

1 | WHAT STRATEGIES CAN HELP IMPROVE THE ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN WITHIN WRITING?

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Introduction

I am a year 3 class teacher in an expanding 2-form entry Primary School in Greenwich. I have taught at this school for the past 5 years and I currently lead lower key stage 2 and Curriculum across the whole school. Previously, I have supported the English Leader with a project about the teaching of reading and due to the positive response and improved learning outcomes from the children and teachers it has inspired me to look into the teaching of writing. I believe as teachers we should always be reflective practitioners, questioning our pedagogy and whether the approaches we use are inclusive and support progress for all learners. Therefore, I have created a key group of children to focus on, these children were selected based on historic and current data collected at the school, as well as concerns I had about these children due to observations in class. My observations were based on how the children viewed themselves as learners and their engagement levels and participation within writing lessons.

My main concern was the slow progress the children were making within writing and their low engagements levels in the class during the input of the lessons and especially during the writing task time. During the spring term I collected data from the children, through questionnaires and classroom observations, I also had a school's direct student who was able to observe interactions with the children while I was teaching which helped to develop a detailed picture of how these children were acting in the writing lessons and what approach they each took when it came to writing.

I conducted my action during the summer term where I invited 11 children to attend an after school Creative Writing Club, only 8 children attended regularly. In the club I wanted to set a safe and creative environment where the children engaged in drama, speaking and listening activities that focussed around a shared picture book. I selected a wordless book by Aaron Becker called 'Journey' as a stimulus for the drama and then consequently this formed the stimulus for writing as Cremin et al (2006) suggested that to engage pupils you should select quality picture books with a 'polysemic nature, their potent visuals and their tendency to leave gaps for the reader to inhabit.' The wordless book worked really well as the children could take ownership of the story building from the detailed pictures and allowed great opportunities through to expand language through discussions around the pictures. Corbett (2010) also emphasises that 'presenting the class with an interesting stimulus, story idea, context for their writing' help the children to generate ideas and a focus for their writing.

Methodology

To structure my inquiry I followed an action research approach which Pine (2009) describes as a study of 'a problematic situation in an ongoing systematic and recursive way to take action to change that situation.' Stringer et al (2010) simply describe the process of action research as enhancing the craft of teaching. I like the ideology that Pine (2009) sets out that action research is innate and should be synonymous within the teaching pedagogy; 'although it is focused on actions leading to change, action research is also a mental disposition—a way of being in the classroom and the school—a lifelong habit of inquiry. I feel strongly about Pine's (2009) definition as I believe as teachers we

should be constantly challenging ourselves and questioning whether we are providing the best education for all students, which is why I chose to focus on a group of children who I perceived to not be accessing the learning with the rest of the class. As a researcher I took on the model of 'act, look, think' which Stringer et al (2010) describes as a 'cyclical, repetitive process of inquiry' where I continuously reflected on my practice during the planning, instruction and evaluation stages.

McAtee (2013) acknowledges that the action research process 'requires not only the critical reflection on practice and theory-practice conversation, but also it designates ongoing and evolving action as part of the process.' This is what I have discovered during the planning process of my action, that each time I thought I had my idea set and my plan was ready another line of enquiry would pop up and challenge what I had set out, or the children who I had set to focus on would inspire another area for my research to take. Until finally, I began my action and adapted my practice as I went. Pines (2009) delineates this as 'reflection for, reflection in, and reflection on action.'

Concern

The focus of my research was promoted by my concerns regarding the progress and engagement of special educational needs and disability (SEND) and disadvantaged (DA) children in my class who appeared to be despondent and withdraw during writing lessons. Corbett (2008) reported that teachers who conducted surveys with their classes have been shocked to discover 'that the majority of children do not like writing'. He described that this opinion has been formed by children as they may feel 'a sense of failure' or 'perhaps writing has become a way of revealing ignorance rather than an enjoyable exploration of ourselves and our world'. The focus children in my research, were selected from a year 3 class due to their low attainment and below expected progress not only in the current year but within previous years at the school. This is where my initial focus changed, I was originally concerned with data and attainment achievements, however from my research and the finds from Corbett (2008) my main aim changed from being data driven to try and foster with the children a sense of enjoyment out of writing.

