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## Evaluation Report of MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Storyacting

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# Evaluation Report of MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting

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## Acknowledgements

# Executive summary

MakeBelieve Arts, a theatre and education company, have for over a decade worked with Vivian Gussin Paley's (1990) storytelling and story acting curriculum, and developed a programme of professional development based on this approach. This has come to be known as the Helicopter Technique. In essence Paley's storytelling and story-acting technique involves children telling their stories to an adult who scribes them verbatim. Later the same day the tales are acted out with their peers on a taped out stage in the classroom. Despite widespread scholarly recognition of Paley's perceptive accounts of child play, there has been relatively little research investigating her storytelling and story acting technique and arguably few practitioners in the UK are acquainted with it.

In early 2012, MakeBelieve Arts commissioned an evaluation of the Helicopter Technique (funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation*)* in order to consider the history of their development of the technique and to provide empirical evidence of its value to children and early years practitioners.  The tender also involved consideration of possible developments of the approach in order to make it more sustainable in schools and early years settings.

This study of the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting, undertaken in 2012, aimed to evaluate:

- The impact on children who have taken part in storytelling and story acting sessions.
- The impact on practitioners who have received training from MakeBelieve Arts in this technique.
- The importance of this work in order to provide indicators of:
    - How the model can be further improved and enhanced
    - How it can be made more sustainable in schools and settings.

## The evaluation process: data collection and analysis

The work combined evaluation with research, and, explicitly underpinned by a strong theoretical frame, drew on a range of complementary evidence,  including desk research in the form of an examination of the MakeBelieve Arts archive of practitioner evaluations, and observational accounts and evaluations written by the MakeBelieve Arts team. In addition, this aspect of the work included interviews with practitioners and local authority advisers many of whom had been working with the approach for many years in conjunction with MakeBelieve Arts, as well as interviews with members of the company's team.

Significantly, the work also involved a classroom based empirical phase, which encompassed observation and documentation of an eight week MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique programme in four contrasting early years settings. These comprised reception and nursery classes in schools in two Inner-London boroughs; and a reception class in a school in a semi-rural area in the south of England, with a class from one of its feeder nurseries. This was undertaken in the summer term of 2012, with follow up interviews with the practitioners involved in the autumn term of 2012. The programme encompassed training prior to the work in classrooms, then regular in-class coaching by members of the

MakeBelieve Arts team, as well as weeks when the practitioners ran the Helicopter Technique independently.

A wide range of data collection methods were employed including:

- Desk analysis of documentary evidence from the MakeBelieve Arts Archive, including practitioner feedback and evaluation, observational accounts and in-house evaluations

- Interviews (transcribed)with members of the MakeBelieve Arts team, local authority advisers and practitioners who had run the programme, as well as personal communication with Paley, the originator of the approach

- Observational field notes made at the training sessions and in the classroom sessions

- Semi-structured interviews ( transcribed) with the 6 practitioners from the 4 settings( pre programme, towards the end of the programme and post programme)

- Informal conversations with the practitioners and trainers

- Feedback forms from all who attended the training sessions

- Videos of classroom practice when trainers and practitioners were engaged in the Helicopter Technique, both together and when practitioners worked independently

- Video stimulated review meetings with the practitioners  to prompt reflection-on action

- Children's stories that were scribed in class story books

- Children's reflections gathered though the use of the Our Story app

- Photographs and other documentary evidence of the children's involvement in the technique, for example written Helicopter stories produced by some children during their free play.

- Teachers' structured observations of their selected case study children guided by logbooks, in which they recorded a range of information

Evidence from these different sources was used to document the key characteristics, of the Helicopter Technique and its impact on children and practitioners in different settings. The archive material was purposively sampled and analysed using the coding scheme developed through scrutinising the interviews and video stimulated review conversations. The qualitative analytical software Atlas-Ti (Muhr, 2004) was employed. The macro-level thematic categories identified were also drawn upon to guide examination of the observational data.

Systematic analysis of the breadth of available evidence from the eight week programme and its attendant follow-up, enabled insight into the layers of impact upon both children and practitioners, even within the short time frame of the programme. The analysis also enabled grounded recommendations regarding the development of the model to be made, and suggestions regarding sustainability and dissemination in order to influence both policy and practice.

## Impact on the children

There was evidence of the significant impact of the Helicopter Technique on the children who took part in storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. A range of elements, benefits, issues and developments were identified:

- The approach provided a motivation and an environment for the development of children's communication. There was evidence of the significant impact of the technique on communication, including literacy as well as aspects of speaking and listening.

- Practitioners valued particularly the focus on children's spoken language. The approach provided practitioners with evidence of children's progress in language and communication, something that was particularly valued in the case of understanding and evaluating spoken language.

- The approach provided considerable communicative support and encouragement for a child with limited verbal language who used a sign-supported communication system (Signalong).

- The archive material revealed that practitioners and advisers who had worked with the approach perceived it made a rich contribution to children for whom English is a second language, in terms of their more extended use of English, widened vocabulary and oral confidence. In the summer programme, the technique was also used successfully in classes with a high number of bilingual learners. We do not however have evidence in the sessions observed as part of this evaluation of the use of children's home language(s) being drawn on to support storytelling or story acting.

- The approach impacted significantly upon children's confidence. This was a general benefit for all children. Additionally, practitioners reported sometimes striking changes in some initially quiet children, who, during the course of the programme, grew considerably in confidence. Some practitioners suggested this increase in confidence was also evident in other areas of school and classroom life.

- The approach contributed to children's developing sense of agency through its respect for children's voices, the emphasis on children choosing whether and how to tell a story and take part in story acting, and the provision of a secure and supportive space for story.

- A striking finding was that the approach motivated the children to engage in literacy activities, in taking down other children's stories and producing their own illustrated story books. It also fostered increasing awareness of written language (e.g. in following the transcription of their stories).

- Analysis of children's language use in their story texts revealed that, over the course of the programme, there was no evidence of systematic development in children's narrative and linguistic structures, or in the range of vocabulary involved.

- Towards the beginning of the programme there was some evidence of gendered behaviour in children's storytelling (e.g. with stories limited to typical 'boys'' or 'girls'' themes), and in their participation in acting out (e.g. a boy's unwillingness to take on a female role). During the course of the programme there were some changes, particularly in children's increased confidence and willingness to take on roles with which they might not identify, but which they performed well and seemed to enjoy.

- Many children became more assured and skilled performers during the course of the Helicopter programme. The technique has considerable potential for fostering children's creativity – particularly of creativity in performance.

- Children's active participation, interest in and ability to talk about their stories, suggests their experiences of story gained through their participation in the Helicopter Technique were positive.

- While Helicopter stories tend to be seen as a verbal accomplishment, multimodal analysis illustrated the significance of communication across different modes (e.g. facial expression, gaze, body movement as well as verbal language). This was evident both in children's communication and in adults interacting with children.

## Impact on the practitioners

The archival work and interviews with practitioners and others involved in the Helicopter Technique over many years suggests that it empowers practitioners as they learn how to listen to children and let them lead; offers practitioners a way of understanding children's level of language development in both their community languages and English and is a process and way of working that practitioners need to experience at first hand. It was stated by several of the educational experts interviewed that the approach had been sustained over many years in some individual settings and it was clear that some of the London boroughs had also sustained their commitment to supporting the implementation and development of the technique in their schools. It was seen in particular to be sustainable in settings where highly qualified practitioners and senior management can support less well qualified staff in use of the technique; where it is built into long term planning; when practitioners are clear about its purpose and its benefits and when they are clear how it fits with planning for and developing children's learning through the EYFS. With regard to sustainability in relation to the practitioners who took part in the summer tern programme, all commented that they intended to sustain their use of the approach into the autumn term and when visited this was seen to be the case, though one was seeking additional trainer support.

In addition, there was evidence of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on the practitioners who took part in facilitating the children's storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. A range of elements, benefits and developments were identified:

- The practitioners were motivated to participate and valued the training, particularly the modelling of the technique with children and the chance to participate themselves

- Practitioners' experiences in their classrooms of the approach and the supportive coaching were mostly extremely positive. They were delighted with the way the children embraced it and began to notice and document multiple benefits for the young learners.

- Practitioners gained considerable confidence in using the Helicopter Technique across the eight weeks, taking stories independently and with apparent ease.

- In implementing the approach on their own with increased assurance, several practitioners made or planned to make minor additions to the approach and encountered and overcame various challenges, these mainly related to facilitating the story acting. .

- Whilst most of the practitioners voiced their understanding of the underpinning principles of the approach, others were less confident about this and some uncertainty about the flexibility of the approach was expressed.

- Some of the practitioners, working to embed the approach within their own pedagogic practice, had also begun to develop the approach with colleagues. Several practitioners had involved the parents who expressed considerable interest.

- The programme of support and the accompanying research nurtured considerable professional reflection and beneficially increased the time that practitioners set aside for one to one time with children. Practitioners commented that this enabled them to get to know the children better, and that the technique prompted them to stand back and pause, and notice and listen more attentively to the children's language and their stories. Some also perceived this raised their expectations of individual learners and increased their attunement to children's language and stories.

- The approach, combined with the Video Stimulated Review caused practitioners to listen to and reflect upon their own language and multimodal communication which they felt had positive consequences in other classroom contexts

- The programme prompted practitioners to review their pedagogy in other class contexts and activities. It reminded some of their values as educators.

- The approach was seen to be extremely well aligned with the underpinning principles of the EYFS, (a unique child, positive

relationships, enabling environments leading to learning and development).  and the Foundation Stage's characteristics for effective learning, (playing and exploring; active learning; creating and thinking critically), as well as the prime areas of learning and  development (personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development) and literacy as one of the specific areas of learning and  development.

In addition, consideration of the different training models suggests that the optimum model of training is at least a full two hour session, preferably in the school day. The core components of such training were seen to be the demonstration with children of the technique and the opportunity for adults to participate both as audience and as participants in their own storytelling and acting.

### Recommendations

On the basis of this evaluation, it is clear the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting is both a rich framework for developing children's early learning and a motivating and valuable pedagogical tool for developing creative teaching. Sawyer (2004; in press) describes such teaching as disciplined improvisation, which has at its basis a framework that is a supportive scaffold. The Helicopter Technique represents just such a scaffold.

It is also clear that the MakeBelieve Arts professional development programme for the Helicopter Technique is well-designed and successful, it positions the trainers as coaches working alongside practitioners and in a non-hierarchical manner, a way of working that is endorsed by Cordingley et al. (2003) with regard to effective school-based professional development. The recommendations for enhancing the model and the programme need to be read in this light.

**With regard to the Helicopter model,** it is recommended that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider:

- Exploring the Helicopter Technique as a tool for identifying the developmental needs of children;

- Clarifying with and for practitioners the significance of accepting children's language;

- Clarifying the role of affirmative feedback in story scribing and story acting;

- Encompassing increased use of children's home languages;

- Reviewing the kinds of session closures used;

- Exploring the potential of using the Our Story iPad app.

**With regard to the professional development programme**, it is recommended that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider seeking to:

- Involve more support staff and other early years practitioners in the setting across the programme;

- Offer a minimum of a half day's initial training and provide printed training packs;

- Build in at least one mid-programme review meeting with practitioners

- Include video stimulated review as part of the programme;

- Include a meeting with the head teacher/head of centre during the programme;

- Profile the learning gains linked to the EYFS and invite practitioners to case study and document at least two children's development in this regard;

- Make more overt the underpinning principles of the approach;

- Explore opportunities for instruction/exploration outside the approach(e.g. with reference to developing children's narratives explicitly and using standard grammatical constructions),  thus preserving the unique space occupied by the approach;

- Profile the creative potential inherent in the technique.

**With regard to making the Helicopter Technique more sustainable in schools and settings,** several previous recommendations regarding the model (e.g. exploring the use of the technique as a tool for needs identification) and the professional development programme (e.g. involving support staff, review meetings and meetings with head teachers) would  serve to encourage sustainability. It is recommended that MakeBelieve Arts also consider:

- *Profiling the strong alignment of the technique with the principles underpinning the EYFS,* and becoming well versed in the EYFS and the ways in which the approach affords an enabling environment, recognises the uniqueness of each child, and builds positive relationships in order to enhance children's learning and development;

- *Framing the Helicopter Technique as an integrated tool* that in particular enhances children's early language, literacy and communicative development;

- *Seeking opportunities to network*, communicate the work to policy makers, and build strategic alliances with early years organisations, through working with others the value of the approach is likely to become more widely and nationally known;

- *Developing Centres of Excellence and Helicopter Champions* which build on the extended work already begun in Tower Hamlets and other local authorities;

- *Establishing an Advisory Board* for the Helicopter Technique could help widen the contacts of the team and afford new opportunities and support;

- *Working with teacher education institutions* in order to offer sessions explaining and demonstrating the Helicopter Technique. Similarly contacts could usefully be established with training schools, and Schools Direct, in order to share the approach with student teachers and develop advocates for the future;

- *Using video more extensively*, through establishing video stimulated review with practitioners for in-house training and using video data to promote the versatility of the technique as a supplement to actual modelling of the approach.

The recommendations based on the evaluation, are offered in order to respond to the project brief and represent specific strategies to enhance the sustainability of the Helicopter Technique. The approach, which respects the uniqueness of each child, and affords children the space to tell and later act out their stories, leads to new learning and development, particularly in relation to communication, confidence, personal, social and emotional development and a developing sense of agency and community. It also enables practitioners to enhance their professional learning and serves to enrich practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As such it deserves a higher profile and wider recognition of its contribution to the education of the whole child.

# Chapter 1: Background

## 1.1 Introduction

The Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting is based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (1990). During her years in the classroom Paley developed a storytelling and story acting technique in which children tell their stories to an adult who scribes them verbatim. Later that day, she suggests children gather around a taped out stage and act out these stories with their peers. Paley's many books (1981, 1986, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2004), are underpinned by a child-centred, play-based philosophy, which reflects a view of children as active meaning-makers and creative thinkers. She asserts the power of fantasy play and the potency of storytelling, dictation and dramatisation in the curriculum.

Her work, whilst unconventional, has arguably made a rich contribution to both theoretical discussions and professional practice. A kindergarten teacher from the University of Chicago Laboratory School, Paley has received several awards for her work, including an Erikson Award for Service to Children (1987), a MacArthur Fellowship (1989), and a Lifetime Achievement American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation (1998). Scholars researching storytelling and dramatic play have recognised and credited her perceptive accounts of children's narrative engagement (e.g. Booth, 2005; Fox, 1993; Gupta, 2009; Nicolopoulou 2005). Additionally, educators have endorsed her work in their discussions of the significance of child play (e.g. Craft, 2002; Smidt, 1998; Tyrell, 2001; Whitehead, 2004; Wood and Attfield, 2005; Wright, 2010). Her work has almost exclusively been discussed and commended by those working in the early years, with the notable exception of Pound and Lee (2011) who draw on her work with reference to creatively teaching mathematics in the primary years.

Due perhaps to the unusual nature of Paley's books, written as they are in the first person from the perspective of a practitioner and without reference to the available literature, it could be argued that her insights are not afforded their full value. Furthermore, there has been relatively little empirical analysis of the storytelling and story acting technique developed by Paley. There are some notable exceptions, namely Cooper (2005), and Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) who focus on storytelling and story acting in the USA and Typadi and Hayon (2010) who, as part of a comparative study, included an examination of the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting in England (see below for an explanation of this term), and its potential for supporting children with speech and language difficulties. These studies are examined in more detail in Section 2.4.

The title 'the Helicopter Technique' developed as a kind of shorthand to describe the in-service programmes based on Paley's storytelling and story acting approach, that have been developed by MakeBelieve Arts, a theatre and education company. In 1997, whilst working at London Bubble, Trisha Lee, (now the Artistic Director of Make Believe Arts), was invited to create an early years programme based on Paley's book *The Boy who would be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom* (Paley, 1990). Connections with the author were established and in 2002 when Lee set up MakeBelieve Arts, Paley became a

Patron of the organisation and Lee expanded her work in this area. The Helicopter Technique remains a foundational cornerstone of the work of the company to this day.

However, early years practitioners in the UK, (with the exception of those practitioners who have worked with MakeBelieve Arts), are arguably unaware of the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting and are not therefore in a position to make use of it to foster children's learning in education. This is particularly problematic in the current context, since concerns are regularly voiced about a perceived decline in children's early language (e.g. Locke, Ginsborg and Peers, 2002; Clegg and Ginsborg, 2006; Nelson *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, although there is an emphasis on creativity, play and language in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012), early years practitioners, particularly those who teach reception classes of 4 and 5 year olds, are under pressure to ensure 'school readiness'; to introduce formal literacy development (reading and writing) (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012). This, together with the high profile emphasis on synthetic phonics (DfES, 2012), may prompt reception teachers or early years practitioners to introduce an inappropriately formal or functionalist curriculum. Additionally, it has been argued that children's social and cultural capital as informal story performers and artful language users remains somewhat unrecognised, underestimated, and underdeveloped in educational settings (Maybin, 2005).

For over a decade MakeBelieve Arts have worked with Paley's the Helicopter Technique and developed a programme of professional development and materials to support practitioners who wish to use this approach. Within their materials and based upon their experience of using the technique in multiple settings, the team make a number of claims about its efficacy and value. However these claims, in a not dissimilar manner to Paley's assertions, have not been subject to outside scrutiny. So in early 2012, MakeBelieve Arts commissioned a robust evaluation of the Helicopter Technique in order to consider the history of their development of the technique and to provide empirical evidence of its value to children and early years practitioners. Funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the tender also required the evaluators to consider possible developments of the approach in order to make it more sustainable in schools and early years settings.

In response to these requirements, the Open University team set out to combine evaluation with research and offer this report explicitly underpinned by a strong theoretical frame and nuanced accounts of closely analysed evidence of the Helicopter Technique in action. The work involved desk research in the form of an examination of the MakeBelieve Arts archive of practitioner evaluations, and observational accounts and evaluations written by the MakeBelieve Arts team. In addition, it included interviews with practitioners who have been involved in its delivery, and local authority advisors many of whom have been working with the technique for over a decade, as well as interviews with MakeBelieve Arts team members. Significantly, the work also involved a classroom based empirical phase, which encompassed observation and documentation of an eight week MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique programme in four settings, in three different local authorities in England in the summer term of 2012, as well as follow up interviews with the practitioners involved in the autumn term of that

year. The programme encompassed training prior to the work in classrooms, then regular in-class support by members of the MakeBelieve Arts team, as well as weeks when the practitioners were expected to run the Helicopter Technique without in-class support.

Systematic analysis of the breadth of available evidence enables us both to make grounded recommendations regarding the development of the model, and suggestions regarding dissemination in order to influence both policy and practice. The evaluation report thus draws upon rigorously conducted research and documents the scope and potential impact of the technique upon both learners and practitioners

## 1.2 Remit of the evaluation

In line with the tender, the project, sought to evaluate:

1. The impact on children who have taken part in Storytelling and Story Acting sessions.

2. The impact on adults (practitioners) who have received training and support from MakeBelieve Arts in this technique.

3. The importance of this work in order to provide indicators of:

   - How the model can be further improved and enhanced

   - How it can be made more sustainable in schools and settings.

Following this introduction, in Chapter 2, we review the relevant literature and highlight in particular the significance of narrative, storytelling, imaginary play, multimodality and language in early learning. We also consider previous studies of Paley's work. Additionally this chapter provides further context by examining the new EYFS (2012) which all early years practitioners in England are charged to work within. In Chapter 3, we explain the methodology employed within the evaluation, and detail the range of complementary data collection tools used for the archival work and interviews with advisors and practitioners and those employed in the class based work. We also explain the process of data analysis, attend to the ethical procedures undertaken and introduce the four settings, providing contextual information about the pre-school settings and primary phase institutions in which the evaluation was undertaken.

Chapter 4 offers an account of the development of the Helicopter Technique over the last ten years that draws on existing evaluations carried out by MakeBelieve Arts, practitioners they have worked with, and professional perspectives on the use of the Helicopter Technique from educational advisors. In Chapter 5, we describe the nature of the Helicopter Technique and the storytelling and story acting observed during the study. Chapters 6 and 7 respectively respond to the central elements of the work regarding the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children, and on the practitioners who took part in the summer term training and support from MakeBelieve Arts. The themes within these chapters derive from the processes of data analysis. Vignettes of the children's engagement, their stories and the voices of the practitioners are shared to convey the core insights. In addition in Chapter 6, where relevant we relate our findings to the requirements of the EYFS (2012) and at the close of Chapter 7 we also highlight

connections in a more extensive summary. The summary findings of Chapters 6 and 7 are then revisited and considered in more depth in Chapter 8, which also makes recommendations regarding the long term sustainability of the Helicopter Technique in educational settings. Most of the recommendations draw directly upon the data; others are more expansive and suggest strategies which might prove fruitful in relation to increasing the scope, scale, reach and sustainability of the Helicopter Technique. Finally, the references are listed and appendices are offered which provide further details on the various tools and ethical procedures employed in the evaluation.

# Chapter 2: Summary of background literature and the wider context

## 2.1 Narrative, storytelling and imaginary play

Narrative as an area of study is wide-ranging and substantial, with several definitions used in the literature. We follow the definition of narrative as a 'representation of an event or sequence of events' (Rudrum, 2005). In viewing the Helicopter Technique episodes and reading the children's stories alongside reading the literature, we also recognise some of the criteria considered by the educational philosopher Kvernbekk (2003), including: 'events, characters and plots, causal sequences', and a unity 'through the beginning, middle and end'.

The centrality of narrative has been noted by many psychologists, who assert that narrative is a major 'organising device' (Langer, 1953:261) enabling us to order experience, whether real or virtual, and a fundamental mode of thought (Bruner, 1986; 1994) through which we construct our world(s). Wells, researching early education, suggests that making sense, constructing stories and sharing them with others is 'an essential part of being human' (1987:222). Taking this still further, the literary theorist Barthes (1977) claims that narrative is 'international, transhistorical and transcultural', though research reveals that different storytelling traditions reflect different story structures and values (Heath, 1983).

Approaching narrative from another angle, Chappell (2008) considers what 'embodied narratives' might be and do, and argues that such narratives 'may not appear logical'; she posits that meaning gleaned from embodied narratives emerges and is felt, but is often difficult or impossible to put into words. She argues that embodied narratives use movement, dance and the dynamics of the physical human form to express these difficult meanings. Similarly, as Gibson (in Abbs, 1989:58) makes clear:

> *Feelings show us the limits of our language. They bring home to us that language is not omnicompetent; for we know far more than we can say. It is when we try to put into words our feelings, when we attend to explore our inner states that vividly and significantly exist, have reality and are of profound consequences for action that the gap between language and experience is starkly exposed. It is such moments we must turn to poets and artists, not scientists, for genuine illumination.*

It is clear from the accounts above that narrative as a creative human endeavour is not tied to purely linguistic forms and that narrative expression must at times transcend the spoken or written word. This embodied view of narrative resonated with the Open University team as we viewed the Helicopter Technique narratives being dictated and enacted by young children.

Research into narrative in early learning suggests that early narrative competence proffers a secure foundation for emergent literacy and long-term success in schooling (e.g. McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson, 2001). Additionally, analyses of children's early storytelling highlight the significance of their narratives for social, cognitive and identity work (e.g. Engel, 1999, 2005; Fox, 1993; Nelson, 1989; Paley, 1981). Fox (1993) for instance

studying the oral narratives of 4-5 year-olds reveals the generative nature of narrative and the complex ways in which children draw on their experience of stories read and told to them, combining these with stories about their own lives to produce complex narrative structures that stimulate their exploration of the physical and social world. Craft, McConnon and Mathews (2012) document the creativity inherent in narratives developed in self-initiated child play and Cremin, Chappell and Craft (2013) recently revealed the foundational nature of narrative in relation to children's capacity to 'possibility think' their way forwards. The concept of 'possibility thinking', developed by Craft (2001) refers to 'what if' and 'as if' thinking in children aged three to eleven. Recent empirical data on possibility thinking reveals that reciprocal relationships exist between questioning, imagination and narrative (Cremin et al., 2013). Engel (2005) too shows that when pre-schoolers use language to weave their symbolic play into a narrative, this enables exploration in an alternative symbolic world and stimulates experimentation and speculation. Engel proposes that children's stories enable them to move easily between 'what is' narratives, in which their play simulates everyday life and 'what if' narratives, in which they play in an imaginary world of possibilities. We make use of this distinction in our analysis of the children's stories in Chapter 6, noting evidence too of their imaginative engagement.

The relationships between narrative and play are multiple and complex. Most relevant to the Helicopter Technique perhaps is that the experience of narrative helps children to understand 'the symbolic potential of language: its power to create possible and imaginary worlds through words' (cf. Bruner, 1986; Wells, 1986: 156). Over the past 20 years, a considerable body of research by sociolinguists and child psychologists has established the developmental significance of storytelling and imaginary play during early childhood. These activities benefit social, emotional and language development as well as children's understanding of their identities and their worlds (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Engel, 1999, 2005; Faulkner, 2011; Fivush, Sales and Bohanek, 2008). Drawing on the works of Vygotsky (1967), Nicolopoulou (2005) observes that narrative and play are forms of socially situated symbolic action. As Wilson also observes, 'playing with anything to make something is always paralleled in cognition by the creation of a story' (1998:195). For Egan (1988), shared narrative in imaginative play (influenced by potent and affectively engaging stories), facilitates shared emotional engagement with and commitment to, a shared idea. As Nicolopoulou (2005) notes, there are a number of studies on play and narrative, which collectively establish that children's developing story skills help them to own and use a wide variety of symbolic resources creatively. Children's use of these skills to construct possible worlds draws on the imaginative capacities expressed in and supported by their pretend play (e.g. Baumer, Ferholt and Lecusay, 2005; Dyson, 1993; Gupta, 2009; Rowe, 2000).

However, in England, in early years settings, in part perhaps due to the downward pressure of the primary curriculum, storytelling and fantasy play are not necessarily given the attention they deserve. For example, when the pre-schoolers that Fox (1993) studied entered formal education, their narrative capacity was unnoticed; one was never invited to tell a story and another was 'tested on suspicion of "language retardness" during the period when he was

recording 29,000 words of narrative at home' (Fox, 2004: 193). The work of Heath (1983) also shows how some preschool age children in their highly oral African American home and community environment of Trackton learnt to 'talk junk', creating stories which used fictionalisations, metaphoric connections and imaginative exaggeration of real events. However, these skills were not transferred into the classroom where children were asked questions about labels and discrete features of objects and events; they were not given the space to share the texts of their lives or create imaginary tales and enact them with their peers. Other studies also suggest children's bilingual repertoires are not always recognised as they move from home to nursery/school settings (Drury, 2007). Worryingly, as Heath (1983) shows, by the time they reached a stage of schooling where their creative and imaginative use of language would have been valued, many of the children had already been alienated through an initial emphasis on skilling and drilling.

## 2.2 Multimodal communication

In the previous section we have touched upon the notion of narratives as embodied, and we now take this further to consider children's narrative creations and enactments as multimodal. A multimodal approach to communication takes into account the wide range of modes we use to make and express meaning. These include embodied modes such as gesture, gaze, facial expression, movement, vocalisations *and* language, and the range of disembodied modes that we encounter in a variety of texts, such as words, images, music and sounds in printed and digital media. Although some linguistic and education research has in the past paid attention to features of communication other than language (e.g. Kendon, 2004), the communicative and learning potentials of these other modes have tended to play second fiddle to language, often being defined by what they are not, rather than what they are, with terms such as 'para-linguistic', 'non-linguistic' and 'non-verbal'.

Multimodality offers a very different perspective on communication and learning. Rather than examining modes in isolation, a multimodal approach considers how different modes all work together to create meanings in a 'multimodal ensemble' (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn and Tsatsarelis, 2001). Just as different instruments in an orchestra all contribute to the performance of a piece, so in communication, different modes all contribute differently to the performance of meaning-making. From this perspective, although language might be central to the making and expression of meaning at one moment, it might be followed by a short period of intense gaze attention, an expressive movement or the drawing of a picture. Different modes are often combined to construct meanings: a gaze might be accompanied by a gesture, and together, the two modes both contribute to meaning. This significant shift in perspective towards the study of multiple modes, rather than the prioritising of language, has begun to offer radically new insights into learning processes.

A multimodal approach is highly compatible with and draws on established sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). According to this theory, learning is most effective in the so-called 'zones of proximal development' (ZPD), or areas of potential learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which are 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by

independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined under adult guidance or in collaboration' (p.86). Vygotsky's work recognised that children use many different symbolic 'tools' to make meaning, including both material artefacts ('objects') and language. He also considered the question of autonomy in play and emphasised that in play children learn skills like self-control and self-motivation and are, metaphorically, 'a head above themselves' (Vygotsky, 1986). Researchers working in the field of multimodality have extended sociocultural theorising to investigate how gaze, gesture, body orientation, movement, images, sounds and talk can all be integral to meaning making and are often interdependent. Children, particularly young children, tend to use whatever mode(s) of communication they feel most comfortable with, and which they think will best express the meaning they would like to convey. Young children sometimes choose to use gesture and/or gaze rather than language, opting for silence if they are unsure what is expected of them (Flewitt, 2005).

Children also often express the subtlety and sophistication of their understanding through silent modes. For example, in a project where 6-7 year-olds were encouraged to make 'panorama boxes' out of shoe boxes to represent an environment such as the ocean or jungle, Pahl (2009) observed how the artefacts they created showed traces of each child's social history and how these histories had shaped their understandings of the concepts they were being asked to recreate. Talking with the children about the detail in their boxes revealed subtle yet significant differences in their understandings, in ways that would not have been evident through talk alone. This was particularly apparent when the children produced something different from what was expected, where their work could easily have been dismissed as showing they had not understood the task 'correctly', whereas they had simply interpreted the task differently, drawing on their own knowledge and experience in highly meaningful ways.

Learning processes are dependent not just on mental processes, but on how educational practices are mediated. A multimodal study of teaching and learning narrative through multimedia software in Swedish primary education, found that a 9 year-old boy diagnosed with autism, who was struggling with school assignments, reached a significant turning point in his narrative skills by engaging with the multimodal potential of the software (Jansson, 2011). Using the software helped the boy to engage with the literacy task and participate in the narrative process, which in turn enabled him to begin to appropriate a structured model for narration, for example recording his own voice to enact different characters' points of view in a structured yet imaginative way.

Recent research has also shown how interaction, drama and visual arts-based activities can enable children to construct multimodal narratives, creating possibilities for them to explore their own identity in classroom learning environments. Over the course of 9 weeks, young children in a culturally and linguistically diverse kindergarten classroom in a Canadian all-day early learning centre used personal artefacts and *I Am* poetry to represent who they were and what was important in their world. Through their multimodal engagement in these activities, the children were able to make their thoughts public and to change how they situated themselves in the world (Binder and Kotsopoulos, 2011).

Multimodal research has also found that peer interactions among 4 and 5 year-olds constitute a fertile environment for stimulating writing activity. Studying the early writing practices of young children in an ethnically diverse pre-Kindergarten class in the USA over a period of six years, Kissel and colleagues identified that interacting with their peers introduced new possibilities for the children's engagement with writing and narrative, particularly when working with more knowledgeable peers, who 'pushed them forward' as writers. In contrast to a focus on the skills of tracing letters and writing names, early years literacy activities that had purpose, an audience, followed an identifiable genre and encouraged interaction between peers and expression through diverse modes offered highly productive and rich literacy learning opportunities. Peer collaboration was also central to a primary schools teaching and learning project in 20 schools in Australia and Tasmania, where new media and the 3D multimodal authoring tool *Kahootz* were introduced to support children's engagement with narrative (Thomas, 2012). In this project, practitioners moved away from the privileging of linguistic modes to a multimodal view of meaning-making. They taught effective 3D authoring to children in the middle years of primary education, including multimedia grammatical design and collaborative multimedia authoring. This revaluing of all modes of signification impacted on the ways the practitioners conceptualised literacy, and reflected an increasing focus on visual and new media texts (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), a conception of textuality as multimodal (Unsworth 2001; Quinn 2004) and enabled the children to enjoy creating new kinds of innovative, critical and creative narratives.

## 2.3 Early language development: a social approach

Before we provide an overview of previous studies of Paley's work, we summarise research concerned with the social aspects of children's early language development as our subsequent discussions and analyses focus on the social contributors to language acquisition. We focus selectively on Vygotskian sociocultural theory of language learning, as this provides a comprehensive conceptual model for language development, and is closely aligned with the assumptions underpinning sociolinguistic methodology which we adopted in our analyses of the children's stories.

The rationale underpinning Vygotsky's (1978) theory is that all learning, including language learning, is a social process which occurs best in interaction with others. In contrast, proponents of the so-called nativist approach to language (e.g. Chomsky or Pinker), regard language development as a biological phenomenon, they highlight the universal patterns of language development across cultures and contexts. Central to the position of nativist approaches is the critical period hypothesis (or sensitive period hypothesis) which specifies that the ability to acquire language occurs best from birth up to puberty. At the onset of puberty, when the brain's organisation and size is believed to be complete, the ability to acquire language fades away (Lenneberg, 1967).

Although evidence from second-language and cross-cultural research points to the existence of some common patterns in language development, there is currently no evidence for a biologically fixed span of years for language acquisition. What is well established is that early childhood, especially between

two to four years of age, is a critical time for the acquisition of certain aspects of language. Notably, in this period, children develop grammar skills, as they progress through several, often spontaneous, language-creating attempts. For example, English children, typically attempt to regularise irregular past tense by saying 'goes' instead of 'went' (Whitehead, 2003). In addition, in early childhood, children are most likely to acquire native-like pronunciation, or accentless speech, as has been shown by studies with second-language learners (Scovel, 1988).

Vygotsky recognised that the nature of development is partly biological and characterised early childhood as a unique developmental period. However, unlike biological and behaviourist approaches to language learning, Vygotsky's approach emphasises the role of parents, teachers, and other 'more knowledgeable others' who lead children to construct new understandings through dialogue and discussions (Bodrova and Leong, 1996). Language acquisition is not viewed as a passive and individual activity, but is seen to develop in the context of its use, and this applies for both oral and written language and across lifespan (Vygotsky, 1978).

A sociolinguistic approach to language acquisition builds on Vygotsky's idea that language is essential for the development of children's thoughts and is primarily mediated by others. By emphasising the social aspect of language acquisition, the sociolinguistic approach to language taken by the research team recognises the influence of others on children's use of specific linguistic features. As such, it provides a unique insight into the social aspects mediating language acquisition which would not be possible from a biological perspective.

## 2.4 Previous studies of Paley's work

In this section, we discuss three research programmes that have examined Paley's contribution to early childhood education. Firstly, we discuss Nicolopoulou and her colleagues' research. This focuses on establishing a sound theoretical basis for Paley's accounts of her classroom, and on identifying how storytelling and story acting supports the development of oral language skills (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 2002, 2005; Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010). Next, we outline Cooper's (2009) account of Paley's philosophy of education and her pedagogical methods. Finally, we discuss Typadi and Hayon's UK-based study, part of which involved an examination of MakeBelieve Arts' Helicopter Technique following the authors' experience of training from MakeBelieve Arts. In contrast to the current evaluation, their study used different methods for investigating the impact of the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting and focused on children in two classrooms who had speech and language difficulties. We include a brief explanation of the use of Paley's work in the first two studies and highlight the difference in methods used by the researchers as we discuss each of the three previous programmes in this area.

### 2.4.1 Nicolopoulou's research programme

Over the years, Paley has written several compelling accounts explaining how her storytelling and story enactment practice developed during the time she taught at the Chicago Laboratory School. As Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010: 63) explain, however:

*Because these accounts focused on one teacher and her classroom, various questions arise concerning the generalizability and effectiveness of this programme. Moreover, Paley did not fully articulate the theoretical underpinnings of this activity or specify the conditions for its implementation in other classrooms.*

Between 1993 and 2005, Nicolopoulou and colleagues carried out five major research studies in the north eastern United States, examining the use of the storytelling and story acting practice, its theoretical basis; its main outcomes; and the conditions that need to be in place to ensure that it works well (Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010: 63).

It should be noted that Nicolopoulou describes the storytelling/story acting activity as follows:

*At a certain point during the day, any child who wishes can dictate a story to a teacher who records it exactly as the child tells it. (...) At the end of the day, each of these stories is read aloud to the entire class at "group time" by the same teacher while the child/author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story.* (Nicolopoulou, 2002: 124)

Nicolopoulou and her colleagues' studies involved hundreds of 3 to 4 year-old children from classrooms in southern California and Massachusetts, from a range of socio-economic groups and the collection of over three thousand children's stories. In terms of the studies' duration, the interventions included a two-year and follow-up three-year study of four middle-class pre-school classrooms; a one-year and a two-year study of disadvantaged, African American children enrolled in Head Start classrooms in a large urban centre, and a two-year study of seven experimental and seven control classrooms in urban schools serving low-income families. The studies were all considerably longer in duration than the current study. The study methods combined ethnographic observation of children's social interaction and meaning making in different cultural contexts, with detailed narrative analysis of the content of their stories, along with quantitative measures of learning outcomes such as standardised vocabulary tests. Typically, Nicolopoulou worked with teachers over a sustained period of time to support the introduction of storytelling and story acting practice into preschool classrooms.

Considering the theoretical basis of Paley's approach, most commentators on her work (including Paley herself) agree that the approach is firmly grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural analysis of play, (e.g. Wright, Bacigalupa, Black and Burton, 2007). Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) argue, however, that her work sits in a particular 'take' on sociocultural learning theory called cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). This theory, currently influential with educational researchers in the UK (e.g. Daniels, 2008), draws on Vygotsky's views about the cultural nature of learning and his belief that development and learning depend on the ways pupils and teachers learn how to share 'cultural tools' (van Oers, 2008).

According to this theory, social interactions and meaning-making activities combine to form complex interacting systems within distinctive 'learning ecologies'. For example, pretend play and storytelling activity in combination are described as 'complementary expressions of children's symbolic imagination

that draw from and reflect back the inter-related domains of emotional, intellectual and social life', (Nicolopoulou, 2005: 496). A core feature of Paley's pedagogical approach is her understanding that within the particular 'learning ecology' of her classroom, children's spontaneous imaginative activities such as fantasy play can be harnessed in a more formal way to support these areas of development. Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) explain that in their studies, the storytelling and story acting practice demonstrated the following characteristics of a learning ecology:

- It has tasks or problems that children are asked to, or want to, solve (e.g. make decisions about how the stories should be acted);

- It encourages particular kinds of discourse (as when children dictate their stories);

- It establishes particular norms of participation, (e.g. turn-taking, the number of children on stage, active listening to other people's stories)

- It provides specific cultural tools and material means (e.g. the tools used to record the stories, the 'story stage')

- It offers teachers practical means to orchestrate relations among these elements.

In terms of children's outcomes, Nicolopoulou and her colleagues' ethnographic observations and analyses of children's stories provided compelling evidence of the progress of children's narrative skills and cognitive abilities over lengthy periods of time. In summary, their research showed that:

- Both middle-class and low-income children showed consistent enthusiasm for and engagement with this activity

- Participation in this activity significantly enhanced the development of narrative skills for both middle-class and low-income preschool children

- In Head Start classrooms where teachers used the storytelling and story acting practice, low-income pre-schoolers developed a wider range of decontextualised, oral language skills compared to children in comparable classrooms in the same school that did not use the technique

- The activity promoted literacy awareness and encouraged children to think actively about connections between thoughts, spoken words, marks on paper, the arrangement of text on the page and the transformations of spoken to written representation and back

- The activity promoted important dimensions of young children's social competence such as cooperation, social understanding and self-regulation.
  (Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brockmeyer, 2006)

Nicolopoulou et al. (2006: 128–129) argue that the educational impact and significance of the storytelling and story acting practice is:

- The public and peer oriented dimension of this activity helps to create a community of storytellers in the classroom

- Participating in this practice helps the children form and sustain a shared culture of peer-group collaboration, experimentation and mutual cross fertilization that serves as a powerful matrix for learning and development

- The activity draws on the power of peer-group processes and their emotional and social-relational importance for children

- This activity engages and mobilises a range of children's interests and motivations in an integrated way, including play, fantasy and friendship

- It helps to promote oral language skills that serve as key foundations for emotional literacy, as well as other important dimensions of school readiness.

Finally, Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) outline some key conditions that need to be in place in order for the storytelling and story acting practice to work well. In her early studies, Nicolopoulou found that many teachers found it difficult to relinquish control to the children during the storytelling/story acting activity, and that they found it hard to manage children's transition between the story acting activity and other quieter, less exciting activities. This was resolved by creating a classroom environment where children were provided with a clear set of rules about how to move between activities. When working with disadvantaged children, teachers also found it difficult to make acting run smoothly with relatively large groups. In part this was because initially, children had little knowledge and understanding of narrative structure and tended to include long lists of characters in their stories so that they could include all their friends. Providing opportunities to tell stories supplemented with book reading activities allowed teachers to scaffold children's developing understanding of narrative structure and offered a solution to this problem.

Teachers also frequently expressed concern about the simplicity of children's initial stories. This led to the realisation that it was important to provide professional development activities for teachers that could:

> *guide their understanding and appreciation of children's narrative development so that in turn they could guide children's narrative development in productive ways.* (Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010: 66).

Finally, when working with large classes of disadvantaged, ethnically diverse children, Nicolopoulou's research established that unless the storytelling and story acting practice was incorporated as a regular, (at least twice-weekly) activity, the benefits to children's social competence, and to their language and literacy development were unlikely to persist in the long-term.

### 2.4.2 Cooper's interpretation of Paley's pedagogical approach

While Nicolopoulou's research focused on the educational impact and developmental significance of storytelling and story acting, Cooper, also working in the USA, has championed Paley's approach in her teaching and research with

trainee teachers, and set up the Teachers' Network for Early Literacy to disseminate Paley's work to a wider audience. Cooper refers to Paley's approach as 'storytelling curriculum', which 'consists of two interdependent activities. In the first, a child dictates his or her story to the teacher. In the second, the story is dramatised by the class' (Cooper, 2005: 230). Although Paley's work 'has touched a chord with a legion of educational philosophers, psychologists, cultural theorists and teacher educators,' Cooper (2009: 5) explains why she perceives teachers in the USA have failed to make systematic use of Paley's ideas. Firstly, she notes that Paley herself does not engage in the kind of theoretical and methodological discussions that normally lend credence to new approaches to teaching and learning. Secondly, her books and articles usually focus on a single issue and this limits the application of her professional strategies. Finally, for many teachers and teacher educators, Paley's radical stance towards critical issues in childhood education is challenging and uncomfortable. Cooper (2009: 8) argues that:

> *Paley is at heart an activist, who urges us to embrace the privilege of teacher as pedagogue and moral authority inside the classroom. Her classroom studies ask us how far we are willing to go to defend young children against the somewhat pernicious realities of schooling.*

As Paley is an unabashed advocate of the play-based curriculum, her work challenges current pressures in the USA (and the UK) to introduce a skills-based early years curriculum and formal instruction in literacy and numeracy. It may lack take-up for this reason.

Like Nicolopoulou, Cooper (2009: 27) locates the theoretical roots of Paley's pedagogy in sociocultural learning theory (see e.g. Boreham and Morgan, 2004). Her view of the 'learning ecology' of Paley's classroom, however, is somewhat different. She identifies two distinct strands to Paley's practice: a curricular strand or 'pedagogy of meaning' and a moral and relational strand that Cooper (2009: 8) calls a 'pedagogy of fairness' that prohibits exclusion of any kind.

Cooper's analysis is based on her detailed study of Paley's writing, her own experience of implementing a storytelling curriculum, and on systematic classroom observation and reflection gained from 25 years' experience of working with teachers in Atlanta, New York and Houston. Some key messages emerge from Cooper's extensive findings: like Nicolopoulou, she found that Paley's storytelling curriculum can have a positive impact on vocabulary development, oral narrative and the kind of literacy skills that support later reading. In addition, Cooper is highly critical of the USA writing workshop curriculum (Calkins, 2003) and argues that in contrast Paley's practice locates writing as a complex cultural activity, which has a profound effect on the development of children's identity as storytellers who write.

Cooper's experience has shown, however, that sometimes teachers need to modify Paley's storytelling curriculum and scaffold children's search for meaning more directly in order to honour Paley's 'pedagogy of fairness'. She recommends that if all children are to benefit from the storytelling curriculum as a genuinely inclusive practice then:

- The teacher's first priority should be to help the child create the story they mean to tell.

- The teacher must ask questions and find ways of making sure that what she is writing captures a given storyteller's intentions.

- Teachers should make clear that they are not prepared to write down stories that are about inappropriate topics (e.g. 'bathroom stories'). Similarly, stories that allude to troubles in the child's home life should be handled according to the same standards that teachers use during circle time or snack time.

- The teacher must be prepared to help the child to move on from single word stories and simple, 'and then, and then' stories when it is clear that these no longer serve a developmental purpose for the child.

- Outside of storytelling/acting sessions, teachers should offer direct instruction in narrative construction and literacy sub-skills.

(Adapted from Cooper, 2009: 89)

In her book *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley*, Cooper (2009) identifies a pedagogical model organised around play and inclusivity , she offers detailed guidance on how to implement Paley's storytelling curriculum with examples of children's stories that illustrate the kind of development that might be expected over time.

