"Composing in the style of Mozart: An exploration of the 'struggling boy writer" comparing the composing processes and strategies of boys and girls

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ABSTRACT: The under-achievement of boys in the language components of standardised tests, together with a perception of boys as having negative attitudes towards the English curriculum, has led to boys being positioned as struggling writers. This article reflects critically on this construction, drawing on data from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study investigating the composing processes and strategies employed by secondary-aged writers. Annotated timelines were created during the observation of children writing in classroom settings. The children were subsequently interviewed using the timelines and their own writing to prompt stimulated recall of their own decision-making processes. Taken together, the observations and the interviews provide scant evidence to support the perception of boys as weak writers. Paradoxically, their patterns of behaviour are more similar to those of successful writers.

KEYWORDS: Boys' underachievement, composing processes, gender, writing, writing profiles, writing strategies.

LITERATURE

Much has been written on how the gender of the writer impacts on the writing produced by both primary and secondary-aged writers. The resulting body of literature has been underpinned by concern about the underperformance of boys in the formal testing procedures of the English-speaking nations. A particular focus of this concern has been to position boys as weaker or less motivated writers than girls (Ofsted, 1998, 2002; DfES, 2006; Browne, 1994; Barrs & Pidgeon, 2002). Maynard and Lowe's work (1999) speaks of the reluctance of young, boy writers, who find writing laborious, time-consuming and passive. Higgins (2002) described junior boy writers who "ran out of strength" on longer pieces of writing. To address this perceived lack of motivation, short, focused and pacy literacy lessons have been proposed, a style now enshrined in the United Kingdom in the National Literacy Strategy.

A second focus has been concerned with the writing rather than the writer, highlighting preferred genres and styles. Boys have become positioned as analytical writers or writers of active, plot-driven narratives, while girls are seen as empathic, descriptive writers, whose writing best reflects the "approved canon" of literature common to most English classrooms (Millard, 1997; McGuinn, 2000; Peterson, 2001). Thus boys can be construed, not as weaker writers, but as "differently literate", writers disadvantaged by what they choose to write about and how they choose to write it. Millard has written extensively on the mismatch between the reading and writing experiences of boys, whereby what they choose to read does not support the figurative and descriptive language they are required to write. In all of this, the overwhelming focus has been on gender identity in terms of preferences expressed or

attitudes exhibited towards writing tasks, or indeed manifested in the text. Nevertheless much of this remains highly contested: notions of hegemonic gender identities have been challenged (Butler, 1990; Epstein *et al*, 1998), as has the presentation of written text as likely to witness to identifiable gender characteristics (Francis *et al*, 2003; Jones & Myhill, 2007).

There is very little in the literature, however, that considers gender in relation to composing processes or patterns of writing behaviour. Daly (2002), reviewing research into boys and writing, comments that "boys mostly feature as the objects of research, on whom alternative practices are being trialled, rather than being measured in terms of their writing behaviour in class" (2002, p. 4). In contrast, this article reports on findings from an ESRC-funded project investigating children's composing processes and their own explicit knowledge of this process, which has allowed a tentative inquiry into what boys and girls do when they take up the pen, and their own perceptions of their own composing processes.

The most influential model of the composing process was proposed by Hayes and Flower in 1980 and comes from the cognitive psychological research tradition. This model highlights planning, translating and reviewing as the three significant components of the writing process. Significantly, they proposed that the relationship between the three processes was not linear or sequential, but iterative and interactive. Thus writers could be identified as showing different characteristics in terms of how the three processes were integrated into writing behaviour. Hayes and Flower referred to Mozartians and Beethovians: Mozartians undertake extensive planning, then frame and improve their writing sentence by sentence such that translating and revising are undertaken simultaneously. In contrast, Beethovians plan and translate quickly to generate a first draft, then engage in a lengthy revision process. Building on these two metaphors for writing behaviour, Hayes and Flower went on to identify four writing profiles.

- *Depth first:* whereby each sentence is planned, translated and reviewed before moving to the next sentence.
- *Postponed review:* typified by the writer attempting to generate the whole text in order to capture thinking before reviewing it as a whole.
- *Perfect first draft:* planning is explicit and lengthy and aimed at the whole text with the aim of minimising the need for revision.
- *Breadth first:* characterised by being the most sequential of the four styles with clear planning, translation and revision stages.

Hayes and Flower did not concern themselves with who might exhibit such profiles, able or weak writers, novelists, journalists or scientists, boys or girls, begging the question as to whether profiles are a feature of the writer or the task.