The eight children in the focus group were a mix of SEND and DA children as well as children who were both SEND and DA as well as two non SEND and DA children, initially I was only going to focus my action with SEND children but after gathering evidence through class observations and questionnaires I felt that I needed to widen my target group. The children who were selected after my observations in class, tended to have a recurrent stock answer when it came to any writing activity 'I don't know what to write', or they would sit and stare into space until prompted by the teacher to engage in the activity. Or in contrast to this, one particular child would write streams of incoherent text that did not match the purpose of the learning outcome and showed a poor understanding of language through muddled word choices, however I perceived this behaviour as the child feeling the pressure of the task and wanting to look as if they were taking part in the writing activity in order to please the teacher. Lambirth (2016) related to this behaviour in his research in children's discourse with writing as 'compliance discourse' and he 'indicates the children's belief in the importance of approbation from the teacher as being central to the satisfactions of completing writing'. Therefore, from these observations I felt that these children did not see themselves as writers and like Corbett (2008) stated 'good writers know it is worth persevering. They have had the sense of satisfaction from audience appreciation, from creating a beautiful book' which directed me towards these children as I felt they did not have this experience when writing and wanted to provide an opportunity for the children to feel proud about their writing and obtain that sense of satisfactions from their work.

Another reason for the focus on SEND and DA children is that these target groups currently have a high profile within my school's priorities which outlines that 'from different starting points, the progress of disadvantaged pupils, including the most able disadvantaged, will match or exceed that of national 'other' pupils in writing.' Furthermore, as a teacher wanting to promote an inclusive education this concern is always at the forefront of my practice. Although I was determined to find an approach that would help the children to progress with their understanding of language and how to engage an audience in their writing I knew I would first have to tackle their despondent and demotivated attitudes towards writing. I believed in Corbett's (2008) viewpoint that the main difficulty 'for many children is not so much a 'lack of imagination' but rather a lack of the building blocks with which to be imaginative', therefore I had to start from a place where I could provide children with these building blocks. This led to my decision to use a wordless picture book as the stimulus for my action. In order to start my action I had to consider the ethical concerns when gathering data and working with a focus group, firstly I sought the permission from the head teacher and then sent a letter to the parents to get informed consent to use the children's data in my research and to explain to the parents the outline of my project and invite the children to the creative writing club. In this letter I made it clear that the club was not compulsory and that the children could leave at any point.

Action

Once I had conducted my class observations, gathered data from the school target tracker and collected data from the class questionnaires I selected my focus children. My action started at the beginning of the summer term, the children were invited to an after school creative writing club. From the negative responses about writing on the questionnaires and the lack of enjoyment for writing I observed in class, I wanted to create opportunities to have fun with writing and work in a smaller group and away from the perceived 'pressures' in a more formal classroom environment. Cremin et al (2006) states: 'It could be argued that the dominant culture of accountability and prescription recently in evidence has marginalised the contribution of drama and the arts in primary education' this is another reason for the smaller focus group and why I chose for the club to be after school, not just for the children's benefit but also as a teacher I wanted to be away from the pressure and the constraints of teaching writing in a class of 30 children. I wanted these children to have my sole attention and for the children to feel confident in a smaller learning environment. This also meant it was easier to lead drama and speaking and listening activities, where each child was able to have the time to express themselves through actions or discussions and receive my direct feedback. Furthermore, from my previous experience I had seen the benefits of Pie Corbett's 'talk for writing' programme and as my focus group were children who would usually stay quiet in whole class teaching situations and relied on the other children to answer questions or fill the gaps in the 'talk' part of the lesson, this reinforced my decision to invite the children to an after school club, so that these children could speak more freely in a smaller group.