### 2.4.3 Typadi and Hayon's focus on children with speech and language difficulties

In contrast to Nicopoulou's use of Paley's approach, Typadi and Hayon (The Westminster Education Action Zone project, 2001 and 2005) investigated the MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting. The authors describe the technique as follows:

> *Children dictate stories to an adult (or older child) and later the same day the stories are acted out in front of the whole class on a taped-out 'stage'. The stories are read to each new character and the children come up in turn to act out without props and with the convention of no physical contact. At the end of each story, the class claps thanks to the storyteller. In each story the story teller is allowed to choose what character they want to be and how many children, for example, will form a 'shop', a 'car' or a 'house', but otherwise children come to act in turn from their place in the circle. This means that children can explore themes from different viewpoints so that for example, boys can be mummies and girls can be Action Men.*

(The Westminster Education Action Zone project, 2005: 79)

Having attended a full day's MakeBelieve Arts training in 2010, Typadi and Hayon, who are both speech therapists, believed that the Helicopter Technique had potential for supporting the language and communication skills of children in the London borough of Westminster who were learning English as an additional language (EAL) and struggled to meet EYFS milestones for speaking

and listening. Subsequently, they were interested in establishing the extent to which the Helicopter Technique could be used, in conjunction with other interventions, to support inclusive practice in early years settings.

In their account of the wider Westminster project, Typadi and Hayon (2010) compare and contrast the Helicopter Technique with an in-service training programme called 'Talking Together'. This programme was designed to develop practitioners use of the techniques used by speech and language therapists to foster children's language development. The Talking Together programme used video-feedback and self-reflection to help practitioners develop effective scaffolding strategies such as: waiting for children to initiate conversations, following their lead, and responding appropriately to the topics they introduce; using a variety of questioning and modelling strategies to extend children's language and vocabulary. The six-week in-service programme on Talking Together was introduced to 22 practitioners in two mainstream school nurseries and two nursery schools. The programme was filmed, and by comparing initial and final videos, Typadi and Hayon were able to measure quantitative changes in children's conversational skills and the teachers' strategies. Their analysis established that all the children with speech difficulties made measurable language gains though the Talking Together programme. Typadi and Hayon concluded, however, that the delivery of the Talking Together programme was time-consuming and the practitioners reported difficulties with incorporating the interaction strategies in their everyday routines.

Towards the end of the same year, Typadi and Hayon introduced the Helicopter Technique into one nursery class and five reception classes in two private nurseries. The length of time of the work varied between settings from five months to two years. The language therapists aimed to investigate if the technique could help teachers identify children with speech and language difficulties and support inclusive practice, and if it offered a cost-effective programme for mainstream settings with low teacher-child ratios. As with 'Talking Together', Typadi and Hayon's evaluation of the Helicopter Technique was designed to identify twenty four children's language development and changes in teachers' interaction strategies over time. As the authors acknowledge, a major limitation of the evaluation was lack of a control class which made it difficult to definitely attribute children's progress to the Helicopter Technique (or indeed it should be noted to the Talking Together programme). However, what is 'undeniable' they assert is that practitioners who used the Helicopter Technique 'have been able to document and plan next steps for their children's learning (particularly in the areas that can be otherwise difficult of maintaining concentration, literacy aspects and feelings), in a way that is clear, easy and comprehensive' (The Westminster Education Action Zone project , 2005: 87–88).

For their evaluation of the Helicopter Technique, Typadi and Hayon developed an observation sheet for teachers to 'record children's progress in the EYFS areas of confidence, imagination in acting, turn taking, attention, listening, and in narrative skills such as providing a sequence of story events, statement of character, place and time and use of connectives and book language' (Typadi and Hayon, 2010:77). On completion of the Helicopter Technique programme, participating teachers reported higher levels of confidence in taking stories from

children in the classroom, in their ability to support EAL children's storytelling, and in leading the story acting sessions. They identified regular discussions with the project therapists during the training phase as contributing to these gains in confidence. Although gains were evident for all participating children, the study's particular focus on the 24 children with English as an additional language, some of whom also had specific language impairment or other communication difficulties, showed measurable gains in language ability, confidence, attention level and turn taking. Given that initially, children tended to 'tell' their stories through play (as, 'they lacked confidence in expressing themselves verbally and needed vocabulary and grammar explicitly modelled by an adult', Typadi and Hayon, 2010: 75), the authors recommend that for children learning EAL and those with specific language needs and difficulties, teachers should use complementary interventions alongside the Helicopter Technique to build language skills that enable these children to tell and act out their stories. Finally, compared to 'Talking Together', Typadi and Hayon, (2010: 86) concluded that the Helicopter Technique, 'provides a practical and flexible framework, allowing both one-to-one and whole-class work. It compels adults truly to listen to children and accept their ideas within a large classroom'. As will be seen this was borne out in the current study.

In summary, there is substantial agreement between the authors of the three studies examined that within the learning ecology of early years classrooms, Paley's storytelling and story acting enables the emergence of communities of storytelling where young children are encouraged to develop confidence as storytellers. It offers teachers a 'pedagogy of meaning' that supports literacy development and a 'pedagogy of fairness' that supports inclusive practice. Nevertheless, all authors recommend that disadvantaged children and those with specific language and communication needs will require additional, targeted support to develop the communication skills and narrative understanding to derive the full benefits of the of storytelling and story acting.

## 2.5 Early education and the Early Years Foundation Stage in England

As our study is situated in England, we now consider the Revised EYFS, which came into force in September 2012, following extensive consultation with stakeholders in the early years sector. Practitioners have welcomed the streamlining of learning goals from 69 to 17, and the corresponding reduction in paperwork. The importance of working closely with parents and carers of young children has also been warmly received, as has a continuing emphasis on play-based learning, which builds on the 2007 EYFS approach to the importance of playful learning experiences. However, the Revised EYFS' strongly curriculum-based approach signals a sea change in early education policy, with an explicit and implicit emphasis on 'school readiness' (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012).

The impact of these changes on young children's communication, language and literacy is particularly marked. The Revised EYFS now divides the previous six areas of young children's learning into seven areas, with three 'prime' areas: personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language, supplemented by four 'specific' areas of literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive art and design. Unlike early years curricula in many other developed and English-speaking countries,

the Revised EYFS therefore makes a clear distinction between the 'core' area of 'language and communication', and 'literacy', which is associated, in this curriculum, with culturally specific skills and knowledge. This approach signals that literacy is understood in the Revised EYFS as essentially skills-based rather than as a commonly experienced, everyday activity similar to speaking and listening. In such a curriculum, there is a risk that the importance of nurturing a love for literacy learning, of finding self-expression and a sense of self through story creation, will play second fiddle to the need to evidence specific literate skills, with an emphasis on phonic awareness. In the study we seek to explore the ways in which the Helicopter Technique is or is not aligned with the EYFS and we raise this issue with practitioners. Threaded throughout Chapter 6 we highlight the connections to the EYFS as we examine aspects of the technique and the benefits to the children. At the close of Chapter 7 we offer an extensive summary and discussion of the insights gained and views offered with regard to the early years framework.

# Chapter 3: Methodology for the evaluation

## 3.1 Aims of the study

In line with the tender, the study of the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting aimed to evaluate:

- The impact on children who have taken part in storytelling and story acting sessions.

- The impact on practitioners who have received training and support from MakeBelieve Arts in this technique.

- The importance of this work in order to provide indicators of:

    o How the model can be further improved and enhanced

    o How it can be made more sustainable in schools and settings.

In order to address these aims we drew on a range of complementary evidence, discussed below.

## 3.2 Literature review

As a backdrop to the evaluation, and to inform our analysis of the data collected, we carried out a review of relevant academic and professional literature. This is discussed in Chapter 2.

## 3.3 The collection of evidence for the evaluation

Our evidence for the evaluation derives from several complementary data sets, summarised in Figure 3.1. We address these further below.

### 3.3.1 Professional perspectives on the Helicopter Technique over time

An important aspect of the evaluation was the development of the Helicopter Technique over a period of ten years. To consider this issue, we analysed documentary material made available by MakeBelieve Arts from their archive. We were also able to consult Vivian Gussin Paley, the originator of the approach (written correspondence), and we carried out eight interviews with educational advisors who had long-term association with the Helicopter Technique and MakeBelieve Arts, and Trisha Lee, Artistic Director of MakeBelieve Arts (see Appendix 1). This part of the evaluation is considered in Chapter 4.

### 3.3.2 The Helicopter Technique in action

The bulk of our empirical work took place during the summer term of 2012 and concerned a study of the Helicopter Technique in action in six nursery and reception classes identified by MakeBelieve Arts (see details below). The study was naturalistic, in that it needed to focus on practices that occurred in their natural setting. The research design was constructed to fit with these requirements. It would not have been possible for instance, to adopt an experimental research design with children allocated randomly to 'treatment' and 'control' groups, nor even, in these settings, to compare two sets of classes, one following the Helicopter Technique and the other a different programme. In collecting data through naturalistic observation, researchers made only minimal

interventions in the implementation of the programme, seeking, instead, to record this as it took place. There is a danger that any recording of everyday practice will affect the behaviour it seeks to observe (as in the linguist Labov's (1972) conception of the 'observer's paradox'). As far as possible, however, we tried to minimise the impact of our observations and in these contexts (where children and practitioners are used to having other adults in the classroom, and where they are engrossed in a particular activity) we do not believe the research had any significant effect on the implementation of the Helicopter Technique or the participation of children and practitioners.

This approach to data collection and, later, analysis was broadly qualitative, seeking to understand, at a level of detail, how the Helicopter Technique worked in particular contexts and how it was perceived by participants. We collected information from practitioners and children involved in the implementation of the summer-term programme, and we observed and video-recorded storytelling and story acting sessions. We also observed training sessions and talked to trainers involved in introducing the programme. In addition we visited the practitioners in the autumn term to ascertain if they were continuing to sustain their involvement in the programme with a new cohort of children. This formed the main strand of our research, and our collection of evidence was a fairly complex process (see Figure 3.1). We say more about this in Section 3.4 below, where we provide information on the evidence obtained from children and practitioners. Data analysis is discussed in Section 3.5.
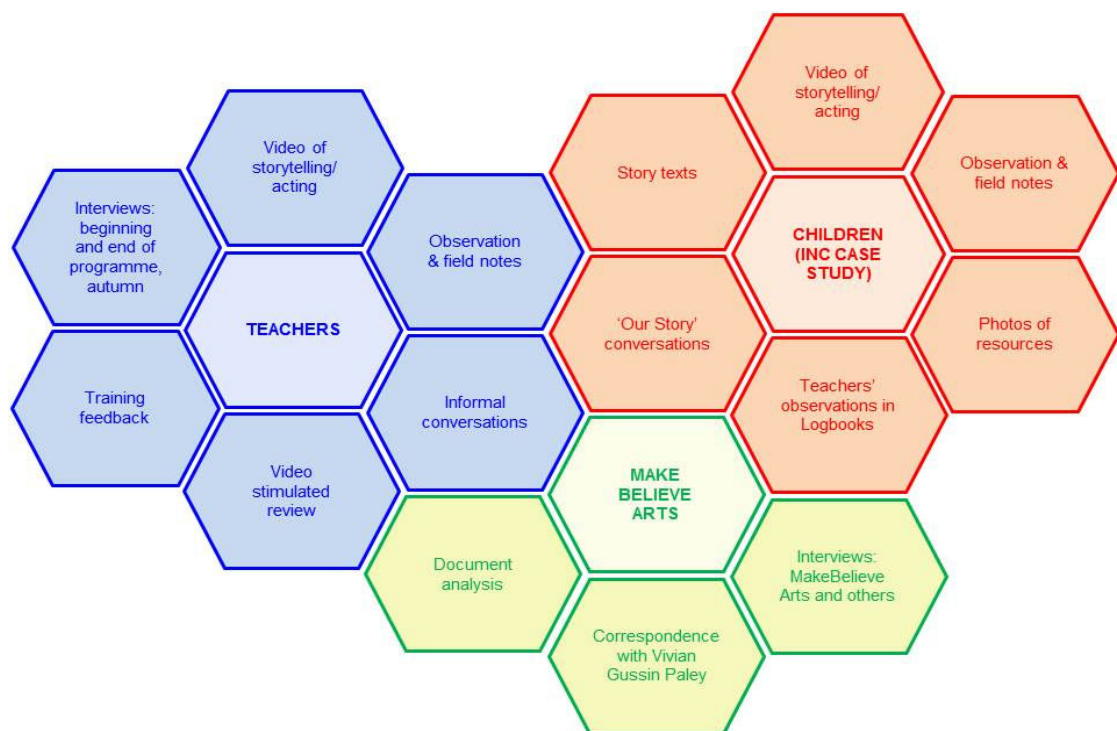


Figure 3.1 Sources of evidence for the evaluation

## 3.4 The 2012 summer term initiative

The Helicopter Technique programme was run by MakeBelieve Arts over a period of eight weeks in the summer term, in the contrasting locations indicated in Figure 3.2.

| Local authorities | Settings | Classes |
|---|---|---|
| Inner London Borough 1 | Charrington Primary | Two mixed nursery/reception classes (Rainbow and Clouds)[1] |
| Inner London Borough 2 | Bournehill Primary | One nursery and one reception class |
| South of England | St Aidan's Primary | One reception class |
|  | Eager Beavers Nursery | One nursery class |

Figure 3.2 Locations of the Helicopter Technique programme: Summer 2012

Locations included reception and nursery classes in schools in two Inner-London boroughs; and a reception class in a school in a semi-rural area in the south of England, with a class from one of its feeder nursery schools. We refer to the Inner-London schools as Charrington Primary School and Bournehill Primary School. The school in the south of England is referred to as St Aidan's Primary School, and its feeder nursery as Eager Beavers. One researcher took principal responsibility for each setting (Swann for Charrington, Flewitt for Bournehill and Cremin for St Aidan's and Eager Beavers). A research assistant (Kucirkova) helped with data collection across all settings, and gained an overview of the delivery of the programme. We provide further information on these settings in Section 3.6. Below we discuss our collection of evidence in the summer term, complemented by a review in the autumn term (see timetable in Figure 3.3).

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[1] The Programme also ran in a third nursery/reception class at Charrington, but our evaluation focused on just two classes.

| EVENTS | TIMING |
|---|---|
| **Pre-programme** | |
| Before, or at an early point in the programme, initial familiarization visits to each setting | April/May |
| Semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with practitioners who would be carrying out storytelling/story acting | April/May |
| **Training** | |
| Observation of training sessions, recorded as field notes | April/May |
| Feedback forms completed by practitioners on training sessions | April/May |
| **Implementation of programme** | |
| Early, at a mid-point and late in the programme, observations, digital photographs and video-recordings of storytelling and story acting sessions | May/July |
| Informal conversations with practitioners, recorded as field notes | May/July |
| Towards the end of the programme, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with practitioners | June/July |
| Video-stimulated reviews with practitioners, audio-recorded | June/July |
| Text of children's stories (transcribed by practitioners and MakeBelieve Arts trainers) | |
| Photographs or copies of any other resources used or produced during the sessions | May/July |
| Observations of case study children, recorded by practitioners in logbooks | May/July |
| Video-recorded conversations with case study children using an Our Story IPad app | June/ July |
| **Autumn review** | |
| In the autumn term, semi-structured, audio-recorded final interviews with practitioners | October |

Figure 3.3 Timetable for the collection of evidence from settings involved in the summer term storytelling/-acting programme

In each setting we carried out an initial 'pre-programme' visit (this took place at an early point in the programme in Charrington because of timetabling difficulties). This allowed us to become familiar with the setting and to carry out an initial interview with practitioners and other staff who would be involved in implementing the programme. Interviews recorded information about the setting and classes, as well as participants' expectations about the programme (see Appendix 2).

We observed training sessions for class practitioners and other staff who would be involved in the storytelling/-acting programme. In Charrington, there was a whole-day training session that included participants from other schools in the borough. St Aidan's/Eager Beavers had a half-day session with staff from both settings as well as practitioners from other schools in the area. Bournehill had an after-school session lasting approximately one hour. Because of constraints affecting other participants, this took place on a day when researchers were unable to attend. Our observations of the training sessions for staff from Charrington and St Aidan's/Eager Beavers were recorded as field notes. We also collected feedback forms submitted by participants in all training sessions, including Bournehill. The training is discussed in Chapter 7.

We made three further visits to classes in each school and nursery to observe the implementation of the programme, towards the beginning, middle and end of the programme. We observed, photographed and video-recorded storytelling and story acting sessions. We also talked informally to participants. Observations and conversations were recorded as field notes.

In two settings (Bournehill and St Aidans/Eager Beavers), during the end-of-programme visit we also interviewed and carried out a video-stimulated review (VSR) with practitioners involved in the programme. Timing restrictions made this difficult in Charrington, and we returned on another day to collect these data. Interviews recorded participants' responses to the programme (see Appendix 3). VSR allowed participants to review 'critical incidents' from the video-recorded sessions with a researcher, stimulating critical conversations about practice, discussion of children's learning and their view of the value of the Helicopter Technique.

Alongside video-recordings, observations and interviews, we collected the texts of all stories told by children and transcribed by staff. We also photographed or collected copies of any other resources used or produced (e.g. written Helicopter stories produced by some children during their free play).

In each class, we worked with participating staff to select three case study children, reflecting the sociocultural, age and ability mix of the class and providing a degree of breadth across the sample as a whole. Staff completed structured observations of these children during the course of the programme, guided by 'logbooks' that we provided. In the logbooks, they recorded information on children's storytelling and story acting skills; communication skills more generally (multimodal, including language); and social skills (see Appendix 5).

During the end-of-programme visit we talked to case-study children about their storytelling and story acting, using an 'Our Story' iPad app developed by researchers at the Open University, including Kucirkova. The app included stills from storytelling and story acting sessions involving the children, which acted as a prompt for children's recall and reflections. All conversations were video-recorded. For further information on the app see Appendix 6.

We made a final visit to all settings in the autumn term, where we carried out interviews with participating staff. These interviews recorded perceptions of the Helicopter Technique after a period of time, and also plans for any continuation of the work in the autumn term and beyond (see Appendix 4).

## 3.5 Data analysis

In line with the qualitative approach adopted in the study, the full data set outlined above was subjected to (initially) open-ended scrutiny that allowed us progressively to focus on important themes evident in the data.

As a first step in our analysis, audio-recorded interview data were fully transcribed and detailed logs were made of video-recordings, with selected extracts transcribed for closer analysis.

In scrutinising the data we used qualitative analytical software (Atlas-ti: Muhr, 2004) to help us record emerging themes systematically across the interview data. The following macro-level thematic categories were identified in the interview data: these are referred to these as axial themes, and we also drew on them to guide our analysis of observational data:

**Themes relating to children**

- Agency
- Belonging and identity
- Confidence
- Communication, language and literacy
- Creativity

**Themes relating to practitioners**

- Impact on staff and their practice
- Improving and enhancing the Helicopter Technique

Within the axial themes identified at this macro level, we also identified sub-themes (see further Chapter 6). Data were coded according to these themes and sub-themes by Cremin, Flewitt and Swann, with each researcher focusing on data from the setting in which they had worked. Another researcher (Kucirkova) examined a sub-set of the data to ensure consistency in coding across these settings.

The analysis of all the new data we collected was organised according to these themes. The structure of our analytical chapters (particularly Chapter 6 on the Helicopter Technique and children, and Chapter 7 on the Helicopter Technique and practitioners) also reflects the themes[2]. Data from different sources contribute different types and levels of evidence. With respect to our main data sources:

- Analysis of informal conversations and semi-structured interviews provided evidence of participants' perceptions of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children and practitioners.

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[2] While the themes were developed in relation to data from the summer term initiative, they also informed our analysis of professional perspectives on the Helicopter Technique over time, discussed separately in Chapter 4.

- Analysis of storytelling and story acting sessions (observations and video-recordings) provided evidence of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children's and practitioners' behaviour during the process of storytelling and story acting.

- Information on case study children in each class, including practitioners' observations in their logbooks, provide more detailed evidence of the impact of the programme on individual children.

- While we collected the texts of all children's stories, practitioners tried to ensure that case study children had the opportunity to tell stories during our visits. This gave us a set of stories accompanied by some contextual information and occurring towards the beginning, middle and end of the programme. Where available we supplemented these by additional stories told by these children. This gave us a sample of 57 stories, illustrating the detail of children's language use and narrative structures, and any changes over the duration of the programme.[3]

After coding and initial analysis, observation and video data were further scrutinised to provide more detailed illustration of storytelling and story acting processes. Typical episodes were selected for analysis, along with any episodes that ran counter to trends in the data and brought new issues to light. For this more in-depth exploration of the data we drew on a mix of interactional analysis (cf. Swann 2007, 2009) and multimodal analysis (cf. Flewitt, 2011, 2008, 2006). Interaction analysis allowed a focus on how children interact with practitioners and their peers in telling and acting out their stories (e.g. how children construct their narratives, how they are supported by practitioners, the roles children take, the interactional strategies they adopt to achieve their goals) and how this process may change over time. Multimodality offered a particularly valuable approach to the analysis of performance, complementing the analysis of children's (and practitioners') verbal language by taking into account the many different communicative modes that children and adults draw on. In this case, video extracts were viewed and re-viewed, both with and without sound, to allow an in-depth focus on modes such as image, facial expression, gaze, body movement, the use of space and artefacts along with language, and how these modes work together to create meanings in a 'multimodal ensemble'.

The analyses of the data-sets outlined above are drawn on in combination to illuminate particular themes. For instance, evidence of children's developing use of narrative may derive from: interviews with practitioners, in-depth exploration of children's construction of narrative during storytelling, the text of children's

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[3] This is a compromise in relation to our non-interventionist stance (see Section 3.3.2) and is an example of a minimal intervention that we had to make. In order to study children's stories over time we needed a systematic sample of stories collected at particular points in the programme. Drawing on the stories of case study children ensured the sample included a range of stories from different types of children on whom we had some contextual information, while not overly distorting the process of storytelling. Following the usual practice, case study children were invited but not obliged to tell stories on these occasions.

stories, and practitioners' observations in logbooks. Analysis of the range of data collected therefore provides complementary insights into the storytelling and story acting programme and its impact on children and practitioners.

## 3.6 The study in relation to earlier work

As mentioned in Chapter 2, our evaluation of the Helicopter Technique differs, in certain respects, from the earlier study of the Helicopter Technique (The Westminster Education Action Zone Project, e.g. Typadi and Hayon, 2010) and studies of other storytelling and story acting programmes based on Paley's work (Nicolopoulou, 2002, 2005; Nicolopoulou et al, 2006; Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010; Cooper, 2005, 2009), all discussed in Section 2.4. Major differences include:

- Studies were carried out in different contexts, and storytelling and story acting programmes are likely to differ between contexts (studies are therefore not evaluating identical activities);

- Crucially, the duration of programmes differed (other studies evaluated programmes that lasted longer, often considerably longer, than the introduction of the Helicopter Technique in the settings we studied);

- There are also some differences in the children under study: while Nicolopoulou's work covered a wide range of children, the Westminster project worked with children with English as an additional language, most of whom lacked confidence in English and some of whom, additionally, had a specific language impairment. While there is some contrast between the settings we studied (see Section 3.8) we are unable to make systematic comparisons between children from different social/cultural groups (as was possible in Nicolopoulou's large body of work). On the other hand, the sample of children is more varied in our study than in the Westminster study.

- In earlier studies, researchers had some involvement in the programme they were evaluating (for instance introducing the programme, working with teachers in its implementation – the level and type of involvement varied between studies). By contrast, as mentioned above (3.3.2) our study was carried out by independent researchers who had no direct interest in the Helicopter Technique and no involvement in its implementation beyond their role as researchers.

- Earlier researchers comment on interventions they made in the classes they studied to supplement storytelling and story acting programmes. For instance, Nicolopoulou and Cole refer to supplementing storytelling/-acting with book reading activities in some cases, allowing teachers to scaffold children's understanding of narrative structures; Cooper refers to teachers offering direct instruction in narrative construction and literacy sub-skills; Typadi and Hayon comment that in the Westminster project children needed vocabulary and grammar modelled by an adult. In the settings we studied, classes following the Helicopter Technique were also carrying out a range of other language/story activities as part of their normal programme of work but our work did not cover (and we did not

see) activities designed specifically to supplement storytelling and story acting. This links back to our first point above – studies are not necessarily investigating the same thing across different research contexts.

- Studies, partly because of their size and scope, and also perhaps the contexts in which they were carried out and the interests and expertise of researchers, adopted different research designs. A major feature of our research, mentioned in Section 3.3.2, was that it was a naturalistic study of practices as these occurred in their habitual settings. This leant itself to qualitative research methods, and would have been incompatible with a design involving 'experimental' and 'control' groups and even, in these contexts, the administration of standardized tests pre- and post-intervention, as in Nicolopoulou's work.

- Despite these differences in research design, there are some similarities in the aspects of children's and teachers' behaviour that were the focus of attention and analysis in different studies (e.g. in the case of children, their confidence, aspects of language and literacy, narrative structure). However these will not have been measured in identical ways across studies. There are different levels of reliance on teachers' reports, researchers' direct observation of activity, analysis of narrative texts, standardized assessment, for instance.

In combination, these points suggest that our study can be taken as complementary to earlier work, adding to the body of knowledge on children's and practitioners' responses to storytelling and story acting in nursery and reception classes. They do also suggest, however, that direct comparisons between the outcomes of different studies need to be treated with some caution.

### 3.7 Ethical procedures

The research was approved by the Open University *Human Research Ethics Committee*, and followed ethical guidelines on research involving adults and children set out in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.* All researchers have current and enhanced CRB checks.

We provided practitioners with an information sheet and an explanatory letter about the evaluation. This was discussed with them; all agreed to participate in the evaluation and none subsequently withdrew. We sent parents the same information sheet and a similar explanatory letter, with a form to complete if they did not wish their child to participate. We informed parents that they could withdraw their child at any stage in the evaluation. The evaluation was also explained to children, and they were reassured that they were under no pressure at any stage to participate. The researchers and practitioners monitored participating children to ensure they did not appear uncomfortable during data collection. In the event, all children in each class participated and none withdrew. (The information sheet, letters to practitioners and parents and ethical consent forms are reproduced in Appendices 7–11).

Principles of confidentiality were observed throughout the evaluation and this will continue in dissemination activity. Raw data have been kept secure in files

with access restricted to the research team. In this report, we use pseudonyms so that institutions or participants cannot be identified in the analysis or subsequent presentations and publications.

## 3.8 Introduction to the settings and classes participating in the Helicopter programme

As mentioned above, the summer-term Helicopter initiative took place in contrasting settings. We describe these briefly below.

**Charrington** Primary School was a larger than average primary school in an Inner-London borough. It had approximately 330 pupils on roll. In the most recent OFSTED report (2008) the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was judged to be satisfactory. The school was multicultural and multilingual. Just over half the pupils were of White British heritage. A quarter of the pupils were of Bangladeshi origin, the remainder came from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds. Two fifths of pupils spoke an additional language to English. A high proportion of pupils were eligible for free school meals. The number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was above average. Many of these had moderate learning difficulties.

The EYFS had its own separate unit, with three mixed-age nursery/reception classes. Provision was coordinated by a phase leader, and each class had a class teacher and a nursery nurse. All classes took part in the Helicopter programme, and we observed two classes, which we refer to as 'Rainbow' and 'Clouds'. Both Rainbow and Clouds had 27 children. As in the school as a whole, the classes were linguistically and culturally diverse. A little under half the children lived in households where English was not the main language spoken. One of the class teachers commented that they had: 'quite a mixture of children with all different backgrounds'. In Rainbow class, seven children (three boys and four girls) had been identified as having special educational needs, and in Clouds four children (three girls and a boy).

The EYFS unit was mainly open-plan and operated a free-flow system allowing children access to different areas and activities supported by adults, including outdoor play. The class teachers planned activities – e.g. guided reading, guided writing – across all three classes. During the school day, each class teacher had an area in which she was based and for which she was responsible on that day – practitioners rotated round different areas. Within each class, practitioners (teachers and nursery nurses) worked closely together to monitor children's development and plan for their individual needs. Each practitioner also had key children for whom they had main responsibility, including liaison with parents.

The Clouds class teacher had arrived in the school only recently – she had been here since just before Easter, covering for a teacher on maternity leave. The Rainbow class teacher had worked in the school for six years.

**Bournehill** was a primary school with an adjoining nursery classroom, also in an Inner London borough. In 2010, the school was put under special measures by Ofsted and has recently undergone major re-structuring, including a new management team and the subsequent recruitment of an almost entirely new staffing team. Just before the evaluation began, the school had moved into new, purpose-built premises, and had not yet had subsequent Ofsted inspections.

There was a well-equipped new outdoor area dedicated to children in the early years. This was a school in transition, 'on a mission' to improve the standards of teaching, learning, curriculum and leadership (conversation with Executive Head). Whilst the Executive Head reported that good progress had been made in a comparatively short time, it was recognised that the school was still 'dealing with a long tail of underachievement' and faced 'a chessboard of problems'. The school had a high percentage of children on Free School Meals, a significant number of migratory families (due to social and housing problems) and a high level of children identified as having special educational needs (SEN). It was also ethnically diverse, with approximately half the children registered with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Many children lived out of the catchment area, and were bussed into school.

Nursery and Reception classes were located side by side in an Early Years section of the newly built school, with interconnecting doors, and doors leading directly to the outdoor play area. Additionally, they shared an internal open hall which ran alongside the classrooms. The nursery class had a teacher and Early Years Practitioner (EYP), supported by two part-time Learning Support Assistants with 24 children (14 boys and 10 girls; four registered with special educational needs; nine with English as an additional language). The Reception teacher was also the Early Years Coordinator, and was supported by a teaching assistant. This class had a total of 29 children (nine boys and 20 girls; three registered with special educational needs; 10 with English as an additional language.

**Eager Beavers** Pre-School and Nursery was registered in 2008 and is run by a limited company. The nursery moved from its existing site in the village centre (registered in 2006) to purpose-built premises in a semi-rural/ suburban area. It provided full day and sessional care for children in the early years age range, with 82 children on roll at the time of the study. In addition to the owner/manager there were 14 other members of staff. Of these four staff were working towards relevant childcare qualifications, with one fully qualified Early Years practitioner. In the most recent Ofsted report (2009) the overall quality of the provision was judged as 'outstanding'. The environment was described as relaxed and nurturing and was seen to be tailored to meet the children's individual needs.

In the preschool classroom where our evaluation took place there was one lead practitioner and four staff. In addition the manager of the centre took part in the Helicopter initiative, attending every session. From the classroom, there was access to a secure enclosed outdoor play area and a very large field/outdoor play area looking out onto open countryside. The children were all driven to the setting and many, but not all, fed into St. Aidan's primary. The pre-school morning class had a total of 19 children aged two-four years (13 boys and six girls, none of whom were registered as having special educational needs or English as an additional language).

**St Aidan's** was a small primary school with less than 150 children on roll. The staff had been stable for several years and the head teacher had been there since 2006 when the school moved to its present site, which was a different site from Eager Beavers, one of its feeder nurseries. The proportion of pupils with learning

difficulties and/or disabilities was relatively high in relation to the national average, in part due to the fact that the school had a good reputation for supporting children with learning difficulties. The school was in a semi-rural, suburban area and a fair number of children were driven to school. The reception teacher commented on the area: 'It looks middle class when you drive through it, but I'd say it's mixed.'

In the most recent full Ofsted report (2008) the overall quality of the provision was judged as 'good'. Provision for children in the Foundation Stage was also seen as good, in particular the care provided and the progress made. Good links with pre-school provision were also noted. Following this report there was an interim assessment in 2011 and the school was confirmed in the 'good' category.

Opening out from the Reception classroom was a gated outdoor play area which was for the use of the class only. The Reception class had a total of 20 children aged 4-5 years: 11 boys and nine girls, none of whom were registered as having special educational needs or English as an additional language. The teacher was supported by a full time Teaching Assistant and regular visitors, including work experience students from local secondary schools and a potential teacher education student.

# Chapter 4: Professional perspectives on the use of the Helicopter Technique in MakeBelieve Arts over time

## 4.1 Introduction

As detailed earlier, in 1997 Trisha Lee was given a copy of Paley's (1990) book *The Boy who would be a Helicopter* and invited to develop an early years programme based on the book. Later, having contacted the author, Lee met with her in the offices of the London Bubble Theatre. From 1997 to 1999, Lee began to develop work in London early years settings using the approach and writing and telephoning regularly to Paley with questions and observations.

In 1999, Lee was invited by Paley to visit her in Indianapolis and observe her working with a group of children as part of the making of a film of her work produced by the Child Care Collection at Ball State Universities. As she noted:

> *I was amazed to see how truly non-judgmental she was of the children she came into contact with. [...] She asked a 4-year-old boy if he wanted to tell her a story. He shook his head. She smiled at him and said 'That's fine, you can be a story listener'. The boy visibly grew with the announcement of the title that was to be his role. On the next day in school, because he had not been pressurised the day before, he was now ready and his stories began to flow.* (Lee, 2011: 123)

When Lee set up MakeBelieve Arts in 2002, Paley who has visited the UK on several occasions to give lectures and workshops on her storytelling and story acting curriculum agreed to became Patron of the company. Subsequently she endorsed Lee's work in the Helicopter Technique, observing:

> *In her 'Helicopter' curriculum, Trisha Lee provides an outstanding example of the uses of storytelling and story acting to promote literacy and social growth. [...] I have come to London to observe Ms. Lee at work and nowhere have I witnessed a better interpretation of children's imaginative outpourings. [...]. As she transfers her skills to teachers, [...], the ways in which children learn are clarified and connections are made that bring children to the next stages of learning.* (Paley, 2003)

Since 2002 the team have delivered in excess of 45 Helicopter INSET sessions in the UK, 8 internationally, (Quatar, Japan, Spain, Ireland and in Chicago, Boston and Houston in the US) and Lee has lectured extensively on the technique also. In class support for the technique has involved the team in working with over 120 settings and with over 3000 children. The company's artistic programme and work in schools has diversified over the years, it now offers a comprehensive in-service training programme that links theatre practice with educational theory across a wide range of creative activities. Nonetheless, Lee remains the foremost advocate of Paley's storytelling/ story acting curriculum in the UK. Over the years she and her colleague Isla Tompsett have amassed a considerable documentary archive detailing their work in schools. MakeBelieve Arts has also produced a number of written and audio-visual resources for Foundation Stage practitioners showing the Helicopter Technique in action in nursery and reception classes. Although written some years ago, their initial publication, *The Helicopter Resource Pack*, (MakeBelieve Arts, 2002), has retained its popularity

over the years. For example, in a recent review of the Pack, Farmer (2011) wrote:

> *I've known about the work of Vivian Gussin Paley for years since reading her book 'The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter' [...] This is the first time I have read a book [The Helicopter Resource Pack] that so clearly describes all the steps involved in using the technique as well as pointing out some potential pitfalls and how to deal with them.*

MakeBelieve Arts made their archive and training materials freely available to the Open University evaluation team. The archive offers insights into the development of the Helicopter Technique in-service training programme as well as a reflective account of MakeBelieve Arts' own learning journey as documented through numerous evaluations, video data, collections of children's stories, press cuttings and the correspondence between Lee and Paley. In this chapter we offer a retrospective account of this learning journey and the perceived impact of MakeBelieve Arts' in-service activities on children and practitioners in various London boroughs. The account is based on the archival material collected and retained by MakeBelieve Arts over many years backed up by expert opinion gained from interviews with educational advisors and practitioners with considerable experience of working with the Helicopter Technique in a variety of settings.

Broadly speaking, the archival material can be categorised as practitioner feedback and evaluation, observational accounts and evaluations written by Lee, Isla Tompsett and, more recently, Ross Bolwell-Williams and evaluations written by educational consultants. As the archive is quite extensive we adopted a purposive sampling strategy. The feedback and evaluations selected for analysis were a) representative of the variety of settings that MakeBelieve Arts have worked with since 2002 and b) had an identifiable author, (it was sometimes difficult to identify the origin of some of the evidence). We selected MakeBelieve Arts' observations of their work in Tower Hamlets as these offer a consistent record of activity over the last six years and demonstrate how schools in this borough have sustained their use of the Helicopter Technique over time. Further evidence on long-term sustainability came from our interviews with the advisors and leading practitioners who have supported MakeBelieve Arts' programmes and have been active in disseminating the Helicopter Technique through their own teaching and writing. Finally, we interviewed Lee and Tompsett, (Bolwell-Williams was interviewed as part of the empirical work whilst in school). We used the coding scheme discussed in Chapter 3 to establish whether common messages emerged from the archival material and interview transcripts.

## 4.2 The impact of the Helicopter Technique: Practitioners' perspectives

One of the key aims of MakeBelieve Arts identified on their website is that programmes based on narrative activity such as the Helicopter Technique can *'fundamentally change the way children engage with learning, allowing them to develop their abilities to deal with an increasingly complex world, to become more adaptable and able to think creatively and innovatively in an environment that is rapidly changing'*. Another claim is that the Helicopter Technique promotes a creative learning environment. In this section, we test these claims by examining evaluations provided by nursery and reception teachers from five, state-maintained primary schools in Lewisham and Westminster together with the views of interviewees who had considerable experience as current or former practitioners of using the Helicopter Technique. One of these is currently the senior manager of a nursery and children's centre in Greenwich. The other practitioner was a highly experienced, former reception class teacher in Tower Hamlets who had also been an advisor in children's centres and schools. She lectures on MA in Education courses at two universities.

### 4.2.1 Impact on children's engagement with learning and creativity

Practitioners' evaluations focused on the potential of the Helicopter Technique to facilitate children's engagement with learning in terms of increased attentiveness and confidence, and improved listening and communication skills. There was considerable mention of children's willingness to listen to each other, both when stories were being acted out on stage and when the stories of other children were being dictated.

> *They make it their own and they bring themselves to it […] and they are listened to by their peers and by the teacher and I know I have seen them develop so much self-confidence.* (Interviewee, 2012)

Practitioners were also impressed with how quickly even quite young children (two and three year-olds) became familiar with and responded to the technique and one remarked that the children in her nursery drew on the skills they used during the story acting sessions at other times.

> *One nursery child had a problem describing something the other day as he didn't have the language to tell the teacher so he physically acted it out which was seen as a direct skill learned from storytelling and story acting.* (Lewisham, 2003)

The evaluation reports also offered evidence that practitioners were using their observations of children's engagement with and participation in storytelling and story acting as one way of assessing learning and planning progress.

> *By using the 'Helicopter' technique the teacher and EYE [Early Years Educator…] have been able to document and plan next steps for their children's learning (particularly in the areas that can be otherwise difficult of maintaining concentration, literacy aspects and feelings), in a way that is clear, easy and comprehensive.* (Westminster, nursery 2004)

Practitioners only occasionally mentioned the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children's creativity and imagination, although one school noted that:

> *The stage has been adopted by the children as a place for their own imagination [...] even when there is nothing going on there; children use it during free play as a stage on which to act out stories.* (Lewisham, 2003)

Another nursery school explicitly stated their desire to nurture creativity through their use of the Helicopter Technique at the beginning of the story book they had created to record the children's stories. Practitioners in this school wanted to develop the creative potential by:

> *Engaging all children (regardless of their initial language or social skills) in the fun and educational activity of telling their own stories and acting them out.* (Lewisham, 2011)

It is possible that due to the ways in which schools have viewed creativity, influenced in part by government policy and the prevalence of the standards agenda in recent years, this aspect of the work remains somewhat under-recognised.

## 4.2.2 Impact on narrative understanding and literacy skills

There was extensive mention of the impact of the technique on narrative development. Here, many practitioners cited examples of children learning from each other, for example:

> *The fact that pupils are often voluntarily listening when the stories of other children are being scribed and that they sometimes incorporate images or ideas from these stories into their own dictation, is proof of the technique's potential to develop language and audience skills.* (Lewisham, reception, 2002)

> *Children's stories have got longer and more descriptive. They are adapting ideas from their peers and actually telling a lot of stories. For the Nursery morning class it is their first term using the technique and yet even over a short period their language has become more descriptive.* (Lewisham, 2003)

As in the previous American studies (see Chapter 2.2.4) there was considerable comment on how the Helicopter Technique appeared to help children's understanding of the relationship between speaking and writing and how this was bound up with their understanding of narrative:

> *In the Year One class there was an important moment for one child as he realised during the 'acting out' that he had merely listed characters in his stories and that he had not developed a narrative. The children are beginning to see that their ideas must be put down onto paper if they want other people to be able to understand. In the Nursery, children are beginning to make the distinction between story and song and are beginning to invent their own stories (as opposed to offering a line of a nursery rhyme, for example).* (Lewisham, 2004)

### 4.2.3 Impact on personal, social and emotional development

The benefits of the Helicopter Technique for children's sense of belonging and identity as members of a community of storytellers/story actors was extensively documented in practitioners' accounts although they expressed this in terms of personal, social and emotional (PSE) development. In particular they commented on how the story acting sessions allowed children to empathise with and understand abstract emotional expressions.

> *The work makes the children all feel like part of a group. They learn how to take turns and in her [the practitioner] own story acting she remembers one boy just saying his name over and over again and the empowerment of being able to do this that he felt. The other benefit is that everyone is accepted and no one is judged.* (Lewisham, nursery, 2004)

One teacher noted that the opportunity to act out feelings was often much more powerful for the children than talking about feelings in the abstract, after reading a book for example. This was especially true for the EAL children. She observed that:

> *When EAL children act in another child's story about feeling sad e.g. "The princess was locked in a tower. The princess cried." the children learn and remember the feelings and related vocabulary very easily.*
> (Westminster, reception, 2004)

There was considerable consensus that the key skills children developed over the six-week period of working with MakeBelieve Arts transferred to other areas of curriculum as the following anecdote illustrates:

> *One nursery child had a problem describing something the other day as he didn't have the language to tell the teacher so he physically acted it out which was seen as a direct skill learned from storytelling and story acting.*
> (Lewisham, 2003)

In addition to fostering a genuine interest in the purpose of writing, practitioners felt that the Helicopter Technique was strong in developing aspects of children's personal, social and emotional development, it was seen to:

- Break down gender-stereotypes;
- Allow children to learn to respect each other;
- Help children develop patience;
- Help children develop spatial awareness during story acting;
- Set new boundaries (e.g. learning not to touch when play fighting) that would transfer to children's free play.

### 4.2.4 Impact on children learning English as an Additional Language

The impact of the Helicopter Technique on the language development of EAL learners was clearly of significant interest to many practitioners, as many schools in the London boroughs of Westminster and Lewisham had (and still have) a high proportion of ethnic minority children. In 2004 for example, 68% and 30% of children in primary schools in Westminster and Lewisham

respectively were EAL learners[4] and the percentage of children learning EAL in London and other major cities continues to grow. For example, in 2011 percentages in the east London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham were 78% and 74% respectively[5]. Understandably, as well as identifying its influence on children's ability to express and understand emotion, practitioners frequently commented on the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children who were learning EAL in relation to specific National Curriculum, Foundation Stage targets. For example:

> *Reception class have highlighted a number of EAL children who have made real progress and increased their vocabulary during the five weeks. [...] It was felt by both the Reception class teacher and assistant that the project definitely meets the targets, raising standards in speaking and listening and achievements of pupils with EAL.* (Lewisham, 2002)

Given the high concentration of children from different ethnic minorities in these London boroughs, it might be expected that practitioners were particularly interested in the potential of the Helicopter Technique for supporting language acquisition amongst EAL learners. The evaluation reports bear this out: just over a third of the reports sampled commented either on individual children's progress, or offered more general observations on the benefits of the technique for children learning EAL. Previous research on the most effective ways of supporting emergent bilingual language learners has established the need for these children to develop a secure understanding of the spoken form of their new language before being introduced to more formal literacy skills such as reading and writing, (Verhoven, 1994 cited in Flynn, 2007:179). In a study of good practice for children learning EAL, carried out in three inner-city primary schools in London, Flynn (2007) identified the following practices as effective:

> *The planned use of oracy to develop both spoken and written English; the skilful combination of word, sentence and text level objectives into meaningful literacy experiences; and the overt teaching of the conventions of written English.* (Flynn, 2007:184)

This study specifically mentions that one of her research schools; the development of talk was supported from entry into the nursery school through use of 'the Paley technique of storytelling' (Flynn, 2007:187). Also in this school, practitioners drew on children's own stories to model the conventions of written English.

Similarly, in a study of EAL learners in Bradford, Kotler, Wegerif and LeVoi (2001) identified the following as important for developing EAL:

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[4] EAL and EM pupils, 2004, National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC), http://www.naldic.org.uk/research-and-information/eal-statistics/eal-pupils, accessed 6th November, 2012.

[5] According to 2011 school census figures collected published by the Department for Education (DfE) – http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jun/22/quarter-state-school-pupils-from-ethnic-minority, accessed, 17th January 2013.

- Opportunities for extended talk

- Collaborative talk between peers

- The establishment of clear ground rules for task-oriented talk (e.g. turn-taking, waiting, listening carefully)

- A learning context that allowed children to draw on their first language and prior experience

- Teachers who offered sensitive guidance and encouragement but who did not dominate or direct pupil talk.