More recently, but also coming from the cognitive tradition, Van Waes and Schellens (2003) compared the pausing and revision behaviour of experienced writers composing at a screen or with pen and paper. They identified five writing profiles. These profiles were determined by behaviour patterns, that is, on the time distributions for pausing and the revision of previously generated text. Two stages of the writing process were identified – stage 1: from the beginning of composing to the production of a first draft, and stage 2: from the first draft stage to the end. The

participants were not asked to reflect on their own decisions as they wrote, nor on what they were trying to achieve, or the impact they were trying to create as writers. Nor were Van Waes and Schellens concerned with differences between ability or gender groups; indeed all of their participants were expert writers. The five profiles identified were:

- *Initial planners:* who pause more on average than other writers but the pauses are most prevalent in stage 1.
- *Non-stop writers:* who spend little time on planning, revise little and hardly ever pause.
- *Fragmentary stage 1 writers:* who engage in very little planning but revise a lot as they write, especially in stage 1, producing writing behaviour that is fragmented and characterised by lots of brief pauses.
- *Stage 2 writers:* who spend time planning before they write, then write pausing infrequently. When they do pause it is often for a lengthy period, revision is undertaken as a post hoc activity during stage 2.
- *The average writer:* who has no clear pattern and combines many of the characteristics of the other four profiles.

Analysis revealed that no pen and paper writer was a fragmentary stage 1 writer and no computer writer was a stage 2 writer, which was the most common style amongst the pen and paper writers.

The work of Van Waes and Schellens suggests that the medium of the writing activity is a strong determiner in the writing style adopted. The ease of editing on a computer predisposes writers to edit more in stage 1, while pen and paper writers tend to postpone revision to stage 2. They qualify this finding, however, by noting that there are writers whose writing styles seem more influenced by pen and paper styles, and those whose style seem more influenced by computer styles, and that these individuals perform differently from one another in the two writing modes.

Severinson Eklundh (1994), also working with writers using word processors, spoke not of profiles but of a continuum that she referred to as linearity. She defined non-linearity as writers engaging in high levels of text editing, inserting and deleting at points far removed from the current point of writing. Her study suggested that writers became more or less linear depending on the demands of the task, the simpler the task the more linearity was observed in writing behaviour. In contrast, Levy and Ransdell (1996) speaking of the writing patterns of pen and paper writers, commented: "These patterns seem so characteristic of individuals that we have termed them 'writing signatures'. Like cursive signature they are distinctively different between individuals" (1996, p. 158).

It is possible that writing at a computer is more likely to impose certain strategies because of the ease and availability of editing facilities than is the case for writing with pen and paper, which may exhibit more individual characteristics. Christina Haas (1996) writes with a word of caution about the relationship between technology and the writing process, describing the relationship as potentially both symbiotic and systemic. She positions scholars and teachers of literacy as "the group that has most to loose as technology remakes writing" (p. 230) and calls for those who write to engage in an active role in the future designing and implementing of technology. Her work

raises questions as to whether the technology should shape writing practice or whether technology should be designed to scaffold and reflect writing practice.

The project reported here did not set out to identify a further set of writing profiles. In the process of analysis, however, identifiable profiles emerged. In the context of this enquiry, with a data set stratified for age, text-type, gender and ability, it was possible to look at these profiles from different perspectives. This article considers the profiles both from a gender perspective and in relation to children identified either as successful or less successful writers. The intention is not to link a particular writing style to gender characteristics. Boys, however, have been positioned as struggling writers and exploring composing styles may provide an alternative perspective from which to view this construction.

METHODOLOGY

Working within a research design that was informed by psychological research focusing on cognitive processes, but placed firmly within the classroom context and itself interdisciplinary, the project reported here sought to investigate the writing and writing behaviour of secondary-aged writers. This article is concerned with the second phase of the project which focused on the composing processes and writing behaviour of children writing in a classroom setting and with what children had to say about the process and what they knew about their own writing behaviour and decision making.

Attempting to identify the thought processes of a cognitive activity is fraught with difficulty. Writing behaviour is characterised by periods of writing interrupted by periods of pausing. Merely observing writers will not reveal the thought processes with which the writer engages. A pause could indicate planning either by generating ideas or referring to previously made plans; it could involve the "imagining" or shaping of a sentence before it is written down; it could be concerned with rereading what is put, either to generate the next idea or to review and edit what has been written. It might also indicate that the writer has drifted off task.

Writing profiles attempt to match the cognitive processes of planning, translation and revision to the writing behaviour of different writers. Hayes and Flower achieved this through "write-aloud protocols", whereby the writer attempts to articulate the decision processes they are engaged in as they write. The empirical reliability of these strategies has been questioned, both in terms of their tendency to disrupt the thinking process rather than reveal it, and in terms of whether writers are able to identify what they are thinking, especially if they are consciously thinking about their own thinking (Russo 1989).   An alternative strategy is to encourage writers to reflect back on the decisions they were making *after* they have completed the writing task. Greene and Higgins (1994) defend this strategy, claiming it has "the advantage of allowing the writer to explain and reflect on their decisions without interfering directly with their attention to the task*"* (1994, p. 118).   A directly observational methodology involving the detailed observation of writers by researchers, often using video, was championed by Matsuhashi (1981) as providing a detailed picture of pausing and writing patterns.

