

## 5 | HOW DOES ROLE-PLAY EFFECT THE ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION OF LOW-ATTAINING YEAR 1 WRITERS?



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### 1. | INTRODUCTION

I am a primary teacher in a 2-form entry school currently in my second year of teaching. I have spent this year as well as my NQT year teaching Year 1. I am also responsible for Design and Technology in the school.

Soon into the beginning of the year with my new class, I noticed a group of children who did not show any engagement with writing tasks. These particular children were falling behind national expectations and were frequently being mentioned in progress meetings.

Within this report, I outline what I did in an attempt to combat this. After searching for advice on ways to approach the problem through books and articles including research by Brunning and Horn (2010) and Neelands et al (1993), I decided to take an approach that I thought would be most suitable for the children concerned. One article I discovered by Neelands et al (1993) outlined a research project which involved using drama as a stimulus to write. It stated that it was found that students responded positively to this approach, and there was a significant increase in their attitude towards writing. After reading similar research projects by Brunning and Horn (2010) and McCown and Biehler (2012), I became increasingly interested in using a similar approach with my focus group.

I decided to teach 2 English lessons using role-play, and 2 without role-play, and analyse the behaviours of a group of 6 children. I carried out the research within a 4 week period during April 2017. I particularly focused on the children's engagement with the writing tasks and their motivation to write, rather than the quality of writing, as I was most concerned about these aspects.

I will firstly outline the method I took to research this concern, particularly explaining the process of action research. I will then outline my original concern in further detail, referring to literature, which influenced the way in which I went about this research. I will then describe the action I took, and through analysis of this research I will detail the outcomes of the results whilst explaining the advantages and disadvantages of the route I took. I will then reflect on my findings and explain how I will use this information to inform any further teaching I practise in the future.

## 2. | METHODOLOGY

As a full time teacher with extra responsibilities, action research was the most appropriate way for me to investigate this issue. It meant that I could continue with my usual classroom practices and implement my chosen strategies without disrupting any routines of the general school day. McNiff and Whitehead (2005 p.2) explained that action research is so practical, that when teachers are first introduced to the idea they say "That's what I do in any case. What's different?" Thus, the research I was undertaking was embedded in my practice, rather than being an addition to it. Action research has been described by Reason and Bradbury (2001, p1) as 'a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes'. Therefore, action research is practical research, which directly impacts practices of high importance. It is used to build knowledge and gather results in order to inform future practice. Therefore, action research was appropriate for my study as it could be embedded in my usual teaching.

McNiff (2016) defines action research in 2 ways: action being what you do, and research referring to how you find out about what you do. In other words, action research refers to the investigation of personal practice. Carr and Kemmis (1986 p. 8) state that 'methods and procedure employed by members of a profession are based on a body of theoretical knowledge and research', meaning that action research holds high importance to practitioners. It influences their practices and develops their skills, making their practice more effective. Action research encourages practitioners to be reflective, and this enables them to develop themselves as practitioners. It has been argued that reflection happens at every stage of action research, meaning that reflexivity is a core part of action research (Cohen and Manion 1994 p.310) 'because the researchers are also the participants and practitioners in the action research-they are part of the social world that they are studying' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 14 in Cohen and Manion 1994 p.310). As 'action research involves teachers studying their own professional practice and framing their own questions' (Parsons 2015 p.25), it could be critiqued that it may become biased. However, 'it challenges the separation of research from action' and 'the separation of the researcher from the researched' (Pine 2008 p.31), making the research valuable for others in the same profession.

As previously mentioned, action research is integrated into existing practice, meaning it can be done in a short time-scale if needed. In addition to this, where other methods of research are spread to a wider audience, action research directly impacts a smaller audience, reaping valuable rewards. These are characteristics of action research described by Mertler and Charles (2008). These features of action research make this method appropriate for research within education, as any issues that arise could be combatted instantly. This makes the findings relevant, current and means they have direct value to other practitioners within education. It could be argued that the fact it is small-scale makes it less valuable and 'a puny form of the real thing', 'hardly something to be taken seriously (Knight 2002 p12). However, it was appropriate for my research as it meant I could act on my findings instantly. This can be argued to be an important part of the research process as it empowers teachers to make changes, which can enhance the education of children (Hine 2013).

