

Conclusions

The conclusions reached at the end of the project were that dramatic and verbal exploration of any writing genre, but particularly narrative, led to a broader vocabulary and increased ability to describe a character or scene. If the child had physically acted out crawling across a floor or having an argument they were better 'armed' to describe it in written words. The question 'how might it feel' became more relevant. For those areas that were not possible to explore in the classroom - such as the sinking of a large cruise liner - video footage that offered images of apparent first hand experiences enabled us to 'borrow' images that were beyond our own experiences.

It was also felt that these activities should be regularly included in literacy lessons.

The research also raises the question of how a variety of drama techniques could be used to encourage collaborative, 'active' learning in other curriculum areas particularly. This is an area for continued research foundation subjects. This is now written into the school 'speaking and listening' policy. These new strategies may be unfamiliar and possibly daunting to some colleagues. We have sought to support the less confident staff members through whole school professional development in speaking and listening during which drama techniques and storytelling were explored in practical ways. The school continues to value this approach and standards in writing in K.S.2. continue to rise.

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Appendix 1

Example of questions in first writing interviews:

1. Do you usually enjoy doing writing in school? Explain how you usually feel when you are asked to write something.
2. What kinds of writing do you enjoy most?
3. Are there things that you find hard when you write? What are they?
4. How do you think you could do better at writing? Describe how you think you can do this.
5. Do you like writing at home? What kinds of writing do you do there?
6. Do you prefer to use a pen, a pencil, or a computer when you are writing? Explain why.

BEST PIECE

1. What made you choose this as your best piece of writing?
2. Where did you get your ideas from?
3. Did you enjoy the work? Explain what you liked most.
4. Did anyone help you with your work? How did they help?

WORST PIECE

1. What made you choose this as your worst piece of writing?
2. What do you dislike about it?
3. Where did you get your ideas from?
4. Did anyone help you with it?
5. Did you find it hard to write? Explain what was hard about it.

National Teacher Research Panel

engaging teacher expertise

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Using drama and story telling techniques to improve writing at KS2, with an emphasis on boys' achievement

Aims of the project

To investigate strategies for helping KS2 pupils, particularly boys, to overcome barriers to writing. In particular to explore whether:

- using drama and storytelling techniques can enable pupils to bridge the gap between what is spoken and what is written;
- a range of oral communications skills including persuasion, description and narrative can be transferred to the written form through shared and tiered writing sessions; and
- the existing influence of T.V. and video viewing can promote the transfer visual images into the pupils' writing.

Context

The original project was undertaken at Paddock Junior and Infants school in Huddersfield. This is a multi-cultural school of 310 and 12 full time teaching staff. The project involved one year 5/6 class with a target group of 8 children. Six of these children were working at a below average level in their writing and two higher ability writers were included as role models. Since the original project the techniques and strategies have been employed by other KS2 staff and are part of the school's English policy.

Summary of main findings

Evidence gathered from interviews, questionnaires and pre and post intervention writing evaluations indicated that:

- standards in KS2 writing continued to rise steadily and significantly (see conclusions);
- there appeared to be a marked improvement in children's confidence in expressing their opinions;
- children, particularly boys, learnt to become more 'audience aware writers';
- speaking and listening activities were seen by the children to be effective means of preparation for writing, particularly with regard to character and action description; and
- confidence was increased not only by direct practical involvement in drama, but also by participating as an 'active audience' through commenting, questioning and voting etc.

Background

The project resulted from an earlier LEA writing project involving a number of primary schools. This had looked specifically at raising boys' achievement in writing in general and had involved regular meetings to examine and discuss examples of work and the stimulus used. When this project ended 3 teachers, including the author, LEA English advisor and University language professor sought to explore strategies further and applied successfully for a BPRS. The research was undertaken over one year and as well as investigating the use of drama also explored poetry, illustration and comic frameworks.

Teaching processes and strategies

Writing Interviews

The project began with writing questionnaires 'All about Writing' (see appendix 1) in which the children expressed opinions and likes and dislikes about writing at home and school. They also chose a 'good' and 'bad' piece of their writing and explained their choice.

Drama Activities

These were then introduced to the class and used on a regular basis either as warm-up exercises or as integral parts of a writing process. The following were particularly successful:

Hot Seating: this activity involves the questioning of a specific character by one or more pupils. The character may be a well-known character e.g. 'Goldilocks' or a character created by the children themselves. The character is asked to sit on a chair and questions are fired at them. Different rules may be introduced, e.g.:

- You must tell the truth
- You are allowed to exaggerate
- You must say the opposite of what is known to be true

An alternative to this is that the character is asked to put him or herself into a given situation and behave accordingly e.g.:

Goldilocks - we want you to imagine that you have gone home and discovered that bears have been in your house...eaten your pizza and chips, played on your game boy and broken your latest CD. How do you feel?

This is your Life: This activity helps to elaborate upon known and unknown situations. It is particularly useful when exploring 'Biography' and 'Autobiography'. It involves focussing on a specific character - again well known from existing texts or created by the pupils. As with the television programme related characters - friends and family - are invited to comment on the main character and their actions. This allows us to build a wider picture of the character/story -to see it from a variety of viewpoints. For example Goldilocks finds herself face to face with the three bears, but also her mother and her social worker.

In the Manner of: This activity can be used to explore word level exercises based around adverbs or as a lead in to text level work on character description through action.

- With a specific 'adverb' in mind e.g. timidly - a child is asked to enter the classroom and make their way to a central chair and sit down.
- The complexity of the sequence of actions can be reduced or increased to suit the experience, confidence of the group involved.
- The rest of the group are asked to identify the 'manner' of movement/ adverb being explored and to explain what actions/ expressions etc enabled them to guess correctly.

