



National Teacher Research Panel

engaging teacher expertise

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History Mysteries: History, Literacy and ICT at Key Stages 1 and 2

Harry Potter, the Warley Woods Mystery and Literacy across the Curriculum

Aim of the project

To investigate whether effective reading by children and enactment of the stories would improve and sustain children's writing and their learning of history.

Context

This action research project involved a mixed ability Year 4 class of 28 children. The research was in two phases. In the second phase, the year 4 children worked with all the children in year 2. The class teacher, who was the history coordinator, was supported by a teaching assistant and other staff in the school. Parents joined in with some of the activities.

Summary of main findings

- Through effective questioning the children learned to develop hypotheses.
- The children were able to assimilate the genre of both the factual evidence from the trial and the fiction of j. K. Rowling, and to apply their knowledge and understanding of these different genres in their own speaking and writing.
- The children's work developed to the point where they gave exemplary examples of extended writing.
- The development of the history mysteries web enabled children to revisit lines of enquiry; exploring the web independently or with a partner. This helped the children to add relevant evidence from the trial in their writing.
- Answers given by the children to the questionnaires showed how their asking of questions had changed their ideas about history, and how they were more aware of bias and interpretations.
- The cross key stage phase gave staff and children the opportunity to collaborate to meet each others needs.
- The project was exciting, challenging absorbing and fun for both staff and children; the whole class teaching episodes, in particular the detective enquiry and the re-enactment of the trial, developed the children's reasoning and oral skills.

Background

The research was inspired by a History, Literacy and ICT course run by the Black Country Partnership, and delivered by Dr Jon Nichol from Exeter University. An interactive programme of work was planned which integrated History with Literacy and ICT. This made use of some of the key teaching ideas of the National Literacy Strategy in reading, demonstrating and modelling.**

St. Gregory's Catholic Primary School is popular and regularly over-subscribed. At the time of the research there were 254 pupils aged 3 - 11 years on roll. The percentage of children eligible for free school meals was 8.6%. The percentage of children with special educational needs was about 20%; seven of those children had statements of educational need. Higher than average numbers (3.6%) of the children had English as an additional language. The results of assessments at the end of Key Stage 1, Non Statutory SATs and NFER tests and teacher assessment showed a wide range of academic achievement across the class in which the research was implemented.

The project



I developed a local history study to help the children make connections between different sources by linking the popular writing of J. K. Rowling with local archive material related to Warley Woods, a grade two listed urban park, landscaped in the late eighteenth century. The discovery of a newspaper report of a trial referring to a possible murder in April 1822, a legend surrounding a ghost, and architect's drawings of a gothic abbey, were the rich sources from which the history mysteries grew. The planning evolved over the autumn and early spring terms. My mentor, Jon Nichol, gave help, advice and encouragement via email.

In the initial week-long teaching block, during the spring term, the focus was upon the murder enquiry and related tasks. This was then reviewed and a second phase took place in the summer term. The second week of teaching expanded some of the established themes, but within the genre of board games. So the literacy hour was creatively adapted. Other curriculum time was used too, but not exclusively to blank out all other subjects.

The ICT element developed a life of its own. The children's activities became ongoing tasks to be fitted in around the timetable, sometimes extending into lunch times when enthusiasm to continue became too great to delay. The development of the web grew in stages as the project progressed.

Teaching processes and strategies

Strategies involved in this project included:

- linking different genres; factual evidence from the murder trial and the fiction of J. K. Rowling;
- planning and implementing an innovative, creative, child centred and effective scheme of work, which imaginatively linked local history sources, archive materials, literacy and ICT;
- emphasizing oracy to provide strategies for children to ask and answer questions through investigating evidence from an 1822 murder trial;
- studying the use of questioning by children through interviews, questionnaires and writing to see how this contextualised literacy extended children's thinking and reasoning; and,
- implementing ICT in context by developing an interactive History Mysteries Web which included: teaching plans and resources, a history treasure hunt, a detective enquiry and game for use by children and teachers.

Key teaching episodes - history detectives

The aim was to test the hypothesis that children can think of their own questions to develop and follow a line of enquiry. The research question was, could children form questions in order to solve the mystery of what happened to Samuel Whitehouse?