The method of action research follows two specific cycles, which I undertook. The following process has been outlined by Stringer (2009). It requires the researcher to firstly recognise the issue and define the field of action. This involves questioning the issue, defining who it is effecting and where the action is going to take place. Next, the researcher must plan their action. This involves reading various sources of literature which then influence the steps of the action. Once the plan has been made, it needs to be put into practice, which leads on to the next cycle of action research. The methods are put into effect and the researcher must analyse the outcomes. Once the researcher has performed the action, the most important step becomes relevant. The researcher

must reflect on their findings in order to learn from the action. This involves taking into account the impact of the action, any points that could be altered if repeating the action to make it more effective, and using this information to plan the next field of action.

After recognising the problem in my class, I collected information to inform the action I needed to take. Whilst researching by reading a variety of literature, I learnt that role-play is a strategy used to engage and motivate young writers, as it encourages children to 'start thinking' (Doecke and Parr 2005 p.218) and induces creative thinking which builds writing skills (Olson 1996). I considered the specific pupils I needed to target, and thought this approach would be suitable for them. I came up with a plan to research whether role-play has an effect on motivation and engagement towards writing. I took a range of ideas from Brunning and Horn (2010), Cook (2000), Cremin, (2006), McNaughton (1997) and Neelands et al. (1993), and implemented them into my planning. I decided the best way to do this was to teach 2 lessons with role-play, and 2 lessons without role-play, and monitor the motivation and engagement towards the writing of 6 children. I did this so that I would be able to analyse findings by comparing both lessons with role-play, both lessons without role-play and also compare them against each other. 3 of the participants were boys, and 3 were girls. I created a monitoring form influenced by Wilkerson(1998) and Robson (2002), in which I could note the behavioural habits of these children in order to measure their engagement. I then analysed my findings and found key themes, which I then reflected on. Robson, C. (2002 p.311) has critiqued that 'there is a major issue concerning the extent the observer effects the situation under observation'. However he also argued that this could be overcome by the observed being so accustomed to the observer being there that they carry on as normal (Gittelsohn et al. 1997). As the children were in their usual classroom environment during the lessons in which I observed them, I would argue that this could have been the case during my research, making it less biased.

### 3. | AREA OF CONCERN

As previously mentioned, my particular concern was the lack of engagement with and motivation towards writing by low-attaining writers in my class. These particular children were making little or no progress and consistently being levelled as 'below national average' for their age as writers. I noticed that these children hugely lacked motivation to write and lacked engagement with any writing tasks, and could not help thinking that this impacted on their writing ability. Not only did they lack motivation and engagement, but also a few of these children often became defiant and displayed troublesome behaviour during English lessons and writing tasks. This caused a problem for their own learning, as well as the learning of other pupils in the class.

Brunning and Horn (2010 p.25) state that 'becoming an able writer brings great intellectual and social rewards, but the extended nature and difficulty of this process creates unique motivational challenges'. This stresses the importance of developing the ability to write. It also mentions that the development of writing skills brings 'motivational challenges' (Brunning and Horn 2010 p.25), which is what I was experiencing in my classroom. These points stressed that the fact these children in my class were already behind and displaying low levels of engagement was something to be concerned about. This point also recognises the fact that motivation and engagement towards writing can impact writing ability, meaning there was a possible relationship between motivation towards writing and attainment in writing.