The experience of practitioners working with MakeBelieve Arts suggests that the Helicopter Technique shares many of these features and for this reason it offers a child-centred pedagogy that is highly effective in supporting children learning EAL. One of our interviewees described how in her setting, practitioners introduced the technique in a highly focused way over the course of a week as this helped EAL learners to understand the structure of the storytelling and story acting sessions and what was expected. She also commented on the Helicopter Technique's potential for offering a highly meaningful literacy experience:

*For some children, especially the children who have language difficulties or who don't have English as a first language, that's the first time they are making links between some of what they have said and the fact that they can hear the words that they said. They know that it was written down because they were next to the scriber when it was written down and that it's exactly the same. [...] It's about making that link for writing that's got to be made for the child prior to writing.* (Interviewee, 2012)

As many children learning EAL did not have the experience of seeing writing in English happening at home, the practice of having someone scribe their own story helped them to begin to make the link between the spoken word and written text. This was thought to be more important than teaching children the conventions of written English before they have developed confidence in speaking.

Other practitioners commented on the importance of building on children's home language and prior experience. In this respect, the presence of members of staff who could translate children's stories was highly valued.

*A couple of children's first language is Bengali and I had a member of staff present to translate the stories as they were told. This really helped the children to fully understand and participate in the stories. K was especially helped by the translation as her understanding of English was fairly limited but with the help of H, the translator, she was able to join in and was very confident in the acting out and managed to tell two stories in Bengali.* (Lewisham, 2008)

In settings with a high proportion of children learning EAL, translators played a very important role in ensuring inclusive practice and the involvement of all children in Helicopter storytelling and story acting sessions. For this reason, one practitioner commented:

*I would strongly urge that for us to work this way in the future, the person who translates should ideally attend the INSET and that we have time prior to the sessions to talk about how it might work* (Tower Hamlets, reception, 2007).

Amongst the evaluation reports there are several accounts of individual children's progress and the confidence they gain in using their new language. In some cases, practitioners reported systematic evidence that allowed them to measure the impact of the technique on the development of children's vocabulary, or mentioned that they had taken part in the Westminster evaluation. Advisers that we also interviewed suggested that:

*Children learning EAL may not have the language skills yet to say their stories but they are often good at using gestures to tell their story. When objects are available they may be able to tell their story by manipulating the objects which the adult then scribes by giving the words to the child's actions. During story acting they can choose to act when they are ready and because actions are involved and not talking they may find it easier to participate and understand what is happening.* (Interviewee, 2012)

Others also noted that the Helicopter Technique appeared to be more effective when it was introduced later on in the school year. One adviser argued that in terms of the language development of EAL learners, the technique, 'Probably works best when you have built up their language' as, in her view, children need to have enough English just to put three or four words together in order to have enough of a story. In terms of developing children's confidence in speaking, however, many practitioners related examples where sensitive encouragement to take part in storytelling and story acting sessions, even when a child could only manage a few words of English. They felt that this was more important for the development of children's communication skills than having enough vocabulary to tell a coherent story. For example, as a result of participation in Helicopter sessions, one reception class teacher offered the following example:

*Her confidence has increased; she is more willing to communicate with others using broken English and her home language rather than just non-verbal communication. She is less likely to become distressed in the nursery environment.* (Lewisham, reception, 2003)

In summary, those practitioners who commented on the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children learning EAL agreed that it was a highly effective support and that this impacted upon their progress:

*The project definitely meets the targets, raising standards in speaking and listening and achievements of pupils with EAL, [...] Reception class have highlighted a number of EAL children who have made real progress and increased their vocabulary during the five weeks.* (Lewisham, reception, 2003)

### 4.2.5 Impact on practitioners

A key theme to emerge from the practitioner evaluations was that the storytelling/story acting sessions gave them time to really observe the children in their classes. For example, one practitioner commented:

*I enjoy sitting back and watching how the children sit and listen and I get engrossed in watching how they do the acting out.* (Lewisham, 2004)

Advisers interviewed also commented upon this kind of impact on practitioners, for example noting:

> *It really makes practitioners think about how they interact with children; how much they really listen to what they have to say, how much time they give them to respond or initiate an idea. It makes them also think how they use questions and their body language to lead an activity to what they have in mind.*
> (Interviewee, 2012)

Practitioners additionally commented that the Helicopter Technique allowed them to find things out about the children that 'would not necessarily come out in a normal day' (Lewisham, 2004). They felt that Helicopter sessions provided a regular and reliable structure that allowed them to listen to and to engage in open dialogue with children. These dialogues proved to be a good vehicle for evaluating children's expressive and receptive language development. A considerable number of comments indicated that practitioners also gained valuable information about children's home lives and interests. For example:

> *There was a realisation during the project that story as something that used to be a big part of family life was no longer in place in many homes and that now more than ever it is schools' responsibility to ensure that techniques that encourage children as storytellers are vital. The technique is interesting because it is a clear way into finding things out about children's lives.*
> (Lewisham, nursery 2003)

> *It was also noticed that children's awareness of story conventions through their other work in the classroom sometimes spills over into their own dictated stories, i.e. once upon a time and happily ever after, and also that this technique pulls in all their own cultural references and experiences and gives the teacher a huge insight into the language and potentials of each individual.*
> (Lewisham, reception, 2003)

These comments and observations indicate that teachers regarded the learning environment afforded by the Helicopter Technique as qualitatively different to the 'normal' environment of their classrooms. The evidence suggests that they felt that the story acting sessions offered 'quality time' where they could sit back and observe the children and get to know them better.

Although the majority of comments and observations were positive, practitioners occasionally voiced reservations about their ability to sustain the Helicopter Technique after the six-week training period without further support from MakeBelieve Arts. 'Refresher' sessions once or twice a term were seen as desirable. It is worth noting that these are offered by MakeBelieve Arts and are popular with practitioners and schools. One practitioner working in a nursery setting felt that the Helicopter Technique was more manageable with groups of 10–12 children than with larger classes. Another doubted whether her colleague would have the confidence and patience to conduct Helicopter sessions without the side-by-side support of MakeBelieve Arts' personnel. On the whole, however, the practitioners who contributed to the evaluations did feel confident that the Helicopter Technique could be integrated into the curriculum and many planned to do this and use it on a regular basis.

*One of our school targets is to include more speaking and listening and drama during literacy. The helicopter project covers this area so every Friday morning we have our story-telling during the literacy slot. The stories are acted out after lunch during the circle time slot. As literacy and circle time form part of the daily routine there is always a set place for the 'helicopter' every Friday!* (Lewisham, 2004)

Two schools described how MakeBelieve Arts had developed a 'peer-tutoring' system that allowed children from Yr5 to benefit from the Helicopter Technique. They worked with MakeBelieve Arts to train older children in the technique so that they could work with nursery and reception-aged children. These schools targeted Yr5 children identified as having particular needs, for example children who needed to develop their oral skills, shy children or those who had difficulties with forming relationships with same-aged peers.

Practitioners reported clear benefits for both the older and the younger children. It improved the older children's writing skills and knowledge of story structure as well as their speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, they enjoyed working with the younger children. The advantages noted for the younger children included increased confidence, increased sensitivity and awareness of the need to communicate clearly, and increased sophistication and freedom in their use of language. One teacher noted,

*For the Foundation Stage children it was seen as a good addition for the younger children to feel that someone, other than a teacher is keen to listen to them* (Lewisham, 2003).

## 4.3 Development of the Helicopter Technique over time

In this section we draw on the series of evaluation reports written by MakeBelieve Arts that document their work in settings in Tower Hamlets from 2005 to the present. These reports, written by Lee and Tompsett, offer reflective accounts of the development of MakeBelieve Arts' practice, and represent perceptive observations of how practitioners responded to training in the Helicopter Technique.

 The documentary evidence from across the archive indicates that as creative practitioners, the Artistic Director of the company and her colleagues are committed to 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. Schön (1983), described teaching as 'improvisation learned in practice' and used these constructs to describe the approach experienced educators use to learn from the everyday challenges they encounter. Reflection-in-action, describes the ability of practitioners to 'think on their feet', to connect with their feelings, emotions and prior experiences and to respond to the immediate situation. Subsequent reflection on their reactions to the situation allows them to explore the reasons for and consequences of their actions, either through face-to-face discussion or documented reflection.

As well as documenting how they responded to the challenges of working in a variety of settings with a diverse range of children and practitioners, MakeBelieve Arts' own evaluations always contain collections of children's stories. The evaluations, therefore, serve two purposes. For members of the company, they are a learning journal detailing local adaptations to the six-week

programme necessary to meet specific challenges encountered in certain types of setting. They also offer many illustrations of individual children's narrative development over time. This has allowed members of the company to refine their practice and deepen their understanding of children's narrative and creative development.

In some settings; the six-week in-service programme took place in both nursery and reception classes and was repeated more than once in different terms, or different school years. The archive therefore offered many detailed examples of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children's learning and development in highly creative environments with practitioners and children who were enthusiastic and excited about the Helicopter Technique:

> *Within the first week we had more children queuing to tell stories than we had time to take them, and by the end of 6 weeks only 2-3 children had not told a story.* (Lee, reception 2007)

Although this was the norm, some settings presented unusual challenges that meant it was more difficult to establish the Helicopter Technique. In this section we focus on the company's reflections on how their own creative practice changed and developed in response to these challenges.

### 4.3.1 Working with under-threes: breaking the rules

Like Westminster, Tower Hamlets has a high proportion (78% in 2011) of children with EAL in its primary schools with a wide range of languages, although the majority of these children's families originated in Bangladesh, and this diversity is reflected in the nurseries and playgroups that MakeBelieve Arts have worked with. In one playgroup for example, Lee commented, 'It is strange to observe children playing alongside each other in near silence'. She felt that this could possibly be attributed to the number of languages spoken and children's lack of confidence in speaking aloud. Working with two and three year-olds presented a number of further challenges. The part-time nature of their attendance made it difficult to establish continuity of experience over the 6-week programme and to work with playgroup staff to develop children's storytelling skills. Although the Helicopter Technique offers a consistent and structured activity framework, many children below the age of three were reluctant to tell stories or to join in the acting out of their peers' stories. MakeBelieve Arts found that supporting this age group required considerable flexibility as the children spoke a variety of languages. In addition, they found that for this very young age group, an understanding of narrative structure and the ability to work collaboratively with peers was only just beginning to develop, as noted by researchers (Nicolopoulou and Richner, 2007; Hay, Payne and Chadwick, 2004).

> *I spent a lot of time outside of storytelling and story acting telling my own versions of popular stories and involving the whole class in acting these out together. These activities helped the class to all work together and I found myself regularly changing the rules (of Helicopter Technique) or inviting everyone up to act in a story in order to support the group.*
>  (Lee, playgroup 2006)

### 4.3.2 Using signing to support storytelling/story acting

One of the evaluations describes work that Lee and Tompsett carried out with nursery and reception classes in a school with a specialist unit for hearing-impaired children. The level of attainment of many children in this school was below average. In addition, a wide variety of social and ethnic backgrounds were represented and a majority of children were learning EAL. This presented multiple challenges. Here, Lee and Tompsett recount how they had to learn how to adapt the Helicopter Technique to accommodate children and support workers. They also report how they learnt signing in order to understand the children with hearing impairments although a trained sign interpreter was on hand to interpret their stories. This however, turned out to have benefits for all children.

> *Signing has had a fascinating effect on the acting out of stories [...]. The sign language representation has clearly captured the imaginations of the children [...]. The wonderful thing about having sign language incorporated with the acting out is that both the hearing impaired children and the children with English as an additional language are helped to understand the stories by these signs.* (Tompsett, nursery 2005)

Signing, therefore, introduced an additional modality that helped children understand the stories when these were read out. This multimodal representation proved to be a good way of supporting children with EAL to have the confidence to become actively involved in the storytelling/ story acting sessions, as did working with practitioners who could translate for these children. Lee and Tompsett also found that signing supported another key feature of the Helicopter Technique. When practitioners used signing to support children this highlighted the importance of trusting the children to lead and of accepting the story as told.

### 4.3.3 Supporting creative practice

In his writing on creative education, Sawyer (in press: 14) describes the teaching paradox, 'How to find the balance of creativity and structure that will optimise student learning'. He claims that many practitioners grapple with this paradox when they attempt to teach for creativity (NACCCE, 1999) and develop creative learning environments for pupils. As a way forward, he suggests that this paradox can be resolved when teachers and classrooms engage in 'disciplined improvisation' that allows teachers to work together to build new knowledge within existing frameworks and structures. He asserts that 'the best teaching is disciplined improvisation because it always occurs within broad [curricular] structures and frameworks', (Sawyer, in press: 11). It could be argued that the Helicopter Technique supports the development of 'disciplined improvisation' and creative practice within Paley's well-defined storytelling/story acting framework.

In their work with practitioners in Tower Hamlets over the years, there is extensive documentation detailing how the Helicopter Technique training scaffolds practice that fits the definition of disciplined improvisation. In some settings, however, practitioners struggled to let go of their more normal ways of working. In these situations, team teaching frequently provided a way forward

and was found to be an invaluable way of giving practitioners the confidence to 'go it alone' between the MakeBelieve Arts sessions. For example:

*H. became very excited about the idea that she didn't have to lead the class to get them to tell a story. She was amazed at how the class responded to the technique and was very observant about what I was doing when I led the approach. […] By week two the class had changed beyond all recognition […] there was a sense of much more freedom and creativity than I had felt the first time round. […] By week 3 H. said that she realised that they [the children] were creative, she just had not been listening.* (Lee, nursery, 2011)

This observation is fairly typical. Lee and Tompsett describe how they learned not to expect this kind of breakthrough with the teachers and the children until the third week, although in settings with a high proportion of children with EAL, they observe it sometimes did not happen until the fourth or fifth week.

## 4.4 Educational experts' perspectives

Over the years, MakeBelieve Arts has worked with highly experienced, educational professionals, including early years advisors and independent educational consultants. As outlined earlier, we carried out 'expert' interviews with seven of these professionals, all of whom had actively supported the Helicopter programme and introduced the technique to practitioners through their own in-service and initial teacher-training courses. We used the same set of questions for each interviewee although, as the interviews were semi-structured, some topics were followed up in more detail depending on the direction of the interview. Lee and Tompsett were also interviewed and Paley was also offered the opportunity to comment, she chose to write her responses as indeed did one interviewee. The basic interview schedule is given in Appendix 1.

The educational experts revealed a deep knowledge of Paley's work; they had carried out research on this for their Masters dissertations and other publications. It is worth noting that their views were remarkably consistent with those expressed by practitioners over the past ten years in the evaluation reports (see 4.2 and 4.3 above), and by those practitioners we interviewed. In addition, as they had worked across a variety of settings in different London boroughs, the experts were well placed to comment on and make comments and recommendations concerning the sustainability of the Helicopter Technique over time based on the experiences of settings they had worked in or supported.

### 4.4.1 Initial impressions and recommendations

The experts talked at some length about their first impressions of seeing Paley, (on one of her visits to the UK) or Lee demonstrating the Helicopter Technique with children. For one, 'It was just the most incredible thing […] it just stayed with me and I was enthralled by it'. For another, it was apparent that this way of working could support children's communication and language in creative ways and, 'That this would be do-able particularly in nursery'. One discussed the first time she invited MakeBelieve Arts and a group of children to demonstrate the technique to a large group of teachers and nursery nurses in Lewisham.

*At the time, [it] seemed quite ground breaking actually, a little bit scary for us to be using real children in that sort of way, but I think it gave the practitioners a feel and a taste for what they could do [...]* (Interviewee, 2012)

Two of these professionals felt that practitioners were only really able to understand how the Helicopter Technique could work in their own setting after witnessing it in action: they 'got it' when they experienced it for themselves. They all recommended that being coached by an experienced MakeBelieve Arts facilitator was essential to understanding how to really listen to children and how to let them lead. They felt the Resource Pack offered practical advice on aspects of common concern to teachers, for example whether to write down the stories children tell exactly as they are spoken or how to work with translators and children with EAL. As one commented:

*Once you've got some stories and once you've acted them out and you've got the tape on the floor and you actually observe what children are actually capable of, I think that was a light bulb moment for some of the practitioners [...] it makes us listen to what they've got to tell us [...] 'don't lead them on, they're in charge' [...] it puts the children much more in control.* (Interviewee, 2012)

### 4.4.2 Later impressions and recommendations

In their interviews, several of these professionals commented that they thought describing 'Helicopter' as a 'technique' is detrimental, as the term implies there is only one 'correct' way of working, which could, in the wrong hands, be reduced to a bland routine. They felt practitioners need to understand that scribing the story and acting it out are *processes* that support children's learning. One observed that although MakeBelieve Arts remain faithful to Paley's philosophy and practice, they are now more comfortable with the notion that practitioners have to find their own approach to working with these processes and noted 'this is a kind of way of freeing up practitioners and children to be creative and imaginative rather than having a straight jacket'. The facilitators themselves were less concerned about whether the Helicopter Technique was described as a 'technique' or as a process but agreed they were now more flexible in the way they worked with practitioners and with each other. Lee commented she had come to realise that a key aspect of the training and their own practice was about being a reflective practitioner.

*I've learnt over the years [...] as I've been working with teachers, and actually it is about the personality [...] I try now to say that a lot when I do training with people that it isn't about trying to be me. All the teachers I work with they all have their approach, but actually there's a truth in the approach.* (Lee, 2012)

The training was seen to be highly valued which offers strong validation for the work, it was also often noted that practitioners were learning more than the approach, for instance:

*They would say things like 'it's the best training I ever did, I really understand it', ... they don't necessarily do just what Trish says, but they like the technique. ... I guess what they take from it is an understanding that what children say is important. (*Interviewee, 2012)

Paley too resoundingly endorsed the development work of the company, noting in particular the influence of the Artistic Director's theatre background:

*I have learned much from Trish Lee to augment my understanding of the benefits of creating a theatrical setting for the children's story and play. She is herself a storyteller and player, a good role model for teacher-as-innovator. Her "stage business" adds purpose and; pleasure to problem solving and script improvement. Her respect for the irregularities of children and teachers alike brings out the optimal learning opportunities in each scene. Trish's own theatre background has enabled her to carry my version of ST/SA further than anyone I know.* (Paley, private correspondence, 2012)

### 4.4.3 Sustainability

As noted earlier, the interviewees commented positively on the training they or their local authority practitioners experienced with MakeBelieve Arts, noting that this was recognised as high quality. In some cases practitioners attended on their own, in others more staff or all staff from a setting or school were involved. The consequences of these various models of involvement in the training are likely to have had ramifications in terms of sustainability, though examining this would need to encompass an evaluation of multiple training sessions and follow up interviews or observations in schools on a large scale (and over time) to provide appropriately rigorous evidence. It is probable however, that where practitioners attended single training sessions and were inspired to try the approach out (which evidence suggests they were), and where they were encouraged by colleagues within their setting, (either by senior management or other practitioners also trialling the technique), this would have helped them sustain the approach in the classroom.

When educational initiatives such as the Helicopter Technique are adopted, practitioners and settings make a commitment to them and many settings and several London authorities have chosen to prioritise and fund working with MakeBelieve Arts over time. With regard to sustainability, one deputy head we interviewed told us that although her setting has not had much contact with MakeBelieve Arts for a number of years, they continue to use the Helicopter Technique as it produces measurable gains in terms of children's personal, social and emotional development and communication skills.

Another expert interviewed noted that as part of her remit she has to 'go in and check and follow up', and she too voiced the view that there were nurseries known to her where it was introduced and timetabled into the curriculum and that in these settings the use of the technique had been sustained over time. Yet another noted that when practitioners in the authority see the impact on children's learning, then:

*Very rapidly they will continue where possible when they are in that school or setting to continue to do it and fit it in… Certainly when I first started to talk about this in Tower Hamlets there were quite a few practitioners, and they were saying 'I didn't hear about it in Tower Hamlets, I heard about it x, y and z place and I'm still using elements of it'.* (Interviewee, 2012)

There was broad agreement that the Helicopter Technique was most likely to become part of practitioners' regular practice in settings where there was strong support from senior management and practitioners with a good understanding of child development (often at Masters level). Sustainability was less likely in settings with a high turnover of less well-qualified staff and/or senior management. In the view of one interviewee the difference in relation to sustained engagement over time related to practitioners' understanding of child development, she perceived that:

*Qualified staff are more likely to remain engaged than unqualified staff ... I think because they understand child development better.* (Interviewee, 2012)

The professionals interviewed were all keen to see the approach more widely used by schools and settings and several noted that they see it as a potent tool to support the EYFS in their own authority, for example:

*I don't think it's as widespread as I would like it to be, that would be my honest answer, and with the new Early Years Foundation Stage framework for the Early Years coming through I think that might be one of the things that we really use as a push for that.* (Interviewee, 2012)

In Tower Hamlets, Lewisham and Westminster there has been considerable investment in and a clear commitment to the Helicopter Technique over the last ten to twelve years, this is noteworthy. One reason why these boroughs have retained their commitment to it and maintained their involvement over time appears to be the evidence that they have collected, both through observation and through feedback from practitioners, of the benefits of the technique and its value for supporting learning in the EYFS. As one adviser noted:

*The practitioners learned to listen to children and give them time to express themselves and the children became more confident in expressing themselves even with the little English they initially had. It was good to see changes in children's confidence, turn taking and language skills as a result of using the technique on a regular basis over two terms. (*Interviewee, 2012)

Valuing the contribution the technique made to children's learning, this adviser continues to endorse and support practitioners in both developing and sustaining the technique over time. Another, in a not dissimilar fashion noted: that the 'more that the benefits can be shown, the more likely the profession will sustain it'. In many settings in these authorities, practitioners have undertaken action research projects and masters dissertations to establish how storytelling and story acting supports children's development through the Foundation Stage. This additional work may have enabled them to develop their understanding of the benefits of the technique and thus fostered their commitment to supporting practitioners in developing it.

Based on their experiences of working across a variety of settings over time, the education experts we interviewed now advise practitioners to make provision for the Helicopter Technique in their long-term planning. Following the enthusiasm of the early days when, 'I think we thought people would be doing it all the time, [...] I think that we accept now that not everybody can do everything all of the time, and so there needs to be a more structured approach'. They also commonly voiced the view that the 'pressure of the curriculum' influences take

up and the extent to which the work is sustained, and that this additionally depends on the enthusiasm of the practitioners, how many practitioners are involved and if it is:

> *across the whole of Foundation Stage and maybe into Key Stage 1, and if everyone's supporting each other that's much better obviously. But you know it's the demands of the curriculum.* (Interviewee, 2012)

The professionals all tend to advise practitioners to work together in schools to encourage each other, as they recognise in-school support is needed with relatively constant curriculum change and the pressure on practitioners to try new strategies and approaches on a regular basis. They also recognised that changes in school management can mean that new and alternative ways of working are required to be introduced and that this can reduce the time available for the approach.

Nonetheless, they present strong arguments that when the Helicopter Technique is used on a regular basis, it produces demonstrable gains in terms of children's communication skills, personal, social and emotional development and literacy. They also argue, however, that it is not solely responsible for children's progress in this area. In common with the US research findings, (see section 2.4.1) our interviewees advised that settings need more than one technique to support communication, language and storytelling, particularly in relation to introducing children to the more formal aspects of literacy involved in reading and writing.

However, they recognise that the Helicopter Technique model is extremely powerful by comparison with other structured approaches, as acquiring narrative understanding helps children's understanding of modes of representation and gives them insights into their own thinking:

> *Some of the stories are very brief, [...] but it's a beginning in the same way that we'd say single-word utterances with babies are a beginning in language. [...] It allows them to practice [...] representing things in different ways [...] in their own story.* (Interviewee, 2012)

They also argued that the multimodal nature of the technique and its combination of speaking, seeing a story written down and enacting it in words, movement and gesture was advantageous in terms of children's cognitive development and expressive and receptive vocabulary learning.

Finally, both the education experts and the MakeBelieve Arts facilitators agreed that compared to unsupported pretend play, where children often experienced rejection or lack confidence to engage with peers, the structure of the Helicopter sessions offers a predictable and safe environment where there is increased equity and children's imagination can flourish. Over the years, it has emerged as a sustainable practice that genuinely fosters inclusion and a sense of community.

## 4.5 Summary and conclusions

The key points to emerge from the interviews and documentary analysis were that the Helicopter Technique:

- Facilitates children's engagement with learning in terms of increased attentiveness and confidence, and improved listening and communication skills;
- Empowers children, as everyone's voice has equal value including that of children with additional needs and children with EAL;
- Allows children to develop empathy and to talk about feelings. This has a positive impact on staff as they get to know children better;
- Can develop children's imagination and creative use of language, though this was less frequently mentioned;
- Empowers practitioners as they learn how to listen to children and let them lead;
- Offers practitioners a way of understanding children's level of language development in both their community languages and English;
- Is a process and way of working that practitioners need to experience at first hand;
- Is sustainable in settings where highly qualified practitioners and senior management can support less well qualified staff in use of the technique;
- Is sustainable in settings where it is built into long term planning, when practitioners are clear about its purpose, its benefits and how it fits with planning for learning through the EYFS.

Similarly, since 2002, MakeBelieve Arts, working reflectively as a team and with local authority advisers and practitioners, have extended their experience and understanding of:

- The needs of nursery age children;
- Working with older children and training them to support younger children;
- The value to children of experiencing their parents' stories when parents are invited into a setting and the value to parents when children are able to take their stories home;
- The power of the stage as a symbolic space to sustain a community of storytellers/story actors;
- How to address practitioners' concerns;
- How to ground the Helicopter Technique in educational theory and research.

# Chapter 5: Storytelling and story acting observed

## 5.1 Introduction

In this section we illustrate the storytelling and story acting processes we observed during the summer of 2012. Practitioners involved in implementing the Helicopter programme first attended training sessions (detailed in Section 7.2). For the implementation of the programme, each nursery, reception or mixed nursery/reception class had one MakeBelieve Arts trainer assigned to it. In each class the trainer worked with one or more practitioners over a period of eight weeks to run storytelling and story acting sessions. During two of these weeks, trainers were not present and practitioners ran the sessions on their own. For all settings, we made an initial familiarisation visit, followed by observations and video-recordings of storytelling/acting sessions at an early point, mid-point and towards the end of the programme. Our observations included one of the sessions run by the practitioner(s) with no trainer present.

We discuss below our observations of storytelling and story acting, and how practitioners and trainers worked together during the sessions they ran jointly.

## 5.2 Storytelling

Storytelling sessions followed the standard 'Helicopter' pattern, in which individual children were invited to tell a story to an adult (practitioner or trainer), which the adult transcribed. A list was kept in each class to ensure each child was offered a turn at this activity, and 6-8 stories were collected in each session. Children had a choice and, particularly in the early stages, not all elected to tell a story when asked. In one or two cases children came to tell a story but then did not do so, as in the following extract from field notes:

> *A girl is sitting with the trainer. She is silent for a while and the trainer frames this as having a think – she says it's OK to think, and acts out thinking with her hand on her chin. A boy who is watching mimics this action. The trainer turns to the girl, and says this is her thinking face. The girl smiles but doesn't say anything. The trainer asks if she has a story – she doesn't respond. The trainer asks if she'd like to go and play and she nods. The trainer says that's fine, she can tell a story another day. The trainer comments to the class teacher that it's OK to give one little prompt, but not to push it – she'll come when she's ready.*

As a rule, children became enthusiastic as their familiarity with the activity increased – some kept an eye on what was happening to ensure they had a turn.

During storytelling, the child and adult sometimes sat slightly out of the way of other activity – e.g. to one side of a room, or in an adjoining play area - but there were always other children nearby. Children might come with a friend who was telling a story, and others just hung around to watch and listen. Very occasionally another child would intervene, sometimes suggesting text that was incorporated. However across all the sessions we observed the stories were not joint accounts

between children. The emphasis was on the individual child telling their own story, attended to closely by the adult[6].

Usually the adult and child sat on the same level, on the floor, on children's seats, stools or a sofa. When there were two adults (practitioner and trainer) both sat with the child. One adult transcribed the dictated story while the other listened, and adults swapped roles for different children. The adult transcriber wrote the story on one page of a 'storybook' that was kept for each class for the duration of the programme. Initially children were reminded that their story could be as short as they liked but could not go over the page. This practice became routine, and when it looked as if a story was in danger of running over the adult sometimes suggested it could be a chapter in a longer story. The adult held the page so that this was clearly visible to the child, and the child could watch what was being written. At an early stage of literacy, then, children were able to see their own spoken words becoming text on the page. Children sometimes interacted more closely with the text – e.g. placing their finger where they wished the story to end, pointing to particular words.

The children's stories were meant to be transcribed verbatim by the practitioner or trainer, including any non-standard grammatical structures, incomplete utterances etc. The idea of verbatim transcription – respecting the child's words as spoken and not attempting to 'correct' or improve upon these – was emphasised in training as a core principle of the Helicopter Technique. The transcription of non-standard grammar was accepted by the majority of the practitioners, but one remained unsure about this practice (see Section 7.5, Challenges).

The act of verbatim transcription itself is not unproblematical – for instance:

- Sometimes children self-edited, or repeated a word/phrase, and a decision was needed on which words to include;

- Children occasionally offered a phrase that could be a commentary, or part of the story text;

- A word or phrase was sometimes unclear or ambiguous;

- Occasionally adults simply misheard a word/phrase.

This was sometimes observed with children who were confident speakers of English, as well as with children learning English as an additional language. In the case of a child who used Signalong[7] with limited spoken English, the class teacher commented that she had actively to interpret what he was communicating. In all conversations people need to 'make sense' of what others are saying and lend their own interpretation to what is said, and it is perhaps unsurprising that this also occurred as adults transcribed children's stories. While adults did try to capture the child's intentions there was, necessarily, a degree of interpretation involved.

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[6] MakeBelieve Arts has noted that it could happen that children jointly construct a story, but we did not observe this practice.

[7] Signalong is a sign-supported communication system based on British Sign Language and designed to help people with communication difficulties.

Because the adult was transcribing as the child spoke, they sometimes had to stop the child so that they could write. This became a process of phrase-by-phrase narration, with the adult then reading phrases back to the child as they wrote or immediately afterwards. Sometimes they checked an aspect of the story as they wrote (e.g. 'shall I write this?'). While we have no point of direct comparison, this phrase-by-phrase narration may affect the structure of the story eventually produced. Sometimes, in reading back, a practitioner emphasised each word in turn, a mode of delivery that was perhaps designed to emphasise the correspondence between spoken and written word but that also disrupted the flow of the narrative. The process seemed to work better when they read whole phrases with their intonation pattern intact, preserving more of the meaning of the utterance, and this was encouraged by trainers.

When the story was complete the whole text was read back to the child. This was usually read with expression – so although this was the child's text it was endowed, by the adult, with some of the quality of a performance. The child was then asked by the adult which character they wanted to play, and this was circled in the text. The adult also underlined other characters and objects that could be 'played' by children in performance – e.g. a sun, a tree, a building. The storytelling therefore left the adult with a script for the performance and a few pointers towards staging – see the brief example in the box below.[8]

While this was the usual practice for storytelling, sometimes children began spontaneously to transcribe other children's stories. In one class they were then given books for this purpose. In another class children wrote 'Helicopter' stories and, exceptionally, these were performed in a story acting session.

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[8] The standard practice was to perform all stories the same day they were collected, and this was almost always observed. Very rarely a child's story was not performed on the same day (e.g. because time ran out).

**Storytelling: the beginning of Anna's story**

The class teacher reminds Anna about story length. Anna says 'to there', pointing towards the end of the page. The teacher comments, 'that's right'.

As Anna tells her story, the teacher leans forward to listen and watch.
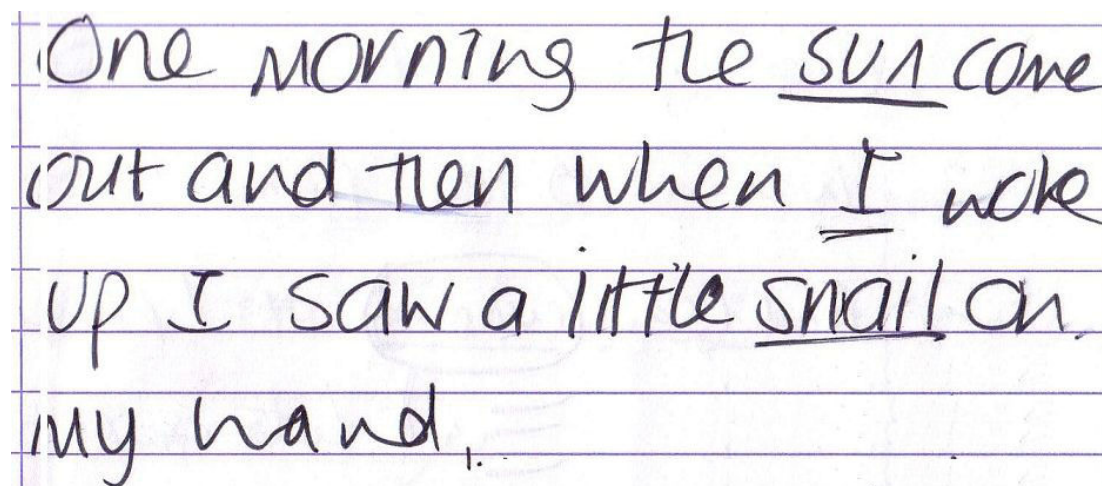
After a pause Anna begins – 'One morning the sun come out and then a little little snail came.'

The teacher asks, 'Shall I write that down?' and Anna says yes.

The teacher begins transcribing, 'One morning the sun come out …'

Anna leans towards the teacher and says into her ear: 'and then when I woke up I saw a little snail on my hand.'

The teacher interprets this as a self-edit and transcribes the second version offered by Anna:

One morning the sun come
out and then when I woke
up I saw a little snail on
my hand.

When Anna has finished her story, the teacher reads the whole story back to her and offers her the choice of character. Anna would like to be a baby snail.

## 5.3 Story acting

Story acting sessions were held on the same day as storytelling, and brought together all children in the class to perform the stories that had been collected that day.

Story acting sessions had a similar format across the different settings. Masking tape was used to mark out a large rectangular stage. The children sat round the stage in a single row, along with the practitioner and/or trainer running the session. One or two other staff members usually joined the audience. When the practitioner(s) and a trainer were working together they usually took turns, managing the performance of the stories they had collected. Following Paley, the Artistic Director of MakeBelieve Arts refers to this role as being like a stage manager rather than a director. We retain that concept here and consider its value further below. Some practitioners also retained the role of classroom manager where this was required (e.g. to manage children's behaviour).

As each story was performed, its author sat on the floor in front of the adult acting as stage manager. The adult read out the story, calling up the author and other children to act out roles. Actors were identified strictly on a turn-by-turn basis going round the audience. Children could elect not to take on a role, in which case this passed to the next child along. Initially some children appeared awkward about taking on cross-gender roles (e.g. a boy coming up as a mother or a little girl), but instances of this decreased as children became more familiar with story acting. On one occasion a girl told a reluctant boy, 'It's OK, you can be different in stories,' and the boy then took on a female role. In another class, when a girl came on stage to play a girl, a boy in the audience remarked, 'She is a girl for real life!'

As stage manager, the adult played a key role in the performance:

- They read out the story with expressive intonation etc.

- They interpreted the underlined text, thereby deciding which characters were needed. This was fairly obvious in the case of individual characters (a king, a queen, a princess) but decisions were needed in the case of groups (how many aliens, or pirates?). Decisions were also needed in the performance of objects (e.g. two or three children might be invited to be a castle or a bridge). Sometimes such decisions were made in discussion with children.

- They encouraged children to get into their roles (e.g. 'can you show me how the wolf would walk?').

- They sometimes brought in the audience ('shall we all fix the computer?').

For each performance then, artistic decisions were needed – the right number of children to animate the story without over-crowding the stage; what kind of objects could/should be performed – by how many children; how/when to bolster a character who looked a bit uncertain (e.g. bringing in an extra character, bringing in the audience); how/when to enliven things (e.g. quickening the tempo, bringing in the audience); judging the moment – when particular strategies would work best.

Children's performance styles varied considerably – some children appeared awkward at the beginning of the programme, but became more at ease as this progressed. Some gave relatively unmarked performances – e.g. standing or walking round the stage in character. Some were subtle – a girl held an imaginary wand and looked at it pointedly, another lifted an imaginary crown and placed it on her head, then stood still. Others were more striking – a girl snarling at the audience as a bad monster; a boy bouncing and shrieking as Monkeyman. Later in the programme there were some spontaneous interventions from the audience – calling out *fe-fi-fo-fum* as a giant came on stage; howling as a wolf appeared. (Creativity in performance is discussed in Section 6.6.)

All performances ended in applause, prompted by the stage manager, as the actors returned to their seats.

While the child/author's written text provided the script, then, this was considerably amplified in performance. The quality of the event itself depended

on the adult as stage manager and the contributions of actors and audience. In this respect the performance can be seen not simply as a rendition of children's transcribed stories, but as a joint construction between several participants, guided by an adult.

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**Anna's story performed**

Anna's class teacher takes the book to read out Anna's story.

Anna bounds across the stage to sit by her teacher, and the teacher begins to read: 'One morning the sun came out …'.

George is invited to come on stage as the sun. He hesitates then gets up and spreads out his arms and legs.

Lina comes up as 'I' and another girl as the snail.

On 'little snail on my hand', the snail takes the girl character's hand, and the girl strokes the snail's head.

Anna giggles at this.

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## 5.4 Practitioners and trainers working together

Sessions that were run jointly by practitioners and trainers required close collaboration. Usually, the trainer and practitioner(s) alternated in taking stories from children then in managing the corresponding performance of these stories. In most classes this ran smoothly as the story book was passed from one to another. Towards the beginning of the programme, trainers might be more 'hands-on', explaining the process to practitioners and sometimes joining in with practitioners to take stories. They also provided brief 'on-the-spot' feedback:

> *The class teacher takes the book to transcribe a story from one of the girls in the class. The trainer co-elicits, repeating the child's phrases. The teacher listens carefully, sometimes repeating words as she transcribes.*

> *The trainer asks the girl: 'Any more? That's the end?' The girl nods. The trainer says 'Let's read it back and then we'll act it out', and the teacher reads the story back. As the child leaves, the trainer comments to the teacher that she should 'say the words as you're writing them down.'*

Such joint activity and interspersed feedback became sparser later in the programme, when practitioner and trainer tended to take more separate responsibility for particular stories. They continued, however, to review activities at the end of storytelling and/or story acting sessions:

> *After storytelling, the class teacher consults the trainer about a story in which two chefs celebrate in a park: how would they do the park? Trees? The trainer suggests they just show characters walking in the park. Children can play the castle, and the bakery. She discusses how you can get children to show 'walking' and 'celebrating' - 'opening up those words of celebration'. The placing of objects is also important – where would the castle go?*

## 5.5 Summary and conclusion

In this chapter we have provided an account of storytelling and story acting, as we observed these in the six classes we studied. We noted that:

- Storytelling and story acting followed the usual 'Helicopter' pattern and practices were fairly consistent across the six classes.

- While storytelling and story acting were available to all, children had a choice in whether or not to take part. As a rule children became enthusiastic participants during the programme.

- We described the storytelling process: the selection of an appropriate setting for storytelling, the close attention paid by the adult/scribe to children/authors and what they said, children's active engagement in storytelling, and the attention they often paid to the transcription of their story.

- We also described the story acting process: again, the importance of setting, with children sitting round a marked-out stage, the significance of the role of the adult as 'stage manager' of this process, children's active participation and the variety of performance styles accommodated in story acting.

- The implementation of the programme required a high level of collaboration and sometimes joint activity between trainer and practitioner and in most cases this ran smoothly.

It was clear from our observations that the programme was based on core principles, evident in the fact that similar practices were observed throughout the sessions. There was also, however, a degree of flexibility, e.g. on one occasion enacting stories written by children. The trainer and class teacher observed that it was valuable to recognise the children's efforts on this occasion, although for the programme as a whole they wished to retain the usual focus on children's oral storytelling.

There was a considerable emphasis on children's agency and choice (e.g. in children telling stories and coming on stage as actors when they were ready to do so).

In parallel to this there was a significant emphasis on respecting children's voices (e.g. transcribing a child's story verbatim, remaining 'true' to this in performance). We mentioned, however, that in transcribing, adults were necessarily interpreting children's utterances, and that adults and other children, also played a key role in the performance of stories. While trainers used the term 'stage manager' (in preference to 'director'), the role seems closer, we would suggest, to a stage manager/director blend. The experience seems highly theatrical, perhaps, in addition to the inspiration of Paley, owing a great deal to MakeBelieve Arts' theatre and education work. The performance adds value to the child's story and, as in any piece of theatre, this is a collaborative event, requiring interpretation of an original text or concept and co-constructed by various participants. The guiding hand behind this is that of the adult managing the storytelling and story acting, and conceding an element of directorial input would recognise the creative input evident in this role. Of value to the

child/author may be not simply that the performance is 'faithful' to their story but that people are prepared to spend time working on the story and making something of this in performance.

We consider some of these points further in the following chapter.

# Chapter 6: The Helicopter Technique and young children

This chapter focuses on the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children in each of the settings and classes we observed. We draw on evidence from video-recordings and observations of storytelling and story acting, as well as interviews and video-stimulated reviews with practitioners, conversations with children around the 'Our Story' app, practitioners' log book observations of case study children, and children's own story texts.

As discussed in Chapter 3, through the analytic process we identified five axial themes: children's agency; confidence; sense of belonging and identity; communication, language and literacy; and creativity in children's stories and performance. We discuss these, in turn, in this chapter. Within some of these higher order codes, various sub-themes were identified. Whilst these overlap and interrelate they are also somewhat distinctive and are therefore afforded individual attention and exemplification. Within 'belonging and identity' for example, we note valuing the child's voice and stories, gender identities, and a category we describe as 'we together', denoting a sense of the communal. Within 'communication, language and literacy', we note the potential influence of the Helicopter Technique on children's verbal language use, the interplay between spoken and written language, children's drawing and writing, narrative development, multimodal communication, and listening and attentiveness. Finally we consider evidence of children's perceptions of the Helicopter Technique.

## 6.1 Agency

The extent to which children exercise their agency in pre-school settings and in the early years of schooling varies according to the different contexts in which they find themselves. In some class-based contexts, children will be expected to join in with practitioner initiated activity, as in storytime for example, whilst in many other contexts there will be more space for them to initiate their own activities and make their own decisions about what they wish to do and how to take this forward. How they exercise their agency will also vary as a result of their perceived degree of freedom and independence. As Dyson (1997:166) observes, 'for children, as for adults, freedom is a verb, a becoming; it is experienced as an expanded sense of agency, of possibility for choice and action'. In this section, we discuss evidence which shows how participating in the Helicopter Technique offered opportunities for young children to exercise their agency, self-determination and decision making in the classroom. We show that the Helicopter Technique was not only motivating, but crucially that it enabled children to feel safe enough to exercise their own choices as storytellers and story actors, and even to adopt new and self-chosen roles as young story scribes for other children's stories. In this respect, we observed how the technique creates an 'enabling environment' (DfEb: 3) where children can develop a positive sense of their own identity and culture as expressed through their stories ('a unique child', DfEb: 3).

In working to nurture the independence and agency of young learners, practitioners may understand the need to nurture autonomy, but agency is perhaps less well understood, although widely researched in the early years.

Early years practitioners seek to strike an appropriate balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated play, affording considerable space and time for playful exploration and innovation, as well as seizing emergent moments for instructional dialogue, and scaffolding children's chosen activities. The Helicopter Technique arguably offers a framework which responds to such a balance, since it is underpinned by a conceptualisation of children as agentic young learners. The approach is framed around the children's own stories which they chose to tell to adults, later also choosing their own character to inhabit and then choosing whether to enact their tale and making decisions as to how to act 'as if' they are a princess, a lion or an army jet for example. In line with the Revised EYFS definitions of the characteristics of effective learning (DfEb, 2012:5), engaging with the technique enabled children to play with ideas, to explore the potential of their stories, and to engage creatively both in their telling and in their enactment .

The practitioners in this study commonly perceived that the children enjoyed taking part as they had some volition in the process. As one noted, 'it's their stories so they can make it be how they want it to be'. Others voiced similar views noting that pleasure came from 'just enjoyment of the stories really, just the freedom to be able to take the story on and say what they want to say with it'. Respecting the children's choices, whether and in what way they wanted to participate in the Helicopter Technique connects to Paley's (1990) expressed ethos and this was emphasised by the MakeBelieve Arts trainers, one of whom noted:

> *...actually the core probably for me is the ethos behind it, but there is a core and Vivian would say this, I remember the first time I met her saying this that no child should ever be forced to tell a story or to act in a story, I'd say that is the core.*

In the Helicopter Technique sessions we observed, there were no instances of practitioners or trainers obliging children to take part in the story acting or indeed cajoling or persuading them to do so. (Children's occasional lack of inclination to participate in the acting sometimes appeared to relate to gender issues and is discussed in Section 6.3.1.) Practitioners were clear that respecting the children's stories and voices was a part of the ethos of the approach and that this fostered a strong sense of inclusivity:

> *...everyone has something to say whether it is just one word and I think, you know, everyone has a story to tell, that's why I said it was quite inclusive.*

> *I suppose that is - the other thing is that because you do just accept what they give you, anything can happen, you know? And I suppose that is another part of the ethos, that anything can happen.*

The practitioners commonly observed that the Helicopter Technique's 'accept all' ethos fostered a strong sense of security such that children felt able to voice their stories and use any subject matter that was meaningful or relevant to them. Recognising the children's interests and honouring these fostered the children's choice making and sense of volition in the process, corresponding to the Revised EYFS theme of fostering 'a unique child' by valuing and respecting all children, their families, their interests and values. As five year old Ben observed with surprised delight, following a story enactment which involved war tanks, army

speed boats, soldiers, gunmen and considerable sinking and shooting – 'We had a war in our own classroom! ' He appeared amazed and excited that 'permission' to engage in such play had been granted. This may relate to the increase in confidence that some practitioners attributed to the Helicopter Technique (see Section 6.2), particularly with regard to quiet children, who came to trust the technique and were able to exert their agency and make their own choices in this context. As one practitioner commented' although 'children can sometimes have that fear of failure or fear of getting it wrong', the approach demonstrated that 'actually anything goes pretty much' , she perceived that this gave them scope to repeat words several times for instance, choose their own characters and shape their own tales.