By adopting both post hoc interviews and detailed observation, the research reported here built on the methodologies developed by Greene and Higgins (1994) and

Matsuhashi (1981). The teenagers participating in the project were all secondary-aged writers, coming from years 9 and 11. Writers were observed in the normal classroom setting, engaged in writing tasks set by the teacher, who was teaching in the context of their usual curriculum intentions. Arguably writing with a researcher armed with a stop watch sitting beside you is not exactly "normal" but the methodology was chosen in preference to the very much more intrusive "write-aloud protocol".

The project aimed to observe the students three times. One observation was with students engaged in narrative writing, one in argument writing and a third observation involved a continuation task. The continuation task could be either narrative or argument; the students completing a task started in an earlier lesson. 82 classroom observations were undertaken with 38 teenagers (20 boys and 18 girls) and 71 interviews with 34 teenagers (17 boys and 17 girls). Most were observed and interviewed at least twice, and some three times. The practicalities of data collection, however, meant that absence from school, or the over-running of setting-up activities resulted in not all students being observed three times and not all observations being followed by an interview.

Each observation lasted 20 minutes, during which observers recorded chronologically incidents of writing, revision, rereading and pausing on an annotated timeline, noting the length of time engaged in these behaviours and, where possible, making detailed qualitative notes about the behaviours. Researching in a way that limits the impact of the researcher on the researched meant that, in comparison to the analysis of keystrokes at a computer, capturing data manually sitting beside a writer will impose limitations on the precision of the timings and the behaviours recorded. Nevertheless, the value of the naturalistic setting and the focus on pen and paper writing were seen as a necessary context from which to explore children engaged in the act of creating text. The timings were entered into EXCEL, with writing (which including editing) recorded as a positive number and pausing (which included reading) as a negative number. Graphs were produced recording the first ten minutes of every observation, each column representing time in seconds. Thus each graph might be considered to be an image of each student's writing behaviour.

The follow-up interviews used the time-line and the piece of writing from the lesson as prompts for stimulated recall regarding composing behaviour and writing decisions. The young writers were invited to reflect on what they had done, the decisions they had made and what their intentions were in terms of the impact of the text. The interviews were analysed for emerging themes, in line with the grounded theory approach to interview analysis, using Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis.

FINDINGS

The emerging profiles

The graphs generated by the observation data provided a visual representation of writing behaviour. It was possible to see immediately which observations reveal writers spending more time writing than pausing, or pausing than writing. Some observations presented a balance between the two behaviours. Spending long periods

of time engaged in either writing or pausing will cut down the number of times a writer switches between behaviours. These initial observations led to the graphs being identified against two criteria: the balance between writing and pausing, and the number of transitions between the two behaviours. The graphs represent 10 minutes (600 seconds). A balanced distribution between pausing and writing was defined as those observations where the time taken in both behaviours fell between 4-6 minutes (240-360 seconds). The mean average for number of transitions was 28, and so we identified 24 transitions or less to represent those observations with a disproportionately low number of transitions. Applying these criteria identified five groups with different writing profiles.

The balanced writers who wrote and paused in broadly equal measures, were further divided into those who switched frequently, the "rapid switcher", and those who didn't, the "stop starter" (see Figures 1 and 2).
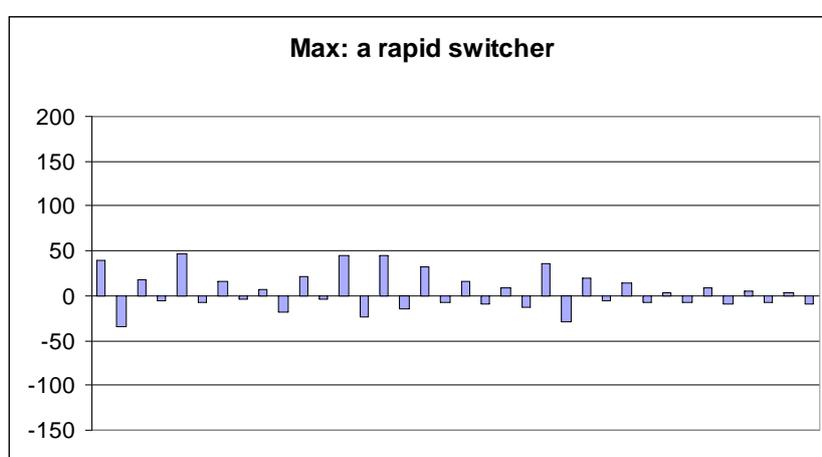
**Figure 1. The writing profile of a rapid switcher**
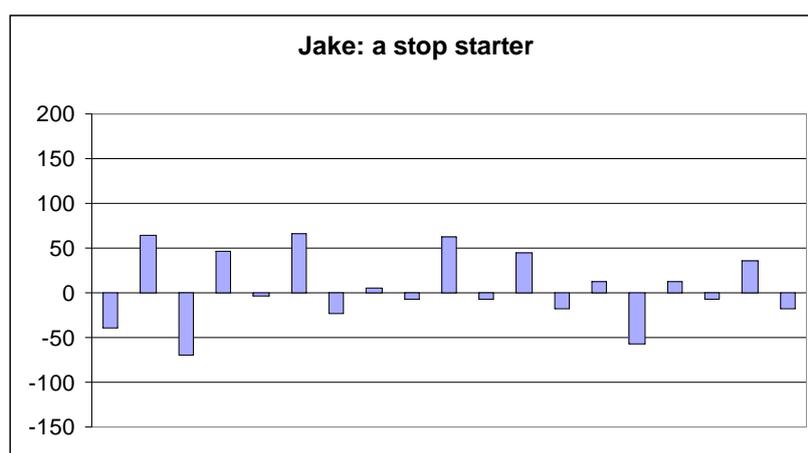
**Figure 2. The writing profile of a stop starter**