Four clusters of conditions are proposed as key to developing motivation: nurturing functional beliefs about writing, fostering engagement using authentic writing tasks, providing a supportive context for writing, and creating a positive emotional environment (Brunning and Horn 2010). I realised that I needed to offer these children an approach tailored towards their specific interests in order to motivate and engage them. I recognised that I needed to take an approach to teaching

that would specifically interest these children. As my research period was restricted, I chose to specifically try to tackle the point of fostering engagement and motivation, and took the other points into account whilst doing so. Wiseman and Hunt (2013 p13) state that 'the relationship between effective practice in teaching and effective practice in motivation and management cannot be ignored'. With this in mind, I decided that I needed to adapt my teaching in order to motivate and engage these pupils. It has been argued that 'teachers who are well prepared with a high ability to motivate pupils, will experience fewer behavioural difficulties' (Wiseman and Hunt 2013 p.4), so I hoped that by adapting my teaching methods in an attempt to engage these writers, I might also notice a change in behavioural issues.

It has been noticed that student participation within learning is related to achievement. Snowman, McCown and Biehler (2012 p.17) offered seven recommendations for teachers to motivate pupils in order for them to learn. One of the suggestions is to 'maximise factors that appeal to both personal and situational interest', and another to 'try to make learning interesting by emphasizing activity, investigation, adventure, social interaction and usefulness'. I bore this in mind and thought about the particular children I was concerned about in order to find a method best suited to them. The children concerned were all either 5 or 6 years of age, and linked to the statements above, I began to think about taking a more interactive approach to writing tasks. Within the non-statutory guidance of the National Curriculum, role-play is mentioned as a tool to enable children to improve their writing. It states that 'drama and role-play can contribute to the quality of pupil's writing to develop and order their ideas through the playing roles and improvising scenes in various settings' (Department for Education 2014). The arguments above suggest that interactive approaches help to engage students, so I thought that this would be a useful starting point. 'Research has shown that interest is one of the motivational variables that has a powerful, positive effect on individuals' cognitive performance' (MacArthur and Fitzgerald, 2008 p146), suggesting that motivation and engagement towards writing are linked with achievement, making this method seem even more appropriate.

From a critical perspective, role-play's relationship to traditional classroom teaching activities is frequently seen as problematic' (Cook 2002 p.74). Cook (2000) questions whether role-play can be used in order to meet national literacy requirements through all forms of writing, such as audience, purpose and text forms. In addition to this, Browne (1999) notes that role-play is one way of making a certain type of writing available in the classroom. Cook (2000) and Browne (1999) are suggesting that teachers need to consider the purpose of each writing lesson, and whilst role-play may be an effective method for motivating writers, it may not be appropriate for all varieties of writing. I took this into consideration when planning the 2 lessons to teach using role-play, as it made me aware that it may not work with all writing outcomes.

Neelands et al (1993) found that role-play had a positive effect on the attitudes of pupils towards writing, and McNaughton (1997) found that using role-play as a tool for writing improved the quality of primary writers. Cook, M (2000 p74) argued that although role-play can be used as a means to create imaginary experiences and social skills, 'its potential for developing cognitive skills, including those associated with language and literacy, is still largely unacknowledged'. This suggests that it may not be powerful in developing better writing skills. Although I was not primarily concerned with the quality of the children's writing, it was still an important view to take into account, as my finding could lead on to other areas to research. Cremin et al (2006 p.277) carried out research in which they found that 'drama appeared to motivate the young writers' and this approach was 'more engaging for all involved'. Through my experiences with the unmotivated writers in my class, I had found that the children often lacked ideas and felt there was little purpose for them to write. Within the work of Cremin et al (2006), it was found that through role-play, children developed ideas due to the imagined experience they had participated in. This led me to

consider that role-play could be a way for the children to feel fully involved in the teaching and learning, whilst creating and developing their own ideas to then write, hopefully instilling motivation. The reading I had undertaken including research by Neelands et al (1993) and McNaughton (1997) led me to believe that an interactive approach could benefit my focus group, as they would be able to express themselves and create their own ideas using their imagination. They would then hopefully become more engaged and in turn have more motivation to write.

### **Ethics**

Before commencing my research study, I of course needed to consider any ethical concerns. The nature of my research was discussed with the executive head teacher of the school and a form was signed giving permission for it to be carried out. It was necessary to seek permission from the executive head teacher in order for her to ensure that the proposed research was in line with the school's values. Furthermore, the head teacher has responsibility for these children within the school so it was important for her to give consent.