In addition to the agency exercised as storytellers, agency was also evident in story acting. Although only the teller could choose which character to be, the remaining performers could choose how to inhabit their given character, how and whether to offer additional expressive movements and/or play and interact with the other children in the tale. In acting, agency was expressed at times in collaborative and communal play, as children worked together to make an army submarine or the wind for example. In watching videos of story acting as part of the video-stimulated review, several practitioners noticed a marked sense of control, ownership and focus in this context.

One issued raised by practitioners was how to support children's story acting without constraining their freedom of expression (techniques included affirming children's actions, or inviting a child to 'show us how the dog moved' rather than telling them what to do). The danger of getting this wrong and limiting children's autonomy are highlighted in the following comments from two practitioners reflecting, in an autumn term interview, on their participation in the Helicopter programme:

> *P1: I think there is a danger of eradicating what you are setting out to achieve just by saying the wrong thing to a child, or by leading them, you know … I could probably look back on the stories and find examples, but it was the one thing that X [trainer] kept on about, you know about them having that autonomy to get up there and do what they wanted to do and interpret the bumble bee in their own way and it is very easy -*
>
> *P2:- to tell them what to do*
>
> *P1:To tell them what to do with it, yeah, yeah and actually that's then taking away their kind of freedom of expression and choice in how they do that.*

During story acting, children's ownership of their stories was sometimes honoured through referrals to the child storyteller. In one class for instance, a child declined to be an army speed boat (that he knew later crashed), but suggested he could be another 'faster boat'. The trainer checked with the child author, who stated there was no such boat in his tale, thus upholding his authorial agency. In another class, a boy whose story was being acted out became upset at how the castle looked and started to cry. The solution that was found again respected the author's conception of his story, as the trainer noted:

*So we just kind of stopped it and I think this group - it's quite risky stopping it because they get quite restless, but it felt like we needed to do it, so we just talked about it ... And we said 'Tom, what's wrong?' and he said 'the castle's all wrong', and we said 'OK, what's wrong with it?' and he goes 'it doesn't look like that'. So obviously in his head he had this picture, it wasn't what that picture was ... And so then he shared with them - 'Oh, could you do this?' or 'There needs to be another person there'. So it felt like once again that he was given that autonomy to make that choice and go, 'it's not right I need to reshape this'.*

Instances such as these provided valuable opportunities for practitioners to help children to explore their feelings and to resolve negative emotions through positive relationships with adults and peers in their class (Personal, Social and Emotional Development, DfEb, 2012:15) and to attend to and take into account what others say (*ibid*: 10).

The Helicopter Technique also fostered child-initiated play and enhanced children's agency when children themselves took up the mantle of being story scribes, writing down their peers' stories. This emerged unprompted as a practice in three of the four settings, becoming a distinct and well-developed feature in two of these. In one case, colourful note books were dedicated to children 'taking stories' from each other; in another, children found paper and scribed their friends' stories though drawings and mark making. Their commitment to, and interest in each other's stories encouraged considerable self-directed learning and engagement with writing in these settings, both within the Helicopter Technique time and beyond it, noted in the following comment from a practitioner:

*One of the things that has really fascinated me is the way the children have extended it, and put themselves into the roles of story taker and storyteller, and have actually wanted to be X (trainer) or myself and do what we do, and they've done that both at the sessions and independently outside of the sessions as well.*

(The use of the Helicopter Technique as a prompt for writing is discussed at greater length in Section 6.4.)

A few of these tales were re-told and 'read' by the young scribes (from both nursery and reception classes), who positioned themselves as the adults during story acting time. They were supported in this role by the practitioners and gained considerable self-esteem and confidence through the process. In addition, the white tape denoting the stage in the classroom was used by children in some settings in their free play.

An extended example of this practice of children taking story is offered below in order to illuminate the agency and sense of empowerment which this afforded to both the learners involved.

**Fiona, aged four, takes Will's story**

On arrival in a class of three-four year olds, four weeks into the programme, the researchers were greeted by the news that Fiona had been taking children's stories since her arrival at 8.00 am. Knowing it was the regular 'Helicopter day', Fiona had apparently told some of her friends she would 'take their stories' and they had sat with her whilst she 'wrote' them down. Later after snack time, Fiona went to sit at a table where Will joined her, which they had presumably pre-arranged. A large sheet of paper lay in front of her and with focused intent she leant on her elbows and looked up at him, black crayon in hand. Due to the general classroom noise and in deference to their personal space, only some elements of their interchange were captured. Nonetheless it is clear that she was imitating the practitioners'/trainer's position, that she valued Will's story, was seeking faithfully to commit this to paper and that they both took the telling and scribing seriously. Initially Will is unsure how to begin, but supported by Fiona he finds his way forward.

> *Fiona: What does your story start with?*
>
> *Will: Don't know [pause] - Once upon a time [pause] there …?*
>
> *Fiona: Do you want to say 'Once upon a time there lived'?*

Will appeared to agree with Fiona's suggestion and she committed this to paper, making a series of capitals F's on the page, one for each word and voicing each aloud like an adult taking story. Will waited until this was done before he continued his tale.

> *Will: There lived a little doggie that …*

Again Fiona made a large and determined F for each word (see Figure 6.1), and included two for 'doggie', perhaps reflecting an awareness of the two syllabic beats within the word. Looking up at Will expectantly she enquired 'What happened next?' Listening attentively she continued to record carefully each stretch of his tale word by word, voicing this aloud and mostly using Fs and some other strokes/marks in order to do so.

Figure 6.1 Fiona's transcription of Will's story

Will's tale involved a wolf, who smashed out of a window and smashed in his belly. Again Fiona made two strokes for the syllables in 'be-lly' which she sounded separately, drawing on her knowledge of sounds. The tale also involved a knife and an eyeball, and the wolf being full, though the order and nature of events are hard to ascertain with any certainty.

What is audible is that after 4 minutes and 28 seconds of assiduously committing his tale to paper, Fiona advised Will 'I think it should be the end now', whilst offering him the smallest smile. Will consented with a nod of his head, and his scribe wrote 'The end' using two strong strokes of her black crayon. The children got up immediately this was done and set off together across the classroom. When a practitioner commented as they passed 'Have you written a story together? How exciting!' Fiona showed her the story, observing 'It's very long!' Another practitioner, who had been taking the other children's stories, asked Will if he wanted to tell her a story, but he shook his head and informed her he had already told his tale to Fiona. In his mind she was clearly a recognisable story scribe.

Fiona, probably perceiving the tale as a piece of Will's work, walked towards his tray and appeared to ask him if he wanted to put it in, but he shook his head and it was still in her hand when story acting time arrived some five minutes later. Several other children's tales preceded Will's, but when it came to his turn the practitioner invited Will and Fiona to come and sit with her. When Fiona held the story in front of her own body ready to begin, the practitioner leant forward gently commenting: 'I will help you with Will's story'. Immediately Fiona sought to retain ownership of her new role and retorted firmly 'I know how it goes'. Then with a strong clear voice she read aloud 'Once there was a dog', pausing to allow the practitioner to repeat 'Once there was a dog' and to invite a child to be the dog, also allowing sufficient time for the child to move around the stage as the dog. Fiona then looked at her sheet and read, 'He fell in the eyeball', pausing again for the practitioner to repeat this and to ask a child to come and be the

eyeball. In this way she asserted her space as the storytelling 'adult', bringing Will's tale to life and arguably orchestrating the practitioner's support. After a longish pause, the telling continued:

*P: Is there any more to this story?*

*Fiona: I can't remember*

*P: Will, can you remember what happened next day in your story?*

*Will: I know but I can't remember*

At this point the practitioner revoiced the story so far, 'A dog came and fell into the eyeball', which prompted Fiona to add, 'And then a knife stabs into his eye', which the practitioner repeated and asked a child to come and be the knife. She then turned to Will to enquire who he wanted to be and as can be seen in the following transcript, Will and Fiona together recalled elements of the tale which were acted out:

*P: What did you want to be in your story Will?*

*Will: I didn't know*

*P: You didn't know okay*

*P: Is there more to your story?*

*[Pause]*

*Fiona: You can be the fox*

*P: Is that the end?*

*Will: I wanted to be a fox*

*P: You wanted to be a fox okay*

*Fiona: And then a fox came*

*P: and James wanted to be the fox coming*

*Fiona: He ate the knife*

*P: He ate the knife - Leo was the knife*

At this point, Leo and Will both made eating noises and leant their heads in as if they were eating each other. The practitioner made an amused noise and observed:

*P: That's lots of eating happening isn't it, I think the Fox was eating the knife*

*Fiona: and then err…and then err… And then a three came*

*P: And then a three came, Jo could you come and be the number 3?*

*P: Is that the end*

*Fiona: No*

*P: Okay*

Here again, it appears Fiona wished to retain control and ownership of the telling space. She had remembered another element of Will's story:

> *Fiona: And the fox was full*
>
> *P: And the fox was full*
>
> *Fiona: The end*
>
> *P: The end … and that was Will's story that he told to Fiona. Well done Will, shall we clap thank you?*

Fiona and all the class clapped and the two 4-year-olds returned to their seats in the circle, heads held high with enormous smiles on their faces. It was evident that the class and the staff recognised this was a special achievement, one girl shuffling up to make space, invited Fiona to sit next to her. The process of scribing and leading the story acting had clearly been empowering for both young learners, one of whom had had seized the opportunity to adopt adult roles and had exerted her agency.

## 6.2 Children's confidence

An aspect of the Helicopter Technique that was very frequently highlighted in our interviews with practitioners, that was associated with young children's sense of agency, and that was in line with the EYFS Prime Area of Personal, Social and Emotional Development (DfEb, 2012:12), was its development of children's confidence. There are several aspects of storytelling and story acting that seem likely to build confidence: individual children voicing their own story; the close attention paid to the child by the transcribing adult, and the attempt faithfully to represent the story in written form; the enactment of the story by others, the attention paid by the audience and their applause all provide an opportunity for children's ideas to be heard, responded to and valued. As one practitioner commented:

> *It gives them a voice, and it gives them a voice in quite a serious way because you are actually giving them the time and attention of the whole class, aren't you, when they are performing their stories – and that is quite a big deal, isn't it?*

Story acting itself provides a supportive environment for all children, as actors, to develop positive relationships in an enabling environment (DfEb, 2012) by standing up in front of others and having their performance valued in applause. As stage managers, practitioners are able to organise the performance to support children who might initially be less confident – a point recognised by one practitioner in a video-stimulated review of a story acting session in which she had brought in the audience to support a quiet child:

> *That's what I like about this – that he doesn't want to say anything [quiet nursery child], but it doesn't matter, they can all shout 'Help!' …. He's a bit 'mmm', but he's still part of it, which is nice.*

In another setting our observations showed Jaime, a quiet 3-year-old with very little spoken English, being encouraged by his teacher to act out the main role of a dinosaur in his two-word story ('Dinosaur. Raa'). His enactment involved roaring an impressive 'Raa' while sitting in front of the practitioner on the stage. The audience laughed, delighted by his uncharacteristically animated portrayal, and his appreciation of this group approbation, his smile, his stance, spoke volumes about the value of this involvement for his growing confidence in the classroom.

Practitioners gave examples of children whose abilities in performance had become visible in story acting, boosting their own confidence and the ways in which they were viewed by others:

> *He's become much more confident. He has been asked to lots of houses for tea at the end of the day. He's a popular boy in the class now. […] I think people have looked at [him] and said, 'Oh, he can act out a story.' You can tell really, it's almost like he's admired.*

> *I thought it would be good for him to show that side of himself, because he came into the class … a few weeks later than everyone else, and … I got the impression he didn't think he was as cool as some of the other boys … So maybe not as inclined to play physically, the rough and tumble of some of the others. And I think he did gain a lot of respect from the others – they thought, 'Oh he is good at that.'*

Practitioners in one setting commented that storytelling and story acting were compatible with other classroom activities and were an 'ingredient' in children's progress in several Prime and Specific Areas of the EYFS curriculum, including confidence. They saw clear improvements in confidence in Helicopter sessions, but were cautious about attributing more general, longer-term gains to the effects of a single initiative. Others were more positive about the power of storytelling and acting in the longer term, recognizing that along with other carefully planned activities, the technique offered rich opportunities to boost children's confidence. This in turn would support their working towards Early Learning Goal 6 (self-confidence and self-awareness) (DfEc, 2012:24).

For instance, one nursery class practitioner suggested that the 'freedom' offered by Helicopter (e.g. the absence of correction) had helped a quiet child grow in confidence – something that was still evident after she joined the reception class:

> *[She] is just like a different child. Now I am not saying it is all down to Helicopter but, you know, I think we really saw her confidence begin to emerge … from being a reluctant storyteller to being a willing storyteller, and from not wanting to get up to getting up to do the story. And you just saw – I mean she is a really good example I think where if we had said 'no', or 'that's wrong' or 'boo' or 'change it' or anything else it just would have sent her straight back into herself again.*

Another referred to a child with a physical disability who, her teacher felt, also had low self-esteem at the beginning of the programme but showed a step change in her levels of confidence during the weeks of her involvement in the Helicopter programme:

*She just gained so much confidence actually because at the time [initial interview] I think I said I knew then that her self-esteem was quite low … she had said to me at the time that people say I can't run as fast as them, just little comments … but I've noticed that she's one of the children who … goes to other children often to tell her story … and I think she said at the end of it 'I'm a really good storyteller' … and I've noticed … she's really concentrating and trying to form her letters properly. She's also more confident with writing.*

Yet another noted that a nursery child, who had commenced the Helicopter Technique 'unsettled', 'insecure' and with 'a lot of anxiety', had made significant strides forward, and practitioners felt the storytelling and story acting programme had really helped her. One practitioner commented:

*Her behaviour has been progressive in accordance with what we've seen, with her coming out of herself with her storytelling and story acting. In this … she has just expanded her relationships with the adults. You can definitely - can point to that, and the enthusiasm with which she's joined other people's stories, so she's become more physical as it's gone on too.*

All practitioners provided similar examples of individual children who, they felt, had been quiet or even withdrawn initially but who had increased in confidence during the Helicopter programme. These comments are supported by our observations, showing many children who were initially hesitant to take part in storytelling or story acting in front of others but who became confident storytellers and performers during the course of the programme, including some examples of quite striking changes. In one case, for instance, a class teacher commented in her logbook on the progress made by a four-year-old case study child, George. George had excellent language skills and was 'very good at writing stories', but for the first four weeks of the programme he was unwilling to tell a story. Our observations show that he hung around watching storytelling sessions but did not take part himself. Furthermore he often seemed to be on the fringes of activity during free-flow periods (e.g. he stood at the back of a group of boys playing on a computer and watched, but did not interact with the other children). Supported by the class teacher and the MakeBelieve Arts trainer, George began to tell stories from the fifth week, and the class teacher's logbook notes that his confidence increased: after his initial unwillingness he 'can't wait to tell his story'. He also began 'to interact much more with others and seems to be having fun!' The extracts below, from our observations and video recordings, illustrate this process in operation. They show how George began to participate, the very subtle support he received from the trainer and class teacher, and responses from other children during story acting. It is likely that it is the combination of these factors that increase children's confidence. As in other parts of the report the extracts point to the considerable skills deployed by the MakeBelieve Arts trainers in the management of the storytelling and story acting process.

**George begins to tell stories**

It is the fifth session of the programme. George initially does not wish to tell a story, though he watches when others do so. While waiting for the class teacher to bring a child who is next on the storytelling list, the trainer chats to George. She comments: 'The day when I get a story from you it will be my happiest day!' With his back to the trainer, George says he couldn't think of a story. He continues, as if speaking to himself, 'when George couldn't think of a story ...' The trainer interprets this as a title and asks if she should write it down. George nods, the trainer writes, then reads the title back and asks, 'And what happened in the story?' And so George's first story begins. It is a story about a story – of how he wanted to do a story but couldn't think of one, till his class teacher told him that his story didn't need to be fantastic, so he thought of a story that, in his words, was 'just a little bit good'. The trainer is clearly delighted by this. She shares the story with the teacher at the end of the session, and George comes up to listen.

When the story is acted out, George plays himself and other children play the trainer and the class teacher. There is limited action in the story, but the trainer, as stage manager, gets the audience to join George in miming 'thinking' when he is trying to think of a story, and this works well. When the audience applaud at the end of the story one of the boys claps towards George, smiling.

George tells a story every week after this. He is a highly reflective narrator, thinking carefully about his words – a process that requires sympathetic scribing by the trainer, as in the extract below from our final observation:

*George's story is about four secret agents and some bad guys. He spends a lot of time thinking as he starts the story. The trainer (taking down the story) and the class teacher sit silently, waiting:*

| Turn no. | Elapsed time in secs | Spker | Speech | Actions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 0 | G: | Once upon a time [pause] there were | |
| 2. | | G: | | G looks away from T, thinking |
| 3. | 18 | G: | Er | |
| 4. | 31 | G: | | Vocalisation, G turns to page which T is holding towards him; turns away again |
| 5. | 35 | G: | Once upon a time there was four | |
| 6. | 53 | G: | secret agents | |
| 7. | | T: | 'Once upon a time there was four secret agents', yeah? Shall I write that down? | |
| 8. | | G: | | G nods |

(G = George; T = Trainer)

This is an extraordinary piece of elicitation. George takes 53 seconds to complete his first narrative clause, with prolonged gaps between phrases. It is almost painful to the observer, but the trainer and class teacher listen completely silently and the trainer transcribes the clause without comment. The process continues for the remainder of the story.

George has always been willing to take part in story acting, but the acting out of his own stories encourages him to take the initiative in performance. His performances are not marked but they are inventive, as in the extract below from a story about two talking castles. Our video commentary shows how George begins to initiate certain actions, with another boy following his lead:

> George gets up as talking castle, pauses to consider then stretches his arms out to the sides. Another boy plays a second castle. He stands facing George and mirrors his stance.

> The class teacher reads: 'They never stopped chatting ...'

> George and other boy 'chat' – George says 'bla bla bla', his arms still outstretched and his body slightly moving to the rhythm of voice. Again the other boy repeats these vocalisations and movements.

## 6.3 Belonging and identity

In their first years of schooling, young children encounter a potentially bewildering range of practices and expectations that are new to them. They draw on their life experiences inside and outside the classroom to make whatever sense they can of 'schooled' learning and the new culture of the classroom. In this section, we discuss evidence which shows how participating in the Helicopter Technique offered opportunities for young children to gain a sense of their own identity and belonging in the classroom, fostering the curriculum aim of supporting children's development as 'a unique child' through positive relationships in the particular enabling environment created by the Helicopter Technique which fostered their learning and development across Prime and Specific Areas (DfEb, 2012: 3-5). We focus on the following dimensions: valuing the child's voice and stories; exploring gendered identities; and collectively experiencing a sense of 'we together'.

### 6.3.1 Valuing the child's voice and stories

Practitioners appreciated the spaces that the Helicopter Technique opened up 'to give [children] a voice, to be able to tell their own stories rather than us just telling them stories that we know'. Practitioners with previous experience of the Helicopter Technique also recognised that its respect for the child's voice had had an enduring influence on their teaching, and had become an embedded feature in their classroom practice.

Through their Helicopter stories, the children were able to incorporate their personal interests and home lives into a 'school' literacy practice. When speakers refer to speech outside of their immediate context, they make what is known as 'intertextual' references (Kristeva, 1980; Bauman, 2004). In our analysis, we considered the children's intertextual references to gain insights into how their

stories were made up of words and phrases taken from the immediately surrounding context (people, artefacts/objects, ideas etc.), from their previous experiences, and from their imagined worlds. By studying this, we could see how they understood the world around them (DfEb, 2012: 38-40) and how they listened to and appropriated others' ideas (DfEb, 2012:10). As one practitioner remarked, some children's stories contained similar characters and actions to those of their peers, whilst others were very different. For example, one four-year-old girl always chose the same theme of her home, her family and coming to school, whereas a boy of the same age chose characters from stories he had heard either in class or at home and added characters from popular culture, whilst another made increasing reference to characters that had featured in his friends' stories.

Sometimes children blended themes from different sources. For instance, a case study child, Hanan, retold a very similar story across three sessions: the story of a little girl who was lost - her dad couldn't find her but eventually did. She also followed this theme when writing her own Helicopter story. Sometimes the girl was simply lost and found, but on one occasion this was blended with a folk tale theme – the girl was stolen away by a big bad wolf. The father found and killed the big bad wolf, releasing his daughter. The class teacher learnt from Hanan's parents that the lost daughter theme reflected an actual event – Hanan had become lost when out shopping and was then found by her father.

These choices made by the children helped clarify for the practitioner where each child's interests lay, what events mattered to them, and gave insights into their existing or aspiring friendships within the class. They also provided an avenue for home activities to be included and valued in the school setting. Sometimes, as in Hanan's story, they allowed particular concerns to be explored. Furthermore, the real and imaginary worlds the children created and recreated and their playful uses of language gave deep insights into their abilities and the multiple influences that shaped how they made sense of their worlds.

### 6.3.2 Exploring gendered identities

Throughout the data there are extensive examples of how children's sense of belonging to particular social groupings, particularly gendered friendship groups, often shaped their stories. In this respect, the Helicopter Technique appeared to have been adopted by children to reinforce the relationships they were forming within the class group, and provided a forum where they could get to know the interests of others in the group. During the period of our observations, this was reflected particularly regarding children of the same gender (DfEb, 2012:10). For example, one practitioner commented:

> *So much of the social stuff comes through in the stories so they feel that they've got to put their friend's name in there, so that ... is defining to some extent how they're doing it*

Whilst recognising the strength of the Helicopter Technique to reinforce children's membership of particular friendship groups, the practitioners sometimes felt some children's creative expression might be constrained by them using the technique to satisfy their friends' expectations and to demonstrate reciprocity:

*She hasn't felt completely free … that whole social 'you've put it in your story and I've got to put it in my story'*

The children's sense of gendered identity was also apparent in the story acting: in all settings, particularly in the early weeks of the Helicopter programme, girls and boys were observed declining to act out gendered roles that they did not identify with. This happened most frequently with reference to popular culture, such as a girl opting out of being a Power Ranger. Some practitioners strove to challenge these gendered barriers and found creative solutions that were acceptable to children:

*… there's quite a lot of gender stuff going on - that 'I don't want to be that character because I associate that with the other gender', and I would challenge that and say 'well actually no you can be a transformer' or whatever it is. 'You can be a fairy transformer'*

By no means all children adhered to gendered constraints, though. For example, the following story was told by a five-year-old girl, midway through the Helicopter programme. Her story contains action events and characters associated with both girls' and boys' stories in her class:

*First there was <u>Goldilocks</u> and the <u>three bears</u>. The mummy bear cooked some porridge for dinner and <u>Hello Kitty</u> was making some cornflakes for their dinner. And **Barbie** had a big, big friend called <u>Teddy</u>. And the second name of Teddy was called Ravi. And <u>power rangers</u> had <u>a fire</u> in <u>their house</u> and the <u>ambulance</u> came to put it out. The end and then they bowed.[9]*

Over time, the children's references to each other's stories helped to build a sense of solidarity, as they appropriated others' embryonic story plots and real, 'popular', 'traditional' or imagined characters.

### 6.3.3 'We together'

We use the term 'we together' to describe how a growing sense of community developed through the children's and practitioners' shared experience of 'Helicopter' stories, and which supported children's personal, social and emotional development in nursery and school (DfEb, 2012: 10-15). This complements Nicolopoulou and Cole's (2010) identification of Paley's 'learning ecology' (see Sub-section 2.3.1.).

One aspect of 'we together' was children's keenness to listen to others' stories, both as they were being told and acted. Children became familiar with Helicopter procedures, and a joint sense of purpose soon developed. For example, one practitioner commented how the children were 'very clever' at knowing the order in which stories were to be narrated, hovering patiently near a storytelling as they waited for their own turn, or fetching peers to take their turn (*ibid*: 9). During acting out, if a child was unsure how to portray a character or action, some practitioners encouraged other children to make suggestions, or the whole class joined in, miming actions in unison while sitting around the stage. This sense of togetherness seemed particularly to boost the confidence of quieter

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[9] Adapted from the practitioner's transcription. <u>Underlining</u> denotes a character to be acted out. **Bold** indicates the role chosen by the story teller.

children, offering a safe and familiar format for them to participate in group activity (see also discussion of Confidence in Section 6.2).

A second aspect of 'we together' that we observed was how the Helicopter stage sometimes constituted a microcosm for children to share their emotions and be helped to resolve upsets that had occurred elsewhere (*ibid*: 9). This aspect of the technique would feed into the children's working towards Early Learning Goal 7 (Managing feelings and behaviour) (DfEc:26).

We mentioned in our discussion of agency (Section 6.1) an occasion on which a child had become upset about the acting out of his story. Occasionally, a child would also become upset when allocated a role they did not want to play, or a child would be very boisterous in the acting out and risk hurting others. At such times, practitioners and trainers sometimes momentarily broke away from a story to attend to the child's emotional response. On one occasion, when we were not present, the trainers and practitioner took time to focus on emotions during the story acting session, and as one trainer mentioned the stage 'became an open forum' to discuss why some children were unhappy. Over time, such incidences became rarer, the children became more accepting of acting out a range of characters, and the Helicopter Technique was valued as making a positive contribution to children's emotional development in the classroom (*ibid*: 13).

## 6.4 Communication, language and literacy

The Helicopter Technique is predominantly about communication in one form or another, so it is hardly surprising that this forms a major part of our analysis. Storytelling and story acting are mainly oral practices, incorporating communication through verbal language (speaking and listening) and other communicative modes (e.g. gesture, facial expression, whole-body movement) but they also link directly into writing in the adult transcription of children's stories and sometimes in children's own written stories. We consider here children's verbal language use in general terms, then children's language use as evident in their stories, the interplay between spoken and written language, children's writing and drawing, multimodal communication, and listening and attentiveness. Children's communicative practices are often highly creative, and we deal separately with creativity in Section 6.5.

### 6.4.1 Children's verbal language use

The impact of the Helicopter Technique on children as we have discussed so far in this chapter was often mediated through language in the classroom: children's developing sense of agency, their confidence, the valuing of children's voices, their expression of identity and their sense of community are all realised through communication and language (see section 6.4.4 for a specific focus on multimodal communication). There is likely to be an association between confidence, in particular, and children's language use. It is notable that, in their log books, practitioners often describe perceived developments in children's language use in terms of confidence, e.g.:

*[She] has become more confident to act out stories and attempt writing phonetically.*

*[She] has become more confident talking in a group, uses a louder voice.*

*[He] was focused and confident when telling a story.*

Fiona transcribing Will's story and the performance of this story guided by the practitioner, and George's highly reflective construction of his first Helicopter story, provide evidence that the Helicopter Technique encourages and facilitates children in expressing themselves through language and in listening attentively to what others say. In this regard, it provides a rich forum for the support of diverse aspects of children's communication and language (DfEb, 2012: 16-22) and for children's achievement of Early Learning Goals 1 (listening and attention), 2 (understanding) and 3 (speaking) (DfEc, 2012:24).

The focus on oral language was valued by practitioners. In one setting where children wrote their own Helicopter stories and then performed these, the practitioner saw this as a useful extension to the Helicopter Technique but also emphasised the value of oral narration and performance in its own right. In a discussion with the trainer after the event she commented that the written stories were necessarily shorter at this early stage in children's writing, and the written text was also fixed, whereas oral stories allowed children to go further and to produce more complex utterances. The children's oral stories could also be adapted, and extended (e.g. when some children added characters or plot sequences). She agreed with the trainer that, while implications for written literacy were important, there was also 'strength in the oral'.

In another setting, a practitioner commented:

*... it's good because it focuses on speaking and listening, doesn't it, and it's difficult to find really good activities that do that.*

A nursery practitioner focused on the value for encouraging spoken language in younger children:

*At the age the children are that we have got, I think it is about giving the children confidence to experiment with language and to use language – and to actually speak. For some children, you know, to say anything at all in some cases, or to tell us a story and then to get up and act it ... that's a huge thing.*

This practitioner also pointed to the benefits of providing a space where young children's language was not corrected:

*To try and change what they do or correct them as they are doing it – I think that's going to, not to instil a sense of failure as such but it is going to put them off.*

Whilst most practitioners appreciated the freedom offered to children to express themselves creatively through the Helicopter Technique, from an educational standpoint, the absence of correction was difficult for one reception class teacher, who found it problematical to accept children's nonstandard grammar (see 7.3.4 on challenges). In this instance, the teacher felt a tension between the power of the Helicopter Technique to support children's self-expression and her

perceived professional responsibility to improve the accuracy of children's language.

Certain children were perceived to become more talkative perhaps, as mentioned above, related to increasing confidence. A practitioner commented that she had noticed this in a child who, before, had spoken only briefly when he initiated conversation with her:

*I've notice with Ben a lot more now – he's more descriptive, and he'll sit for longer with you and tell you more what's going on, what he's doing. There's more to it than just touching base.*

Another pointed to the benefits of the technique for children with more limited speech:

*It is a good opportunity for speaking and listening, and then for children who … aren't ready to do the speaking – they can join in with understanding the story.*

A major focus of practitioners' comments was the value of the Helicopter Technique for providing a 'window' on children's language development. This was significant both for practitioners' and children's peers' understanding of their spoken language abilities. For example a practitioner commented about one child with English as an additional language:

*He's been able to use language in a way that we wouldn't necessarily have known that he could, and that his friends wouldn't necessarily have known that he could.*

Sometimes these insights were surprising, as in the following example:

*Some children who I thought would tell really good stories haven't, and I'd assumed that … their stories would be more complex. I mean Alice is quite a good example of that. I would have expected her stories to be more sophisticated than they are, and I've learned from this about what is a more accurate picture of them I think.*

Several others pointed to their increased understanding of children's language, sometimes relating this to assessment - for instance:

*It's a good way of tracking what is actually going on … just to take them to one side and getting them to tell you a story, and … then you notice all about language which you might not already know that they had, especially with Aidan [a quiet child].*

*One of the assessments for the EYFS is about understanding elements of stories and being able to retell stories in the right sequence, and certainly … you can see what they're doing and then you can work out what you need to do next to improve … it focuses you as a teacher on that aspect of what they are doing.*

*Speaking and listening is one of the things that's most difficult to assess in a way because you don't often get to listen to them.*

Practitioners also mentioned the potential of Helicopter storytelling and story acting to feed into specific aspects of children's language use, such as their vocabulary. As this was usually in the context of narrative development, we deal with this separately below.

Two of the settings we observed (Charrington and Bournehill) included significant numbers of children with English as an additional language (see descriptions of settings in Chapter 3). The Helicopter Technique supported all children's communication and, as mentioned above, it could provide evidence of bilingual children's capacities in English. Equally, it offered the opportunity for children whose home language was not English, to use their home language in the classroom (Communication and Language, DfEb: 21). However, during the period of the observations, we did not find any evidence of children's home language(s) being used in storytelling and story acting in these settings, even in the case of children whose English was at a relatively early stage of development, although practitioners in some settings reported that the children's home languages had been incorporated in other classroom activities.

## 6.4.2 Children's language use in stories

The Helicopter Technique provides an opportunity for children to explore, organise and order their individual and collective knowledge and experience through narrative. This was valued by practitioners, particularly in one of the inner city schools, who felt that 'children who have got a rich experience of listening to narrative are in the minority' in their classes.

Some children's stories tended to focus on their home experiences, some on family or friendship more generally, others on popular culture or traditional tales, whilst others created unified stories that combined real/'what is' references with imaginary/'what if' characters and plots (see also Section 6.3). Similarly the structure of children's narratives varied considerably. For instance Jaime, a three-year-old child with limited spoken English, told a story consisting of the two-word utterance *Dinosaur. Raa* (in Section 6.2 we referred to the animated performance of this story and the likely impact on Jaime's confidence).

Five-year-old Yakubu told a longer story drawing on diverse resources: he listed characters from popular fiction and traditional fairy tales, physical locations associated with both traditional and popular fiction and further characters (a penguin and a ladybug). This is included below with a brief commentary:

| Yakubu's story | Commentary |
|---|---|
| There was a power ranger and then there was a knight. And then there was a princess and then there was a castle, a very big one. There was a dragon and then there was a penguin. He died. And then there was an egg. And then there was a ladybug. There was another castle and it was in the forest. | Y introduces a series of characters and locations, mainly using the same simple clause structure 'There was a …'. There is a description of the castle ('a very big one') and further information offered about the penguin ('he died') and about another castle ('it was in the forest'), giving some variation in clause structure. |

Four-year-old Anna's story was about a family of cats and an important event (a new baby). The narrative structure is more evident in this story and there is some evidence of more complex clause structure:

| Anna's story | Commentary |
|---|---|
| One day there was a little <u>cat</u> and then there was a little little boy cat and then there was a mummy cat and then the daddy cat came from work and then the cat had a new new baby and then they had more cats drinking the mummy's milk and then the daddy cat said "Arrh aren't they sweet" and then there were so many cats and they were lovely and they drink the milk. | A's story begins with a conventional story opening ('one day' and an orientation that introduces characters ('and then there was …'). Complicating action begins with the daddy cat coming home from work, then the cat having a new baby. There is a series of clauses linked by the conjunctions 'and then'. 'The daddy cat came from work' and 'the cat had a new baby' are simple main clauses. 'They had more cats drinking the mummy's milk' is a more complex clause structure including a non-finite subordinate clause, and 'the daddy cat said "Arrh aren't they sweet"' includes direct speech. There is a possible resolution to the narrative in 'and then there were so many cats … drink the milk'. |

A story from four-year-old George, whose storytelling featured as a vignette in Section 6.2, was about secret agents and 'bad guys'. It has a relatively sophisticated structure with clauses linked by a wide range of connectives and some complex subordination:

| George's story | Commentary |
|---|---|
| Once upon a time there was <u>four secret agents</u>. And they were trying to figure out something because the <u>bad guys</u> were trying to find their <u>secret hide out</u>. So the bad guys could get all of the power that the secret agents had. Suddenly the secret agents thought they saw some heads looking through the window. But then they carried on trying to figure out the thing. But then the bad guys suddenly crept through into the hide out and fighted. | G's story begins with a conventional opening ('once upon a time' and a long orientation introducing characters and setting up the narrative (four secret agents trying to figure out something because bad guys were trying to find their hideout and get their power). There is a complex pattern of subordinate clauses ('because …', 'so…', 'that…') as well as the non-finite construction 'trying to find'.<br><br>Complicating action begins with 'suddenly the agents thought …'. Again clause structure is relatively complex.<br><br>Resolution is less clear than in George's other narratives – is there more to come? |

One of the strengths of the Helicopter Technique is that it works well with children at different stages of language development and who have different levels of awareness of narrative. Practitioners also commented on the value of the technique in providing insights into individual children's oral and narrative capabilities, helping them plan activities to support different children:

> *It's taught me more about their ability to structure stories so we've got the lists and then we've got the list with a few events, or maybe the list with one event, and then we've got some children who actually have got a really good structure and they're talking about 'once upon a time', and they're actually using the characters, they'll have fewer characters and then those characters are actually doing something, so it's actually quite a good way of grouping the children if you like into those different categories and looking at what you need to work on with them.*

Some practitioners reported in interviews that they were often surprised that certain children had a less well developed awareness of narrative than they had thought, whilst others revealed themselves unexpectedly as budding screen writers, ready to write 'for a cast of thousands' (practitioner comment).

As the weeks passed in the Helicopter programme, there is evidence of certain children's stories showing a more developed narrative structure. Yakubu, for instance, whose story above relied mainly on the same simple clause structure ('there was a …'), showed a clearer sense of narrative, greater variation in clause structure and a wider range of vocabulary (e.g. a wider range of verbs, some descriptive terms) in the final story we collected, told several weeks later:

| Yakubu's later story | Commentary |
|---|---|
| Once upon a time there was a big castle and then somebody was walking through the forest and then there was a ladybird and there was a big ginormous giraffe and he floated in a magic book and then there was a magic carpet that took books and then there was a bad fairy that turned the wolf into a house. | Y uses a conventional story opening ('Once upon a time') with a possible orientation ('there was a big castle'). 'And then someone was walking through the forest' is a possible complicating action. Further actions are introduced (a giraffe 'floated', there is a magic carpet 'that took books', and a bad fairy 'that turned the wolf into a house'). These latter also examples of greater complexity in clause structure – the use of subordination. Descriptive terms include the amusing adjective 'ginormous', as well as 'magic' (book, carpet), 'big' (castle, giraffe) and 'bad' (fairy). |

While some other children, like Yakubu, showed some progression in their narratives, many others did not. In our sample of 18 case study children for whom we had a systematic record of stories over time, eight showed some increase in story length (not, in itself, directly linked to complexity), eight showed evidence of increasing structural complexity in their narratives and nine employed a wider range of vocabulary (Appendix 12 provides information on how these measures were made). Interestingly, five of the nine children who showed a wider range of vocabulary came from the same school, Bournehill. We do not have any evidence to suggest why this may be the case.

This pattern contrasts with evidence from an earlier study of the Helicopter Technique (the Westminster study – e.g. Typadi and Hayon, 2010) and from studies of other storytelling and acting programmes based on Paley's work (e.g. Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010; and Cooper, 2005, 2009) discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The reasons for this are likely to be complex. It is worth bearing in mind, for instance, that, as discussed in Chapter 3, our study differs in certain ways from the earlier work: direct comparison between studies requires caution as in various respects we are not comparing like for like. Even in the case of the

Westminster study, which investigated ostensibly the same technique, the children, teaching context, implementation of the technique, research design and role of the researchers differed from those in the present study. Importantly, our study took place over a relatively short (eight-week) period of time. Evidence of systematic development in language use is therefore much less likely than in studies of programmes with a longer duration.

The storytelling sessions during which we collected stories occur at different temporal points in the programme, but there may also be other differences. For instance, one case study child began to explore an important theme relating to a real-life event (a child getting lost and being found by her father); in another case, children became preoccupied with recycling an amusing theme (characters falling in the bin). Particularly over a short period, such preoccupations are likely to have a greater effect on story structures than any developmental factors.

The children in our sample are at varying stages of development and the Helicopter Technique may affect them in different ways. George, for instance, grew in confidence (see Section 6.2) but he already had a sophisticated sense of narrative which showed no evidence of further development over the programme. While taking part in the Helicopter programme children were also carrying out other language activities, including story activities, and these could affect the way they used language. Furthermore, conditions differed between classes (children in different classes would have been carrying out different kinds of language/story activities, which might affect their language use in different ways).

### 6.4.3 The interplay between spoken and written language

An interesting observation that occurred consistently across classes was children's intense engagement in the scribing of their narratives. The process of scribing itself required the children to listen attentively to their peers, (Communication and Language, DfEb, 2012:17), and constituted a naturally occurring collaborative and shared activity (*ibid*, DfEb, 2012: 22), where children could developed their understanding of the relationship between the spoken and the written word (Literacy, DfEb, 2012: 32).

Like Nicolopoulou et al. (2006), we found extensive evidence of the Helicopter Technique activity promoting children's awareness of the connections between their thoughts and spoken words, between their spoken words and the practitioner scribing their words on paper, and the arrangement of the writing on the page. Thus the Helicopter programme offered a platform where children were motivated by personal interest and enjoyment to understand the transformations of spoken to written representation, then back to enactment and re-telling. These are fundamental and essential concepts in the development of young children's awareness of language as an abstract and meaningful symbol system, as they begin to learn the relationship between the ways words are written and spoken (Early Learning Goal 10, DfEc:27).

Throughout the data, and without exception, as they became familiar with the storytelling process all the observed children paused in their storytelling to allow an adult (practitioner or trainer) sufficient time to transcribe the words they had uttered. Most, if not all, children watched carefully as their words

became marks on a page which slowly filled up, from top left to bottom right. Sometimes they pointed at individual words (not necessarily the right one) if they thought the practitioner may have misheard what they had said, or if they wanted to act out a particular role. Practitioners recognised this as an unusual and rich opportunity for the young learners. They noted both the time the children spent poring over their words emerging onto the page, and the focused quality of their attention at this time. The children sometimes commented upon 'their' writing, for instance a practitioner noted: 'he was saying that "I filled a whole page" and looking at the words and he was so proud'. Some referred to the significance of this for individual learners, for instance of a child observing transcription: 'he wouldn't be a child who would sit and look at the book with you, and doesn't really show much interest in the written word at all'.

Occasionally, practitioners or trainers asked children to wait a moment longer before they continued, or they double-checked exactly what the child had just said, and on many of these occasions it was possible to see on the video recordings a slight straightening in the child's posture, the shoulders being pulled back, the head held straight. These were empowering moments for the children, suggesting they realised that their voices were being listened to, heard and respected.

Children listening as others told their stories also sometimes focused on the transcribed text. One practitioner commented on a story listener:

> He definitely wanted to know what happened in the end, and wanted a longer ending you know, pointing out where you could fit in more words.

The Helicopter Technique therefore offered children multiple different opportunities to become acquainted with the relationship between the spoken and written word, the sequential nature of writing, the direction that writing unfolds in, along with the notion that stories have endings which must be planned for in terms of overall story length. As such the technique constituted positive relationships and enabling environments for the development of children's speaking (DfEb:21-22), understanding (*ibid*: 19) and literacy (*ibid*: 30-32). It is likely that it encouraged and enabled the young to hypothesise further about print, an important feature of young literacy learners noted by research (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982).

### 6.4.4 Drawing and writing

As noted in our discussion of agency (Section 6.1), in many classrooms children imitated the Helicopter Technique in their free play and in this context several children chose to scribe other children's stories or to write or draw their own. In the process some committed to paper for the very first time, and all were involved in learning about writing and the link between the spoken and the written word. They were also imagining themselves and identifying themselves as literacy users and connecting with other children in the production of meaningful texts. In one setting a practitioner noted that 'writing each other's stories and making books to write stories' became 'one of the main activities of the classroom' and in this setting as in others Helicopter books were given to the children to use to collect stories in their own play.

Some of the practitioners were particularly enthusiastic about the potential of the Helicopter Technique for children learning about writing and for child-initiated writing during Helicopter time itself and in free play. Such writing, when developed as a consequence of using the Helicopter Technique approach in the classroom, arguably echoed the category of adult-initiated and child-extended play identified by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) in their early years work. Practitioners also recognised the motivational power of the Helicopter Technique to encourage both boys and girls to write:

> *The thing that has had the real impact is the fact they **want** to write their own, so do what we've been doing themselves, I think that has really shown them. … they want to do it.*

> *It's been getting the boys more into mark making. It almost seems to give them permission to do it because the mark making table can be quite a girl heavy area and they're drawing pictures of rainbows and houses, and sort of quite girly things, and the boys tend to be down the other end doing their physical play, but this seems to have given them a purpose to put to their mark making and to have something to link it to, so that's something we want to explore further and try and link it into more areas.*

Examples were also given of individual children, partly due in part to their emotional investment in their stories, showed an increased desire to make meaning through drawing and writing. Some practitioners perceived this was 'unquestionably the Helicopter Technique prompted' as in the two practitioners below discussing a nursery aged learner:

> *P1: He's not a big mark maker is he?*

> *P2: He's the one I pointed out to you - to see him mark making voluntarily like that is a massive step forward. I can't over emphasise that, that's a huge step forward.*

> *I: Not because of his age but because . . .?*

> *P1: He won't go there as a choice. When it comes to doing a father's day card, or something where we put in a structured activity he doesn't really sit. To have to sit and listen, though I wasn't aware he was doing it, but for him to sit and listen and to fill a whole page with marks - that's amazing.*

> *P2: Yeah, meaningful as well.*

There were additional examples of children choosing to write at home triggered by the approach. For example, Ethan informed his practitioner that he had written stories at home, though his mum was cross as he had written on her bed and on the wall as well! The practitioner knew that whilst this may have been inappropriate, it was a huge step forward for Ethan, who 'has rarely ever showed any kind of interest in writing'. Yet his desire to tell was strong and he frequently rushed to the practitioner or trainer on Helicopter mornings in order to get his name put down in the book. He was observed during the fifth week committing a tale to paper (in the form of a series of letters and shapes across the page) in the children's own Helicopter book. In another instance, a practitioner asserted that Bill, a Reception aged 'boy that finds it really hard to concentrate normally', had 'really taken off'. In one piece of Helicopter-related 'home activity' - to tell a story

to mum and for her to write it down - Bill returned to school with a Scooby Doo tale on paper. Unusually he had added the end in his own handwriting and included several drawings, which his practitioner noted was 'really different for him - he doesn't want to stop … and he's very excited about it'. Helicopter writing in this context was seen to serve multiple functions. It appeared to have motivated Bill to add to his story, offering him a rich reason for writing - making the tale more his own perhaps - and also served to develop his concentration.