The rapid switcher is typified by frequent, short bursts of both writing and pausing, while the stop starter has longer episodes of both writing and pausing with neither dominating.
The profiles where writing dominated were also divided into two groups: the "brief pauser", those whose writing was frequently interrupted by very brief pauses, and the

"flow writer", those who engaged in much longer episodes of writing (see Figures 3 and 4).
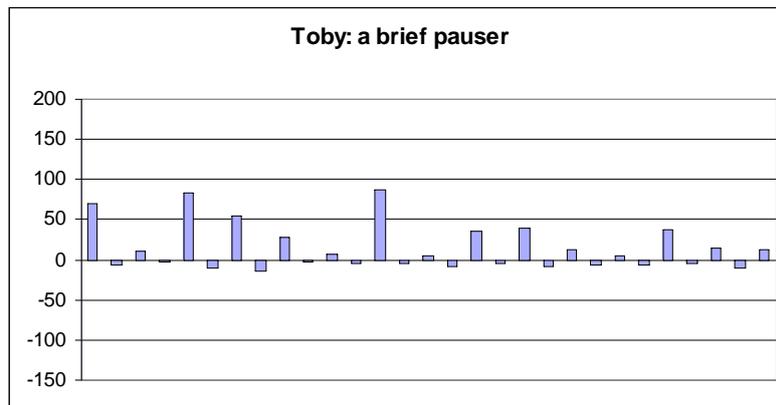
Toby: a brief pauser

Figure 3. The writing profile of a brief pauser
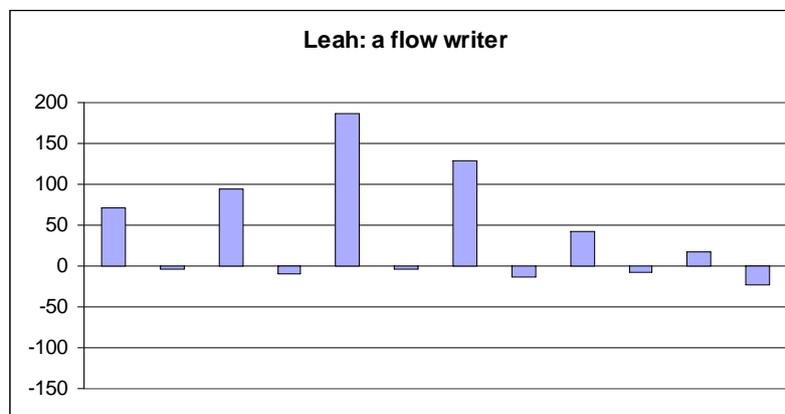
Leah: a flow writer

Figure 4. The writing profile of a flow writer

Finally, the group for whom pausing dominated ("long pausers") were not further divided but collected as a single group typified by lengthy episodes of pausing (see Figure 5).
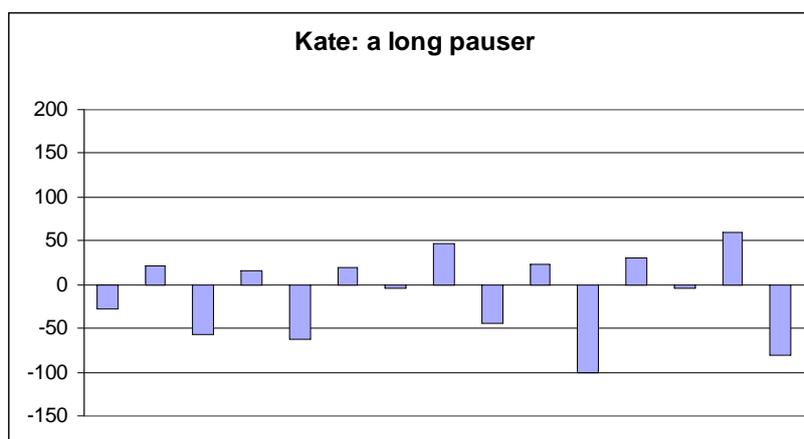
Kate: a long pauser

Figure 5. The writing profile of a long pauser

The most common writing profiles were the rapid switcher and the brief pauser, both behaviours involving a high frequency of transition between writing and pausing.