The children had returned from a history mysteries treasure hunt. There they had discovered a clue:

"Murder most foul!?! - On Wednesday April 3rd 1822 the body of Samuel Whitehouse was found here, with severe head injuries. Your task is to find out if he was murdered. Who or what could have startled his horse?"

A horseshoe had been found at the site. This episode took place in the classroom. Children were reminded of their role as history detectives. The task was displayed and children had worksheets on which to record their questions. The children were given time to reflect upon an individual response and discuss with a partner, before individuals were targeted. Efforts were praised and everyone was encouraged to participate; indeed all did so ensuring lively discussion and debate. Questions were raised, discussed and written up for all to read. Children had an opportunity to record the data for themselves which helped less confident children understand the conventions. The children raised 44 different questions, which ranged from closed simple questions ('Who found him?') to complex higher order ones ('Other than the horseshoe, were there any more things found lying about where the body was found?'). We found it was important to involve at least two members of staff, so that one can scribe questions onto a board or whiteboard, and the other can field questions.

Brainstorm / word association

The intended learning outcome was for the children to relate the genre and vocabulary of J. K. Rowling to the local history sources. The key question was: looking at the picture of Warley Abbey and thinking in the role of "Harry Potter" characters, which words would I choose to use?

The resources were enlarged and we laminated copies of the architect Lugar's drawings of Warley Abbey and pupil worksheets.

This session began with introducing the Gothic building of the Abbey as Hogwarts' Field Centre for Magic Education, and the introduction of the Grey Lady - Warley Abbey's ghost. Children were given time to reflect upon the ideas in their heads, write down notes and share ideas as a whole class exercise. This was an interesting session to observe. The vocabulary was wide ranging including, characters, sounds, smells, magic and mystery. I almost ran out of space recording ideas which were raised. I have also led a session where the children were encouraged to reflect upon the key themes within J. K. Rowling's writing and share their ideas.

Drama - trial scene enactments



This whole class session followed detective enquiry tasks which had looked at the evidence from the trial. The learning objective was for the children to study in depth the characters from the detective enquiry, form clear reasoning skills and extend thinking skills. The key question was: *how can I phrase a question to find out more evidence or detail?*

The classroom was quickly rearranged to form a court. The resources were: a table and chair, gavel or small hammer and wig for the judge. I explained to the children that this session would be a re-enactment of the trial. The task would be to cross question and interview key witnesses in order to establish the truth of what happened to Sam Whitehouse. The children chose a child to take on the role of judge and a decision was agreed as to who should be in the witness stand first: Thomas Fox, the blacksmith. Children had time to write notes and, under the authority of the judge, to ask questions. This session was much enjoyed by staff and pupils. The judge did her best to maintain 'order in court' when the questions came too quickly, and the jurors, or the public became too excited. I intervened a couple of times, but the keenness of the children to hear answers precluded quiet. The role play of the witnesses was of a high quality with children entering into the dialect they thought was appropriate for the blacksmith and the publican! Children were able to change roles from observer to participant easily. The plenary session was to discuss which questions caused the witnesses to reveal more information.

Use of laptop and web



The learning objective was to introduce the children to the Warley Woods web. The key question was: *how can ICT help independent learning?*

The children were shown how to locate the homepage and navigate their way to the History Mysteries Treasure Hunt and the Detective Enquiry sites. The Detective Enquiry site contains hyperlinks to pages containing information about: people, places, maps, evidence, facts and interviews related to the trial. Using hotspots and hyperlinks the children were able to revisit the Treasure Hunt areas and investigate the trial independently or in pairs. This gave the children an opportunity to use ICT in context. The detective enquiry can also be found on www.ex.ac.uk/historyresource.

Group games

This was the main focus of the second phase of the research. This was introduced through an investigation into the children's favourite games. The class played an interactive game set up through a laptop and projector. This was a board game principle which used a picture of Warley Abbey as a grid base. This contained hyperlinks to clues, questions and puzzles related to archive material, which the children had to solve. The children then set into groups to plan and making their own games for the children in Year 2 to play.