In this context, as in many others in which children initiated their own story writing or scribed other children's stories, writing was experienced as a meaningful activity. The young people were writing for themselves and their friends about issues of common interest, so their texts operated as 'tools of identity' (Holland et al., 1998). For example, in Figure 6.2 illustrating Rachel's drawings of Holly's story, Rachel cleverly used a single visual to represent each part of the narrative, such that when the practitioner then asked what the story was, Holly was able to read it back her using the pictures.
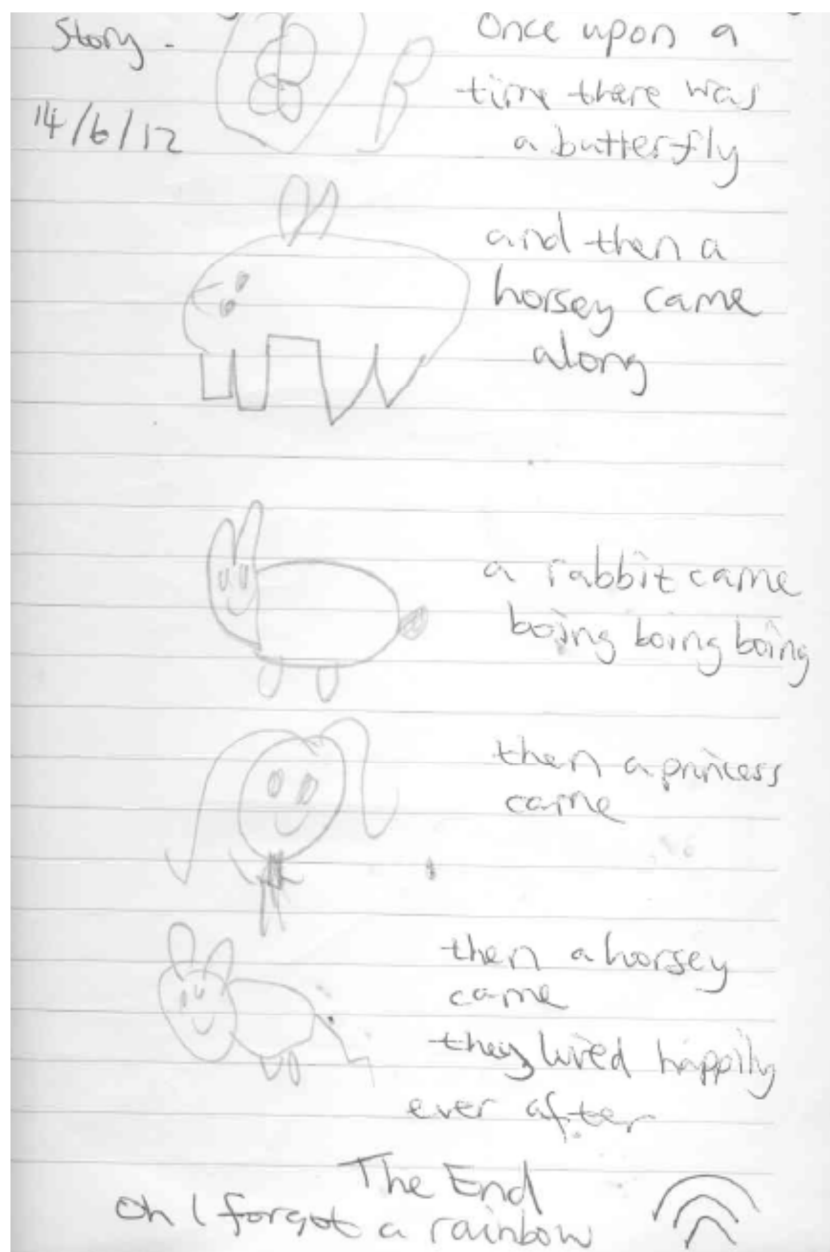
Figure 6.2 Rachel's drawings of Holly's story

There were multiple other instances of drawn stories in this class's two Helicopter story books. Some included the practitioners or other adults writing alongside the visuals as in this case, whilst other visuals remained without written text. It was clear in these books that the children were experimenting with the written word, ascribing meaning to their mark making, some of which included long strings of letters or lines, and some of which included short written texts, such as Isabelle's comforting and thought-provoking tale of the little bird who shivered in the nest as the tree branches were blowing, though he knew he was safe because his mother was with him (see Figure 6.3). In this story Isabelle has underlined a number of words, as in the Helicopter Technique convention, a common feature in many of the stories within the children's own Helicopter books.
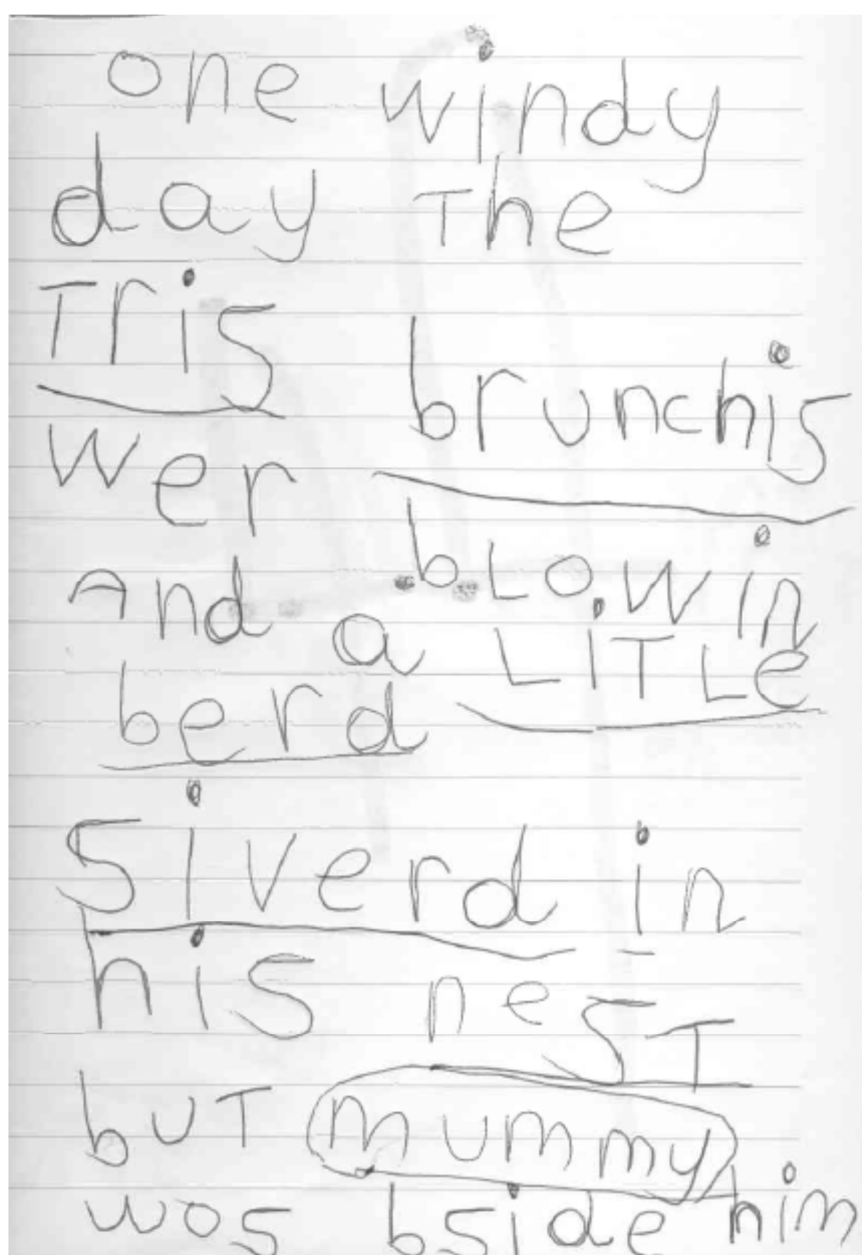


Figure 6.3 Isabelle's tale of the little bird

It is widely recognised that beginning writers need to perceive they have something meaningful and valuable to say. During their involvement in the Helicopter programme, children came to recognise (as we have argued earlier) that their stories were valued and as such committing these to paper was for some a logical next step. In addition, since the children knew their tales would be acted out, the approach provided a meaningful context and purpose for writing, which recent reviews of effective early literacy teaching indicate is critical in supporting young literacy learners (Hall, 2012).

Micah, having dictated a story to a practitioner one morning, then went straight to the role play area which was an office and created another. She sat at the desk, tidied it and worked on her own for nearly 10 minutes on a detailed story picture. A visiting education student entered the office and reported later that Micah had asked her to help write her story down so it could be acted out. It was a tale about a cat and its mummy. In this context she used her reading skills also, circling the word 'cat' on the script, and explaining 'that's to show who I want to be'.
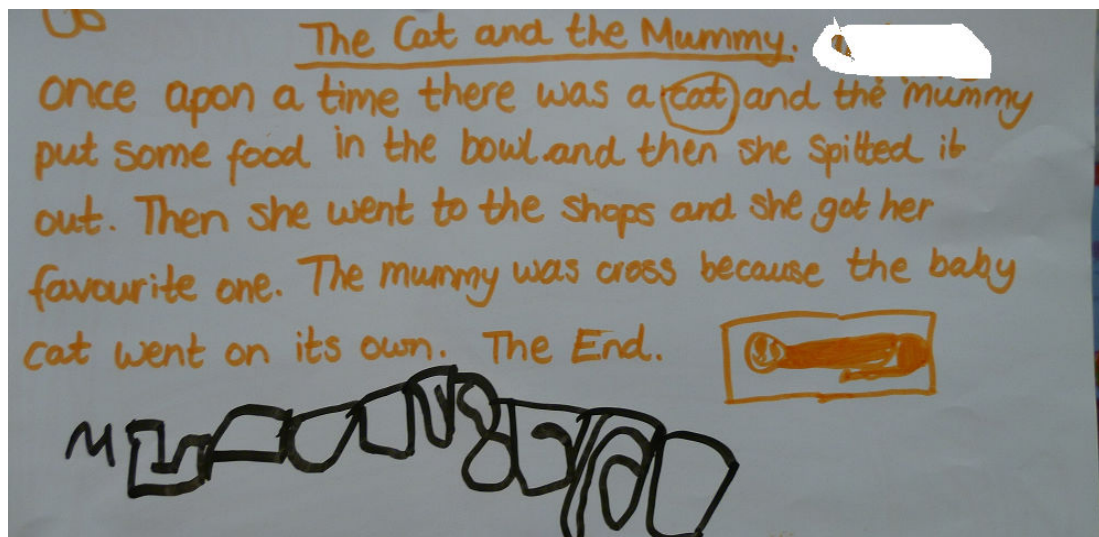


Figure 6.4 Micah's tale about the Cat and the Mummy

Later Micah was asked by the trainer which tale she wished to act out, her original narrative transcribed by the practitioner or her new self-initiated and co-created one. Micah chose her own self-initiated narrative. Again recognition that she had many stories to tell, and that these would be valued, may have prompted her desire to commit to paper and to mark making. Micah looked delighted with both her own drawn story and the new cat tale and hugged them to her as the class moved towards the story acting time, clearly proud. The tale shown in Figure 6.4 was later performed, an act which can in itself support young writers, for as research indicates the roots of writing lie in the other forms of symbolising, including drawing, modelling, play and dramatic enactment. It is these very activities that practitioners seek to engage children in before they come to the abstract symbolic system of writing.

The Helicopter Technique represents one such activity. It does not require children to be 'writers', nor develop a focus on the skills of writing. Rather, it provides a supportive meaningful context for children to tell their stories and act

them out, to bring them to life. In some classrooms however, it also stimulated children's desire to make meaning through writing and drawing and when this was the case and self-initiated, many of the young literacy learners extended their experience of and commitment to writing, and some wrote short stories of their own volition which were then read and enacted.

### 6.4.4 Multimodal communication

While verbal language plays a central role in the Helicopter Technique, throughout the course of our observations, we saw how language was underpinned or replaced by other modes of communication. In this respect, the technique offered all children, including those from diverse linguistic backgrounds and children with particular learning needs, the opportunity for non-verbal modes of communication to be valued (DfEb, 2012: 21). Our analysis of the children's written stories above show the importance of the mode of drawing in children's story scribing. During storytelling and story acting, children expressed meanings through a range of embodied modes, particularly gaze, action and body positioning alongside verbal language. Such multimodal meaning making contributed to practitioners' appreciation of the children's understandings and potential, and enhanced an inclusive pedagogic culture.

The story acting sessions provided a dedicated time in the classroom day where children were encouraged to express meaning through the (mostly) silent enactment of a story, using their bodies to express abstract and concrete concepts, such as 'being happy' or 'being a castle'. Such activity encouraged and to some extent obliged them to explore their conceptual understandings, both individually and as a group. For example, being asked to 'be' an orange required a fairly sophisticated understanding of 'orangeness' – what an orange is, what it looks like, what it does or doesn't do. When invited to do this, one three year old, stood up and was stock still, clearly thinking, then slowly and deliberately she bent down until she was curled up, hugging her knees and sitting on the floor.

Over the course of the programme, the acting out of children's personal stories were situated within a new kind of classroom communicative practice, where children drew on whatever performance styles they were familiar with to act out their peers' stories. For many children whose play patterns frequently featured imaginative and role play, the story acting sessions enabled them to bring these practices to the classroom, and these children often took full advantage of the stage to interpret the stories through body movement, gesture and facial expression, with the occasional vocalisation. Practitioners mentioned how some children were particularly 'good' at performing:

> We have got one (girl) she is very good at it, you say show me being a dog she'll be on all fours going 'woof, woof, woof'.

Sometimes, practitioners attributed individual children's acting skills to their familiarity with narrative forms through home story-sharing, and they observed that other children then learnt from their peers by copying their enactments, providing opportunities for all children, including those for whom English is a second language, to express and explore their conceptual understandings through embodied action:

*T 1: Annabel … knows how to act it out because of her good knowledge of stories the other two children today were following her. I can't remember whether it was a house or something.*

*T 2: Emelia did a very good house and I was quite impressed with that and she's EAL as well so I think it's working quite well with our EAL children because all the courses I've been with to do with EAL and language it's about them knowing the objects to be able to know the words, and for her to know the word and to then act out that word that's quite impressive.*

The story acting sessions also allowed children to share gestural language that was commonly understood across school and home communities, such as waving as a sign for greeting or finger-wagging as a reproach for poor behaviour, or adopting the iconic poses of popular heroes such as Power Rangers. In this regard, as well as promoting meaning-making through action and gesture, the Helicopter Technique constituted an environment where children could practise movement skills, sometimes balancing on one foot to represent a story feature, using and listening to language to describe movement (eg slither, crawl, jump, stretch), and highlighting the importance of safety in movement when several children occupied the stage at the same time (Physical Development, DfEb:25)

The capacity of the Helicopter Technique to enable practitioners and children to take the time to notice both dynamic and more subtle non-verbal expressions of understanding is perhaps what most distinguishes it as an inclusive pedagogic approach. There are extensive examples throughout the data of 'quiet' children actively engaging in story acting (see Section 6.2 on Confidence), as well as children with EAL, children with learning and behavioural difficulties, and children whose stories simply list characters or seemingly unconnected words. For example, a nursery practitioner commented of 3 year-old Johnny, who had 1:1 help, very little language, two older siblings diagnosed as autistic, and who rarely participated in any group activities:

*(Johnny) has never, ever set foot on the stage he just lays around the stage (but) he actually got up and did something on the stage last week.*

This inclusive characteristic of the Helicopter programme was also evidenced extensively in the children's storytelling, where it offered rewarding inclusion in an increasingly familiar classroom practice. Commenting on Johnny's storytelling, his practitioner remarked how, unusually, he had volunteered to tell a story by putting up his hand.

Below we illustrate the significance of multimodal communication in storytelling by a 5-year-old child described by the reception class teacher as having very little English language.

**Wang Tai tells a story**

Wang Tai had a tendency to enact aspects of his stories as he told them, and close analysis of the video data revealed that his actions seemed to spur him on to find the words he needed for the teacher to capture his meaning on the page, as illustrated in the multimodal transcript of a five second extract below.

| Time | Participant | Gaze | Body position and Action | Language |
|------|-------------|------|--------------------------|----------|
| 01:45 | Wang Tai | > teacher | Seated on sofa | |
| | Teacher | > story book | Seated on sofa, scribing story | |
| 01:47 | Wang Tai | > teacher | Raises left arm | and |
| | | | Curls left arm round in a circle | |
| | | | Lowering left arm, raises right arm | |
| | | | Moves his right arm on a level plane from his side, across his front, then jerks it quickly back to point to the right | all the Transformers |
| 01:48 | Teacher | > Wang Tai | Seated on sofa, pen poised over story book | |
| 01:48 | Wang Tai | > teacher | Raises left arm | and |
| | | | Curls left arm round in a circle | |
| | | | Lowering left arm, raises right arm | |
| | | | Moves his right arm on a level plane from his side, across his front, then jerks it quickly back to point to the right | <u>all</u> the Transformers |
| 01:49 | Wang Tai | > teacher > middle distance | Raises right arm quickly in a triumphant manner, holding it in place for a few milliseconds, retracts it slowly | is <u>win</u> |
| 01:50 | Teacher | > story book | Scribing words | all transformers is (*pause*) |
| 01:50 | Wang Tai | > intently to story book | Leans forward so his head is over the story book, watching every move of the teacher's pen on the page | <u>win</u> (*uttered during teacher's pause*) |

The transcript shows how Wang Tai's gaze attention was focussed on the task, initially by attending to the teacher as she waited for his story, and gauging her response as he told his story (01:47). He then began to animate his story as he told it. Often with his actions preceding his words by fractions of a second, he began to move his arms as he uttered 'and' (01:48), then enacted rapid movements to indicate Transformers arriving and leaving, turned his gaze to the middle distance before raising his arm triumphantly and declaring 'is win' (01:49). In the meantime, the teacher had been attending to his story closely, with her gaze initially on the book where she had been scribing an earlier section of the story (01:45), then fixed firmly on Wang Tai (01:48), then returning to the book as she wrote (01:50). Despite her close attention, she did not hear or transcribe Wang Tai's use of a simple conjunction ('and'), or the grammatically correct determiner 'the'. Nonetheless, through a combination of actions supported by explanatory words, Wang Tai completed a 1-page story which was full of drama, and was later enacted by his peers with wholehearted commitment.

Practitioners and trainers also communicated clear meanings silently through their embodied responses to children's stories, and our analysis showed that significant pedagogic work was realised through the teachers' and trainers' uses of body positioning, gestures, gaze attention and gaze aversion. In addition to the close coordination of their gaze and body positioning, practitioners imitated how the trainers often waited patiently for children's stories, with their gaze fixed in the middle distance, a finger resting pensively on their chin, as though they were also thinking of a story. (An example of prolonged space given to a child to tell a story is discussed in Section 6.2.) This action arguably deflected attention away from the storyteller, relieving feelings of being pressured into telling a story. It was also mimicked by children who scribed their own versions of their peers' stories during free play.

One practitioner commented on how you could see from the expression on children's faces that they were thinking deeply about what to put next in their stories. Children's gaze often scanned around the room as they paused to reflect during their storytelling, and drew inspiration from what they saw. Hence the artefacts in the rooms where the children were telling their stories entered in the stories. For example, wall displays showing the names of the child groupings (such as 'ladybirds' or 'stars') sometimes featured as their animate counterparts in the children's stories (see 6.4.4 for an example of this). Images and artefacts in the children's immediate surroundings, or reference to people and places that they knew personally proved to work as a powerful *leitmotif* for the children's narrative creation. Similarly, when we reviewed the storytelling and story acting process with the case study children using the image-based iPad App Our Story (see section 6.6), sharing the photographs we had taken of them, their classroom, peers and teachers proved to be an effective way to encourage even the quietest children to talk about their stories, and how they were acted out.

## 6.4.5 Listening and attentiveness

An important focus of communication in the settings we observed was the encouragement of young children's attentiveness – their ability to listen carefully, to pay attention to others and to sustain attention within particular activities. This is consistent with an emphasis in the Statutory Framework for the EYFS on 'listening and attention' as a significant aspect of the prime area of 'Language and communication':

> *… children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity.*
> *(DfEa, 2012:7)*

As an initiative that requires children to focus closely on an activity, both in storytelling and story acting, it seemed likely that the Helicopter programme would promote active listening and sustained attention, and this was strongly supported by our observations as well as by interviews with practitioners and practitioners' own observations. A striking example comes from the day training session held at Charrington Primary (see also 7.2), where the trainer provided brief illustrations of storytelling and story acting. Training session participants were seated on chairs around the room forming a large oval shape, and when children from a mixed nursery and reception class were brought in to demonstrate storytelling/acting they sat on the floor in a smaller rectangle in front of the adult participants. The trainer referred to the demonstration as 'my little bubble' and asked the adults not to clap or comment, to avoid breaking the children's concentration. The bubble metaphor proved apt as the children, who at the time were unfamiliar with the Helicopter Technique, remained focused and attentive throughout the demonstration, ignoring everyone else in the room. Our observation notes record:

> *Though children are surrounded by adults sitting immediately behind them I only see someone look round once. They are completely absorbed in the activity.*

In interviews, practitioners commented on the attention required during storytelling. We discussed aspects of this above in relation to children's confidence (Section 6.2), but it also has direct implications for listening skills. One practitioner talked about making eye contact with children in storytelling – adults themselves demonstrating listening – which also encouraged children to maintain attention on the activity. Another commented:

> *I think really listening to what the child says is an interesting one … as teachers you have got so many children around you, to really home in on one child with one story and their voice … to really hear that child I think is a really good practice for a teacher when you are busy all the time.*

Joint attention between adults (practitioners and/or trainer) and children was a strong feature of the Helicopter programme, evident throughout our observations of storytelling (see also Chapter 5). For instance, in storytelling, careful attention was paid to seating arrangements ensuring that the adult could see and hear the child clearly and the child could see what the adult was writing.

Trainers gave feedback on this, as in the following extract from observation notes:

> *The trainer suggests to the class teacher – 'just to try to show [the child] the page a bit more.' It's hard for the trainer to work out how to do this as the teacher is left-handed and writes with her arm around the page. They discuss shifting the child's position but decide to leave it as it is, and focus on the visibility of the text when reading back.*

The act of transcribing also encouraged children to pay careful attention to what was going on. A practitioner commented on this in reflecting on the programme in our second interview:

> *It is … very good for listening when you have to tell them to wait. Because they are talking away and you are like 'hold on, let me write that down'.*

This is evident in our observations as adults focused carefully on children telling their story, adults and children maintained joint attention on the story text as the adult transcribed, and later as the adult read this back to the child and marked the character the child wanted to play.

Occasionally there were distractions, for instance from other children, as in the following example where a practitioner is about to read back a boy's story:

> *Just as the teacher is about to start, some girls come up with white spots stuck on their faces: the teacher tells them they'll need to find doctor and they move off.*

> *More spotty children come past – the teacher says there are 'too many sick children'.*

While on this rather dramatic occasion both practitioner and child looked up from what they were doing they quickly settled back to reading the story.

Children's attention was also evident in their close monitoring of the reading back of their story, often checking what the adult had marked up. In reviewing a video extract of storytelling, one practitioner commented:

> *It makes you realise just how involved they are and how much is going on, because … they were so focused on reading the story and making sure which circle was which. That's amazing, that's totally different to what I had in my head.[…] I didn't realise they were so focused as they are, that's really interesting to see.*

Story acting requires sustained attention from the children as audience, and this was commented on by several practitioners. For instance, in reviewing video extracts of story acting, one practitioner noted:

> *… the intensity on their faces, really involved.*

Others talked, in interviews, about children's concentration and listening to each other:

> *I'm really impressed actually with how children have responded in the sense of their concentration. I'm thinking, 'how can you sit for that length of time?'*

*You can learn to listen to people. I think that's a lovely thing about it, that obviously they're listening to the other [story] … it's somebody else's story being told and then they're waiting to take turns, and they've got to be quiet when it's not their turn, but their turn will come.*

Our observation notes indicate that practitioners themselves focused explicitly on the importance of listening – e.g. ensuring children are quiet and attentive before performances begin, ready to do 'good listening', or to 'listen with your eyes, and your ears, and your brains'. Practitioners and trainers modelled attentive audience behaviour, commenting favourably on aspects of the performance and leading applause. They sometimes encouraged more active participation in bringing the audience into the performance (e.g. to mime certain actions – see Chapter 5). Audience members also demonstrated their active attentiveness in spontaneously joining in, as well as occasionally commenting on an aspect of a performance:

*A girl comes on stage as Spiderman, another girl is Ben 10 and a few children are animals. All walk round the stage. On 'Ben 10 sawed Spiderman', the teacher mixes up characters, asking a child playing an animal to look up at Spiderman. Children in the audience correct her.*

*In a Batman story Robin fights with the Joker, who dies. The girl playing the Joker puts her head on one side. The teacher asks how she might die and she gives shuddery groan but still doesn't fall over. Some audience members comment on appropriate ways to die.*

The act of performance also requires listening and attentiveness – paying attention to the story and the actions of others on stage. This, too, was commented on by practitioners:

*I do think that is important – I think, you know, sort of learning to listen to each other and not just listen, but value and engage with, so you are engaging by acting or joining in with actions or whatever.*

*They've got to think about how they're going to move and what they're going to do … which I think makes them more focused … because they've got to follow just what the story is and nothing else.*

In their observations of case study children, recorded in their log books, practitioners noted that listening improved for many children over the course of the programme, particularly those who were initially relatively inattentive. For instance, in the case of children with limited verbal language:

*Much more 'active' listening, turn-taking. This is big progress. He understands more, is also developing an interest in what [others] say, especially if it's in the context of play. Also likes watching Helicopter stories.*

*He has begun to take a greater interest in listening to stories, whether books or other children's stories.*

*She is very interested in what others have to say and listens well. She is getting better at following what is being said. Although she still gets the wrong end of the stick at times this happens less often and totally random answers to questions are increasingly rare.*

### 6.4.6 Children's communication reviewed

Our evidence in Section 6.4 suggests that the Helicopter Technique plays a significant role in supporting all aspects of children's communication and language, including listening and attention/attentiveness (DfEb, 2012:16-17); understanding (*ibid*:18-19); speaking and communication across non-verbal modes (*ibid*:20-22). Inextricably linked to this, is the enabling environment provided by the technique for the development of children's literacy (*ibid*:29-32). In the process, the technique also constituted a rich opportunity for children to fine tune aspects of their physical development (*ibid*:24-25). We have looked at these developments across several different children in different settings, drawing on evidence from practitioners as well as our own observations and analysis of video-recordings.

To draw these different strands together we present a focused example across different aspects of communication in a single case study child, Freddie, who was four years old at the time of the Helicopter evaluation. Freddie is of particular interest as he has limited verbal language and is learning a sign-supported communication system, Signalong (referred to briefly in Section 5.2). At the beginning of the programme his attentiveness was also relatively limited. While this might be seen to present certain challenges in storytelling and story acting, Freddie was perceived by his teacher to have benefited enormously from his participation in the Helicopter programme. The example illustrates the communicative benefits of the highly supportive environment provided in the Helicopter Technique, constructed by practitioners and other staff, the MakeBelieve Arts trainer and children.

**Freddie's development as a storyteller and story actor**

Freddie's story in the first week of the programme was a single gesture about a car, which his class teacher interpreted as the car going 'over there', on her head, in (a) jumper, on Freddie's head, another car going in the sky and in the teacher's mouth. The teacher commented alongside her transcription:

*Told with lots of gestures and hard to understand sounds after Freddie listened to others give their stories, so some interpretation.*

After this initial story the teacher noted in her log book that, during the programme, 'Freddie's stories have developed hugely':

*These progressed to more lengthy gestures. Beyond that he began to introduce sign language he had begun to learn into the stories, e.g. signing songs. By Week 7 he was trying to sign some familiar things as well as telling stories with known signs, actions and gestures and sound effects.*

She commented also that he used some 'nonverbal jokes' in a narrative.

He also began to contribute more actively to story acting:

*Listen[s] really well to other people's stories and giv[es] great performances, needing little support when acting out a simple story.*

The teacher observed more general progress in how Freddie expressed himself, using signs and sounds and gestures, smiling and engaging more with others in

collaborative play. She also comments in her log book on his increased listening and attentiveness:

*Much more 'active' listening, turn-taking. This is big progress. Freddie understands more and is also developing an interest in the context of play.*

The account below from our own observations of Freddie's storytelling (Week 5, June 2102), illustrates the collaborative and supportive interaction between Freddie and his teacher, as well as sometimes the inclusion of another child.

*Freddie has anticipated his turn at storytelling and comes up to the table where the teacher is seated with another boy. The teacher tells him she'll take his story later. A girl seated at the table repeats this carefully to Freddie.*

*Freddie's story comes next. He uses conventional signs for this along with mime and some vocalization. A few words are recognizable. It is a mix of themes from different sources – classroom texts such as games ('What's in the bag?'), a song ('Old MacDonald had a farm') and rhyme ('Three little monkeys'); and home texts (mummy kiss, daddy kiss, Freddie wants kiss). The teacher watches Freddie carefully to interpret his utterances. Sometimes she makes several attempts until she and Freddie are both happy she has got this right. The girl at the table also tries to help by interpreting the utterances. The teacher accepts this for a while but then asks her to allow Freddie to tell his story directly, and the girl concurs.*

*When the teacher writes down Freddie's story she transcribes some signs as uttered (e.g. 'mummy kiss' without a verb), but where the signs refer to pre-existing texts such as a song or rhyme she transcribes these in full (extended) form ('Old MacDonald had a farm'). The final version is:*

*What's in the bag. Moo <u>cow</u>. Ggh. <u>Pig</u>. Old MacDonald had a farm e i e i o. Farm. Moo. <u>Car</u>. Big. Mummy. Kiss. Daddy kiss. Jimmy wants kiss. <u>3 little monkeys</u> jumping on the bed. 1 fell off and bumped his head. Mummy rang the doctor and said no more jumping on the bed.*

The storytelling extract below illustrates the telling and transcription of a single phrase, 'Moo cow'.

The teacher and Freddie are seated at either side of a corner of the table, facing each other. The teacher has the story book on the table where Freddie can see it. The girl (who speaks later) is off-camera at this point, not taking part in the interaction.

In the transcript T = the teacher and F = Freddie. Words in brackets are an interpretation of an utterance – they do not accurately represent sounds produced.

| Turn no | Spker | Language | Action |
|---------|-------|----------|--------|
| 1 | | | T finishes writing previous utterance and looks up at F, pencil poised over the page |
| | | | F has his elbows and forearms on the table and looks directly at T's face. |
| 2 | F | Mmh mmh [moo cow] | F moves his hands up to behind his ears then up into the air, fingers extended. |
| | | | T watches intently. |
| 3 | T | Moo cow | T raises hands slightly (weak mirroring of F's gesture?). Uses questioning intonation, nodding. |
| 4 | F | Yeah | |
| 5 | T | OK - moo cow | T transcribes, repeating words as she writes. |
| | | | F leans forwards, forearms on table; he watches the page, following T's action. |
| 6 | | | T looks up again towards F. |

The story is performed with others, later the same morning. Extracts below are from our notes of the first part of Freddie's story, and the conclusion to this:

*Freddie sits cross-legged in front of the teacher and she begins to read out his story. All the children join in chanting 'What's in the bag?' and Freddie says 'Moo'. The teacher asks him to show how a cow walks round the stage, and he runs around in a large circle. The nursery nurse in the audience puts her hands up at the side of her head as horns, but Freddie doesn't seem to see this.*

*The teacher brings another boy on to the stage as the pig, and blends this with singing 'Old MacDonald had a farm'. Everyone joins in the song and the nursery nurse and some children also sign words.*

*The teacher gets everyone to do 'car' (driving movements with hands) and Freddie runs round the stage driving.*

*Everyone joins in saying and signing 'Mummy kiss', 'Daddy kiss' and 'Freddie wants kiss'.*

*Everyone repeats 'Three little monkeys'. The teacher turns Freddie round so that he can see her signing this.*

*[...]*

*At the end of the performance everyone claps. The teacher and audience say 'Thank you Freddie' and some also sign this. The teacher comments that she is glad they are all getting good with their signing.*

Alongside developments in Freddie's spoken language, listening and performance, the teacher comments that he is beginning to develop an awareness of and interest in writing:

*Freddie does more and more little marks that sometimes look like pre-writing. He does this most days.*

A major milestone for the teacher was reading:

*Reading (4.7.12): whoo hoo – reading back Freddie's story, he looks at word 'daddy' and points to it saying 'dad'.*

During the final round of interviews in this setting when asked to name a highlight in the programme, the MakeBelieve Arts trainer cited the case of Freddie:

*Freddie ... is a huge high point, he's just incredible. I think for me it's watching him struggling with communication and then watching him and realising that he totally comprehends. I've just learnt so much watching him, he's so smiley and happy, and his communication - obviously he really struggles with it but I watched him embracing it, and within other people's stories how he really comes alive.*

The trainer comments also on the teacher's efforts to understand Freddie and to encourage him in signing and notes that Freddie himself, the teacher and the trainer had all worked together and learnt a great deal from his stories.

## 6.5 Creativity in children's stories and performance

It is widely recognised that young children are spontaneously creative both in their play and as they play with language, though there are cultural differences. Research has shown that children naturally experiment with language sounds, structures and meanings, and some argue that such creative language play contains the seeds of poetic, literary and dramatic forms (Cook, 2000; Tannen, 2007; Swann et al., 2011). In this evaluation we draw on the idea of creativity as democratic and life-wide (Craft, 2001). Such 'little-c' or 'process creativity' (Sternberg, 1998) is well aligned with the Revised EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning: creating and thinking critically (DfEb, 2012: 8), the Early Learning Goal 17 (being imaginative) (DfEc, 2012:30) and the Specific Area of Expressive Arts and Design (*ibid*:44-47). It is also in line with the definition proposed by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, which suggests that creativity is 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value' (NACCCE, 1999, p. 29). Such outcomes, we note, are original for the child and of value in the context of their production, in this case in the process of engaging in the Helicopter Technique. In this section, we discuss evidence which suggests that participating in the Helicopter Technique nurtures the creativity of young children.

### 6.5.1 Creativity in storytelling

The act of constructing stories is itself a creative activity, as children produce their own tales drawing on characters and plots that are meaningful to them and to others. Examples of stories discussed in Section 6.4 above show creativity in process as children pay attention to the narration of their own stories. While some story themes become routinised (the proliferation of super heroes,

particularly in boys' stories) the juxtaposition of particular sets of characters is unique and these often have particular twists that have some relevance for the children. In one case, for instance, Superman does battle with (but doesn't kill) a dragon who is hurting people's feelings. We mentioned also that children may creatively weave together themes from different sources. For instance, a child with English as an additional language, whose narrative structures were limited to 'and then' clauses, brought together a little pirate in a tree, a vampire and a werewolf which led to a successful performance. Another began his story with a man driving home in his car and doing some online shopping – an everyday story that was suddenly disrupted when his car was shot at by the army (eventually withdrawn by the king). George, the initially reticent but accomplished storyteller we discussed in Section 6.2, had the opportunity to create stories with distinctive themes (his own inability to think of a story, talking castles, secret agents planning their next move while bad guys peered through the window of their room).

As noted above (Sections 6.1 and 6.4.) children also spontaneously collected stories from others, on occasion going on to act these out. Some also produced their own imaginative written texts. In these activities, some of which were observed during Helicopter time and others initiated in the children's free play, children exerted a strong sense of ownership and control which, as Jeffrey and Woods (2003, 2009) have shown, often leads to creativity or innovation. The observed incidences suggest that there was often an initial owner or director of this Helicopter framed play, which involved supporting peers and/or drawing in collaborators and actors, as well as observers. In some cases props were employed, for example cloths and hats, crowns and other resources. Adults were not seen to be involved though they were affording space and time for such play and in some cases the children's stories were later acted out on the Helicopter stage.

Children's creativity here was individual and collaborative, verbal but also working across multiple modes, with young learners collaborating together to explore and mimic being the adult, generating new tales, taking stories from one another and sometimes enacting them. In one class it was noted that the children became more inclined to 'act out' tales in their free play:

> They've become more animated and they're using props a lot. The acting - they're actually physically doing their movements to show the story. Acting out the story as opposed to just ... you know, you might approach them and say 'what are you doing here'? 'We're playing Harry Potter', but they're just telling the whole story without actually acting out, and now they seem to be acting more.

### 6.5.2 Creativity in performance

The story acting element of the Helicopter Technique is a highly multimodal act (see 6.4), strongly linked to creativity. Children improvise their Helicopter stories with others on stage, where they are invited to express themselves 'as if' they were a lion, a fairy, or a plane, often in collaboration with others. Although this involves a 'script', how the children choose to interpret and perform this is up to them, decided (with the support of the adult as stage manager) at the moment of their improvisational engagement.

There was considerable evidence of children's creativity in performance, though the practitioners, whilst recognising the activity as inherently a creative one, made fewer comments specifically on this than on other benefits of the technique.

It is interesting to note, that whilst not a part of the Helicopter Technique, in two settings the story acting session was demarcated and closed by the use of a song about a frog. In this context the children were often highly animated, particularly as they got to know the words and accompanying actions. Once they knew the lyrics, they included multiple actions, gestures, body movements and facial expressions. In this case they were engaging communally in a single joint performance, contrasting with the Helicopter stories on stage where performers were more 'exposed' to the watching eyes of their peers as they enacted animate and inanimate characters and objects, often with considerable ingenuity and expression. There was observational evidence that some children drew confidence from this activity, albeit a brief closing activity.

In several classes, practitioners perceived that the degree and kind of physical expressions used by the children developed over the eight week period, as the children came to trust the space, gained assurance on the public stage and understood that they could interpret their 'character' in whatever way they chose. Additionally, some voiced the view that as children's confidence grew (see Section 6.2) their gestural and physical engagement and creative expression developed: 'the body language has just opened up hasn't it?' Interpretations of horses, Spiderman, palaces, dustbins, oranges and nests were all brought imaginatively to life in diverse ways, though as in the use of common themes in children's narratives, common performance tropes also emerged, such that castles or bins came to be formed in a similar manner in a particular class. The popularity of dustbins in one setting was connected by the practitioners to the children's desire to take part in the physically free and playful act of falling or 'splatting' into the dustbin, which involved collapsing onto the floor. The children's marked capacity to fall without bumping into others is a point of note; it did not appear to constrain their self-expression.

In many cases children immediately improvised an action, such as crawling around as a dragon with their head and eyes rolling from side to side, in other cases children paused to consider how to interpret the character, for example how to be a talking castle, or the sun. There were instances of children combining ideas and experimenting with these during the enactment, for example, a child tentatively positioned herself as a book and adjusted her shape three times as the tale moved onwards. There were also instances of collaborative creativity as children sought to portray parts of the story together. For instance, two nursery aged boys responding to the line, 'there were two heads walking on their heads', paused to think, then one put his hand behind his back and bent forwards deliberately lowering his head to the floor. The other followed, extending this by waddling about, which the first boy then also did. This revealed both their flexibility with ideas and their capacity to watch and play together. Their performance was responded to with gales of appreciative laughter. In another classroom, four boys asked to represent a submarine imaginatively lay end to end, creating a long structure comprised of their bodies. This was initiated without conversation: one child lay down and the others

joined him. The front child, with his head on the floor, raised one hand in the air to represent the periscope. On some occasions noises accompanied the actions, such as creaking doors (even when 'creaking 'was not mentioned in the story text), gunshots, dragons growling and cats purring, as well as occasional unprompted speech on the part of the children in role.

Whilst these features were evident in some cases, in others the degree of expressiveness and creativity shown was considerably less developed. On occasion children entered the stage space and remained there almost immobile – as one practitioner commented: 'a lot of our acting out at the moment is standing on the stage, that's as far as we are getting'. In response to their perception of this situation, one pair of practitioners modelled this element in the autumn term with new entrants to the nursery. Whilst not part of the Helicopter Technique, these practitioners perceived that the children had not yet understood that they could imagine themselves to be an object or a person and needed support in this regard.

Practitioners noted several advantages in relation to the story acting element: they felt that the children enjoyed the physicality involved: that for some it introduced them to the concept of 'performance', and that any form of enactment, however small, encouraged self-expression and made the children's ideas and stories more concrete. Several noted that, particularly for children with English as an additional language, voicing and enacting words was invaluable. Whilst stepping on to the stage was also a challenge for quiet children, in the safe environment of the Helicopter Technique this became feasible. Inviting children to join in and mime an action e.g. 'shall we all pretend we're swimming? ' was also seen as a useful scaffold to help those less confident, sometimes increasing the participation of a previously shy child (see also Section 6.2). One practitioner commented on the changing performance style of a child who had initially been hesitant:

*Bigger space, bigger movement, more creative movement, closer to other children, more interactive with other children. I mean with Ben today, [he] had to go and eat her as part of a story, and he was physically almost munching on her arm and she wasn't bothered. Whereas six weeks ago she wouldn't have liked that at all.*

Again, this reiterates the enabling environment created by the technique for young children's physical development and dexterity, as mentioned in Section 6.4 (DfEb, 2012: 24-25). The trainers appeared highly attuned to the creative engagement of the young people, for example one described a child performing a dinosaur:

*I said to him 'can you show me how your dinosaur moves', and I just expected him to go 'grrrr' and do a really big running around. And he just looked at me for a little while curiously, and then he went like this [the trainer showed how the child held up three fingers to make a bumby backed dinosaur] and it was brilliant. His dinosaur was far better than what I was expecting, it was actually a brilliant dinosaur.*

Another trainer recounted a time when a child made the smallest of gestures from the side of the stage which creatively denoted a horse, commenting that

this afforded a high degree of satisfaction to the child and was an 'affirmation of power for her - you could just see her just lifted up a bit'.

Whilst the trainers were experienced at analysing the story acting, the practitioners were less so, they found the Video Stimulated Review sessions a useful opportunity to observe more closely and appreciate the children's responses. Many expressed some surprise at the degree of focus and 'imaginative engagement' shown by the children – e.g.: 'they are more inside the characters than I thought', and 'it amazes me she went round like that the whole time, raising her legs up like a proud horse, I didn't notice that at the time'.

At the close of a story enactment and in response to children's interpretations, practitioners all offered positive and affirmative comments to the children. These were often, though not always, brief and generic in nature, for example 'wonderful' – 'great' – 'lovely' – 'super'. Several commented that the trainers were seeking to develop this aspect of their practice in order to extend the children's expressive engagement by asking for or prompting more nuanced interpretations. As one noted, 'she said stop saying thank you and actually praise them for the actions'; and 'that was another thing she's really instilled in us - praise them for the action "good rolling, good walking, good shuffling"'. Though this was not always seen as easy: 'she wants us to be more specific, asking questions about how the lion looks and to give specific feedback about their actions etc., but I feel less confident about this'. The demands of 'helping to bring the story to life', as one practitioner described it, whilst also being the voice of the child as a reader of their narrative, were recognsied.(see section 7.5) Spontaneously offering such comments during the acting was frequently described as 'challenging' and 'hard':

> *... because your brain's working . . . you've got one part of your brain that is totally focussed on keeping the flow of the story. You've got another part of your brain that's thinking 'right, who do I need to ask up next to do what'. You've got another part of your brain that's thinking 'OK, when I ask them to come up and do that how am I going to ask them to show it to us', and then there's another part of your brain that's thinking 'I must remember to praise all of that', and there is so many things going on at once.*

Despite these challenges, the teachers could see the rewards for the children, and were committed to the story acting element of the approach.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the adult's reading back of a story as part of storytelling also often included a performance element. In these cases the adult voices acted like a mediator of affect, their expression affording affirmation of the children's ideas as well as celebration of them and engagement with them. In their use of gaze, and occasional passing of comments during the scribing such as 'Goodness me a lion!', practitioners also conveyed their interest and response to the creative ideas expressed in the tales.