Rapid switchers	Stop starters	Brief pausers	Long pausers	Flow writers
32 (39%)	8 (10%)	25 (30%)	8(10%)	9(11%)

Table 1. The numbers of children adopting the different writing profiles

Gender and achievement: Differences and similarities

Although rapid switchers and brief pausers were the most common profiles, this was more true for boys, as the girls did not seem to have a preferred profile. Both behaviours involving sustained periods of either writing or pausing were more likely to be represented by girls. Only girls were long pausers, and most flow writers were also girls (see Table 2).

	Rapid switchers	Stop starters	Brief pausers	Long pausers	Flow writers
Boys	24 (51%)	4 (9%)	18 (38%)	0	1 (2%)
Girls	8 (23%)	4 (11%)	7 (20%)	8 (23%)	8 (23%)

Table 2. The numbers of children adopting the different writing profiles shown by gender

Most flow writers were also low achievers, particularly low-achieving girls. High achievers, by contrast, tended to adopt those writing styles that involved shorter episodes of writing and pausing and more switching between them (see Table 3).

	Rapid switchers	Stop starters	Brief pausers	Long pausers	Flow writers
High	16 (43%)	3 (8%)	15 (40%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)
Average	10 (47%)	1 (5%)	5 (24%)	4 (19%)	1 (5%)
Low	6 (25%)	4 (17%)	5 (21%)	3 (12.5%)	6 (25%)

Table 3. The numbers of children adopting the different writing profiles shown by achievement

Isolating the two criteria and comparing for gender revealed that boys had a greater tendency to have a balanced distribution between writing and pausing, and a greater tendency to switch between them. In contrast, girls were more likely to have a non-balanced profile and a tendency to settle with one particular behaviour, either pausing or writing. Comparing for ability revealed that balance was not a characteristic of any ability group, but that switching was more typical of able writers (see Table 4).

	Balance	Not balanced	Total
Total	40 (49%)	42 (51%)	82
Boy	28 (60%)	19 (40%)	47
Girl	12 (34%)	23 (66%)	35
	Switchers	**Settled**	**Total**
Total	57 (70%)	25 (30%)	82
Boy	42 (89%)	5 (11%)	47
Girl	15 (43%)	20 (57%)	35

	Balance	Not balanced	Total
High	19 (51%)	18 (49%)	37
Average	11 (52%)	10 (48%)	21
Low	10 (42%)	14 (58%)	24
	Switchers	**Settled**	**Total**
High	31(84%)	6(16%)	37
Average	15 (71%)	6 (29%)	21
Low	11 (46%)	13 (54%)	24

Table 4. The numbers of children adopting a balanced or not balanced profile or a switching or settled profile shown by gender and achievement

The average number of episodes of both writing and pausing was 28 episodes. Comparing the average number of episodes for both gender and achievement groups yielded the results in Table 5.

	High Achievers	Average Achievers	Low Achievers
All	31	27	23
Boys	35	30	29
Girls	25	23	17

Table 5. The average number of episodes of both writing and pausing shown by gender and achievement

Able writers recorded more episodes on average than less able writers and this remained true when gender was taken into consideration. On average, able boys recorded more episodes than average and low-ability boys, and the same was true for girls, suggesting that able writers switch between pausing and writing more frequently. For all abilities, however, boys recorded more episodes than girls. The pattern boys present here, contrary to the perception of boys as struggling writers, mirrored that of the able writers.

Reflecting on writing

In the follow-up interview, these teenagers were asked to comment on their own perceptions of themselves as writers, both in terms of what they wrote and how they wrote it. The interviews were coded for emerging themes. Using Nvivo, it was possible to identify whether a code was populated more by boys' comments or by girls'. Of the 74 codes identified from the interviews, only 28 show marked gender differences. A marked gender difference was taken to be those codes for which the difference between the number of comments made by boys and girls was as much as half as many again. Thus, almost two-thirds of the interview data accounted for comments and perceptions which were broadly common to both genders. When talking about writing, there were more commonalties between gender groups than there are differences. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews fell into three broad categories: comments that reveal attitudes to writing, comments that reflect linguistic understanding and comments about the writing process.

