipe for pizzas they had made earlier in the week. Each child had an A4 sheet which gave prompts for the structure they could use to record the recipes and a separate prompt sheet with the vocabulary they might need. Some children had A4 sheets with more and some with fewer prompts. Mrs Hollway had allocated these according to the needs of each individual child. Some children were self sufficient in following the structure and completing the exercise and others needed more help. Help was given by the Mrs H and Mrs W moving around the room and observing the children at work and where appropriate making suggestions and comments about what they could do/were doing. We discussed with Mrs H that subject matter can be important to engage reluctant boys in writing tasks, whereas girls will tend to happily write about anything.

4. Class 3 – Poem discussion

We observed class 3 who were working on a fun, comic poem which was displayed on the white board at the front of the class. Mrs Bamborough led the discussions about the features of the poem, inviting contributions from many of the children in the class. Small groups were tasked with discussing a number of features of the poem, such as the number of verses, the use of alliteration and how the starting letter of each line ran consecutively through the alphabet. They were then asked to share what they had discussed with the rest of the class. The discussions I observed were lively and committed to finding something to contribute to the whole class discussion. To illustrate what the children had observed and to make it “hands on”, the whole class then worked together to create a couple of similar lines of poetry. Again Mrs B led the discussion and used the interactive white board to great effect. Finally, small groups were then given a letter of the alphabet each and were tasked with producing and writing down further lines of poetry. Each line had to have a noun, verb and two adjectives beginning with their allocated letter. The hilarious results clearly showed that the children had understood the exercise and enjoyed letting their imaginations go within the structure. E.g. an ignorant icy iguana ignoring...

5. Class 4 – news reports of extreme weather

We visited class 4 who were studiously engaged in writing news reports of extreme weather events, supported by Miss Mottram. The class was split into small groups each of which had been allocated an extreme weather type to write about. Each group had a number of books and other sources of material to share which contained both factual information and imaginative writing about the subject matter. It was clear from my discussions with the children that the class had spent time discussing the features of news writing, as those that I spoke with clearly understood the nature of such articles. The children were keen to include quotations in their articles and to use interesting vocabulary. There were also a number of prompts displayed around the class room. The children were helping each other and working independently with a real sense of purpose and determination.

Summary

It was fascinating to see the progression of the children's abilities in writing from reception through the middle two classes to the oldest class and how the resources and techniques are deployed by the teachers and TAs to make each exercise appropriate for each child. In all cases the approach was one of supporting the children in their learning and giving them the tools they need to make the most of their learning. The atmosphere throughout was very positive and the children were engaged and supported. Because of the focus on able boys I tended to talk predominantly with boys in each class – I was really pleased to find that all of those I spoke to had a truly positive and healthy approach to writing. From the googling I had done before the visit I was concerned to see whether any of Foxton's boys had switched off to writing and was really pleased to find that this was certainly not the case and in fact the opposite was true. This was a very enjoyable and worthwhile visit.

Recommendations

- Ideally, more teaching space is needed to ensure appropriate space is available for small group work.
- Funding for full time teaching assistants should continue – the resources and great ideas which the staff have require these levels of support to achieve.
- Tracking and targeting learning according to ability to continue at the sophisticated level already being achieved.

Jane Kohler