A detailed example is offered below of one enactment to show the complex interplay between the voice of the 'stage manager', in this case one of the practitioners, and the creative action and interaction on the stage, on the part of the children. The story, from a nursery aged child, Eddie, was as follows:

*Once there was a little boy called Harry Potter, and then Harry growed bigger and Harry had a wand and then the ogre came and Harry sticked his wand on the ogre's nose and then a big giant came and it was Hagrid and then the ghoulies came and harry waved his wand and killed the ghoulies.*

**Performing Eddie's story**
[In the transcript, **bold** = emphasis; *italic* = non-narrative asides made to children]

| Turn no. | Practitioner voice | Practitioner actions | Children's Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Once** there was a little boy called Harry Potter | Slow voice, marking the import of the tale | Eddie sits in front of the P facing the class and grinning delightedly |
| 2 | *Eddie you wanted to be Harry Potter didn't you?* | Touches Eddie on the arm | Eddie stands up eagerly |
| 3 | And then Harry growed bigger | Slow with emphasis, voice inflection upwards on 'bigger' | |
| 4 | *Can you show me Harry growing bigger?* | P looks directly at Eddie, eye contact | Eddie stretches up on to tip toes and descends, still smiling |
| 5 | Aah! And then Harry had a wand | Appreciative feedback through big smile and 'aah!' | |
| 6 | *Where's your wand?* | Whispered conspiratorially | Eddie lifts his hand to show the imaginary wand held within it and looks at it with satisfaction. |
| 7 | Then the ogre came | | |
| 8 | *Rory would you like to come and be the ogre, Thea would you like to come and be an ogre, **Jo** would you like to be the ogre? Show me your ogre Jo* | Steady even voice inflection until she reaches Jo, who is clearly eager to join in. P's voice suggests she knows this and is welcoming him into the tale. Delighted expectation on P's face | Jo stomps up and down with his hands raised above his head, this speeds up until he turns around completely and falls to the floor and one shoe comes off |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | And Harry sticked his wand on his nose | Slow and deliberate reading with weight and even emphasis | |
| 10 | *Go and show me sticking the wand on the ogre's nose.* **Oooh!** | As the wand reaches out, P adds vocalisation for emphasis: 'oooh!' | Eddie moves slowly towards the ogre and points his wand towards him. Jo leaps up in the air, calls out in pain 'Wowa wowa wowa' and falls dramatically to the floor, rolling over on the ground. |
| 11 | And then a **big giant** | Slow and with emphasis | |
| 12 | *May would you like to be the big giant?* | | May stands tall then falls to the floor, leaning up on her hands. Jo continues to stomp around the edge of the stage as the ogre, raising his arms up and down and stamping his feet, lifting them high each time. |
| 13 | And it was Hagrid. And then the ghoulies came | Slow and explanation-like | |
| 14 | *Simon, Ben and Alex can you come and be the ghoulies* | | Two children get up quickly and start jumping around the space with feet together, this turns to stomping, they are joined by Alex who also jumps. |
| 15 | And Harry waved his wand and **killed** the ghoulies. *Aah!* | Louder voice. Slow. Adds aah! At second use of the wand and death of ghoulies | Eddie waves his wands up and down pointing it towards the ghoulies, the ghoulies die dramatically making noises as they fall. Eddie smiling says 'sorry' as he keeps waving his imaginary wand. Jo as the ogre keeps stomping. May as Hagrid remains still and on all fours. |
| 16 | *Well done and our ogre is still stamping around and that's brilliant and that's Eddie's story shall we all clap? Well done.* | | The players return to their seats, Eddie goes last, standing tall, smiling and looking delighted all the while as the class clap |

This transcribed story enactment shows how the voice of the practitioner affords weight and significance to even the smallest actions in the tale. She narrates the tale as if it were a story in a book, using different inflections and even engaging in dramatic whispering and responds intuitively with sounds to the effect of the wand on the ogre and the 'ghoulies'. Her evident pleasure in both narrating Eddie's story and seeing the tale unfold, serves to frame the experience for the children who seize the opportunity of bringing it to life with energy and flair. The zany ogre, whilst affected by Harry's wand, chooses not to let this mean he has been killed and continues to stomp with enthusiasm until the end. Eddie, normally a somewhat quiet and reserved child, who had previously turned down some opportunities to take part in other children's stories, remained quite close to the practitioner at all times, except when he stepped towards the ogre, but is clearly imagining the story as if he were Harry. When he apologises to the dying ogres it is unclear whether he is doing so as Eddie, or in role as Harry taking pity on his victims. It is clear the story is imaginatively co-constructed by the practitioner and all the children involved and valued by the audience as a creative act.

## 6.6 Children's perceptions of the Helicopter Technique

Our conversations with children using the Our Story app indicated that their experience of the Helicopter Technique was positive. While some did not reconstruct their original stories, many took great pride in doing so and were keen on sharing their experiences. They were quick and comfortable in re-constructing their stories, sharing their views and feelings through stories. Equally, children seemed to retain positive memories of the story acting part of the session and re-viewed the pictures with great interest. They showed a clear sense of what their story was (or would be) about and seemed intrinsically motivated and enthusiastic about the reminiscing task.

It is difficult to tell how much children's recollections - and reports of recollections - were mediated by the approach we used to prompt their reflections. The use of the app may have significantly affected the nature of the stories and experiences children shared with us. We therefore describe children's recollections in relation to the app affordances for recall and active construction of past experiences. As we describe children's activities with the app, we highlight the skills and knowledge which are directly relevant to their experience of the Helicopter Technique.

Each child chose to represent their narrative in a different way. While some children were keen on reconstructing the story they had told the practitioner in the morning (e.g. Ethan, Jake), others used the retelling session as an opportunity to create a new multimodal story (e.g. Yakubu and Maiden). For ease of representation, we report children's activities according to their experiences of storytelling, and of story acting.

### 6.6.1 Children's views and experiences of storytelling

Children's activities showed that while some children reproduced their original stories with considerable accuracy, other children said they simply didn't remember their stories. For example, when retelling her story to the researcher, Hanan, whose story followed a pattern of repetitive story plots of a father

looking for his daughter, the story she told the researcher was almost identical to the one she had told the practitioner. Anna not only reproduced verbatim text from her story but also re-enacted the small snails and diamonds which were part of the original text. By contrast, Yakubu seemed not to remember his story, or perhaps considered it insufficiently important to be remembered:

> Researcher: Do you remember what your story was about?

> Yakubu: Uhm, oh, I don't know. I just made it up.

When reconstructing stories, some children spent considerable time finding the right pictures and putting them in the order of their previously narrated story. On these occasions, the filmstrip presentation option helped children to present their experiences in chronological order (e.g. Ethan, George). Other children did not rely on pictorial cues and, with the researcher's first prompt, they readily reproduced the story as told to their teacher (e.g. Hanan, Anna).

However all children enjoyed exploring storytelling pictures. In addition to the photographs pre-selected by the researcher, children took great delight in selecting more, or different, images. Children were very selective about which images they chose from the photo-folder and seemed to enjoy the possibility of choice. They were particularly keen on finding images which showed them as the main story protagonists. Although in the conversation the researcher reminded children about their participation in other children's stories, children seemed to use a simple rule of thumb to identify pictures representing their own stories: if they were included in the picture, then it must be from their story:

> Researcher: How do you know which one is your story?

> Anya: Because that one is me [points to herself in the picture].

Considering the children's young age and the natural tendency of pre-schoolers to perceive their own self as the centre of interest, it is not surprising that children wished to find pictures which depicted themselves and/or their own stories. However it is encouraging that in the process of picture browsing, children also acknowledged the presence of their friends and recognised their friends' stories. It is unclear why and how much children remembered from their friends' stories, although one child seemed to have a clear idea, as shown in this rather amusing excerpt:

> Researcher: Is this Yakubu's story?

> Alecia: No, that's Dan's.

> Researcher: How do you know?

> Alecia: Because because that's Dan and Micky and I just remember because I have an excellent brain.

The app's open-endedness and possibility for customisation may have unlocked children's creativity and stimulated actions and behaviours that go beyond the expectations of a traditional review activity. For instance, instead of choosing pictures already taken, Yakubu was very keen on using the in-built camera to take new pictures from the classroom (e.g. a picture of a classroom cupboard) and insert them into the story he was reconstructing with the researcher. Similarly, Emily asked and was willing to take new pictures and create a new

story of herself and the researcher there and then, in the moment of reminiscing. In this respect, the app, while used here as a research tool, may have potential for enriching the Helicopter Technique, a point taken up in Recommendations (Chapter 8).

### 6.6.2. Children's views and experiences of story acting

During picture-viewing, we also gained some insights into children's perceptions of particular aspects of the story acting part of the Helicopter Technique. For example, when looking at a picture from the performance of her story, Alecia commented that she was unsure of why her friend acted out the story in a specific way, as shown in this conversation extract:

> Researcher: What's Ralph doing? [in the picture]
>
> Alecia: Stretching.
>
> Researcher (surprised): Is that what happened in your story?
>
> Alecia: Yeah, I didn't know what he was doing at all.

Anna accompanied a picture from her story acting session with a big smile and a comment: 'those are all my little babies'. When prompted by the researcher what a particular boy was doing in another picture from her story, she said:

> Anna: Trying to catch all the babies.
>
> Researcher: Why did he have his arms open?
>
> Anna: He's trying to fly like bird.

These responses show that children are sometimes able to consider and comment on their friends' roles during story acting. Further glimpses into children's perceptions of roles and their awareness of others were also provided.

The audio-recording feature of the app enjoyed special popularity among children but was exploited to different degrees in children's story-retellings. While some children recorded parts of or entire stories they had told the practitioner, others used the recording to enrich their earlier story. For example, Yakubu found a picture of a 'big giraffe' which was part of his original story and accompanied this picture with a recording of the giraffe's munching sound. Another child, Maiden, was eager to add a scary animal sound to his pictures. Interestingly, when children chose to audio-record their entire stories, they followed two different strategies. Some children (Ethan and George) recorded parts of their stories in correspondence with individual pictures showing particular segments of the narrative. Others (Alecia and Anna) recorded their entire stories in one go and in relation to only one specific picture. Surprisingly, one case study child (Emily) used the recording feature to create a new piece we had not previously heard her telling:

> Hello, my sister is coming to my house today. And I can't wait. Today I really am excited. And it was my sister's birthday (....)'.

A further sign of some children's inventive creativity with the recording facility, was their inclusion of the researcher as one of the protagonists in their reconstructed stories, asking her to 'say something' with them, or even to engage in a longer recorded conversation. In three instances (Emily, Yakubu and Alecia),

this was preceded or followed by children taking a picture of the researcher with the inbuilt camera. Alecia also wanted to add the researcher's name to the pictures of her reconstructed story. Such 'story-inclusion tactics' could be perceived as children's way of creating stories which are directly relevant to the story-listeners. In addition, children's willingness to reposition the researcher as a 'co-storyteller' reflects their experiences of storytelling in the class, where great value was placed on supporting all children in narrating their experiences. The positive influence of the practitioners and/or MakeBelieve Arts trainers in this process was manifested in children's encouragement of the researcher to participate, as shown in this episode with Emily:

*Emily asks the researcher [the app audio-recording is on]: Can you say something?*

*Researcher: I don't know what.*

*Emily: Don't worry I'll help you, we can say it together.*

The fact that attitudes and even part of discourses of the practitioners and/or the MakeBelieve Arts trainers crept into children's own perceptions of story is shown here:

*Emily [when viewing one of the pictures from story acting]: Someone the queen and someone the king but that doesn't matter in stories. [Our emphasis]*

The possibility offered to record sounds without any restrictions meant that children with limited vocabularies could reconstruct, capture and act out their original stories in one easy process. For Jaime, whose entire story was about a dinosaur making an *Arrrh* sound, recording the *Arrh* and playing this back to the researcher was a powerful moment of story-sharing.

Children's reflections on their experiences of the Helicopter Technique were rich and encouraging; all case study children were eager to communicate their experiences. Indications of their agency and active choice-making were evident in the various kinds of stories they told us and although some children interpreted the Our Story session as an opportunity to tell a new story, their active engagement and participation is evidence of their previous positive experience of storytelling.

### 6.7 Summary and conclusion

Chapter 6 provides evidence of the significant impact of the Helicopter Technique on the children who took part in storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. Information collected from practitioners, along with our own observations and video-recordings and data from the children themselves, suggests the following:

- The approach provided a motivation and an environment for the development of children's communication. There was evidence of the significant impact of the technique on communication, including literacy as well as aspects of speaking and listening.

- Practitioners valued particularly the focus on children's spoken language. The approach provided practitioners with evidence of children's progress

in language and communication, something that was particularly valued in the case of understanding and evaluating spoken language.

- The approach provided considerable communicative support and encouragement for a child with limited verbal language who used a sign-supported communication system (Signalong).

- The archive material discussed in Chapter 4 revealed that practitioners and advisers who had worked with the approach perceived it made a rich contribution to children for whom English is a second language, in terms of their more extended use of English, widened vocabulary and oral confidence. In the summer programme discussed in this chapter, the technique was also used successfully in classes with a high number of bilingual learners. We do not however have evidence in the sessions observed as part of this evaluation of the use of children's home language(s) being drawn on to support storytelling or story acting.

- The approach impacted significantly upon children's confidence. This was a general benefit for all children. Additionally, practitioners reported sometimes striking changes in some initially quiet children, who, during the course of the programme, grew considerably in confidence. Some practitioners suggested this increase in confidence was also evident in other areas of school and classroom life.

- The approach contributed to children's developing sense of agency through its respect for children's voices, the emphasis on children choosing whether and how to tell a story and take part in story acting, and the provision of a secure and supportive space for story.

- A striking finding was that the approach motivated the children to engage in literacy activities, in taking down other children's stories and producing their own illustrated story books. It also fostered increasing awareness of written language (e.g. in following the transcription of their stories).

- Analysis of children's language use in their story texts revealed that, over the course of the programme, there was no evidence of systematic development in children's narrative and linguistic structures, or in the range of vocabulary involved.

- Towards the beginning of the programme there was some evidence of gendered behaviour in children's storytelling (e.g. with stories limited to typical 'boys'' or 'girls'' themes), and in their participation in acting out (e.g. a boy's unwillingness to take on a female role). During the course of the programme there were some changes, particularly in children's increased confidence and willingness to take on roles with which they might not identify, but which they performed well and seemed to enjoy.

- Many children became more assured and skilled performers during the course of the Helicopter programme. The technique has considerable potential for fostering children's creativity – particularly of creativity in performance

- Children's active participation, interest in and ability to talk about their stories, suggests their experiences of story gained through their participation in the Helicopter Technique were positive.

- While Helicopter stories tend to be seen as a verbal accomplishment, multimodal analysis illustrated the significance of communication across different modes (e.g. facial expression, gaze, body movement as well as verbal language). This was evident both in children's communication and in adults interacting with children.

There are one or two issues for further consideration and development. These include working with bilingual children who use English as an Additional Language. Interacting with such children clearly depends on the usual practice in the school and the level and types of language support that are available. The openness and flexibility of the Helicopter Technique suggests that it could accommodate children's use of home language(s), and this may increase some children's fluent participation in storytelling/story acting. It would be interesting to investigate this further.

The respect evident in the Helicopter Technique for children's voices contributes to the supportive environment provided for children's stories, and for their development as storytellers and performers. We suggested that on occasion this may be in tension with a need felt by some practitioners to intervene in children's narration and performance: for instance, extending the range of themes and the roles available in children's narratives, encouraging children's use of standard grammar. The evidence we have provided of children's development during the programme (e.g. their engagement in literacy activities as well as in the use of spoken language, their increasing willingness to take on different roles as performers) may be helpful here. It is also worth noting that there are other spaces for direct intervention on these issues. It may be useful to acknowledge this in seeking to preserve the unique space occupied by the Helicopter Technique.

# Chapter 7: The Helicopter Technique and practitioners

This chapter examines the data collected through the interviews (pre, post programme and follow up) with each of the six practitioners and informal conversations with them and other members of staff in the four settings during the period of the evaluation. We also draw upon field notes made during observations and on-site interviews with trainers about the work in each setting.

In order to explore the impact of the programme upon the practitioners we focused on their initial perceptions and expectations, and then sought their views about the training, their reflections on their experience of using the technique and any challenges they encountered as they developed it in their classrooms. In particular we considered the extent to which the technique was sustained into the autumn term in each of the settings.

Several themes were identified, firstly that through working with the trainers, both in the training and in the classroom, the practitioners came to value and enjoy using the technique, in part because they recognised multiple benefits for the children and in part because they valued the expertise of the MakeBelieve Arts team. Secondly that , the practitioners developed considerable confidence in using the Helicopter Technique through the support offered and that this in turn led several of them to make some small alterations and adaptions to using it in the classroom, demonstrating their professional 'ownership' of and commitment to the approach. Thirdly, that their involvement prompted considerable reflection in-action and reflection on-action. This served to enrich their professional practice and understanding, not simply within the context of using the approach, but more widely. As a consequence of this range of impact and their own engagement in the approach, all the practitioners, when visited in the Autumn were continuing their use of the technique.

We consider all these aspects of impact in this chapter, also discussing the challenges encountered, the issue of sustainability, and, drawing upon our own understanding of the EYFS, we consider the degree of alignment of the Helicopter Technique with this early years curriculum framework., also connecting to the practitioners perspectives in this regard. We conclude by summarising the findings..

## 7.1 The practitioners' motivations and expectations

In this section we consider the practitioners' motivations and expectations at the start of the project and their initial experience and attitudes towards the approach. The practitioners' previous experience of the Helicopter Technique varied. Three had encountered it before, one had been on a training day with MakeBelieve Arts and had later implemented it in her setting, and two recalled some '8' and 'perhaps 15 years' previously that they had been involved in both being trained and using the approach. Of the remaining practitioners, two had never heard of it and the other, whilst aware of the approach had never worked with it.

Three of the practitioners had been selected by the head or senior management to take part and had not volunteered**,** where this was the case they often commented upon this expectation/requirement that they were to take part,

stating for example 'initially I was just told you have to do (it), you have to get involved'. Despite this early sense of imposition and perceived lack of choice in some of the settings, all the practitioners interviewed prior to the training were looking forward to the project. Two had 'seized the opportunity to be involved' and others had been encouraged by their colleagues, some of whom 'knew more about it and were interested in creative ways of telling stories', so they had agreed readily. In one case it was seen 'as a school decision but we'd heard about the Helicopter Technique beforehand and it just seemed like a wonderful idea'. Several had not experienced working alongside arts practitioners in their classrooms before and viewed this positively. One became more interested when she looked at the clip of Paley on YouTube. Paley's comment that 'the best thing you can do in your day is to speak to a child, have a conversation' had resonated with her and prompted reflection, causing her to comment:

> *'It sounds to me like this project …might teach children that what they say, there's something happens with their words. … I think that goes for anything in life, not just stories … I think that's just important that your words are valued, they mean a lot.'*

**Without exception the practitioners were interested and positive** about taking part, most were very enthusiastic about the opportunity. It was recognised as a potentially helpful project for: the children, their own professional development, the wider setting, two noted they were also interested because it was a research project. For example*:*

> *Anything that can help the children is always worth having a look at, having a go at.*

> *It's just giving new experiences to the children and to the staff as well.*

> *We're definitely looking forward to it. …Just because it's something really new, it's something quite exciting, it's great to be involved in it from sort of a research point of view.*

**Few reservations were expressed at the outset**, two of the practitioners who had been involved before wondered if the Helicopter Technique would be difficult with three year olds with limited language and if the issue of using traditional tales had been resolved. One wondered if it would widen the youngest children's understanding of story as 'I think they expect when we say "can you tell me a story" they expect a story from a book'. Two were worried about the current demands upon them as professionals and the challenge of integrating 'yet another' activity into their provision. Also the possibility that the children might say 'something controversial' or sensitive was voiced. For example:

> *Initially, I have to be honest, I thought 'oh, something else', because with the Read/Write Inc [a phonics programme) I felt a bit - overloaded - which everybody does I know.*

> *If there's an occasion where someone's being silly, swearing for example, which I don't think would happen in this class but you never know, you have to stop and say 'there are certain rules' just like you know we wouldn't ever use bad language in other contexts, we don't here or maybe if someone maybe says something which you think 'oh, it's a bit disturbing'.*

## 7.2 MakeBelieve Arts training and professional support for practitioners

MakeBelieve Arts provided support for practitioners in implementing the Helicopter Technique through an initial training session, and working alongside practitioners during the introduction of the technique in the summer term. We discuss both these forms of support below and using participants' written feedback and our own observations of the training in two of the settings, we seek to draw out the key elements and value of the experience.

### 7.2.1 The Helicopter Technique training sessions

The training sessions unfolded differently in each setting. In Charrington this was a full day's training, in St. Aidan's ( which combined with Eager Beavers) this was a morning session and in Bournehill the training comprised an after school staff meeting slot, which due to school activities was reduced, we understand to around an hour. Thus each had different time frames.

In Charrington, a day-long INSET session was held for practitioners in the school and from other schools, children's centres, play zones and day care nurseries in the borough. In all, 21 practitioners attended the session, all working with children in the early years. The session was led by the Artistic Director of MakeBelieve Arts and consisted of:

a)     Introductions within the group and an introduction to the Helicopter Technique.

b)     A demonstration of story acting and storytelling with a group of twelve young children from the school. The trainer first worked with the children acting out children's Helicopter stories from other settings, which she read from a book, then took stories from two of the children, which the group acted out. She took 'private stories' from children in the main Early Years area, observed by small numbers of practitioners at a time. These stories were then acted out in front of the whole group of practitioners taking part in the training.

c)     Viewing extracts from a film of Paley, which demonstrated her work, with reflections.

d)     Small-group and plenary discussion of the approach as illustrated in the film and demonstrated by the Artistic Director.

e)     Further discussion of the approach, including questions from participants.

f)     A participant in the session telling a story, which was then acted out by the group.

g)     Participants telling and responding to 'private stories' in pairs (one respondent having been asked to be encouraging, another to act bored), followed by a review of this activity.

h)     Final review and discussion/question and answer session.

The session was fairly packed but participants were clearly engaged throughout.

In Eager Beavers and St Aidan's, the training was offered as a morning session for teachers and other practitioners from local schools to attend. The focus practitioners from Eager Beavers and St Aidan's attended as well as the heads of

both settings. The session was led, again, by the Artistic Director of MakeBelieve Arts with another trainer also present in a support role. This shorter session covered points a), b), f) and h) from the list above. The Artistic Director took 'private stories' from the children in the hall in front of all the attendees.

In Bournehill the initial training was held as an after-school activity. Unfortunately, due to the date of this training, no members of the research could team could attend. Teachers reported that the training was scheduled to last for up to two hours, but in fact was obliged to be cut short due to other school activities. They recalled it lasted approximately one hour. *They felt it had been very useful as an introduction to the trainers and to get an overview of the technique.*

There was some knowledge of the Helicopter Technique in Charrington, from individuals who had done training before or who had heard about it from other staff , though quite a few were new to this work, but in St Aidan's and Eager Beavers no one was familiar with the approach or had direct experience of it. Responses to the training sessions in Charrington's and St Aidan's /Eager Beavers were universally positive, and these are considered first. Participants commented in their feedback forms that they had gained insights into the storytelling and story acting process and felt able ( and in many cases were now keen ) to implement the programme in their settings (or that they had gained further understandings in cases where they had already worked with the technique).For example:

> *Good modelling of technique, saying the story as it is written down, pace was good, could imagine this would keep/hold the interest of children.*

> *Very well presented, clearly explained and exciting!*

> *Feel reassured and confident that I will be supported by X(trainer) when she comes in to work with the children*

It may be significant that feedback from Bournehill, where the least initial training was given, tended to be minimal (ticks and 'fine' or 'helpful'). Several practitioners in this setting were already aware of how the approach worked, nonetheless one noted that it 'reminded me of the system' and others were appreciative of the opportunity to revisit the technique and develop their expertise. By contrast, participant responses in the longer session at Charrington were often quite detailed. Participants referred to the enthusiasm of the trainers and features such as good/clear presentation of the technique, their feeling that they understood the approach and its rationale, the fact that all questions were dealt with, the appropriateness of the session length, and the relevance of all the elements in the day listed above.

The demonstration of storytelling and acting with children was particularly welcomed by staff at all venues and clearly impressed many of the practitioners, the space in which the stories were told and enacted was described by Lee as a 'bubble' in which, despite the presence of large numbers of adults, the children were focused and highly engaged. They seemed largely unaware of the adult circle around them so intent were they on the activities involved. We mentioned above (Section 6.4.5) that this provided evidence of children's attentiveness, but it should also be noted that the adult audience was highly focused as well

throughout the activity. In addition, several participants at Charrington and St Aidan's/Eager Beavers referred to the value of participating themselves in story acting, for example:

*Encouraging, lots of praise for the children/adults too!*

*Found it very useful to act out and partake in a session like the children will.*

One practitioner voiced a degree of 'fear' of acting and expressed some discomfort about joining in, but this was handled skilfully by the Artistic Director and following the adult participation session, the practitioner expressed less concern, noting in conversation afterwards that she felt 'in safe hands' and that she wanted to make sure 'the children are likewise' . The Artistic Director combined factual information with reassurance and considerable enthusiasm across the two observed training sessions, commenting in one 'There's nothing anyone can do that's wrong in this – whatever they do is right.'

On responding to a question on changes they would suggest to the training session, many participants either made no suggestions or commented that they had enjoyed the day/morning and had nothing to add. Changes suggested in the Charrington session usually referred to more information on working with specific groups of children e.g. children with special educational needs, younger children or children with English as an additional language. Some participants in the shorter sessions at Bournehill and St Aidan's /Eager Beavers would have liked more time. Some participants (across sessions) mentioned that they would have welcomed more material to take away. For example 'a handout with key phrases on would be helpful'. A brief summary of the technique was provided in all sessions, and other materials were available to buy: we do not have records of how many were purchased.

Considering the different sessions, which varied in time and in the ways noted above, it appears that even in a short focused after school training, practitioners were able to grasp sufficient of the technique to take it forward into their classroom practice. However it is the case that more extended periods of time did enable the underlying principles to be explored in rather more depth and also afforded more scope for building relationships between the MakeBelieve Arts team members and the practitioners. The central activity, which was universally valued and applauded, was the demonstration with children as this enabled the practitioners to grasp the nature of the technique. Also as noted the participation of staff in their own telling and enactment was seen to be invaluable.

An optimum model for training appears to be of at least an extended staff meeting length, but preferably a half day and in a morning if possible, as practitioners are often tired and thus inevitably less receptive at the end of the day. The core elements of such training are those noted above, though these comments are made tentatively as no member of the team was able to attend the Bournehill session.

### 7.2.2 Trainers and practitioners working together in the classroom

We mentioned in Chapter 5 that during the eight-week period in which the Helicopter Technique was introduced to classes, MakeBelieve Arts trainers worked with practitioners for six of the eight weeks. Our observations of the Helicopter Technique in action included these sessions, and in our account in Chapter 5 we noted (Section 5.4) that joint management of the sessions between trainers and teachers mostly ran extremely smoothly. This included on-going classroom modelling of the approach and supportive critiques of practice, such work in order to develop practitioners knowledge and skills is described in the research literature as coaching (Cordingley et al., 2009) and was seen as highly valuable and, indeed, crucial, by both trainers and practitioners. For instance, a trainer commented:

*I think what's brilliant about the Helicopter model is that obviously you get the opportunity to work alongside the teacher, it's not tokenistic or gimmicky: ..., because there is that commitment over time that you're showing ... I think it would feel wrong ... if you just came in - 'This is what we're doing' - and then left, because there's no sustainability then.*

It was clear that MakeBelieve Arts trainers took their in- class role seriously and that this was valued by the practitioners, who appreciated the various dimensions of this including for example, the modelling, the feedback and the sense of teaching alongside:

*I think X(trainer) was very good with getting you up and running, getting me up and running and just kind of showing, teaching alongside, that was really valuable,*

*I think what we did was where they came in over a period of time and you had time in between to try out things and then raise it and then X(trainer) gave you feedback, first she models it and then you do it with her and then alone, I thought it was very effective actually.*

*Just like it was done really that's the best way.... having somebody sitting there with and prompting you as you go until you get more comfortable about it and then giving you feedback afterwards, so they are giving you the rein to go with it with a bit of guidance but they are following it up.*

As several recognised 'You need to have a proper coaching process' and 'It's not something you could just a read a book about it and then go "Oh, I could do that".' One practitioner commented in particular on the value of observing trainers working with children on Helicopter stories:

*I suppose it's given me an opportunity to sit back and watch a bit ... particularly [when trainers] have been doing it because I have then been able to sit back a bit more. It was interesting that with [a child in the class] was very upset because he wasn't able to be a character in the story I think, and was really sobbing, and [the trainer] responded to that in a particular way, and I ... that was quite illuminating for me.*

This quote highlights a number of key features regarding the coaching, including that the practitioners appreciated the opportunity to reflect on classroom practice, by observing how the children responded to the trainers

when the trainers were leading the activity. This gave them the (rare) time and mental space to think about the children's social and emotional responses and development in the classroom environment, and how that shaped their receptivity to learning opportunities. In addition, the dialogue with trainers provided practitioners  with the opportunity to talk through their own professional ideas and finally, that the practitioners appreciated the opportunity to see the trainers being very flexible in their approach to the Helicopter Technique.

 Our observations  suggest that practitioners benefitted from such regular coaching style feedback, and appreciated trainers' brief comments and suggestions during the process of storytelling and story acting and occasionally at the end of sessions. Whilst practitioners were all positive about the support received, due to the pressures of the classroom context, in some settings, they were not always able to lend their full attention to these crucially important moments for reflection. One or two practitioners mentioned points with respect to relationships with trainers: we deal with these separately below (Section 7.3.4).

## 7.3 Practitioners' experiences and reflections

Across the 8 weeks of the programme as the practitioners worked alongside the trainers and on their own, their largely positive initial attitudes towards the approach were substantially affirmed and developed in action and their confidence as facilitators was nurtured. During this time they encountered various small challenges. In this section, based on the findings from our evaluation, we examine the impact of the programme upon the practitioners and also consider the challenges

## 7.3.1 Views of the benefits and principles of the Helicopter Technique

At the close of the summer term and in the autumn interviews, the practitioners were invited to comment on how well the approach had gone in their settings. All involved noted it had gone 'very well' or 'well', predominantly the former. Positive attitudes were expressed about both the Helicopter Technique and the support they had received, as one observed 'it's been a wonderful experience'. This positive affirmation of the experience is particularly noteworthy since three of the staff involved had been expected to participate by the senior management. Whilst they had also encountered challenges discussed later, there was clearly very considerable enthusiasm for and commitment to the approach.

'*Thursday has become a day that's really exciting. You kind of wake up and go 'oh, it's Thursday, it's Helicopter today'.*

The practitioners' **affirmative appraisal of their experiences** mainly related to the perceived benefits. One noted that the simplicity and clarity of the Helicopter Technique which 'doesn't require anything special' just 'thought, time and a roll of masking tape and paper and a pen' helped to ensure that both the children and the adults took it on board quickly and with enthusiasm. Others observed that it had been a privilege to be part of the research and to share that experience. All recognised that the children had taken to it easily and had benefited from their involvement. For example:

*It's gone really well, the children have really embraced it and to watch them grow through each of the sessions has been really amazing. One of the things that impressed me when we saw the first sort of demonstration session down at the school was how two children that I know to be extremely shy and timid got up and had a go at it, and that's been replicated here.*

*The benefits to be gained from a technique that requires such simple resource and delivers……………every area of learning… holistic development for every child, whether they are a quiet child or whether they are you know a loud, excitable child … is invaluable. … I think then they will go on to have the confidence and the curiosity and everything that is needed to go on and do academic learning.*

The core benefits and principles articulated by the practitioners were the **inclusivity and equality of opportunity** that the approach offered, the 'freedom to express, be it through speaking, acting, clapping, thank you' and its capacity to recognise and honour the stories of all.

*I think the core of it is, I think a child can tell their story as it is to them, exactly as it is for them, and I think every child matters with that, every child, both in terms of telling a story, every child can tell a story as we have discovered ….but also every child can participate then in the acting out of the story and if they didn't want to of course they can also chose not to… I think not every child maybe feels ready to tell their story but I think every child has a story somewhere in them and I think there is something quite amazing about hearing their story.*

*It is good tool in that no matter when you have come into the setting, where you have come from, what your background is, it goes back to that equality again the rules are the same for everybody, the opportunities are the same for everybody, the choice is there, the freedom is there.*

Its potential to contribute to **children's communication, language and literacy** was also frequently noted (as discussed in Section 6.4), their oral stories were valued in and of themselves and were seen to prepare the ground for later learning, 'it will impact on wanting to read more stories and then to write, so it is all quite linked together really'. Also the children's engagement and attentive listening was frequently remarked upon. It was seen as a genuine context for learning about writing and for communicating through drawing and mark making/writing. Where there were separate nursery and reception classes (Bournehill and Eager Beavers/St Aidan's) this was profiled more by the reception teachers.

*…the way it fed into writing and that sort of thing which is of course is the pressure in a school as well, you know you get them writing in reception for that reason alone I think … but I think there is way more to it than that… where they are so familiar with their own story that writing it becomes sort of, it sort of became obvious to them that you might want to write it down and tell somebody.*

Additionally, by the close of the project, a number of other benefits were identified; these have been discussed in Chapter 6 and included **increasing children's confidence, the development of relationships, a sense of**

**belonging, agency and imaginative play**. As one practitioner observed 'there are so many underlying, hidden areas of learning in it... it's so meaningful and so effective'. Another perceived that 'having the record of the children's stories is a really good way of evidencing their language' and still another viewed the technique as a valuable group activity which prompted involvement and interaction which was 'much more interesting perhaps than register time or sitting and just listening to a story'. Also, as discussed in Section 7.5, it was seen to support nursery children developing their social and emotional 'readiness' for school' and, as we discuss further in the concluding section of this chapter, it was perceived to be very well aligned with the EYFS.

**The potential flexibility of the approach** was often mentioned, though the evidence on this issue was somewhat contradictory, as whilst many described the Helicopter Technique as flexible and responsive, there was also fairly frequent reference to the notion of 'doing it correctly', or as the practitioners perceived in the way the trainer wanted. Whilst no imposition was in evidence, the way of working shared by the MakeBelieve Arts trainers was interpreted by three practitioners as needing to be adhered to and 'delivered'. For example 'we have tried to stick to the rules' , 'I think I was doing it how you're meant to., and with regard to involving the teaching assistants 'I didn't do it because I didn't think I was supposed to .. Although most practitioners introduced small alterations (noted below) in response to their own children's needs, some expressed a degree of uncertainty about whether these would be seen as appropriate. However, as the following quotes from two of the trainers indicate, the MakeBelieve Arts team does not see the approach as tightly framed or inviolate.

> *It's never been about kind of getting like 'we should never have done that, we don't do it that way', because like Vivian said the whole reason that she never wrote a book about her practice or the technique (is)because she wants people to do it, and it could feel like you're restricted in 'you do this, then there's step 2, there's step 3. It's not like an instruction manual, and she writes from the perspective of the stories that she's given or things that have interested her, or interested her class, and I think that feels right, and what we're doing now it's not saying 'if you don't do it step 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 you've done it all wrong.*

> *Each classroom has a completely different culture to it, so like with X [a boy in one setting] and stopping it, and stopping the story that might be seen as 'oh, but you didn't do that in the training', or 'but you're missing out some children, and that didn't happen' and you kind of have to go 'Rules are there and made to be broken because it has to work for you.'*

For three of the practitioners this was not always clear. Their perceptions in this regard may relate to the pressure to perform and conform in the context of primary education over the last decade, such that teachers in the primary years and to some degree even early years practitioners may feel obliged to seek 'permission' to develop their practice in various ways, or may feel less than secure about adapting and experimenting with pedagogic techniques and strategies. It may also be that as a consequence of the wider culture of accountability in education, the term 'technique' implies to practitioners a set of procedures, whereas to the MakeBelieve Arts team, we understand the term

connects to 'techniques' in drama which are recognised by the team as flexible. The practitioners' perceptions also relate to their sense of ownership of the technique. Additionally, there were comments regarding practitioners' desires to explore the rationale of the approach for example' 'I'd like to know a little bit more about the underlying principles ', and 'I think that it always helps to understand a little bit more about what underlies it, so that if you're not sure you can refer back to that.

### 7.3.2 Increasing confidence

As noted earlier, the practitioners began the project with different degrees of experience of the approach, but all, without exception, expressed the view that they had gained considerably in confidence through working with MakeBelieve Arts and developing the approach in their own classrooms. They had both enjoyed the process and valued the experience.

> *I've really enjoyed it. Scared but excited to start off with, excited and not scared right at the very beginning, then it went to scared and excited, and now I feel more confident with it back to excited again. Running a session on my own I relish doing that, it's a great activity I really enjoy it.*

> *I think my confidence has grown over time, and I just wanted to make sure I was doing it right for the children and taking their stories.*

Though for this last practitioner, her concern to 'do the right thing' for the children, meant that whilst she felt confident at the close of the summer term, her sense of assurance had waned somewhat by the autumn term; she sought additional support, 'I would just like someone to give me a refresher to start me off again'. However, this practitioner was clear that once she had had a couple of additional sessions and the trainer had introduced it to the new group of children she would 'run with it'. In part her concern related to the improvisational nature of such creative teaching (Sawyer, 2004):

> *You can't pre-empt every situation that is going to arise so you need to have that confidence in your understanding of the whole concept of it and what you are trying to achieve to be able to deal with the anomalies that come along'*

Several of the practitioners ascribed their increase in confidence to the quality of the 'coaching' and the support they received, noting this was 'very, very useful'

> *I think they've been very good at showing us what to do and then enabling us to do it ... that's been a kind of expectation 'actually, do you know what, you've got to do it now', and that's worked really well, so I felt sufficiently impelled to do it if you know what I mean, but I've also felt that I can do it.*

> *I think we had enough input and enough training for me to feel confident that I could carry it on, I think that would be fine, I think the bigger issue is just timetabling and regularity and that sort of stuff and trying to do it in smaller groups so children have more turns.*

Staff found that as the project developed they became more relaxed about practical issues, such as pushing the furniture back, making space and coping with large groups for example. With increased assurance they largely solved these problems.

### 7.3.3 Exploring practitioners' adaptations

The practitioners varied in the extent to which they wanted to make minor alterations and adaptations to the approach in response to the children or the demands of their own setting in the autumn term. As noted in Chapter 6 some of the children adapted it for themselves, imitating the Helicopter Technique in their free play. In relation to the practitioners' adaptations, two were adamant that they would make no changes, the remainder perceived that, there were small alterations that they might make once practising the approach independently. In this way they sought to develop their ownership of the approach and demonstrated their confidence in flexibly responding to the approach.

At the close of the summer term programme and in preparation for the autumn term work for which they were independently responsible, the practitioners variously mentioned planning to **alter the pace** of introducing children to the Helicopter Technique, increasing the **group size** over several weeks, or changing **the space** for the acting out, making use of the foyer outside the classroom as this was larger. One pair of practitioners intended to use the technique in the afternoons, (the mornings were seen as 'slightly more structured' by the practitioners). In one class it was intended that the story acting would happen in story time once a week as this wouldn't 'disrupt any of the things that can't be put into other parts of the day because of staffing'. Whilst arguably a timetabling issue, such positioning may have ramifications for the way in which staff view the Helicopter Technique in the longer term.

In addition, one practitioner was keen to use the approach for **teacher-directed work as well as child-initiated play;** by the autumn term visit she had told the class a Creation story which they then acted out on the Helicopter Technique stage (in line with a traditional tale that the trainer had retold the previous term). The Creation enactment was seen to be highly successful and had resulted in 'God' becoming a common character in the children's later tales. In addition, this reception class had been encouraged for a home based activity to 'find a favourite place and tell a story there'. In this way the approach began to cross boundaries between home and school. One child had sat in a tree and told his mum a story about soldiers and police, another child's father had responded to this task by scribing his son's story and volunteering to visit the class (he is a professional storyteller). Later, it was suggested that the children in this class might wish to borrow a favourite book character and use them in their stories. One child had chosen the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk, another James Bond, and yet another Sleeping Beauty who, in time honoured fashion and building on the child's previous experience of the technique in the nursery, fell in the dustbin! The class was also making little moving puppets of their characters.

In the autumn two practitioners reported that they had **modelled the acting out** for their youngest children, 'because it just wasn't working at all'. They perceived that the new children needed additional support in order to understand the terms 'come up onto the stage' and 'act out'. Another practitioner, working alongside her teaching assistant classroom had also taken part in the story acting alongside the children, and had scribed each other's stories which had then been acted out.. In this way, both adults and children were engaged in acting out their

tales alongside one another. The children had accepted the adult involvement and had been pleased to take part in the practitioners' stories. Such a development aligns well with the NACCCE (1999) position, endorsed by Sawyer (2004), that children's creativity is best nurtured in contexts in which adults are also creatively engaged, where creative practitioners are fellow artists and co-collaborators in the process of meaning construction. Another practitioner had modelled 'how you might put a story together where something actually happened rather than it just being a list of characters'. She believed a MakeBelieve Arts trainer had modelled this on an earlier training.

> *I do think for children who haven't got very many of those story structures internalised that's fairly crucial actually to do that, because it's that thing isn't it that you're just well it's the zone of proximal development isn't it? You're pushing them on, but also interestingly other children will be doing it because their stories will have that dimension to them.*

By the autumn, several practitioners had begun to or planned to **involve older children**, which some of them knew was a practice developed previously by MakeBelieve Arts. Practitioners differed on the value of this strategy, some perceived if the children came in small groups and were less experienced literacy learners, this would be advantageous for both groups, whilst others were concerned that if the Year 6 did not know the younger learners, then the nursery children might not feel comfortable. Another practitioner was considering establishing a 'special table with a cloth' for the story dictation in part to profile it in the classroom. She had learnt this idea from previous MakeBelieve Arts training and recalled 'When that tablecloth's on they become very independent' ...' coming to the table ready to tell'. She also observed that this had worked well in the outside play area.

### 7.3.4 Challenges encountered

In the majority of the settings the Helicopter Technique was smoothly introduced and the experience was a highly positive one. Inevitably though, in introducing a new approach to busy practitioners, some difficulties were encountered. In addition, most of these professionals were learning about the Helicopter Technique for the first time and were therefore likely to experience some challenges as they developed their assurance. We examine those that were raised or observed, though we wish to stress from the outset that these were relatively small scale in nature, and they did not deter the practitioners from sustaining their use of the approach, nor did they alter the overwhelmingly affirmative attitudes expressed about the technique and its inherent value.

Initially in two classrooms, straightforward organisational concerns arose, regarding the timing of the programmed sessions and the available space for the children to act out. Whilst the time taken to develop the approach had planning consequences for all the practitioners and the organisational issues needed attention, these were seen as 'mundane things' and alternative arrangements were found, though some of the practitioners' plans could not be operationalised until the autumn term.

**In relation to the story scribing**, several practitioners commented that they found taking stories, maintaining a watchful eye on interaction and engagement and responding where necessary to particular children was very demanding.

> *I think because it's quite difficult to ... be able to release yourself to just talk to the children and it worked fine today but then you see X(trainer) was here doing it as well, it wasn't just me. But when I'm doing it on my own I've found it quite difficult to do 5 stories. I might do 2 or 3 but actually it's quite difficult for me to do more because there are so many demands being made on me.*

In several classes there were multiple adults present which reduced this problem, nonetheless one teaching assistant voiced the view that she felt caught between her 'normal 'role and her part in the programme.

> *The other children know that 'oh, you're doing your story' but their natural routine is if they've got a problem they'll come to X (teacher) or they'll come to myself, and I feel with that I'm kind of going 'just hang on, just wait a minute' and I'm distracted by . . . because I want to help them but I know I'm supposed to be doing this.*

One of the six core practitioners, a reception teacher also expressed discomfort about scribing and not 'correcting' the children's grammar. She felt strongly that the 'teacher should model the correct language... should model always if possible how to do things properly' and perceived that 'you couldn't correct the grammar, not that I would want to do that, I would want to do that in a subtle way just model, correctness of language maybe'.

**With regard to leading the story acting** more issues were raised. This role involved: reading aloud the child's tale, inviting children to enact characters or represent objects, keeping the audience attentive, prompting, praising and closing and opening each child's story. It was widely acknowledged as challenging, albeit enjoyably so. Initially the difficulties encountered tended to focus on management; many found it hard to cope with the role of 'stage manager' (to use MakeBelieve Arts' term), particularly when the tales involved many characters and thus children. At these times practitioners noted 'crowd control' was necessary; one typically commented 'I felt I had too many actors on the stage and it felt a bit chaotic'. It was recognised that 'particular children actually take up an awful lot of the energy'. Using her knowledge of the children one practitioner sought to seat children in particular positions in the circle to minimise difficulties. Others, particularly those in nursery settings, pondered whether it might be better to act out in small groups, though they recognised this would 'lose the togetherness' and reduce the inclusivity of the approach. Additionally, observational evidence indicated that it was sometimes difficult for the practitioners to see how other children in the circle were reacting and whose turn it was, and that remembering who was who sometimes represented a challenge.

> *The thing I've kept forgetting was like once you've allocated somebody to a part, somebody is just standing there like who was Ben Ten, and who was the cart, but the children soon correct you, but I was losing the plot completely. Some people who are wandering through the room might just think that we're sitting there reading that story, just asking children to come and join them, it might look easy on the outside -it really isn't.*

The practitioners assiduously sought to honour the children's stories and saw this as a serious responsibility.

> *I'm anxious about how to do the stories. Not anxious because you're here or anything like that, it's not letting the children down, and not spoiling the children's stories for them. Helping to facilitate for them what they want it to be and what they've seen in their head when they're telling you the story, it is a huge responsibility, so I feel quite a lot of anxiety beforehand. I might take a little bit of extra time to read through the stories again if I can just to get it clear in my head so I can keep those energy levels up, keep the flow up, try and keep the audience engaged and listening so they're not spoiling it by their behaviour for the children that are on the stage, so there's a huge amount of responsibility I think for the facilitator.*

Practitioners also recognised the significance and challenge of appropriately interpreting the children's stories and their responses during the acting:

> *She'd physically withdrawn and gone and sat away from the circle, and I thought that was because she didn't want to be in it, and actually it was because she **did** want to be in it, but she didn't want to be that particular person.*

The challenge of managing the story acting was recognised by the MakeBelieve Arts team, as the team's Artistic Director observed 'I watch and I always see how hard it is for teachers to lead the acting out... I think they get frightened about how not to lead, and ... it's not leading but actually you can sort of do things that support the children'. She also observed that eventually and with support:

> *They get it in their own way, and I'm always marrying that thing of allowing them to be them and not me, cos I don't want them to have to. It's not about going 'can you do this the way I do it'. It's trying to support them so they feel confident, and that the children feel confident with the activity.*

Some tensions emerged for a few practitioners regarding **accepting the children's words or extending them during the acting out**. This related to the view that there were 'rules' which needed to be followed, though as noted earlier, contradicted the perception that the approach was flexible and responsive. The following voices reflect that at times some of the practitioners, learning a new approach, were a little unsure of the boundaries and perhaps lacked the confidence to discuss these issues, which predominantly focused upon accepting or extending the children's actions.