The creative writing club met once a week for an hour for 12 sessions over the summer term, each session was focused around Aaron Becker's wordless book called 'Journey'. The fact the book had no words created great opportunities for discussions about what was happening in the images, making predictions and creating questions, it worked really well in giving the children ownership over the story. These discussions helped the children build confidence talking in the group as all of their ideas were valued and the children began to question each idea by looking for more detailed clues in the pictures to back up or challenge the ideas that had been shared. Dix (2016) highlighted the importance of 'creating dialogic spaces' as it 'allows children to interact more purposefully, gaining

conceptual understandings: meanings are negotiated and joint inquiry proceeds through discussion and critical thinking.’

In each session the children were able to get into role as the main character acting out key parts of the story, which then lead into the children’s writing for that session. This style of drama being incorporated into writing was described by Cremin et al (2006) as ‘seize the moment’ which they believed “increased the children’s ownership and control over the compositional process since their writing was an integral part of the dramatic experience and often fed back into it.’ Each time the children used drama to act out a scene in the story or to act out what they thought might happen next allowed the children to get to know the text really well (Corbett 2007). Corbett (2010) has also emphasised the ‘importance of creating a positive climate for story writing and that would feature... opportunities for developing stories through drama and play’.

After the first session it was clear that some children had had previous apprehension about the creative writing club as one child stated quite clearly that he didn’t really want to go to the writing club but had ‘actually enjoyed it’ and wanted to know if we would be doing more drama in the next session. Another children the next day after the first session said she had ‘more ideas’ for her story and had written them down at home. It was clear that the children had enjoyed the drama element of the session and didn’t see the writing as a difficulty.

The following sessions featured a similar structure recapping what had previously happened in the story, children reading their versions of the story to the group and then looking at the next pages in the book and responding to it with drama, drawing and discussions. These activities were modelled and scaffolded by the teacher. During the discussions I would give the children a language structure that they could imitate when describing what was happening. This language scaffolding helped the children to use story language and helped to develop their vocabulary. Corbett (2010) stated ‘it is hard to write a sentence if you cannot say one’. He valued the importance of teachers modeling ‘story talk’ for children to experience saying and imitating words aloud. The children enjoyed upleveling their vocabulary using a synonym display in the classroom which then would prompt discussions about the use of big or vast and the children would explain which word was better and why. At the end of each session the children would have time to add to their story using the pictures from the book ‘Journey’ as a stimulus.

Evaluation

During the implementation of the action there was a notable improvement with the children in the focus group taking a more active part in whole class writing lessons, these children were putting their hand up more often to share their ideas and where writing a lot more when it came to the written task. Comments like ‘I don’t know what to write’ were heard less frequently in the class and the school’s direct teacher noticed a change in the children’s attitude towards writing when she was teaching the class. This change in the children’s behaviour in the writing sessions had an impact on their progress and attainment, however due to the large gap in their attainment against the expected standard more work is needed to help these children close the gaps in their writing attainment. However as I had changed my focus from being data driven to the children’s emotional response to writing I felt the action had been more successful in getting the children to be more active in whole class sessions and to hear and see more positive interactions with writing from the target group.

The research project has highlighted the importance of drama and speaking and listening in class and how when valued these activities can impact children's engagement and success within writing, Corbett (2008) stated that 'without words, experiences and feelings cannot be captured. Without the template of language to label life, to explain ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves, we cannot create and communicate. And the opposite of creation is destruction. Illiteracy breeds the fist of frustration.' Therefore I feel strongly about preparing children to be successful with language and giving many opportunities for speaking and listening and imitation in class.

Looking into the future I will also continue to value the importance of creating a safe learning environment for all pupils, as Rooke (2012) found that 'teachers deliberately shaped classroom learning environments that they believed had a positive impact on the way children perceived themselves and one another as writers.' Which in turn impacts on the likelihood that a child would actively take part in lessons and felt confident to share their work and feel as if they are a writer.

Finally I feel it is important to finish with the words of Pie Corbett (2008) who said that 'creativity matters because it makes us all special. We can all succeed in this but all of us will succeed uniquely.' I feel strongly that all children will succeed if they are given the appropriate opportunities and the results of my action research has shown that given a different learning environment and more focussed teaching SEND and DA children who have historically made slow progress are able to improve their progress and engagement within writing.

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