The children within my focus group gave verbal assent. This was necessary as they were participating in research. The BERA states that 'participants must understand the process in which they are to be engaged' (BERA 2011 p5). Therefore, I made them aware that I would be observing their behaviours in a range of lessons, and detailed what I would be looking at in particular using the observation form I had made. I also informed them that I would be using the information gathered to write an essay. They were aware that they could withdraw from the process at any time. As the nature of my particular research did not explicitly make any changes to a normal school day, this verbal assent was adequate.

Zeni (2006) explains that it is important for the researcher to show participants that they will be protected, by offering anonymity and confidentiality of data. So that the focus children cannot be recognised, I have created new names for them and used these names throughout this research to enable anonymity.

## **4. | ACTION**

<b>Lesson – role-play</b>	<b>Lesson – no role-play</b>
<p>To use appropriate adjectives to describe</p> <p>Children listened to the story 'Whatever Next!' by Jill Murphy.</p> <p>Children had to role-play getting ready to go to space, getting into a rocket and blasting off. Children then described what they could see in space. Children then wrote this in their books.</p>	<p>To write an information text using subheadings</p> <p>Children had been learning about Neil Armstrong. Children watched 2 videos explaining facts about him. They were introduced to subheadings and had to write facts about Neil Armstrong under appropriate subheadings.</p>
<p>To use role-play to help plan a story</p> <p>Children had been reading a series of books called 'The Katie Stories' which involves a girl going to an art gallery and jumping into pictures. Children watched a Mary Poppins video where the characters jump into pictures. Chn then chose a picture to physically jump in to and role-played what happened inside.</p>	<p>To write instructions using adverbs</p> <p>Children practically made biscuits in groups. Children introduced to adverbs. Children then wrote the instructions using adverbs.</p>

As previously mentioned, the method I used for this research was participant observation, and I analysed the data qualitatively.

After deciding I was taking a role-play versus no role-play approach due to findings from research by Kremin et al (2007), Neelands et al (1993) as well as others previously mentioned, I firstly created an observation template that I could record some of my findings on. I needed a template that was quick and easy to use, so I could use it while I was teaching. I wanted a way which I could record things instantly, as participant observation is supposed to be recorded 'in the moment'. A disadvantage to this is that I may not have noticed all behaviours of the 6 children whilst also concentrating on teaching the whole class. This was quite difficult at times, but I did my best to record as much as possible.

I then created a lesson evaluation form inspired by Descombe (2010) and Wilkinson (2003) to gather the opinions of the children. I made this simple and phrased it in ways that I knew the children would understand. I decided that I would scribe their answers in order for them to feel less pressure. A critique of this is that the children may not have been honest in order to not offend me. Robson (2002) notes that there is no way of knowing whether the participants would have acted the same had they been observed. In addition to this, children on occasions had to do this in their own time. Despite these criticisms, the children were happy to answer the questions and did so without any trouble.

As previously mentioned, Wiseman and Hunt (2013) noted that a well prepared teacher results in fewer behavioural difficulties. I planned the 4 lessons that I wanted to teach and made sure I was fully prepared for them. I collected data instantly and straight after the lesson, and briefly analysed each lesson in order to gauge the themes that had appeared. I waited until all 4 lessons had been taught to make comparisons between them. This meant that I could make comparisons using all of the information I had gathered from all 4 lessons in order to draw some themes and conclusions.

## 5 | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

I took a qualitative approach to my data analysis as 'descriptive data can provides an account of classroom behaviour and interaction without making an effort to judge these events as good or bad' (Wilkerson 1998 p96). I used a grid that I had created to monitor the engagement of each child in each lesson. This was inspired by Wilkerson (1998) and Robson (2002). This grid had a range of common behavioural actions influenced by common behaviours I had noticed during previous teaching.