> *Sometimes I feel like it will be OK to add a bit more, to sort of say 'well how would you move', or 'would there be aliens on the planet, would there be a bigger boat' you know just to kind of give them a little bit more almost reassurance that it's OK to change it when they're on the carpet.*

> *I feel sometimes it can be quite restrictive. It's almost like stopping them. When we're in the circle and we're acting out the story it's almost putting the brakes on I feel sometimes.*

Practitioners in several classrooms discussed this issue and whilst recognising the significance of each child's own story, also found themselves as early years educators wanting to extend the children's language and interpretations. In the

main, though not exclusively, these concerns were raised by reception teachers, who are arguably expected to ensure young children's 'readiness' for the National Curriculum Key Stage 1 goals, and as such may be more inclined to view the Helicopter Technique primarily as a potential teaching context, rather than an enabling context. Some perceived that when they were leading the work independently, after the programme, they would be more likely to seek extension opportunities. As one noted:

> *If you have ownership of it in your classroom then I think you can do with it what you like. I think it's important to stick to the story that they give, but then you might want to sometimes say, not in the middle of the story, 'but why did you choose that character', or 'what made you think of that story'? Would you ever tell a different story if they keep repeating the same story? They've had the same character sometimes, the story's been a parallel but if you got in that situation where a child is always telling the same story would you move it forward?*

There was a related debate amongst practitioners and support personnel in three of the classes about **whether there was a 'right way of doing it'**. As noted earlier, these practitioners wished for 'a more theoretical understanding'; one felt she had 'just learnt the technique'. In the remaining classrooms however, the practitioners did not raise this issue; this may have been due to a number of factors, such as length of training, alignment of the Helicopter Technique with current practice, previous experience, relationships with trainers and so forth.

In relation to **working in partnership with MakeBelieve Arts' colleagues**, as discussed in Section 7.2, the practitioners valued, respected and recognised the expertise of the team. Nonetheless some small challenges were encountered, mostly relating to their expectations of this arts partnership and the extent to which the trainers recognised and credited their expertise as early years practitioners. For example, in two classrooms, the practitioners were unsettled in the first session when the trainer, having introduced the concept of story scribing to the class, moved to scribe stories in a space and handed responsibility for the class back to the staff. This was unexpected and created some discomfort as activities had not been explicitly prepared for or planned.

> *It threw me completely because I didn't know what to expect the first week, and I thought they were going to be in control, and I was willing to sit back and then it was 'over to X (teacher) now'.*

> *I think to be fair that first week that they came I wasn't really, I wasn't sure how it was going to happen and I thought they were going to lead the session and then go away, I see why, had they said to me it is going to be in the child initiated time I would perhaps have… (had) things prepared.*

Common to arts partnerships, (Galton, 208) this situation arguably reflects the practitioners' expectations about the potential leadership role of the external partner. Such teething problems soon ceased however as relationships and routines were established. Additionally, being repositioned overtly as learners in their own classrooms, developing their assurance with a new approach and being offered advice in front of the children was also experienced as challenging by two practitioners.

*I mean like you say with one person on either side or with X (trainer) opposite, you're in that position again where you think 'I'm just doing this wrong. I'm just doing all of this wrong, and I don't really know what I'm doing', and I feel that that comes across to the child then because they're so used to you just being you and doing what you do and then all of a sudden you're this different person whose kind of flapping a little bit, a bit uncomfortable. It was tricky.*

On being invited to make recommendations to MakeBelieve Arts with regard to the programme of support and the model, few practitioners had anything but praise to offer the team. Just three suggestions were made, firstly building in time for more reflective discussion (it was felt that this might afford increased clarity about the underpinning aims of the technique), secondly creating a 'frequently asked questions sheet', and thirdly, encouraging all early years practitioners and support staff present in the room to participate actively. Whilst appreciating the time and costs involved in setting aside more time to review the progress of the work (such as a mid-training review), some, though not all of the practitioners, felt this was important as they were 'always in the midst of it' in the classroom and thus less able to capitalise upon the informal trainer-practitioner dialogue. All appeared to value the time to talk through their thoughts with the researchers, both through taking part in VSR and in sustained interviews, indicating perhaps that more dedicated talk time outside the classroom would be advantageous, though clearly there are financial consequences of such provision.

### 7.3.5 Sustainability in the classroom, the wider setting and the longer term

In both the summer and autumn term interviews, we enquired about the practitioners' intentions and current use of the technique, and we also explored the extent to which the practitioners' colleagues' and any parents had become aware of or involved in the Helicopter Technique. It was clear that with regard to the former all involved intended to sustain the approach within their practice. . With regard to the latter this was an area of diversity and to some extent represented a challenge. In Section 4.4. 3, it was made clear that the technique has been embedded within some local authority practice for many years and that in some settings use of the technique has been retained across this time, although pressures of the curriculum and changes to senior management meant that the take up has varied, despite teacher enthusiasm and commitment. However in this section we focus exclusively on sustainability within the six settings involved in the summer term programme.

As noted earlier, in some classrooms, practitioners and teaching assistants and/or other staff were involved from the outset: in early discussions, in the training, in the classroom taking stories and in stage managing the story acting. Some also received on-going support and feedback from the MakeBelieve Arts trainers. In other classrooms, just the core practitioner or practitioner with EYFS in the nursery classes was involved. In one, the head of the nursery centre was fully involved in the whole process alongside a practitioner. These different degrees of involvement had consequences.

The practitioners, as discussed in section 7.1, were committed to developing their use of it in their classrooms and their settings. What they appeared to find harder to achieve was to involve colleagues who had not been involved from the

outset and several mentioned that when they brought up the approach in the staff room and other contexts they found it was 'hard to do it justice'. This may have been because of the simplicity of the technique which may perhaps sound of lesser significance and value than the realisation of it in practice or in the eyes of the practitioners involved. It may also have been due to a lack of understanding on the part of some practitioners of the principles underpinning it.

**In relation to teaching assistants and other early years practitioners** within each classroom, many expressed curiosity and some watched sessions. A few were also involved and in one case, the opportunity was viewed as a valuable professional development opportunity, by both the qualified teacher with whom she worked and the head teacher in this setting.

> *I think since we used it (the approach) she has really grown, not just with that in that area but I think it has really given her a confidence to bring herself, bring something of her into the classroom.*

It was noted in some settings that involving other practitioners might have eased the pressure on individuals and made it more manageable,

> *Nobody else has taken any (story dictation) yet, so for instance Meluda hasn't taken any stories yet, and if I was doing it again in my own classroom I would get other people doing it as well.*

In relation to the senior management**,** all practitioners observed that their head teacher, executive head or Early Years coordinator was positive, for example they noted these colleagues were 'really enthusiastic about it' or 'very keen'. Some had been involved in the training and had previous experience of the approach, though we are not aware that head teachers visited to see the approach in action, although the Early Years coordinator was more directly involved. Due perhaps to the short time frame, and the perception that 'we need to be a bit more in control of it' first, few staff from other year groups had watched the approach during the summer term.

However, in the summer interview it was clear that all the practitioners were committed to finding a way to organise the Helicopter Technique as a regular feature of their classroom practice in the autumn, it was typically noted:

> *We're definitely going to be doing it weekly at least if not more, because it has had a major impact, and at the minute we're doing it weekly and it's really affected what's going on.*

> *I think the thing that we would really like to do is to have it a regular part of our timetable from September when we come back, and we're trying to get our heads around how that works.*

Alongside solving practical timetabling issues, the practitioners commonly spoke about how they might share the technique with others in the autumn also, for example:

*I'd like to get them involved and do some training with them so that they continue because I think it's a really good thing for them to do*

*That might be something we might look at it in the autumn. You know if it becomes part of what we do we would then ... in our termly newsletter and that sort of thing we would talk about it more.*

In one context, it was planned that in order to ease transition, the Year 1 practitioners would continue it and incorporate it into their storytelling sessions. In another, the technique was used to enable the nursery pre-school class to join with the younger kindergarten children during the summer half term. The 3 and 4 year olds had 'actually asked to do it' as 'they'd obviously seen it through the door and were interested in it, so we did it altogether'. It was intended that this would be developed further in the autumn also.

**With regard to parents,** interest was shown and questions asked in most settings. All the practitioners were seeking to share some of the work with parents. One had filmed the class telling stories in all the languages of the class prior to using the approach and decided they would like to do another film using the Helicopter Technique. These practitioners also discussed the possibility of inviting children to dictate their stories in their first languages and asking mothers to translate them,

*We could have a day couldn't we when we have the parents come in. They take their own child's story then they re-tell it or translate it. We'll think about that one.*

Another class held a kind of assembly in which the trainer, (not the practitioner), modelled the technique for parents, another ran a workshop with parents, yet another invited parents in to their end-of- day activities regularly each week, (one of which was Helicopter stories), this 'got a lot of parents really involved in it, and they really enjoyed doing it'. Another planned to offer this opportunity in the autumn term, enabling parents to take part in story time.

*Where we do like Helicopter stories, story bags, traditional stories, and like each room or each area is doing like a different type of storytelling so you can come in and watch, so we'd quite like to do that from next year just to get the parents involved.*

Others had made displays of the children's story acting, with photographs and reflective commentaries from the children in the form of speech bubbles, and were considering creating displays in corridors. A reception class teacher had also made a book of the children's stories illustrated with pictures drawn by the children to capture, celebrate and profile their stories for sharing at home, she hoped it would encourage reading and discussion.

**In relation to sustaining the approach** in the settings five of the six were using it when we visited in the autumn term. The sixth, also committed to continuing the technique, was awaiting the return of a MakeBelieve Arts trainer to 'refresh' her practice and introduce it to the new and younger cohort of children in the pre-school class. This was in part due to the fact that the key practitioner at this setting had moved to a new nursery, (where it is worth noting she subsequently introduced the approach into her practice). Another nursery also commented that they had waited until the various groups of children had settled in before

commencing it again. Most of the practitioners were taking stories at least once a week, some even more frequently. Two settings had had shifted the time to the afternoon and all perceived it was becoming part of their normal practice and would be integrated into their planning for 'story' in the longer term. Several practitioners wished to explore the longer term impact of sustaining the technique across a year, for example:

> *I would be very interested to see it through the year, …I don't think that was a typical cohort last year and we only did it for a short time…, I mean we will do it through this year to actually see what it does through the year.*

Additionally in the autumn, several practitioners referred to having discussed it with colleagues in other classes, some of whom were intending to visit in order to learn and then commence the approach in their own classrooms. Two spoke of their intention to involve Year 6 children in scribing stories, and one wanted to plan an in-house school INSET day where other teachers could be involved so that they could:

> *See how effective it is and … how they can incorporate it into their lessons or into the classroom, because even the Year 6 they have all got a story to tell haven't they?*

Others perceived it could be a school wide tool for 'raising teachers' expectations' and was useful as it 'brings that togetherness which is so crucial'. Though none had yet developed the use of the technique across the school, it should be acknowledged this was early days and that the practitioners had only been involved in the technique for 8 weeks, one term previously. It was evident however that they all recognised its potential for work across the school, perhaps particularly in the EYFS and Key Stage One.

## 7.4 Enhancing reflective practice

There was considerable evidence from the practitioners in all settings that the Helicopter Technique had, in multiple ways, begun to make an impact upon their practice. The approach was seen as a simple, yet in some respects a demanding technique and one which fostered professional reflection.

> *I've been doing this (early years practitioner) for 8 or 9 years now, something like that, and I would say out of all of the things I've done this is the hardest- right from walking into a room when I didn't really know what I was doing- to doing this. … I have found it . . . not hard in a bad way, but really challenging and a lot to think about …not to let the children down, a lot to question.*

In this section, we detail the core areas in which the practitioners perceived the technique had impacted upon or influenced their practice. These included: increasing time to listen and get to know the children, enhancing observation and 'standing back', raising expectations of the young learners and increasing their awareness of and attunement to children's language and stories. Significantly too, most of the practitioners highlighted subtle ways in which the Helicopter Technique had impacted upon their own multimodal communication as educators, including their use of language in the classroom and several noted it had helped them make re-consider their pedagogic practice more widely.

All practitioners took the project seriously and seized the opportunity to take part, to reflect (in Schon's (1983) terms, both in-action and on-action) and to learn. Reflection- in-action occurred in the classroom alongside the trainers and in the weeks when staff undertook the technique independently without the trainers. In one setting with two trainers working together, reflection-in-action was modelled by the MakeBelieve Arts team as a duo. Reflection-on-action happened as staff documented their case study children's learning and when they discussed the technique afterwards, considering its value and affordances with, in some cases other educators and care workers in the classroom, and also with the Open University research team (through the interviews, informal conversations and the video stimulated review). There were also instances of staff informally reflecting-on-action with the trainers.

Even before the project commenced, one practitioner commented she had begun to consider her storytelling provision and found that when she simply changed her request to children from 'tell me about your picture' to 'tell me the story', they not only had more to say, but were also more animated and offered her unexpected details. When the project finished as well as at the autumn interview, many practitioners expressed interest in the research report, one noted eagerly 'I can't wait to read it, see how it was in other settings and what the analysis shows'. This indicates their reflective engagement in the programme and the potential of the Helicopter Technique for children's learning.

**Increased time to listen and get to know the children** was frequently commented upon. Practitioners commonly observed that the approach meant they were 'spending that extra little bit of time on a one to one basis' and that 'this gives you the opportunity to do it, to actually sit down with the children and learn a little bit more about them'. Some felt it was 'the only time really you actually sit down and let them come out with their own, their own version of whatever they want to do, whatever they want to say'. Furthermore, it was recognised that making one to one time for children was not always feasible or part of practitioners' everyday practices - 'we wouldn't sit down, would we?' and 'without doing this project I don't think we would ever sit down'. Focused busy professionals, coping with full classes of young learners and with multiple demands on their time, the practitioners all recognised that the technique 'is all about them (the children) -'about what they have inside them' and as such it offered them as early years educators the chance to to focus on individual learners and 'really listen' and to learn to 'listen to children's ideas without trying to shape them'. For example one noted:

> *Really listening to what the child says is an interesting one because I think as teachers you have got so many children around you, to really home in on one child with one story and their voice, you know to really, almost to zone out all the others, to really hear that child I think is a really good practice for a teacher when you are busy all the time.*

Also it was seen as a particularly useful tool when used from the start of the Autumn term.

*It is really interesting that this year, because we have started doing it with the children at the very beginning, as we are getting to know them, it is forming a much more significant part of our 'getting to know the children' and what their interests are.*

The often intimate one to one story scribing space which the technique affords was highly valued and appeared to prompt some practitioners to carve out more time and space for such personal encounters with children, not just within the boundaries of the approach, as one noted:

*I think when you sit down and take a story that is a really nice moment and I know that last term there was a moment, instead of thinking 'right I must get this done and that done' I would just make myself sit down and read a child a story which I hadn't necessary done, you know just one to one, so that has helped me with that, to relax, because it is never ending isn't it in a classroom and what you have to do and what you can put up and what you can prepare.*

**Observation was also foregrounded in the Helicopter Technique** and practitioners frequently commented that the approach both reminded them and prompted them not only 'to take time and make time for each child', but significantly also to watch and perhaps even listen more closely: 'I think in a class you are so on demand aren't you? It is sort of like 'come here, do this, do this, do this' and so you actually get that time to sit there and actually watch the child'. Some noted that 'practitioners talk too much usually, so it is quite good at teaching us… to pause and to wait'. The following dialogue between two practitioners illuminates this point still further.

*P1: I think it has personally made me actually look back more and wait for the children and actually pick up on smaller clues, it is just remembering to do that and it sort of reminds you that when you say 'can you tell me a story?' and no words come out, just watching them and their reactions, …*

*P2: You mean it has taught us to stop*

*P1: and look*

*P2: Reacting and predicting and helping too much*

*P1: Yeah just actually watching the child, it just reminds you just to sit back and watch because even though they are not talking doesn't mean, it is like when they are acting, because who was it the other day who was doing that? (gestures with hands) When you said do something? And you couldn't see it but they was doing this with their hands (gestures again)*

*P2: Like squeezing their hands*

This extract from a longer conversation, like several others, indicates that the approach served to reinforce **the value of 'standing back'** from the children in a sensitive and attuned manner so as to observe, notice and attend to individual children's words and actions. 'Standing back' has been evidenced as a key pedagogical stance in the classrooms of early years practitioners who seek to foster children's creativity and 'possibility thinking' (Cremin, Burnard and Craft, 2006). What appears to distinguish standing back is when and how often practitioners position themselves, such that stopping and observing, and listening and noticing the nature of the learner's engagement is prioritised. The

Helicopter Technique programme, appeared to create additional opportunities for pressured professionals to stand back, to watch and to learn about the children. Such opportunities were recognised as invaluable by the practitioners. Additionally, re-viewing the children's engagement and their own roles as facilitators on the video was valued by the practitioners, who were acutely aware that 'at the end of the session you don't think of all of those things. You deal with it then and then it goes out of your brain doesn't it?' As others also noted:

> *It makes you realise just how involved they are and how much is going on because like they were so focussed on reading the story and making sure which circle was which that's amazing, that's totally different to what I had in my head.*

> *I suppose it's a very good way of reflecting on what has gone on, but actually seeing, you do see different things that you wouldn't have noticed because you're actually there so looking at the video you see a lot more than what you would normally see so it's a good way to kind of reflect and interpret it. I think you get a lot more interpretation.*

> *To me I just thought they were being . . . not as noisy as it is in discovery time, but an element of fiddling about. I didn't realise they were so focussed as they are, that's really interesting to see.*

Practitioners also commented that the video represented a potentially useful tool for staff to record and document children's engagement over time. In one setting two nursery staff videoed each other using the approach in order to dialogue about their developing practice and found this additionally supportive, Working closely together and operating in a climate of mutual trust, they felt the video enabled them to interrogate their Helicopter Technique practice in order to refine it.

As a result of the focused attention paid to the children perhaps, some practitioners mentioned their **expectations of learners were raised** through the use of the technique. As documented in Chapter 6, there were many examples of quiet children developing enhanced self-esteem and increased assurance, prompting one teacher to note 'now she has come out of her shell, she's moving on rapidly, she's far more able than I realised'. Another also commented with regard to the children's language 'I think some of the staff might be quite surprised, ones who haven't seen it, at how much the children in reception, how articulate some of them can be'. Additionally, in the classes where children took stories from their friends, practitioners tended to alter their expectations, as one reception class teacher noted:

> *Rachel was just amazing how she, you know went round and asked children, took their stories down or even children who didn't have the confidence to write were actually drawing pictures for other children and telling the stories and elaborating on that story, you know themselves. Poppy was particularly good at that and she, the story language that she used you know was so rich and I think that taught me to have those high expectation and that nothing, even for the tiny ones is impossible*

In re-viewing an episode in which Poppy led the story acting, (reading her friend's story that she had drawn/scribed to the class and inviting children to be

the characters, as well as spontaneously inviting them to 'show us how the dog moved' for example), the practitioners in this setting were amazed not only by this five year old's confidence and independence, but by the mature response of the rest of the class.

> P1: They're not looking at adults as if to say 'am I doing it right'. It's kind of like 'we're doing it'.

> P2: I wouldn't have thought in a sense that was possible really

> P1: To actually lead a session like that. Effectively they're taking a lesson.

> P2: And not needing us, I like that about it. It wouldn't matter if we were there or not I don't feel. I think they could just do it themselves. Step back out of the circle and sort of just be a spectator to it and say 'right you do it'.

As one of these practitioners later observed

> I was actually very proud of them by the way they dealt with it all and I was really, you know it just taught me that always have high expectations, not to put pressure on the children but I was amazed at the standard with which they could actually deliver themselves.

In addition to raised expectations, some practitioners felt that they became **more attuned to children's language and stories**, one stated that in order to teach the young learners what a narrative looks like, she engaged in work about narrative structure that was sequential and ordered. In contrast she perceived the Helicopter Technique, rooted in the 'children's own stories and often their own lives', was more flexible and had helped her listen more attentively to the children and 'understand more about where they are with their language development'. Significantly, others also spoke about the approach reinforcing the degree to which they valued children's stories:

> I think I've realised that children, whatever stories children tell you they are valuable, they are not always perfect in structure obviously or whatever but you can take it and you can make it into something more.

There was also evidence that some practitioners became more attuned to children's stories offered incidentally and in non-Helicopter contexts, as the following extended vignette indicates.

> I think it is more an awareness to really have an ear open for that story! And it could be in the official Helicopter story slot but it could be in the not official Helicopter story slot where the child just tells you a little story, and it could be a real little event that happened in their lives or they could come up with something. You know I was walking down the stairs just bringing children back from dinner and one of the children suddenly goes to me 'Shh, shh, there is a wolf up there' and he started to whisper and started to tell this story so we were just all whispering and creeping along down the stairs as this child told us why we had to be very quiet and there was this child-eating wolf lurking around the school… it was just lovely because everybody went really quiet and tuned into this child telling this lovely story, and so we are sort of crawling down the stairs trying to not get eaten by a wolf on the way back from lunch!

Additionally and strikingly, the approach appeared to help some **practitioners listen to themselves and reflect upon their own use of multimodal communication, including language in the classroom**. During the video review session practitioners commented upon this and it was often mentioned in the autumn term, suggesting that as the project progressed some of the practitioners became aware of small and subtle ways in which the approach had begun to influence their communication. Several were sensitive to the differences between their language use during the Helicopter work and in other contexts. For example:

> *I read out loud and read with masses of expression, I love it, absolutely love it, but in this scenario I don't know if it's appropriate to do that because it's their story and it's kind of influencing how they then act it if I'm going 'Aagh' that's implying that it's something amazing, and actually maybe Eddie didn't want him getting the wand on his nose to be amazing. Maybe Eddie wanted it to be a 'boom' on the nose.*

The video stimulated review enabled focused attention to be paid to the way the practitioners sat alongside the children in story scribing and listened to and facilitated the telling, acting and the children's engagement in others stories. As a result some of the practitioners came to notice that inadvertently they might be directing the children through their use of particular responses, sounds, intonation, eye contact and so forth, 'this makes you very conscious and aware of that' and 'maybe my tone of voice gives too much instruction'. Some felt that the technique

> *Really brings it home that actually you do it (inadvertently direct children) a lot more than you think you do, and you have to really work hard not to. It's not something that comes naturally. It's easy to slip into bad habits.*

In this way through reflecting on their use of the Helicopter Technique the practitioners came to **evaluate the extent to which their practice was child led.** Borrowing the open, arguably enabling language of the Helicopter Technique, one practitioner believed had helped her to 'let them really, truly come up with their own ideas and be child-led'. Others commented similarly that they had become 'better at listening to children's ideas without trying to shape them' and were more conscious of 'not putting words into the children's mouths and not pressurising them in any way'. For example one noted she had learnt:

> *...to really tune into children, you know listening to them, too often you are kind of quick to correct and 'this is the right way, not the wrong way' but now just being reflective,... positive praise and everything else but to actually acknowledge what they do and just to really acknowledge it, not always trying to some them 'no it's not that way, it's this way' but just change the language maybe that I use with them.*

Another also noted that she had been:

*Adapting my language in a way that encourages them to join in, to participate, put very simply, 'would you like to come and be a bee?' (said in a monotone), 'come and be a bee!' (expressed encouragingly) You know, simple things like that, just changing the way you say something that ... is still giving them a choice, but being a bit more positive and ...encouraging them to engage more. So language was a big thing for me.*

It was recognised that this attention to multimodal communication and 'teacher talk' and its potential to empower or otherwise young learners 'stretches your thinking' and had begun to be applied by some staff in other areas of their practice. For instance, 'when I've been role playing with children just in a small group or something I've been using 'how could we be a doctor', and just trying to encourage them to think more rather than saying 'oh, we could do this'…. using that questioning technique a bit more'. Such a 'questioning technique' affords increased space to the children to offer their own suggestions and to extend their agency. In sum, as another practitioner noted The Helicopter Technique and the programme: Opens your eyes more to the language that you are using with the children to what you can do to develop them, to distract them, to encourage them, to support them, I think it just, it just gives you another way of thinking about things.

**Considering the ramifications of the approach for wider child-led practice** was also a feature of some of the final discussions. Practitioners noted for example that their involvement had made them question how they organised other activities, and 'whether we could do them in a different way that would make it more engaging for the children'. The children's evident enthusiasm for the storytelling and story acting was contrasted with their involvement in other whole class structured activities, and in some cases this prompted practitioners to reshape these. In one setting 'show and tell' was altered from a straightforward question and answer session to a more child-centred and child-led activity. The children were invited to describe their 'treasure' before they took it out of the treasure basket so that the rest of the class could guess what it was. This was seen as more involving and more successful, and, in line with the Helicopter Technique, it allowed the children to lead and increased their agency, affording more space for their voice and views. It was noted in this regard that the Helicopter Technique 'would be a really good training tool to teach practitioners how to enable child-led play and activities'. Yet another practitioner, seeking to increase child involvement and connecting this to subtle nuances in her use of language, observed: 'I've sort of been thinking of ways to keep them involved in what's going on by using different tones of voices, different actions and things like that so that's improved my practice'.

Practitioners also commented on how the children's playful enactments during the programme carried over into and enriched other planned classroom activities, giving the children an underlying confidence in and familiarity with performance, for example:

*P: We've just been doing work on the 'Pig in the Pond' … and we've retold it using symbols… They did it really well so they had to retell the whole story, just with, I mean obviously we helped them but they had to retell it using picture prompts, sort of symbol prompts, and it's quite long and we performed it to the Year 2 class twice and they did it really well.*

*I: And so you think the Helicopter Technique might have helped this kind of thing?*

*P: Yeah, because it is about performing… It's also 'I know about this, I kind of understand what this is'. Yeah.*

Some practitioners referred to the way in which they were seeking to integrate the approach within the wider story and storytime provision and perceived it was offering a more active child-led strand to this work, which had sometimes been perceived as perhaps too dependent upon literature. In one school the use of the technique was seen to **bring the creativity back**, and served to 'refresh' professional practice reminding the practitioner, (whose school had been very focused on introducing a new phonics scheme) of wider issues such as 'sharing children's home cultures, like celebrating what they do with their family, but it's also made me think a bit more about the importance of drama too and the children being able to express themselves'. This had begun to make an impact on practice as increased attention was being paid to drama and 'all the things that I know that we should be doing'.

This last comment is a telling one, suggesting that the approach has the potential to remind practitioners of what they know and understand about child development, play and learning. It is widely recognised that persistent pressures in the classroom, institutional challenges and wider accountability demands, frame and shape practice and may side-line practitioners' implicit knowledge and understanding. The Helicopter programme, by providing support for practitioners as they made use of the child-led technique of storytelling and story acting, appeared to enhance their reflective practice and serve as reminder of their implicit professional knowledge and understanding. In addition, as has been detailed, the technique impacted upon practice in more explicit ways and in particular enabled practitioners to pay closer attention to their own use of multimodal communication, including language in order to foster child-led learning.

## 7.5 Alignment with classroom practice and the EYFS

An underpinning aim for our evaluation was to observe and to garner practitioners' views on the extent to which and in what ways the Helicopter Technique can be used effectively in early education to support the statutory framework for and delivery of the Revised EYFS (DfE, a and b), including: the characteristics of effective learning; the underpinning themes and principles; and the three 'prime' learning areas of personal, social and emotional development, communication and language, and physical development. We also considered the contribution the Helicopter Technique could make to the 'specific' learning areas of literacy, understanding the world, and expressive arts and design. Many of these have been discussed in Chapter 6, but in this section, we summarise our findings on this aspect of the evaluation.

Furthermore, we note that whilst the EYFS offers a curriculum-driven approach to early childhood education, the social pedagogy model offered by Paley's method of storytelling and story acting, as delivered through Make Believe Arts' Helicopter Technique, offers a rich environment for supporting children's longer term development as enthusiastic learners and emotionally well-adjusted citizens.

**Characteristics of Effective Learning** We found that the pedagogic approach underpinning the Helicopter Technique was closely attuned to the Revised EYFS characteristics of effective learning by encouraging children to: play with and explore ideas; to be actively engaged in their own learning; and to be creative and critical thinkers (DfE, 2012b). The technique meshed neatly with the full spectrum of the EYFS characteristics for effective learning, and indeed with the practitioners' existing classroom practice.

As discussed in Chapter 6, our evaluation evidenced deep synergies between the underlying principles and practice of the Helicopter Technique and the core aim of the Statutory Framework for the EYFS that 'every child deserves …the support that enables them to fulfil their potential'. Woven throughout the Revised EYFS are four themes to which practitioners should be committed and which are intended to shape practice in early years education (DfE, 2012b, p3):

**Theme 1: A Unique Child** From the evidence presented so far in this evaluation, we can conclude with confidence that a key theme to emerge from the interviews and observations was that the storytelling/story acting sessions offered practitioners time to focus on the children in their care as individuals, to find out about what mattered to them, to value their unique interests, preferred ways of communicating, and to acknowledge the extent to which the children in their care were experts in their own lives. Similarly, the Technique offered a space for children to recognise each other as different, yet as part of a shared culture, often with similar interests and concerns.

**Theme 2: Positive Relationships** During interview, practitioners spoke of how the Helicopter Technique is premised on positive relationships not only between teachers and children, but also between peers. Teachers particularly valued how the clear structure of the storytelling and story acting sessions provided a reliable pattern of classroom activity through which the children learnt and accepted that they had to take turns. They felt it helped to maintain 'the boundaries and the expectations with the children … like maintain that expectation that everybody is expected to sit round the stage and keep their feet off and listen, so it is encouraging … respect'.

In terms of fostering positive relationships between children, the technique offered a familiar forum where children were required to act out a role that had been written by someone else, and to perform a dramatic role alongside other children as part of a 'team', where cooperation was needed for the successful performance of each story.

**Theme 3: Enabling Environments** A further theme that emerged from the practitioners' viewpoints corresponded to the third EYFS principle of creating an enabling environment. Practitioners noted that the Helicopter Technique is premised on a principle of acceptance, including acceptance that: children might express themselves in verbal and non-verbal communicative modes; that

children's language use would not be corrected when they spoke; and that their choice of story topics would be respected. Essentially, the Helicopter Technique reinforced for children the message that they had a voice in the classroom and that their voice would be unequivocally listened to. Evidence in support of this aspect of the technique's potential for creating enabling environments has been presented in Chapter 6, but one illustrative example encapsulates this aspect of the technique, and is summarised here. In one setting a recurring theme of dustbins was in evidence in many of the children's stories during the summer term, and by the time we visited in the autumn term, this theme had moved with the child from nursery to the reception class in the local primary school. Whereas this topic might be disapproved of in perhaps more traditional approaches to school-based storytelling, it had been welcomed in the programme, as the nursery practitioner noted:

> *To me that just sends the whole 'well that was accepted there, I know that was okay, I am alright with that I am on safe ground' and they are going to keep going on with it, and I bet at some point during reception year they will move on from it … that dustbin is a key element of transition for them, isn't it?*

In this example, the technique appeared to equip the practitioner with the patience, confidence and reassurance to accept the theme of dustbins as important to the child, respecting the child's natural interest and desire to repeat this theme. Furthermore, in all the settings we observed how children's right to opt not to participate was unquestioningly respected: 'if they didn't want to it was okay'; 'nothing is wrong, everything is ok'. It is noteworthy that very few children chose to opt out, or certainly not for long.

Practitioners also mentioned enjoyment as a key feature of the Helicopter Technique, which in turn contributed to positive relationships within an enabling environment where genuine adult-child and peer appreciation were routinely expressed. For example:

> *…they just had great fun didn't they? They loved it and I think that whole positive affirmation with the 'let's clap, thank you' at the end, it is, I think that was not just 'ohh we will clap for the sake of it' I think that was a genuine, you know 'they did well, we really enjoyed that.*

**Theme 4: Learning and Development** Overall, the Helicopter Technique sessions were frequently perceived by practitioners as being characterised by allowing children the space to play with their ideas, to explore their own and other children's narratives through enactment, which in turn involved active engagement in their own learning and development. The data presented in Chapter 6 evidence the extent to which the technique was perceived by staff to have a positive impact on children's engagement, offering for example, opportunities for all children to engage creatively with narrative forms in their storytelling and story acting, and to reflect critically on their own stories by developing them over time, either through multiple retellings or through experimenting with different topics and plots.

In addition to speaking to the four themes which currently underpin the early years curriculum in England, the Helicopter Technique also linked neatly into and supported, in varying degrees, the Prime and Specific Areas of Learning:

**Prime Learning Area: Personal, Social and Emotional Development** As evidenced in Chapter 6, throughout the training programme, we observed how children had to develop and display the emotional and social maturity to accept that certain rules had to be followed, and that the children were individually and collectively responsible for the maintenance of these rules. The repetitive nature of the technique, and it's clear format, offered all children the reassurance that if everyone followed the rules, then everyone could be happy. For example, in one classroom, emotional tensions occasionally ran high in a cohort where the experienced and highly competent teacher commented that 'keeping them focused is quite hard work'. In this class, the teacher, working with the skilled support of the Make Believe Arts trainer, valued the technique most highly as 'a kind of forum for exploring emotional issues'. Therefore, not only did the technique offer a secure environment where children's personal, social and emotional development could flourish, but it also offered a space where tensions could be aired, understood and dissipated.

**Prime Learning Area: Communication and Language** Practitioners made frequent reference to the value of the Helicopter Technique for children's communication and language development. As one teacher commented, the technique is underpinned by an inclusive ethos, which offers 'a good opportunity both for speaking and listening, and then for children who … aren't ready to do the speaking but they can join in with the sort of understanding the story because it is being acted out in gestures and so on and actions'. Practitioners also appreciated the opportunities offered by the technique to promote talk through imagination:

> *The whole point of imagination also brings on lots of speaking because without that pretend play, being able to be someone else, you will never get that imaginative writing or imaginative ways about them which will inspire them to want to talk.*

As mentioned in Chapter 6, the technique created inclusive learning opportunities for all children to express their interests and imaginings through language in a meaningful activity which was esteemed by their teachers and by their peers. For the more vocal members of each class, this offered occasions for the exploration of rhetorical devices which could be used for dramatic effect, and for less confident talkers, including children with speech and language difficulties and children learning English as an additional language, it offered a safe and reassuring environment for self-expression through multiple modes, as observed by one teacher:

> *I would say it was to do with…, confidence building, language, well not so much language, language and gesture or nonverbal and verbal communication*

**Prime Learning Area: Physical Development** Perhaps unexpectedly for us as a research team, aspects of the Helicopter Technique programme offered a supportive environment for young children to reflect on and express themselves through the physical enactment of stories during the story acting sessions, and these physical enactments contributed to the specific curriculum area of 'physical development'. For example, the story acting sessions were often energetic, involving gross motor movement where children had to learn to exercise control over their bodies and to hold different postures, to stretch,

crouch, jump, stride, hop, crawl, and sometimes to act in unison with each other. The boundaries for this activity were clearly marked out by the masking tape which formed the edges of the 'stage', and children had to learn to control their own bodies and move safely within the space created by this makeshift yet revered stage.

**Specific Learning Areas: Literacy Expressive Arts and Design** With regard to the specific area of literacy, there was extensive mention by practitioners of the impact of the technique on the children's increasingly skilful use of narrative techniques. In contrast to the new focus on school readiness as embedded in the Revised EYFS, with its focus on phonics and the acquisition of specific literacy skills, teachers appreciated that the Helicopter Technique offered a holistic early literacy activity that had real purpose and encouraged interaction and collaboration between peers in a creative and expressive activity. Practitioners felt that the children were highly motivated in their storytellings by their certain knowledge that each story would later be acted out. Thus the children's early literary endeavours with this technique unfolded in a meaningful context, which meant that the children were deeply involved in and focussed on both the storytelling and story acting activities, with a real sense of purpose for their classroom-based talking and use of narrative devices. It should be emphasised that these are all critical characteristics for the effective support of early literacy development (Hall, 2012).

**Specific Learning Areas: Understanding the World and Expressive Arts and Design** Practitioners valued how the Helicopter enactments contributed directly to the children's growing experience of the 'expressive arts', both in the storytellings and in the story enactments, which all children took part in at some stage, and sometimes to the surprise of the teachers in their class. Furthermore, practitioners mentioned how through the storytelling and story acting the children explored concepts which prompted their deeper understanding of the world, including themes such as those emerging from popular culture, traditional tales of heroic acts and mythical beasts, replicating the movement of trees in a breeze or bees in a hive etc. – the list of activities is as long as the children's imaginations were rich.

Overall, practitioners were in agreement that the Helicopter Technique offered extremely rich cross-curricula potential in a practical and practicable manner, as summed up in the words of one nursery class practitioner:

> *The key benefit for the kids … is that nothing is wrong, everything is okay and it gives them that freedom to express, be it through speaking, acting, clapping 'thank you', it just gives them that level playing field, that equality of opportunity again. Key things for the practitioners, …. it is a technique to deliver all of this and the holistic development of a child.*

## 7.6 Summary and conclusions

There is considerable evidence from Chapter 7 of the marked impact of the Helicopter Technique on the practitioners who took part in facilitating the children's storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. From our interviews with practitioners and trainers along with our observations of the training and of the Helicopter practice, and through examination of the video-

recordings of the practitioners in action, a range of benefits and developments can be identified:

- The practitioners, who had not all volunteered to take part, were nonetheless motivated from the outset to participate and valued the training, particularly the modelling of the technique with children and the chance to participate themselves

- Practitioners' experiences of the approach and the supportive coaching in the classroom were mostly extremely positive. They were delighted with the way the children embraced it and began to notice and document multiple benefits for the young learners.

- Practitioners gained considerable confidence in using the Helicopter Technique across the eight weeks, taking stories independently of the MakeBelieve Arts staff and becoming more relaxed about organisational issues.

- In implementing the technique on their own with increased assurance, several practitioners made or planned to make small additions, for example, establishing a special story scribing table and telling and enacting teacher-led tales.

- Small challenges were encountered and overcome in all settings, these mainly related to facilitating the story acting. This role was recognised as demanding by both trainers and practitioners.

- Whilst most of the practitioners voiced their understanding of the underpinning principles of the approach, others were less confident about this and some uncertainty about the flexibility of the approach and unwritten 'rules' was expressed.

- All practitioners sustained their use of the approach into the autumn term, though one intended to do so after additional trainer support.

- Some of the practitioners, working to embed the approach within their own pedagogic practice, had begun to develop the approach with colleagues. Several had involved parents who expressed considerable interest.

- The programme of support and the accompanying research nurtured considerable professional reflection and increased the time that teachers set aside for one to one time with children. Practitioners commented that this enabled them to get to know the children better, and that the technique prompted them to stand back and pause, and notice and listen more attentively to the children's language and their stories. Some also perceived this raised their expectations of individual learners and increased their attunement to children's language and stories.

- The approach, combined with the Video Stimulated Review caused practitioners to listen to and reflect upon their own language and multimodal communication which had positive consequences in other classroom contexts.

- The programme caused practitioners to review their pedagogy in whole class activities, reviewing their multimodal communication, including language and developing more drama work. It reminded some of their values as educators.

- The approach was seen to be extremely well aligned with the underpinning principles of the EYFS, (a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments leading to learning and development), and the Foundation Stage's characteristics for effective learning,( playing and exploring; active learning; creating and thinking critically), as well as the prime areas of learning and development(personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development) and literacy as one of the specific areas of learning and development.

# Chapter 8: Summary and recommendations

In this final chapter we revisit the key insights gained though the evaluation of the eight week Helicopter programme undertaken in three early years settings in England during the summer term, 2012. Initially, we focus on the key aims of this research and evaluation work, namely the impact upon the children and the practitioners involved. Then we turn to two core sets of closely interrelated recommendations. We offer recommendations regarding the Helicopter model and focus on the technique itself, recognising its success as a framework that fosters creative teaching and learning. We also detail our recommendations for making the approach more sustainable and draw upon our analysis of the programme of on-going professional development offered by the trainers and the views of practitioners regarding work within their schools. Next we consider specific recommendations with regard to the Early Years Foundation Stage, to the development of Centres of Excellence and Helicopter champions and finally consider possible ways forward with regard to Initial Teacher Education. Most of the recommendations draw explicitly upon the data collected and analysed as part of the commissioned evaluation. Some, in agreement with MakeBelieve Arts, are more exploratory and seek to support the team in finding strategic ways forward to ensure that the value and impact of the programme is more widely recognised. We close with recommendations for disseminating the evaluation report.

## 8.1 Summary of impact on children

In Chapter 4, our documentary analysis of archive material made available by MakeBelieve Arts, along with interviews with MakeBelieve Arts staff, and with educational advisors and teachers who had a long-term involvement with the Helicopter Technique, suggested the technique was valuable in facilitating children's engagement with learning in terms of increased attentiveness and confidence, and improved listening and communication skills; empowering children (everyone's voice has equal value including that of children with additional needs and with English as an additional language); particularly enriching the confidence and oral communication of EAL learners and allowing children to develop empathy and to talk about feelings. There was also evidence regarding the approach fostering children's imagination and creative use of language. This is consistent with evidence obtained from our analysis of the Helicopter Technique in action in the summer of 2012.

Our own evidence included a considerable level of empirical detail based on observations and video recordings of Helicopter sessions as well as interviews with practitioners and conversations with children involved in the programme. In Chapter 5 we provided a narrative account of storytelling and story acting in the six classes we observed. We commented that, across these settings, there was a considerable emphasis on children's agency and choice (e.g. with children telling stories and coming on stage as actors when they were ready to do so). As the programme developed, the children became eager participants. We noted also that there was a parallel emphasis on respecting children's voices in the programme (e.g. transcribing a child's story verbatim, remaining 'true' to this in performance). We suggested, however, that alongside the focus on children's voices, the creative role of practitioners deserved recognition, particularly in

orchestrating the performance of children's stories: we argued that children might be seen to benefit not simply because performances were 'faithful' to their story but also because of the 'value added' when the story was worked up as performance, under the guiding hand of the practitioner/stage manager.

In Chapter 6, we grouped the impact of the Helicopter Technique on children under certain key themes, identified across our data set. As we noted in the conclusion to the chapter, our analysis provides evidence that participation in the technique provided a motivating environment for the development of children's communication. There was evidence of the significant impact of the technique on communication, including literacy as well as aspects of speaking and listening and examples of benefits for children with limited verbal ability, or who were at an early stage of learning English. We noted also that, in addition to its direct benefits for children, storytelling and story acting provided teachers with valuable evidence of children's progress, in particular their communicative development.

In addition, there was considerable evidence that the approach impacted significantly upon all the children's confidence, as well as instances of striking changes in some initially quiet children, who, during the course of the programme, grew considerably in confidence. The approach also contributed to children's developing sense of agency; engendered a sense of solidarity and community; allowed children to take on a range of roles in performance, including roles that cut across gender boundaries; had significant benefits for children's language and for their communication across a range of other modes; and fostered children's creativity. It also motivated the children to engage in literacy activities as well as nurturing awareness of written language. There was no evidence of systematic development in children's narrative and linguistic structures, though the time period in which the evaluation was undertaken was relatively short. Finally, it was clear that the children's active participation, interest in and ability to talk about their stories, suggested that their experiences of story gained as part of their participation in the Helicopter Technique were positive.

There is one issue that merits further consideration. We note from the archival material that practitioners and evaluations indicate that they perceived it made a rich contribution to children for whom English is a second language, in terms of their more extended use of English, widened vocabulary and oral confidence. We did not however ever see any use of the children's home languages and perceive that given the openness and flexibility of the Helicopter Technique it could accommodate children's use of home language(s). This may increase some children's fluent participation in storytelling/story acting. It would be interesting to investigate this in other settings.

## 8.2 Summary of impact on practitioners

In Chapter 4, our documentary analysis of archive material made available by MakeBelieve Arts, along with interviews with MakeBelieve Arts staff, and with educational advisors who had a long-term involvement with the Helicopter Technique, suggested the technique empowers practitioners as they learn how to listen to children and let them lead; offers practitioners a way of understanding children's level of language development, potentially in both their

community languages and English; and is a process and way of working that practitioners need to experience at first hand. There was also some evidence that the approach fosters children's creativity.

In relation to sustainability, some of the educational experts interviewed observed that the approach had been sustained over many years in some individual settings and it was clear that some of the London boroughs had also sustained their commitment to supporting the implementation and development of the technique in their schools over time. The experts recognised that the pressure of the curriculum and the support of senior management represented challenges in this regard. It was seen to be sustainable in settings where highly qualified practitioners and senior management can support less well qualified staff in the use of the technique; where it is built into long term planning; when practitioners are clear about its purpose and its benefits and when they are clear how it fits with planning for and developing children's learning through the EYFS. In relation to the practitioners who took part in the summer tern programme, all commented that they intended to sustain their use of the approach into the autumn term and when visited this was seen to be the case, though one was seeking additional trainer support.

This summary of the archive insights is broadly consistent with evidence obtained from our analysis of the Helicopter Technique in action in the summer of 2012, though the current evaluation identified additional and more specific elements of impact summarised below.