It was statements recording attitudes to writing that demonstrated the greatest gender differences. 50% of these codes showed a gender difference. This compared to 40% for composing processes; only 19% of codes reflected linguistic understanding. Thus, the greatest gender differences operated at the attitudinal level rather than comments about what they do, choices made or understanding of these choices. Statements reflecting attitudes to writing included comments referring to their likes and dislikes of writing in different genres, the pleasures and frustrations they experienced when writing in a school context, and thoughts on their use of writing away from the school context. Story writing appeared to be the preferred writing task and was favoured above writing to argue, descriptive writing or factual writing. All of these categories were identified by the young writers themselves, rather than being categories suggested as significant by the interviewers. There was little here to give weight to a perception of boys as preferring argument, analytical or factual writing; indeed it was narrative and imaginative fiction that both genders and all three achievement groups preferred.

These teenagers also revealed their linguistic understanding, speaking about their word choices, their understanding of the effectiveness of phrasing and how a text relates to their understanding of the task. In referring to the impact of the whole text on the reader, more boys than girls spoke of their intention to create an effect on the reader through the way they wrote their piece. Boys also made more comments about making linguistic decisions with regard to the opening and the ending of a text. Furthermore the explicit use of formal language to create a "voice", particularly for argument writing, was referred to more by boys than girls. These could all be considered either as planned or on-line decisions: linguistic choices made during the planning or the translation processes. Girls, on the other hand, were more likely to speak of making post hoc linguistic evaluations of what they had written, particularly at sentence level. This may well reflect a composing style that uses post-hoc revision as a strategy rather than translating and revising in tandem.

Comments about the composing process relate closely to existing categorisations in the psychological literature. Students spoke of idea generation, which can occur before or during the writing process, the translation of ideas into text and the revising and editing of text. In speaking of their composing processes, these young writers identified the different strategies that they employed. The most common strategy identified for generating ideas was planning; reference was made both to mental planning and to written planning. Boys were marginally more likely to refer to written planning while girls were considerably more likely to refer to mental planning. This perhaps explains why girls were also more likely to speak of not always knowing where they are going with a piece of text, and of writing in order to generate ideas. Girls were also more likely to refer to a strategy identified as writing first, then thinking later, whereby they write with the intention of returning later to edit and improve – getting their ideas down first, then improving the phrasing later. As a strategy, it may well be linked to that of writing to generate ideas, also a strategy referred to more frequently by girls. This use of writing as a means of generating and capturing ideas is similar to the non-stop writer identified by Van Waes and Schellens, or Hayes and Flower's Beethovians. Writers identified as flow writers spoke of their strategies as writers and echoed the tendency to plan mentally, writing to keep ideas coming, and of thinking forwards rather than reflecting back on what had been written.

- Well, I didn't know what I was going to write about and then I just decided that, start and see if I got any ideas when I started writing (Year 9, high-achieving girl).
- Most of the time I just write and it just kind of comes as it comes, really (Year 9, high-achieving girl).
- It's like if I ever plan anything and I'm meant to write it down it's nothing like the plan because I think of stuff on the way (Year 11, low-achieving girl).
- I'm kind of just going to make it up as I go along (Year 9 low-achieving girl).
- Because I generally have something in my head and then I write it all down and then I have to think a bit and then write it down (Year 11, low-achieving girl).

A similar set of strategies was also articulated by writers identified as brief pausers.

- I launched straight into it, well, as she was explaining it on the board, ideas were running through my head so I thought, if I have a plan I'll probably forget some of the ideas so I thought I'd just get it all on paper and if it makes sense then that's OK, but then I'll go back and make corrections later on (Year 9, average-achieving girl).
- If I keep going, I get more ideas from what I'm writing and I'll try and drag a point out or something and then find ideas from other points (Year 9, average-achieving girl).
- I have an idea of what the whole story is going to be like anyway, always in my head, so if I just write and if it doesn't sound right, I just scribble it out and try and do it again (Year 9, average-achieving girl).

Brief pausers are also writers who write more than they pause, but whose writing is punctuated by many brief pauses. It is likely that they share many of the characteristics of flow writers, generating ideas as they write. The tendency to switch between behaviours is more characteristic of successful writers, suggesting that a writing strategy that is driven by the need to capture ideas through writing is more successful if it is punctuated by pauses to briefly monitor progress. Evidence here suggests that flow writers are more typically low-ability and girls, while brief pausers are more typically high ability and boys.

The long pausers were all girls. Indeed the patterns of behaviour that demonstrated being settled as writers either through lengthy episodes of writing or pausing were both behaviours typical of girls and of low-ability writers. Several of the writers identified as long pausers were aware of themselves as having this pattern. Their comments suggested that lengthy pauses were likely to be concerned either with planning or generating ideas, with writers block, or with a sense of dissatisfaction over what they had written. Girls were also more likely to speak of themselves as drifting off task, which may also be contributing to their long pauses.