Findings

The project was challenging, absorbing and fun for staff and children alike. The search for sources led to unpredictable outcomes, such as a murder enquiry, a legend about a ghost and a gothic building, with the whole process evolving and developing like a story.

The initial teaching needed to be introduced with confidence and enthusiasm, as the introduction of the detective enquiry treasure hunt for clues and the assimilating of the children as characters in role from "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" by J. K. Rowling were crucial to the success of the project.

The emphasis on whole class enquiry and oracy, in particular children raising their own questions and hypotheses in the detective enquiry and their enactments of the trial in role play, meant children encountered a huge amount of information. The children were able to think of their own questions to develop and follow a line of enquiry; questions were formed to solve the mystery of what happened to Samuel Whitehouse. At the end of the detective enquiry sessions the children put forward all possible reasons for the cause of Samuel Whitehouse's death.

The whole class sessions: word association, tasks related to the genre of J.K. Rowling and the reading of chosen parts of the texts, all embedded ideas and vocabulary for the children to build upon in their writing. All the children across the ability range eagerly produced extended pieces of writing in the style of J. K. Rowling; each fulfilled the criteria of including in their writing elements of the detective enquiry. The task was undertaken with great enthusiasm; indeed many children continued the tasks in their own time, play time and dinner times word processing their ideas in 'Word' and editing as necessary.

In writing, all the pupils who took the NFER National Literacy Strategy evaluation test met their set target for Year 4 - 53.9% achieved their set target and 46.1% exceeded their target. This was a significant improvement on the results for the previous year, in particular in the category for children who exceeded their target where the percentage more than doubled. The development of the History Mysteries web gave children the opportunity to revisit the different facets of the History Mysteries in their own time individually or with a partner.

The children's writing reflected the use of questioning as this example shows:

"Grey Lady," said Harry "Is it true about the murder of Samuel Whitehouse?"

"Yes, it is true. I saw Sam's horse riding off. And that is all I saw."

"Thank you. I must go and see where he was found. Tomorrow we are going to find out some clues about when he died. I wonder if he was murdered. Who found him?"

"I didn't see that."

"Was the body dead?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"Was it the blacksmith who killed him?"

"I don't think he wouldn't do anything like that."

The children's answers to the questionnaire, which was given following the project, revealed how the children's ideas about history had changed:

"The asking of questions changed my ideas about history because they made me think more and understand better."

"It made me think that history is a mystery, that no-one knows what happened."

"They (the questions) changed my ideas about history because now I know that people from the past can lie and be truthful."

"They (the questions) changed my ideas about history because I didn't think a murder back then would still be this serious today."

Research methods

The basis for the academic background is grounded in the practice of Action Research through teaching in the classroom. This included time to reflect upon the teaching and learning, and an opportunity to reinforce or adapt the concepts. For example, the evidence from the trial of 1822 had been transcribed for use in the whole class detective enquiry session, but when this activity was repeated by small groups the evidence was presented on colour coded card and set out more clearly.

The evidence base includes the initial ideas, lesson planning, observations and notes, written up during and after teaching. The children used disposable cameras during visits and used a digital camera to record activities during lessons. These pictures were often a good trigger by which to recall key events.

The main writing tasks were an account to be printed in the Warley Woods Community trust newsletter, and an extended piece of writing in the genre of J. K. Rowling to solve the mystery of what had happened to Samuel Whitehouse. The focus of the interviews was for the children to reflect upon their learning and the strategies which had helped them to solve the mystery about Samuel Whitehouse. The interviews were in small mixed gender groups of three related to perceived ability. The questionnaires which were completed independently focused on how the use of questioning had helped the children in their tasks; in particular their raising of questions.

I believe the emphasis upon oracy and acting out situations, gave the children a wealth of experience to draw upon and so their writing was sustained, imaginative and evocative.

Suggestions for further reading

Nichol, J with Dean, J. (1997) History 7-11 Developing Primary Teaching Skills, London, Routledge.

Fines, J. and Nichol, J. (1997) Teaching Primary History, Oxford, Heinemann.

Turner-Bisset, R (2001) Expert Teaching Knowledge and Pedagogy to Lead the Profession. London, David Fulton.

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www.ex.ac.uk/historyresource

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