Say What You See (Narration): This is an extension of the previous activity and seeks to explore narrating and exploring character description through action by literally describing everything that a person/character does. For example as the child enters the room with an adverb in mind e.g. 'angrily' the narrator begins to describe their every action out loud to the rest of the group. "David flung the door open and stomped into the room. He pushed the door shut with a crash. As he stormed across the room he knocked a pile of books to the ground and threw himself onto the chair. David huffed and puffed as he slammed his right fist into his open left hand." The above exercises enable the children to 'speak' their thoughts and character ideas before being asked to write them down. This works on the premise that 'if you can't say it you are unlikely to be able to write it'.

Line Up: Children are asked to draw a picture of a character - describe the appearance of their character in words. They then pass their written description to another class member who attempts to 'draw' the character from the description given. The two pictures are compared....how well have we used words to describe physical appearance? The focus now turns to personality and physical movement...again the children use words to 'describe' these aspects of their character. They pass their written description to another class member who attempts to 'act out' the given role. The original 'author' begins to direct the actions and movement of their 'character'. The class are asked to 'paint a character portrait' of what they have just witnessed in written words.

Storytelling

This took a number of forms from whole class storytelling using artefacts/objects to group or paired storytelling with picture or sentence stimulus. The children responded well to sharing ideas with their peers. Sometimes they created spontaneous storylines in small groups and then 'mixed and matched' ideas to create yet another story. On other occasions they explored previously written work for 'constructive' discussion. The boys were interestingly less happy to read out their own work, although as the project continued they chose to have it read by others - peers or teachers. One process involved the pupils recording their own myths on tape in the storytelling tradition of relying on the spoken word.

Writing Partners

These were used both in friendship groups and in peer tutoring with the more able writer supporting the less confident. They worked together during initial discussion, storytelling, scribing exercises and through shared writing. In the latter they either worked on a collaborative piece or literally 'took it in turns' to explore how gender affected decisions in storywriting - writing a paragraph/chapter at a time.

Video/visual image

Some children in the target group and the boys in particular found it difficult to generate original images and characters to describe in their own writing. Lack of actual experience and reading experience left them confined to their own immediate environment. A lot of boys playing cricket in the park! However they all spent a lot of time watching films and videos that offered them a much wider world to draw upon. We decided to use this. When appropriate questions were asked before viewing and a focus set the children became 'active viewers'. No longer just taking images for granted, but actually examining them, describing them and turning them into written passages.

Findings

While aware that these findings are based on a small sample of children, the author found that speaking and listening appeared to be vital in written language development and could be successfully incorporated into the literacy hour. The standard of writing improved, particularly character and action description. First hand experience enriched the children's vocabulary and allowed them to include images they had not previously considered. (See handout of pre/post intervention examples).

Children were seen to access their use of drama in different ways and while the majority gained most by practical involvement others took the route of 'active audience' - either commenting on what they observed and suggesting ways to improve the action or questioning motives and relationships. Both forms of involvement extended their use of language and encouraged individuals to express opinions and ideas within a supportive environment.

All children chose storytelling as a particularly useful process; they valued being able to share ideas with peers. The ideas began with oral activities, but then developed into successful writing partnerships. They did not worry about having their ideas 'copied' and prestige was gained when ideas were accepted and 'borrowed'.

Writing interviews highlighted that the judgement of what was a good piece of writing differed considerably between pupil and teacher. With the initial questionnaires it became clear that the less able children often echoed the comments written by the teacher or focused solely on neatness of handwriting or length of text. As the project proceeded the children became more involved critics of content.

Children, but particularly the boys, used their viewing experience to become more 'audience aware writers'. The boys' writing included many more references to film which was shown for example, in overuse of dialogue. We read what the characters said, but because there was an expectation that we could 'see' the action they did not bother to describe it. However, when this was highlighted to them and they were asked to 'slow the video down' and indeed 'pause' it they began to transfer the visual image into descriptive writing. They began to realise that the reader was their audience and needed images to be explained and drawn in words.

Standards in writing continue to rise in KS2 with 29% of children achieving level 4 or above in writing in SATS 2001 and 79% of children achieving level 4 or above in writing in 2003. While other factors will have impacted on these results there is evidence that points to interactive drama activities resulting in improved descriptive language and narrative structure. Seven out of the eight children in the focus group achieved level 4 or above in SATS.

Research methods

While all activities were undertaken with a whole class of 26, a target group of 8 were chosen whose work would be used for the focus of the research. These children were chosen for a number of reasons including attitudes towards learning and writing in particular and interest & confidence in drama based activities. The aim was to have a broad range on which to draw from the shy, relatively able writer to the egocentric 'can't be bothered' individual! Writing Interviews - Writing interviews were conducted with the target group at different stages throughout the project. These took the form of written questionnaires which they filled in, with guidance, at the beginning and end of the study. The purpose was to note their attitudes and writing habits at the beginning and whether they had changed by the end. It was particularly useful to examine and evaluate their questionnaires. Oral interviews took place on a regular basis, sometimes formally, but also as part of the ongoing process during lessons.

Pre and post-intervention comparisons - The impact of the drama activities and strategies could best be explored by setting short writing tasks before they took place and then repeating them again after. In this way it was possible to see improved action, character description etc. (see available hand outs)

Discussion - This took the form of whole class and target group discussions/evaluations of exercises undertaken and their usefulness in developing writing. Much of this was actually verbal and the children voted with their feet by choosing the exercises they wanted to use.