When the children were completing the lesson evaluation forms, I verbally asked the children the questions and wrote down their answers myself, in order for it to seem part of a general classroom conversation, and not to be seen as extra work for them. I did this for each child after each lesson. A critical issue to this is that it was done at the end of each lesson which took up a little bit of their play time, and this could be seen as unfair for those children. However, the children were aware that they could withdraw and were keen to answer my questions. I also wrote down any quotes the children made about the lessons.

I began by planning the 4 lessons and made sure I scheduled them for the same time each week so that each lesson took place for the same amount of time. I completed the observation forms throughout each lesson and asked the children to complete the evaluation straight after each lesson. Observation techniques are seen as a powerful way to research, as 'it draws on the direct evidence of the eye to witness events first hand', (Denscombe 2010 p.92) meaning the data

collected is real and raw, which was appropriate for my research as it meant I could act on my findings straight away in order to make a difference to the focus children. This is a major advantage of using participant observation as a research method.

However, there are disadvantages to using this method. Firstly, the participants had to be made aware that they were going to be observed. Luckily in my case, it is normal that I am in the classroom with these particular children. However, observation does create a question of whether the participants have changed their behavior, or if they would behave differently had they not have been being observed (Robson 2002 p.311). In addition to this, observation can be time consuming (Robson 2002 p311), and in my case, I needed to be more focused on the 6 children than the rest of the class for the 4 lessons that were part of my research. However, the research I was doing was intended to improve my teaching practice to all pupils, so I felt it was the right thing to do.

Through analysing my data, I came across 4 themes: behaviour, engagement, motivation and enjoyment. These themes link back to work by Brunning and Horn (2010) who noted that behaviour and engagement were two of the main conditions argued to develop motivation, as well as a positive emotional environment.

In addition to this, Brunning and Horn (2010) as well as Wiseman, D and Hunt G. (2013) noted the relationship between engagement and behaviour, so these 4 themes seemed relevant to analyse. I will now go on to discuss the findings in the appropriate subheadings below.

### **Behaviour**

It was immediately clear through teaching the 4 lessons that the children displayed less behavioural issues during the lessons with role-play than in the lessons without role-play. During both lessons without role-play, 2 of the children involved in the research displayed disruptive behaviour. In one of these lessons, one of the children had to be sent to time out. However, during the lessons with role-play, less behavioural issues were recorded, and there were no major behavioural incidents. This suggests that less behavioural issues arise with the pupils in my class when role-play is involved. This was of course a small-scale study so I cannot generalise this to other classes within my school, but it seemed a possibility from my results.

### **Engagement and participation**

The fact that the children displayed less behavioural problems in the lessons with role-play enabled them to become more engaged with the learning taking place. In both of the lessons with role-play, all of the children showed 'some participation' or 'lots of participation'. Richard was a little shy during the first role-play session and initially did not want to join in, but after some encouragement joined in happily and did so straight away in the next role-play lesson. This is important to take into account as it suggests that role-play is not suited to all children. However, it is important to note that in the lessons without role-play, not one child showed 'lots of participation'. They either showed 'forced/no participation', and a minority showed 'some participation'. This could be linked with the behavioural issues taking place, but does also suggest that they were not enjoying the lesson as much, and as previously mentioned in reference to literature by Cremin et al (2006) and Neelands et al (1993), engagement is heightened when there is a level of enjoyment.

It was also noted that in one of the lessons with role-play, 3 of the children had lots of ideas, and I believe this could have been a result of the role-play. This in turn reduced the behavioural problems during writing time and enabled the children to be more independent when writing. One of the children commented that their favourite part of the lesson was 'telling my partner what was happening', showing how they enjoyed engaging with others during the lesson. Charlotte commented that the part she enjoyed most of a lesson with role-play was 'watching Mary Poppins



and going in the picture with Casey', which displays the level of participation she was taking within the lesson. This is noticeably different from lessons without role-play.