- I'd say I think a lot more than I write, because I find it easier that way. I find it very hard to start writing and once I do I'll be fine and I will go through it and then I'll make lots of changes, so I do a lot of thinking and I do some writing (Year 11, average-achieving girl).
- Think there was more I could have put, thought about, but I just couldn't think (Year 11, low-ability girl)
- If I write something I'll go back and say, "Oh no, I don't like that any more." So I have to change it, but at the time I may like it, but then I just change by the time I've finished another piece of writing or something (Year 11, average-achieving girl).

Van Waes and Schellen speak of stage 2 writers, who spend a long time planning, then write pausing infrequently, but that when they *do* pause, do so for long periods of time. They also refer to initial planners, whose long pauses are mostly situated at the beginning of a task. The long pausers identified here show some of the characteristics of both these profiles. Van Waes and Schellen identified stage 2 writers as the most common style amongst pen and paper writers, but in this study the long pauser was one of the least populated profiles. In common with the profiles identified by Van Waes and Schellen, the long pausers in this study referred frequently to planning through the generation of ideas but also referred to pauses as occupied with revision.

In describing their own writing behaviour, boys were twice as likely to position themselves as switchers – not as writers who have to stop because they keep getting stuck, but as writers who write and think in short bursts. This behaviour is typified both by rapid switchers and brief pausers, both groups which were populated more by boys than girls. This behaviour is most like the fragmentary stage 1 writers that Van Waes and Schellen identified as being writers who revise a lot as they write. This is perhaps a little surprising, as Van Waes and Schellen showed that no paper and pen writers in their study adopted this profile. It is perhaps worth bearing in mind that their study was with academic writers. Reflecting on what they were thinking about in these short pauses, these brief pausers and rapid switchers revealed a variety of strategies, many of them concerned either with the translation phase (converting ideas into phrases and sentences) or with revision. Indeed, the way that revision and translation seem to be undertaken in tandem is reminiscent of Hayes and Flower's Mozartians.

- I guess I was just catching up with myself a bit, checking that I was going… where I wanted to be going with the piece (Year 11, high-achieving boy).
- It was mainly when I was trying to think of a better word than the one I already had (Year 9, high-achieving boy).
- It's mainly pauses for words, but I did pause a few times to think, "Where am I going to go now' (Year 11, high-achieving boy).
- What I do is I write, and basically carry on writing, but when I pause, I'm not thinking about what I'm going to write next, I'm thinking about what's going to happen in two or three paragraph's time (Year 11, average-achieving boy).
- That one was a change of mind because I didn't think it was going to work. I thought it would make the wrong impression on the reader…they would take the wrong meaning (Year 11, high-achieving boy).
- I'll realise I've just been sort of writing off the point and I'll cross it out and then correct it (Year 11, low-achieving boy).

Many of these strategies look forward to where the writing is going; an alternative strategy is to look back at what you have already written, and use this as a strategy for generating ideas. In general, this was not a common strategy, but of the few who mentioned it, it was boys who were twice as likely to speak of rereading text in order to generate ideas. "I read back through it to see if I wanted to repeat any points which I made. I'm trying to think of more ideas which I've put down" (Year 11, high-achieving boy).

Stop starters are balanced writers who switch infrequently and have the least distinct profile of all; indeed, they may well be deemed average writers in line with the Van Waes and Schellan's study. What the interviews revealed was that many of these

writers had quite a detailed understanding of the decision-making processes they engaged in when they wrote. As well as being able to comment on their own writing habits, many of these young writers were also able to provide a commentary on what they were aiming to achieve through their writing.

DISCUSSION

The question of whether these profiles are a feature of the task or of the writer remains pertinent. The literature would suggest that pen and paper writing, in particular, produces writing profiles that are more typical of the writer than determined by the task (Levy & Ransdell, 1996). Anecdotally, however, researchers involved in this study were aware that certain lessons posed greater cognitive or creative demands on the students. In comparison with other lessons, these lessons involved a disproportionate amount of time being spent in pausing and, presumably, thinking. The children in this sample that were observed three times did not always retain the same profile. There was a tendency, however, for them to vary with regard to having a balanced profile or not, but to retain profiles typified by switching or settled behaviour. It is possible to propose from this that balance between pausing and writing may be determined by the task, but that switching or not, may be a characteristic of the writer.

Switching behaviour is caused by the brief pause either interrupting a balanced profile or a profile in which writing behaviour dominates. It is this brief pausing that seems to be characteristic of the successful writer. This is in contrast to long pauses, which seems to be more characteristic of the weak writer. What remains elusive for the writing researcher is precisely what cognitive processes occur during these pauses. Spelman-Miller (2000) reports that long pauses tend to occur at the ends of clauses and sentences, while brief pauses tend to occur between words or even within words. Matsuhashi (1981) described pausing as linked to content generation and phrasing, while Gould (1981) considered pausing to be more concerned with reviewing what is already written as a strategy for propelling the writing forward and generating the next idea. The writers in this study described content generation and revision as more typical of what occurs in long pauses. Indeed the brief pauses that are typical of switching behaviour are probably too brief to be concerned with idea generation, phrasing or revision. It would seem more likely that such pauses are more concerned with online revision: maintaining and monitoring decisions about content and phrasing and that this monitoring of intentions supports successful writing. It is perhaps surprising therefore that when looking at the average and low-achieving children in our sample, 80% of the boys from this group adopted profiles involving switching behaviour compared to only 30% of the girls.

In some respects, this article is concerned with the marrying of two very dissimilar traditions. Much of the research into gender comes from the socio-cultural tradition, while the work on composing processes comes from the paradigm of cognitive psychology. The one is concerned with contextualising behaviour in its cultural setting, the other with decontextualising behaviour in the interests of validity. Cognitive psychology is concerned with the process, with what people do; socio-culturalists are concerned with the influences that create the motivations for what people do. Socio-culturalists alert us to the considerable power exerted by the context

and communities in which we learn that impacts on what we write, how we write it and the value we place on the text. Czerniewska reminds us that "when children learn to write, they learn more than the system of writing. They learn about the social practices of language" (Czerniewska, 1992, p. 2). This article, however, is not concerned with the text, but with the behaviour that produced it. Can there be socio-cultural explanations for why boys are more likely to switch between pausing and writing, or is this behaviour determined only by the cognitive demands of the task?

To suggest that there is anything predictive about gender or successful writers and a tendency towards a certain writing profile would be unwise. Even within this data, there is enough variability to make such a claim untenable. It is possible to make an argument as to why able writers might adopt a switching strategy, requiring briefer pauses to make planning, editing and revision decisions because many more writing structures have been internalized. It is more problematic to account for why gender should be exerting an influence, especially so in a climate of concern about the poor performance of boys as writers, when evidence here would suggest that they are more likely to adopt a writing style that mirrors the writing behaviour of able writers.

Different studies produce different profiles, but many of the chief characteristics of the different profiles appear in all of the studies, and while there is not a perfect match there is considerable overlap. All profiles include a variation on Hayes and Flower's original Mozartians and Beethovians. The former are the initial planners who translate and revise knowing where they are going, who switch frequently between writing and pausing as they monitor the translation and revision processes. The latter are the planner/translators who generate ideas during the translation process, then revise and improve later. They exhibit a drive to write in order to capture thinking, possibly leading to a flow-writing profile, or conversely a pattern where the lack of initial planning may lead to a profile typified by lengthy pauses. Evidence from this study pictures boys as more likely to fall into the first group and girls into the second, not only in terms of observable behaviour but also in terms of their own reflection on their writing behaviour. Much of the psychological research, while identifying profiles, has not commented on whether one profile is more successful than another, or whether one might be a sign of a more mature writer. In part, this has been because much of this research has been with expert writers.

What this data does not provide is any evidence that legitimizes the perception of boys as weak writers. Evidence from the first phase of this study (Jones & Myhill, 2007) also challenges the perception that there are weaknesses evident in the texts that boys produce. When comparing the linguistic characteristics of the writing produced by boys and girls matched for ability and text-type, boys did not demonstrate discernable weaknesses at word, sentence or text level when compared to girls. Indeed, just as the composing processes of boys showed a tendency to mirror that of able writers, the few gender differences revealed in the texts they write also show this tendency. Furthermore, contrary to expectation regarding preferred genres, boys did not demonstrate higher performance for non-fiction writing.

Millard (1997) describes boys as differently literate and refers to boys as highly dependent on visual literacies for generating their ideas and the form of their writing. This data, however, revealed very few references in the interviews to the use of visual strategies at all, and of the few which did, it was girls who were more likely to speak

of their own tendency to visualise and to be the observer of scenes in order to generate ideas. The tendency to visualise as a strategy to generate ideas also seems to decrease with ability, with low-ability writers being three times more likely to refer to this strategy than high-ability writers. Whether the focus is the text or the composing processes employed, there is little here to encourage the characterisation of boys as struggling writers. It remains the case, however, that more boys than girls are represented in the lower scores for attainment tests in English, particularly for writing tasks. If explanations for this underperformance cannot be found in their composing processes, or in the linguistic characteristics of what they write, explanations must be attributable to other aspects of performance such as motivation, testing mechanisms or teacher assessment and expectations.

Much of the research in gender and literacy has tended to treat boys and girls as two homogeneous groups, displaying separate and predictable gender identities, and the perception of language as a natural strength for girls and a problem for boys is an example of this tendency. It is not the intention of this article to present an alternative set of constructs that polarises boys as natural switchers and therefore skilled writers and girls as naturally settled and therefore unthoughtful writers. The evidence presented here, however, goes some way to contesting the notion of the struggling boy writer, and refocusing attention on the varying needs of all those who struggle with writing.

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