### **Motivation**

One of the points, which stood out to me, was that Charlotte was constantly seeking adult assistance and attention when writing during the lessons without role-play. However, this was not the case during the lessons without role-play. Charlotte got fully involved in the role-play and then wrote with very little adult intervention during writing time. It is also important to note that Emma, Kiki and child Lenny produced minimal writing during one of the lessons without role-play, but wrote independently during both lessons with role-play. This is a huge achievement for these particular children. This independent writing was undertaken with no behavioural issues and little adult intervention. It is important to note in this case that one child said 'can I go and show my work to Year 2' once they had finished, as they were so proud of the writing they had produced. Although the writing was not necessarily produced to a higher quality than usual, the child had obviously recognised that working independently was a personal achievement for them.

### **Enjoyment**

When asked how much they enjoyed the lesson, all children chose the smiley face for each role-play lesson. I had previously explained that the faces were to be selected in reference to their personal level of enjoyment of the lesson. When asked what their favourite part of the lesson was, the children were all able to respond quickly and confidently. Peter replied 'taking off and going to space' which was the role-play part of the lesson, and also added 'I did all my work'. This is significant as it shows that he was proud of the fact that he was able to complete his writing task, and highlights the awareness he has of the fact he does not always complete writing tasks. Interestingly, after the other role-play lesson, 2 children also commented on their enjoyment of the writing part of the lesson. Peter said that his favourite part was 'being in the picture and writing about it' and Lenny said 'writing about what happened inside the picture'. This was hugely valuable to me, as these particular children are usually reluctant to write and show little enjoyment towards writing tasks. In addition to this, Kiki said that the most enjoyable part of the lesson for her was 'going in the picture and the crocodile scaring me', which highlights her level of engagement with the role-play. In contrast to this, not one child mentioned any enjoyment of the writing aspect of either of the non role-play lessons. Instead, they commented on other aspects of the lessons, such as 'watching the video' and 'mixing the ingredients'. This suggested to me the children might not have enjoyed writing as much in the lessons without role-play.

## **6 | CONCLUSION**

### **How do I modify my ideas and practices in the light of my evaluation?**

The most point I learnt from this project was that the children were much more motivated to write when they were able to use their own ideas. The children enjoy writing when they have created the ideas themselves. I also learnt that the children much prefer lessons where they have a chance to interact with others and get up off of the carpet, rather than sitting and listening for the whole time. This resulted in fewer behavioural problems and more engagement and involvement in the lesson. Both of these points relate back to arguments made by Brunning and Horn (2010) and McCown and Biehler (2012).

These findings have shown me that the low-attaining writers in my class need interaction with others and freedom to create their own ideas before writing, in order for them to feel motivated to write. This has been supported by McCown and Biehler (2012) who stressed the importance of social interaction and activity when motivating pupils to learn. McCown and Biehler (2012) as well



as Brunning and Horn (2010) suggest that pupils need to be fully involved in the learning interactively in order for them to focus and engage in the learning taking place.

If I were to repeat the process, I would like to ask the children their thoughts and feelings about writing, prior to the teaching of any of the lessons, as I think this would have been interesting to take into account. This would give me some background knowledge of their opinions on writing and I would then be able to make a comparison to their opinions on writing after the research had been completed.

This research highlighted some pertinent considerations for future research, which I will now consider. It is not definite that taking a role-play approach will suit all children, as some children may benefit from alternative approaches such as collaborative work or using forms of technology such as Internet videos or research, which children did comment on within their lesson evaluations. Also, I did not analyse the quality of the writing, and did not notice an obvious difference. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out how the quality of writing could be improved having enhanced their engagement and motivation towards it. In addition to this, this approach may not suit the teaching of all writing styles, which was noted by Cook (2000).

From completing an action research project, I have learnt that a lot can be taken from closely observing in a short space of time. I have also realised that the general observations I make every day impact my teaching without me even realising. Teachers are constantly making observations and adapting their teaching in relation to this, and I have now realised that these little observations are actually highly effective. If I were to continue this cycle, I would like to go on to see if I could find a way to improve the quality of the children's writing, and perhaps see if role-play could be used to do this also.

## 7. | REFERENCES

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