In Chapter 7, drawing on our analysis of the interview data, the observational evidence and the video stimulated review, we identified the nature of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on practitioners. Initially viewed with interest by the practitioners, the Helicopter programme was experienced not only as an enjoyable learning experience for all involved (adults and children alike), but was also recognised as providing a supportive framework for professional learning. Following the initial training, in which the approach was skilfully modelled, the planned programme, mapped over eight weeks, afforded regular space for the practitioners to participate as well as observe and, in the planned absence of the trainers, to take the lead. The MakeBelieve Arts trainers, positioned as valued coaches, worked alongside the practitioners to develop their understanding of the approach and to hone their practice as Helicopter facilitators. This support and the experience of working with the technique on their own, served to enhance the practitioners' confidence, both enabling and impelling them to take more ownership of the approach and to respond to the challenges they encountered. Small adaptations and extension activities were introduced demonstrating practitioners enhanced assurance with the technique and many shared the approach with parents who showed considerable interest. Whilst all the practitioners could articulate some of the underlying principles, several wished to know more about the rationale, there was also a degree of uncertainty regarding the flexibility of the approach.

The programme prompted considerable professional reflection in-action and on-action, and this was fostered through on-going dialogue with the trainers (and often colleagues in the classroom), the documentation of case study children, three interviews and the Video Stimulated Review session with a member of the

Open University research team. The practitioners found that the approach enabled them to spend more time on a one to one basis with the children, and that in this time and during the story acting (when they were not leading), they perceived they had occasion to stand back more and observe, listen, notice and attend more closely than usual to the children's words and stories. This helped them, they perceived, to learn more about each unique child and in some cases practitioners felt this had served to raise expectations. In addition, practitioners commented that they had come to pay increased attention to their own use of multiple modes of communication including language, in particular the extent to which they inadvertently directed children through the subtle use of intonation, eye contact, gesture, movement and sounds as well as words.

The use of the Helicopter Technique also had ramifications for wider practice with practitioners reviewing their pedagogy in whole class activities, reviewing their use of language and developing more drama work. The approach was seen by the practitioners and the Open University team to be extremely well aligned with the underpinning principles of the EYFS and the full spectrum of the Foundation Stage characteristics for effective learning, as well as the prime areas of learning and development and the specific area of literacy as set out in the new framework (DfE, 2012)

Recognising the multiple benefits of the approach and demonstrating their assurance as facilitators, organisational issues that the practitioners encountered were largely resolved and the approach was beginning to be integrated into the wider story provision in some classrooms in the autumn term. In others it was integrated within child-initiated activity, as a practitioner-enabled opportunity for children to tell their stories and enact them. Though head teachers were keen, the implementation of the technique across the settings was understandably in the early stages, though there were plans to involve other staff and to run INSET, additionally older pupils had been involved as story scribes.

## 8.3 Recommendations: Improving and enhancing the Helicopter Technique model

On the basis of this evaluation, we perceive that the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting is both a rich framework for developing children's early learning and a motivating and valuable pedagogical tool for developing creative teaching. Sawyer (2004, in press) describes such teaching as disciplined improvisation, which has at its basis a framework that is a supportive scaffold. The Helicopter Technique represents just such a scaffold. We also perceive that the MakeBelieve Arts professional development programme for the Helicopter Technique is well-designed and successful, it positions the trainers as coaches working alongside practitioners and in a non -hierarchical manner, a way of working that is endorsed by Cordingley et al., (2003) with regard to effective school-based professional development. Our recommendations for enhancing the model and the programme thus need to be read in this light.

### 8.3.1 Recommendations to enhance the model

- Our recommendations here relate to the storytelling and story acting process. Some are responsive to what we observed and analysed, some

are more developmental and scoping in nature. Many represent small issues for consideration and discussion by the team with regard to fine tuning the model. We recommend that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider:

- *Exploring the Helicopter Technique as a tool for identifying the developmental needs of children*. If it used in this way, it could enrich its potential for sustainability. For example, when using the approach, if teachers notice an aspect of a child's development which needs support, they make a note of it, (as per the usual observational practice), and plan support during other activities (e.g. child's ability to use varied vocabulary could be enhanced through a rich read aloud diet of rhymes and songs).

- *Clarifying with and for practitioners the significance of accepting children's language.* On occasion practitioners wished to intervene in order to develop children's narration and performance. We suggest exploring with practitioners other spaces for more didactic intervention, as appropriate to children's age (e.g. working with children on vocabulary and/or narrative development, more standard grammar, challenging perceptions of gendered behaviour). This would help to preserve the unique space occupied by the Helicopter Technique.

- *Clarifying the role of affirmative feedback in story scribing and story acting*. Specific, labelled feedback in the scribing and acting has potential to enrich learning. Peer feedback could also be solicited orally or using digital means. Two caveats accompany this recommendation: support may be needed for feedback on story acting and by default feedback may lead to shaping children's stories.

- *Encompassing children's home languages*. We recommend that in contexts where there is a highly bilingual and multilingual school population, children's stories are transcribed with the help of bilingual assistants (if available) so that children's meanings are preserved and communicated to others. Parents too might be approached for help with translation.

- *Reviewing the kinds of session closures used*. In some settings a song was sung at the end of the story acting, other sessions finished with positive affirmation or applause. We found that the use of a universal action song provided a sense of a collective belonging and a small act of performance.

- *Exploring the potential of using the Our Story iPad app* to prompt and extend children's collections of stories. It could be used either as an additional way of capturing children's stories or as a tool for reflection.

In addition, in schools which have sustained the development of the approach over time, we suggest the following activities as possibilities for the MakeBelieve Arts team to consider. It is intended these could operate as small-scale additions and variants that retain the core features of the approach, but vary the practice in order to retain commitment, share the work with new staff members and

others and foster professional ownership of the technique. In circumstances in which the approach has been used over time, we suggest:

- *Encouraging practitioners to create a classroom book of the children's stories* once a year or more frequently. This could be a digital or paper-based book, or both, based on a selection of children's stories, with photos of storytelling and story acting, children's own captions and visuals.

- *Sharing such books* with parents and school stakeholders (e.g. governors, local authority personnel) and children. Although a book could not capture the overall impact of the Helicopter Technique, it might afford stakeholders insights into the nature of the approach. Additionally, such a polished record of children's stories might help sustainability through inspiring uptake by other schools.

- *Encouraging the creation of individual books for learners* to be used at transitions between classes. These could serve as a summary of children's narrative progression.

## 8.3.2 Recommendations to enhance the programme of professional development

Our suggestions for fine tuning the programme of support seek to build on the current practices of MakeBelieve Arts and where appropriate extend these. We recognise that some of our recommendations raise cost issues and that these will need to be considered by MakeBelieve Arts team in the light of their business plans and costs to schools. Nonetheless we based on the evaluation undertaken, we perceive them worthy of careful consideration.

We recommend that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider:

- *Seeking to involve more support staff and other early years practitioners in the setting across the programme.* This would enable the approach to be developed, sustained and owned by more/all the staff in each class. It would be best undertaken in collaboration with the lead practitioner, identifying staff who could take part in order to enhance staff confidence and expertise.

- *Seeking to offer a minimum of a half day's initial training and provide printed training packs* for all attendees as part of this package. This useful resource and could be used as a starting point for later discussions and a reference point for on-going support. It could also serve to embed the Helicopter Technique principles at the outset of the programme.

- *Seeking to build in at least one mid-programme review meeting with practitioners.* The review could be created during the lunch break, in PPA time or after school, but is seen as advantageous to enhance commitment, and ensure sustainability.

- *Seeking to include video review as part of the programme.* Though we acknowledge this is additionally time consuming, it was a very effective tool for promoting reflection and fostering commitment and understanding of benefits.

- *Including a meeting with the head teacher, head of centre* and/or the senior leadership team during the programme to support consideration of the benefits, and focused discussion of the potential use of the approach in other classes.

- *Profiling the learning gains linked to the EYFS* and inviting practitioners to case study and document at least two children's development, providing them with materials to support this process and discussing this at the review meeting. This will create documentation to share with other staff and thus support sustainability.

- *Making more overt the underpinning principles of the approach* from the outset, supported by key fact cards and the Training Resource Pack, including a clearly-presented summary of links to the EYFS.

- *Profiling the creative potential inherent in the technique* and enabling practitioners through the case study documentation and review discussions to understand the ways in which the approach can foster their own and children's creativity. Providing practitioners with clear definitions of what is meant by creativity in the model would help support an understanding of everyday creativity and of the significance of creativity for social, emotional and cognitive development.

## 8.4 Recommendations: Making the Helicopter Technique more sustainable in schools and settings

In this section we focus on the ways in which the model might operate more effectively within the challenges of curriculum implementation and school stakeholders' expectations. We recognise e that several of our previous recommendations regarding the model (e.g. exploring the use of the technique as a tool for needs identification) and the professional development programme (e.g. involving support staff, review meetings and meetings with head teachers) will also serve to encourage sustainability. In this section we consider recommendations in four ways, those that relate to early years provision, the EYFS and the curriculum, those that relate to developing Centres of Excellence, and to Initial Teacher Education. Finally, we make recommendations regarding new technologies.

### 8.4.1 Recommendations regarding the Helicopter Technique and schools and settings that teach the Early Years Foundation Stage

Whilst MakeBelieve Arts have developed their work with nurseries in recent years, there is scope for capitalising upon the rich connections between the approach and the current EYFS and research into effective early learning (Hall, 2012). Our recommendations in this subsection should be viewed in the light of the importance of introducing practitioners to the principles of the Helicopter Technique while making the approach both more applicable across the curriculum and more sustainable within early years provision. It is therefore recommended that MakeBelieve Arts consider:

- *Profiling the strong alignment of the technique with the principles underpinning the EYFS*, the characteristics of effective learning and the potential for developing both the 'prime' and the 'specific' areas of

learning detailed within this framework. Making explicit connections to these on their website and in their publicity materials, as well as in any training sessions and handouts for teachers. Although the approach encompasses much more than this, and this too deserves to be recognised, such public framing will help make the approach more attractive, enabling practitioners to recognise with immediacy the contributory value of the Helicopter Technique to their work.

- *Becoming well versed in the EYFS* and the ways in which the approach affords an enabling environment, recognises the uniqueness of each child, and builds positive relationships in order to foster enhance learning and development. These four areas represent the four themes of the EYFS and underpin all the guidance. This will help to ensure that this becomes part of their ongoing dialogue with practitioners, nurturing commitment to the approach both within and beyond the current framing of the early years curriculum.

- *Framing the Helicopter Technique as an integrated tool* that in particular enhances children's early language, literacy and communicative development. Presenting the model in an integrated manner in the context of the wider curriculum and existing classroom activities would enable practitioners to better connect the Helicopter Technique with their current activities in the school curriculum and therefore foster sustainability.

- *Foregrounding the dual benefits of the approach in all publicity*. We see the approach as providing rich support for children's learning *and* as a powerful tool for professional development and recommend MakeBelieve Arts position their work at the intersection of both these goals.

- *Continuing to seek opportunities to share the approach* and in particular its capacity to fulfil the requirements of the EYFS, with policy makers and with leaders in the early years as well as practitioners. To this end, MakeBelieve Arts might produce leaflets/material targeted specifically at this audience.

- *Building strategic alliances with early years organisations* (e.g. The British Association for Early Childhood Education, TACTYC, The Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators) such that through new networks and working together the value of the approach becomes more widely and nationally known.

## 8.4.2 Recommendations for developing Centres of Excellence

The MBA team, whilst skilled, is small. The Helicopter Technique is potent yet not well known. It is therefore recommended that amongst other strategies noted in this section, Centres of Excellence and Helicopter Champions are developed. Building on the work already begun in Tower Hamlets and other Local Authorities, it is recommended that the team consider:
- *Supporting a small number of schools or groups of schools to become Centres of Excellence.* Their role would be to share their sustained and developed practice of the approach with other teachers, with initial teacher education students and to allow visitors to attend and watch the

technique in action. In return these hubs of excellent practice could receive additional support from the team, perhaps in relation to tickets for performances or 'bonuses' related to other aspects of the team's work.

- *Supporting a small number of individual practitioners, local authority advisers or academics to become Helicopter Champions.* Their role would need to be negotiated on an individual basis, but in essence they would be invited to support the MakeBelieve Arts team as advocates and champions and to broker new opportunities for the work, locally and nationally.

- *Establishing an Advisory Board for the Helicopter Technique* with heads from the Centres of Excellence and Helicopter Champions. The Board, could alongside the team be involved in reviewing plans and supporting strategy development. The Board might avail new opportunities to spread the word about the approach and increase the networks of influence, both real and virtual, which MakeBelieve Arts can facilitate and support. The Helicopter Technique conferences could be planned and practitioners from the Centres of Excellence invited to lead sessions, thus empowering them to share their current use and the ways in which they integrate the approach within their wider practice.

### 8.4.3 Recommendations regarding Initial Teacher Education

We suggest in the current climate of dramatic shifts in teacher education that the following strategies are worth considering in order to share the Helicopter Technique with larger numbers of teachers and teachers in training. It is recommended that contact is made with:

- *Teacher education institutions* in London in order for MakeBelieve Arts to offer sessions explaining and demonstrating the Helicopter Technique (with a small group of youngsters from a local setting) in front of post-graduate students for primary/early years. The Open University team can provide names for MakeBelieve Arts regarding such contacts.

- *Training schools*, these schools are working in partnership to deliver initial teacher education in various parts of the country and larger numbers of ITE students visit these schools. In this instance MakeBelieve Arts could demonstrate the Helicopter Technique with initial teacher education students and children.

- *Schools Direct,* who from 2013 will be more responsible for initial teacher education in most parts of the country in collaboration with schools.

### 8.4.4 Recommendations for using new technologies

A YouTube video was made during the project as it is recognised that seeing the teachers and children in action is one of the most powerful ways of illustrating the richness of the model. Alternative uses of new technologies that the team might consider could include:

- *Video stimulated review as the basis of MakeBelieve Arts' own in-house training*. It would provide a means for discussing the subtle nuances

inherent in each trainer's practice and more objectively verifying the approaches of individual Helicopter Technique trainers.

- *The use of video data to promote the versatility of the technique* among participating or potentially participating schools. This should supplement rather than replace the highly effective actual modelling of the approach in the training, but might be useful at MakeBelieve Arts conferences in the context of developing Centres of Excellence or within initial teacher education.

- *Extending the use of the story blogs*. These can be an excellent way of sharing reflective practice, either by teachers participating in the Helicopter Technique or trainers. For this purpose, obtaining views and comments from diverse and global audiences would help to iteratively improve the practice and extend the reach of the MakeBelieve Arts' network and products.

## 8.5 Recommendations for dissemination

In order to maximise the impact and influence of the evaluation, it is suggested that a Dissemination Strategy is planned, making use of and extending MakeBelieve Arts's range of contacts, networks and opportunities and working with the Open University team, where appropriate.

**Share the Executive Summary**: Ensure wide dissemination to EY practitioners and teachers through multiple organisations, including:

- Department for Education

- Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI)

- The Scottish Executive

- Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)

- Training Agency

- Teacher Training Resource Bank

- Arts Council England, Scotland, Wales

- Early Years Education

- Preschool Learning Alliance

- The British Association for Early Childhood Education

- National Children's Bureau (NCB)

- National Childminding Association (NCMA)

- The Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators (TACTYC)

- Early Years (the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland)

- National Literacy Trust

- Booktrust

- The Centre for Literacy in Education

- The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

**Plan publications**: Working in collaboration with the Open University team, we suggest considering: articles in the following magazines and on the accompanying websites: *Child Education, Early Years, Nursery World; The Times Educational Supplement*; The British Association for Early Childhood Education's professional journal *Early Education,* the Preschool Learning Alliance journal *Under 5s,* Early Years Educators' magazine *Eye,* UKLA's magazine *English 4-11*, the Society for Storytelling *Storytelling News* and National Drama magazine *Drama.*

**Target professional conference presentations:** These might be focused on the alignment of the Helicopter Technique to the EYFS and effective early years teaching for example at Early Education conferences or linked to the benefits regarding communication, language and literacy, for example at UKLA, NATE, LATE or Booktrust conferences.

**Plan academic conference papers**: The Open University will work to lead in this area in order to share this evaluation of Paley's work nationally and internationally. The Open University team is currently planning to submit a proposal for a symposium on this work with Nicolopoulou at the Literacy Research Association conference in Dallas, December 2013.

**Develop Podcasts or YouTube videos**: This has already begun but could be strengthened through layering the evaluation's insights into such promotional materials.

The above recommendations, based on the evaluation, are offered in order to respond to the project brief, they represent specific strategies that seek to enhance the sustainability of the Helicopter Technique. The technique, which respects the uniqueness of each child, and affords children the space to tell and later act out their stories, leads to new learning and development, particularly in relation to communication, confidence, personal, social and emotional development  and a developing sense of agency and community. It also enables practitioners to enhance their professional learning and serves to enrich practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As such it deserves a higher profile and wider recognition of its contribution to the education of the whole child.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 MakeBelieve Arts – Interview questions (May/June 2012)

*Interview Schedule for experienced advisors and practitioners who have worked with MakeBelieve Arts over a number of years*

Please note that this is a semi-formal interview and the following questions are indicative. During the interview, we may wish to explore some issues in more depth with supplementary questions.

1. How did you first become involved with MakeBelieve Arts and the Helicopter Technique (MBA) & HT?
2. Have you had an opportunity to see how Vivien Gussin Paley uses the technique on one of her visits to the UK?
3. Thinking back over your involvement with MBA has the way in which MBA uses the HT changed much?
4. In your view, is there anything distinctive about the HT that makes it different from other initiatives that use storytelling and drama in early years settings?
5. Can you think of an example of setting that you have been involved with where the HT has been particularly successful and made a significant difference to practitioners and children?
6. What, in your view, is MakeBelieve Arts' vision regarding the HT?
7. Is the HT a good way of helping children develop their speaking and listening skills?
8. Thinking about developing children's communication skills, how do children with EAL respond to the HT?
9. Thinking back over your involvement with settings that have used or are using the HT, can you summarise how it influences practitioners?
10. How important is it for children to act out their stories?
11. Can you summarise what the main benefits for children are?
12. Are there differences between boys and girls in terms of the way they respond to the technique?
13. What about children with additional needs?
14. When the six-week programme with MBA finishes, in general do practitioners sustain their use of the technique over time?
15. Are you aware of early years settings outside London and the SE that have adopted this technique? How widespread is it?
16. Do you have any reservations about the HT that you would like to share with the evaluation team?
17. Is there anything else that you would like to share with the evaluation team that we have not covered?

### Key Questions for MakeBelieve Arts interviews

Thinking back to the early days when you first came across the Helicopter Technique can you recall what it was that made you think that it was something special?

Thinking back again to the early days of visiting schools and starting to work with Helicopter Technique what do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

You have been very care careful to document everything over the years? What would you say the main lessons are that you and your colleagues have learnt? Have you introduced any major changes over the years?

Can you think of a particular example of a setting or school that you've worked with where you felt that the Helicopter Technique was very, very successful and made a real difference to practitioners and the children in the school?

What are the most important aspects of the Helicopter Technique that you try to get across in the training that you offer to teachers? Can they modify it to suit their own context?

*SUPS Do you think some things are clearly the same in every school, I'm wondering about when you actually mark out the drama area, the stage, and how important is that stage?  Is that something that's absolutely crucial, could you do without it?*

*So what do you think is so significant about that space for the children?*

How important is the personality of the trainer?

When you read Vivian's books, it is clear that she allows the children to direct the acting out of their own stories and choose who else can be in their story. Why is this important?

*SUP How do teachers respond to this?*

What about the sorts of stories the children tell? Have these changed over the years? Do the children return to the same stories on different days, or do they build on the stories that they created on the previous day, or is it as you say fast and changing and something new every time?

What is it that is distinctive about the Helicopter Technique that you do not get with the sort of play that normally goes on in the home corner or playground?

What are your own views on the value of play in the early years classroom?

I noticed that from the accounts of the early years that that you often commented on the opportunities that children have to try out different roles. I also noticed that very often it was girls who took the lead and the boys would follow.  The boys weren't quite so keen on trying out the different roles to start out with. Do you notice much difference between boys and girls in terms of their engagement?

How do children with special needs or EAL respond?

What do you think the main benefits are for children in general?

Thinking about the teachers and the training. How important do you think the training is, or do you think it is something that practitioners could actually just pick up by reading about it in a book?

# Appendix 2 Helicopter practitioner interview: initial/pre-programme

School/nursery:             Borough:

Practitioner name:

Role/job title:

**1. School/class profile[10]**

Tell me a bit about [school/nursery] and the children you're working with…

a) [School/nursery] catchment area?

b) Approximately how many children do you have on your register/books

| Girls: | Boys: |
|--------|-------|
|        |       |

c) Approximately how many children attend on a typical day?

| Girls: | Boys: |
|--------|-------|
|        |       |

d) Approximately how many of the children attending are:

|                      | Gs | Bs |                   | Gs | Bs |
|----------------------|----|----|-------------------|----|----|
| White (British)      |    |    | Mixed             |    |    |
| White (Other)[11]    |    |    | Chinese           |    |    |
| Black/ Black British |    |    | Other ethnic group|    |    |
| Asian/ Asian British |    |    |                   |    |    |

e) Approximately how many of the children attending live in households where English is not the main language spoken?

| Girls: | Boys: |
|--------|-------|
|        |       |

f) Approximately how many of the children attending are on Early Years Action, Early Years Action Plus or have a Statement?

| Girls: | Boys: |
|--------|-------|
|        |       |

---

[10] We can combine with/relate to other sources of information.
[11] E.g. Continental European, Irish

**1. School/class profile ctd.**

g) How well would you say children in your class generally play, communicate and manage their own learning? [Prompt: please think of all your children's profiles and how they fit with the EYFS requirements]

**2. Practitioner information**

a) How long have you been working at [school/nursery]?

b) Say a bit about your role in [school/nursery]:

c) Any other relevant information on professional background, interests etc.: [Prompt – e.g. any relevant prior teaching or other experience]

**3. Motivation for taking part in Helicopter programme**

a) What interested you in taking part in the Helicopter programme? [Prompt: voluntary, selected etc.?]

b) Are you looking forward to it/any reservations/worries?

**4. Expectations about the programme**

Do you have any particular expectations about the programme – what you might get out of taking part:

a) expectations for yourself, as a practitioner? [Prompt: possible benefits/problems, short/long-term changes etc.]

b) expectations for the children taking part in the programme? [Prompt: possible benefits/problems, short/long-term changes etc.]

c) expectation for your school/nursery? [Prompt: possible benefits/problems, short/long-term changes etc.]

**5. Current use of story/storytelling, drama etc.**

a) What is your view on the role of story/storytelling in class? (How) do you currently use story/storytelling? [Prompt: inc. picture books/other resources, story time etc.]

b) What is your view on the role of fantasy play in class? (How) do you currently use fantasy play? [Prompt: inc. enactment of stories, providing opportunities for role play]

c) What is your view on the role of drama in class? (How) do you currently use drama? [Prompt: inc. dramatic activities or plays, children's performances for Christmas/other festivities]

d) What is your view on the role of play in class? (How) do you currently use play? [Prompt: inc. what opportunities have children for play in the classroom]

e) (How) do you see the Helicopter programme fitting in with these activities?

**6. And finally …**

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions!

# Appendix 3 Helicopter practitioner interview: end of programme

School/nursery: Borough:

Practitioner name:

Role/job title:

**1. General response to taking part in the Helicopter programme**

a) In general, how well do you think the Helicopter programme works in your class?

The programme is working:
very well quite well not sure not very well not at all well

b) Can you think of any aspects of the programme that work particularly well in your setting?
[Prompt – details]

c) Can you think of any aspects of the programme that don't work very well in your setting?
[Prompt - details]

d) Going back to your original thoughts about the programme [from pre-programme questionnaire]:
- initial interest
- looking forward/reservations/worries
- expectations for yourself, for the children, for the school/nursery

… do you still have these views, or have your views changed?
[Prompt – details under original headings]

**2. Helicopter and children**

a) How do you think the children have responded to the programme?
[Prompt – do they enjoy it, look forward to it, not enjoy etc.?]

b) Have you seen any changes in the children since the introduction of the programme?
[Prompt – changes in children's behaviour, confidence, self expression, language use, interaction with others, listening etc., with peers and adults]

c) Do these changes apply just to their participation in the programme, or have they affected children's [behaviour/confidence/language use/interaction with others/listening etc.] across other classroom activities?
[Prompt – details]

d) Do you think that some children have benefitted from the programme more than others?
[Prompt – which (kinds of) children?]

e) Thinking of the Focus children for a moment, can you talk me through any changes or comments you have with regard to their responses: (a) any changes (b) and /or beyond Helicopter Technique time?

[Take each focus child in turn and connect to their observations]

f) Have you gained further insights into the children's interests as a result of listening to their stories and acting them out?

## 3. Helicopter and practitioners/classroom practice

a) How do you feel personally about running the Helicopter sessions?
[Prompt – enjoy or not, confident or not, etc.]

b) (How) do you think the Helicopter programme is fitting in with the other activities you do (including other uses of story - picture books and children's story writing etc.)?
[Prompt – are there links or is Helicopter separate?]

c) Do you think there have been any changes to your classroom practice/activities since the introduction of the Helicopter programme?
[Prompt – details]

d) Have the children used the technique spontaneously in other areas of their free play?

## 4. Helicopter and the school/nursery

a) Have you had any responses from others in the school/nursery to the programme?
[Prompt – other colleagues, head teacher, parents etc.]

b) How have [other colleagues, head teacher, parents etc.] responded?
[Prompt – details]

c) Has the technique been used with older children in the school

 [Prompt - acting as scribes for younger children?]

## 5. Looking forward

a) Will you continue running the programme in the autumn term?

[Prompt - How often?]

b) Do you anticipate running it as you do now, or will you change anything?

c) How do you feel about running the programme in the autumn?
[Prompt – looking forward to it, any reservations etc?]

d) Do you think you will continue to use the technique in your teaching? [e.g. long term planning]

## 6. And finally …

Is there anything else you would like to add?


Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions!

# Appendix 4 Helicopter practitioner interview: follow up interview

School/nursery: Borough:

Date:

Practitioner name: Role/job title:

**1. General response to taking part in the Helicopter programme**

a) On reflection, how well do you think the Helicopter programme worked in your classroom last term? You said … last time - are you comfortable with that?

very well quite well not sure not very well not at all well

b) Were there aspects of the programme which worked particularly well in your setting? Last time you said ……………… is that how you feel now or differently?

[Prompt – paraphrase- after details]

c) Were there any aspects of the programme that didn't work very well in your setting? Last time you said ……………… is that how you feel now or differently?

[Prompt - details]

d) In relation to the case study children, your reasons for choosing them were…

X…

Y…

Z…

Did the Helicopter Technique make a difference to them in this regard to you think?

X, Y, Z

e) What do you consider to be the core of the programme, its underpinning principles?

**2. Helicopter and practitioners/classroom practice**

a) Do you think that personally you gained any particular skills through running the programme?

b) Do you think you made any changes to your classroom practice, subtle or otherwise as a result of running the programme?

c) Did it in any way influence or impact upon your relationships with the children?

d) Have you sustained your use of the programme over time, into this term in any way? Prompt – frequency of use?

e) If you have continued to use the Helicopter Technique how has it felt working without support from MakeBelieve Arts?

f) Has your use of it changed in any way and if so in what ways?

g) Have you seen any changes in the children in general since the introduction of the programme, or have you spoken with their new teachers about any changes?

[Prompt – changes in children's behaviour, confidence, self expression, language use, interaction with others, listening etc, with peers and adults]

h) This term have the (new?) children used the technique spontaneously in other areas of their free play as we observed in some settings last term?

i) Do you envisage you will still be using the Helicopter Technique across the year and in your teaching longer term?

[Prompt – why? How might it integrate with other work? How often?]

j) Beyond the technique itself, do you think that experiencing the Helicopter Technique will bring about any long term changes in your classroom practice, either directly or indirectly?

### 3. Helicopter and the school/nursery/current practice

a) If you were introducing the Helicopter Technique to other early years teachers, perhaps in other schools, what would you suggest are the core benefits for children and for teachers?

b) What might you suggest they need to be careful about or need to pay particular attention to?

c) In what ways do you perceive the Helicopter Technique fits or otherwise with the revised EYFS guidelines?

d) What advice would you offer to MakeBelieve Arts in relation to their support for the programme

[Prompt: what did you find useful and what less so?]

e) Have you discussed the Helicopter Technique with other colleagues, head teacher, parents at all?

[Prompt – details]

### 4. And finally …

Is there anything else you would like to add?


Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions!

## Appendix 5 Practitioners' log book

## LOGBOOK OF TEACHER OBSERVATIONS

**Case study children:**

……………………………… ……………………………….. ………….……………………..

**School/nursery:** ……………………………………………………………………………

**Your name:** …………………………………………………………………………………

Questions to consider:

*Does the child express him/herself more verbally and/or non-verbally?*

*Are there changes in the ways the child describes things and events?*

*Is he/she a good storyteller?Are there changes in his/her storytelling?*

*Does he/ she make more eye contact with peers and adults?*

*Are there changes in the ways he/she plays with other children?*

*Does he/ she wait to take turns? Has this changed?*

*Is he/she a good story-listener?Can you give short examples?*

MakeBelieveArts
Re Imagine Learning

The Open University

Child's name: ………………………………………………..……………………………

Date: ………..………………………

**Please make a note of any positive or negative changes you observed in this child, these could be during or outside the Helicopter session and are not limited to the areas listed below.**

| Changes in … | Positive or negative? | Please tell us more…(you could include examples, and where/when you noticed any changes) |
|---|---|---|
| how the child expresses him/herself verbally (e.g. use of vocabulary, complexity of sentence structure) | | |
| how the child expresses him/herself nonverbally (e.g. gaze, use of body, gestures etc) | | |
| the child's use of 'writing' and drawing | | |
| the child's storytelling skills (e.g. description of events/things; complexity of story) | | |
| the child's story acting (e.g. performing a role; attending to the audience) | | |

| Changes in … | Positive/ negative? | Please tell us more… |
|---|---|---|
| whether/how the child talks about topics that are important to them | | |
| how the child listens to others (peers and adults) | | |
| how the child plays with others (peers and adults) | | |
| how the child shares things (with peers and adults) | | |
| how the child takes turns (with peers and adults) | | |
| the child's confidence | | |

| Changes in … | Positive/ negative? | Please tell us more… |
|---|---|---|
| Other: (please specify) | | |

# Appendix 6 Further information on the Our Story app

### Protocol for Our Story use with children to recall their experiences

In researching children's experiences, we were keen on getting an insight into children's views and feelings of the story acting and storytelling process. Except for one case study child who was absent at our last visit, all case study children were approached at the "review visit" and were asked about their stories and experiences of the Helicopter Technique. The researcher showed children a selection of pictures from the story acting session and prompted the conversations with an informal question along the lines of: "*I have a few pictures of the story you told today but I forgot what it was about, would you like to tell me?*". The conversations were video-recorded either by fellow researcher (Setting B &C), one of the practitioners (Setting A) or by a stand-alone camera (Setting A&B). To generate children's recollections of stories, we used an iPad and the Our Story app.
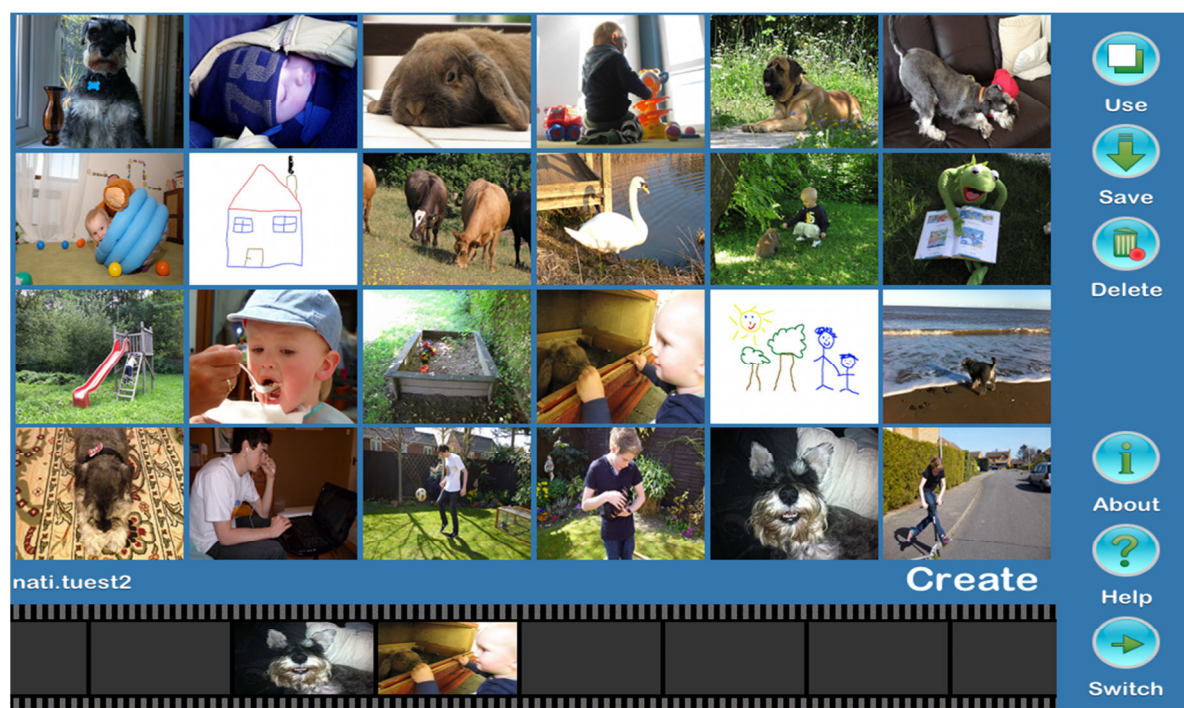


Our Story app user interface

### *The Our Story app: further information*

The Our Story app was developed by researchers at the Open University to enable the authorship and sharing of children's stories on smartphones and tablets. The app allows the users to create their own story, with a simple user-interface and the possibility to record their own sounds, embed their own text or pictures/ drawings. The app was developed with a wide range of users in mind (practitioners, researchers, individual families) and is freely accessible via the Apple store.

The app consists of two parts: a gallery of pictures and a storyboard. For each picture in the gallery, users can add text (words, sentences or whole paragraphs) and/or add their own recorded sound. The storyboard (filmstrip at the bottom of the gallery of pictures) enables users to put their pictures together in a sequence, making up a story with a beginning and end.

We chose to use the app because of its three principal features: first, it allowed us to use digital, high-resolution images of storytelling and story acting as a stimulus for conversations; second, the inbuilt audio-recorder and text-annotation facility were used to support children's re-tellings in both a written and audio mode; third, the filmstrip and gallery of pictures enabled us to facilitate children's recollection of the story sequence and re-construction of their stories.

# Evaluation of the 'Helicopter Technique' of storytelling and story acting

Your setting has been invited to take part in a research project commissioned by MakeBelieve Arts and carried out by researchers from the Open University. The project is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and is designed to evaluate an educational programme for enhancing young children's storytelling and story acting. The programme is called 'The Helicopter Technique' and was designed by Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher from Chicago. The technique has been used extensively and successfully in the USA, and has been introduced to the UK by MakeBelieve Arts. It involves adults listening to young children's individual stories, writing them down word for word, and then engaging the class in acting out the stories in the classroom.

The Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting aims to develop children's love of telling and listening to stories. It gives them the opportunity to experience their stories being listened to, having their stories written down and acted out by their classmates. It should develop children's creative imagination, vocabulary, communication and listening skills. It should also help children learn to take turns, to listen to each other and to reflect on other people's experiences as they act out different roles. This is the first time the technique has been evaluated, to see if these possible gains can be observed in practice.



## How will the evaluation be carried out?

Evaluators will visit three or four times during the delivery of the programme - probably a familiarization visit, then three visits to observe and video-record the programme in action, once near the beginning, once in the middle and once towards the end of the programme.

Practitioners will be asked to identify a focus group of three children who they observe during the programme – details of the type of observations (which will be kept low-key) will be provided nearer the time. In one of the later visits, the evaluators will interview practitioners to record their views of the programme. With the permission of the practitioners, this will include a 'video-stimulated review', where practitioner and evaluator re-view and discuss a key aspect of the programme, selected by the practitioner. The evaluators will also talk to children, probably in small groups, to ask about their views of the programme.

In the Autumn Term evaluators will return for a brief visit to carry out a final interview with practitioners, discuss any reflections and so on.

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:
Professor Teresa Cremin, the Open University
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Trisha Lee, MakeBelieve Arts
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# Appendix 8 Staff Information Letter

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Dear Practitioner,

## Evaluation of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting

Your setting has been invited to take part in a research project based at the Open University, funded by MakeBelieve Arts and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. This letter tells you about the research, and how to contact the researchers should you need to.

### What is the research about?

The project is an evaluation of an educational programme for enhancing young children's storytelling and story acting. The programme is called 'The Helicopter Technique' and was designed by Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher from Chicago. The technique has been used extensively and successfully in the USA, and has been introduced to the UK by MakeBelieve Arts (MBA). It involves adults listening to young children's individual stories, writing them down word for word, and then engaging the class in acting out the stories in the classroom. This is intended to become part of everyday classroom activities.

### Why is this evaluation important?

The Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting aims to enhance children's love of telling and listening to stories by giving them the opportunity to experience their stories being listened to, having their stories written down and acted out by their classmates. It aims to develop children's creative imagination, vocabulary, communication and listening skills. It should also help children learn to take turns, to listen to each other and to reflect on other people's experiences as they act out different roles. This is the first time the technique has been evaluated, to see if these possible gains can be observed in practice.

**What will happen?**

As part of the study we will observe the Storytelling and Story Acting being introduced and used in your class. Two of us will visit the class and write down our thoughts on what we see, make video recordings of the children's story enactments and talk with the staff and children about their experiences. We will make audio recordings of some of these conversations. We will do this three times during the Summer term, and once in the Autumn term.

**What will happen to the information?**

We will change all names so that the children, settings and staff will be anonymous. Any information given to us will be treated as confidential. It will be stored safely and used only by the research team. The information we gather will be used only for research and training purposes. We will write a report for MakeBelieve Arts, and we will give a summary of this report to each setting and to parents who wish to receive a copy. The information will also be used to write articles for publication and for presentations to other researchers and practitioners at conferences. Some of these publications and presentations may be available on the internet. Selected clips from the video recordings and/or still photographs might also be used and we will ask for parental and staff permission to do this. This is optional.

**What happens if I change my mind?**

We will be sensitive to the children's wishes and we will be guided by teachers/practitioners in this. If we feel that a child does not wish to be recorded at a particular time, we will stop for that time. We will also respect the wishes of staff throughout the research, and we will arrange visits at times that are convenient, as far as possible. However, you may still change your mind about participating in the study and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, even after signing the consent form. If you decide to do this, we will not use the information from you.

**What are the benefits of the study?**

The main benefits of this study are to gain reliable insights into the potential benefits of the Helicopter Technique for children and for staff. This information may help to inform local and wider use of the technique to enhance children's storytelling and story acting. It will also give practitioners the opportunity to think and talk about different ways to improve their practice and there may be direct benefits to the children who participate in this study.

**Any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:


**Professor Teresa Cremin t.m.cremin@open.ac.uk**          **01908 653212**

**Trisha Lee, MakeBelieve Arts Trish@makebelievearts.co.uk**     **020 8691 3803**

# Appendix 9 Parent Information Letter

**The Open University**

**Educational Dialogue Research Unit**

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Dear Parent,

## Evaluation of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting

The educational setting your child attends has been invited to take part in a research project based at the Open University, funded by MakeBelieve Arts and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. This letter tells you about the research, and how to contact the researchers should you need to.

### What is the research about?

The project is an evaluation of an educational programme for enhancing young children's storytelling and story acting. The programme is called 'The Helicopter Technique' and was designed by Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher from Chicago. The technique has been used extensively and successfully in the USA, and has been introduced to the UK by MakeBelieve Arts (MBA). It involves adults listening to young children's individual stories, writing them down word for word, and then engaging the class in acting out the stories in the classroom. This will become part of everyday classroom activities.

### Why is this evaluation important?

The Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting aims to develop children's love of telling and listening to stories. It gives them the opportunity to experience their stories being listened to, having their stories written down and acted out by their classmates. It should develop children's creative imagination, vocabulary, communication and listening skills. It should also help children learn to take turns, to listen to each other and to reflect on other people's experiences as they act out

different roles. This is the first time the technique has been evaluated, to see if these possible gains can be observed in practice.

## What will happen?

As part of the study we will observe the Storytelling and Story Acting in your child's class. We will visit the class and write down our thoughts on what we see, make video recordings of the children and talk with the staff and children about their experiences. We will make audio recordings of some of these conversations. We will do this three times during the Summer term, and once in the Autumn term.

## What will happen to the information?

We will change all names so the children, settings and staff will be anonymous. Any information given to us will be treated as confidential. It will be stored safely and used only by the research team. The information we gather will be used only for research and training purposes. We will write a report for MakeBelieve Arts, and we will give a summary of this report to each setting and to parents who wish to receive a copy. The information will also be used to write articles for publication and for presentations to other researchers and practitioners at conferences. Some of these publications and presentations may be available on the internet. Selected clips from the video recordings and/or still photographs might also be used and we will ask for parental and staff permission to do this. This is optional.

## What happens if I change my mind?

We will be sensitive to the children's wishes and will be guided by teachers/practitioners in this. If we feel that a child does not wish to be recorded at a particular time, we will stop for that time. We will also respect the wishes of staff throughout the research, and we will arrange visits at times that are convenient to participants. However, you may still change your mind about your child participating in the study and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, even after signing the consent form. If you decide to do this, we will not use the information from your child.

## What are the benefits of the study?

The main benefits of this study are to gain reliable insights into the potential benefits of the Helicopter Technique for children and for staff. This information may help to inform local and wider use of the technique to enhance children's storytelling and story acting. It will also give practitioners the opportunity to think and talk about different ways to improve their practice and there may be direct benefits to your child for participating in this study.

## Any questions?

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:


**Professor Teresa Cremin t.m.cremin@open.ac.uk**          **01908 653212**

**Trisha Lee, MakeBelieve Arts Trish@makebelievearts.co.uk**    **020 8691 3803**

# Appendix 10 Practitioners' consent form

**CONSENT FORM: STAFF**

**Evaluation of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet relating to this study, and I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the staff or researchers. If I do this any information collected about me will be discarded.
- I give permission to be video-recorded in the setting by the named researchers, as set out in the information sheet.
- The research team will not use real names for children, teachers/practitioners or schools.
- I give permission for the research team to use the audio and video recordings for research and training purposes only.

I am happy to take part in this study.

YES ☐                    NO ☐

Name (please print)
…………………………………………………………………………..

School/
Preschool...…………………………………………………………………………...

Signature………………………………………… Date………………………………..

**Thank you for your time.**

# Appendix 11 Parents' consent form

**CONSENT FORM: PARENTS**

**Evaluation of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet relating to this study, and I understand that:

- My child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my child at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the staff or researchers. If I do this any information collected about my child will be discarded.
- I give permission for my child to be video-recorded in the setting by the named researchers, as set out in the information sheet.
- The research team will not use real names for children, teachers/practitioners or schools.
- I give permission for the research team to use audio and video recordings of my child for research and training purposes only.

I am happy for my child to take part in this study.

YES ☐          NO ☐

Your name (please print)
……………………………………………………………………

Name of your child
…………………………………………………………………………..

Signature……………………………………………Date…………………………………

**If you do NOT want your child to be included in this study you MUST return this form. If we do not hear from you, we will assume that you give us your permission.**

**Thank you for your time.**

## Appendix 12 Language use in children's narratives

In order to examine children's language use in their narratives, and possible changes over time, we investigated stories from 18 case study children.[12] In most cases these were three stories told during our first, second and third observation visits. In one or two cases, where one of these stories was not available (because of absence, or because the child chose not to tell a story) we substituted a story from a similar point in the programme. Three children produced only two stories (again because of absence or choosing not to tell a story). In the case of Charrington our first observation visit occurred at a relatively late point in the programme (Week 5) and so we also included these children's first story text where this occurred earlier (in Weeks 1 or 2 of the programme). For consistency, we also included the first story text for all children, where this occurred before our first visit. This gave us a sample of 56 stories in all, with a reasonable spread across the programme.

In our analysis of the children's stories we looked at:

- Word length of stories

- Elements of story structure. We were interested in how children structured their stories. This is potentially highly complex, so we focused on two measures that we could examine systematically across the range of stories in our sample:

    o Narrative structure: whether stories included an *orientation*; *complicating action* (clauses that tell us in sequence what happened, and then what happened); and some form of *resolution*, or rounding off.

    o Clause structure: the extent to which stories use fairly simple, often repetitive structures, such as 'and then there was a knight and then there was a princess and then there was a castle'; or introduce some variation, including more complex structures such as the use of subordination (e.g. 'there was a bad fairy that turned the wolf into a house', or 'they were trying to figure out something because the bad guys were trying to find their secret hide out').

- Vocabulary: in order to look at the range and variety of vocabulary used in stories we adopted a measure known as a type: token ratio. This is a

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[12] We have a sample of narratives from 19 children, collected at different points in the programme. This is because Rainbow class in Charrington Primary initially selected four children as case studies before narrowing down to three, and we have narratives from all four children. However one of the case study children, Freddie (also from Charrington, Clouds class) used signing to tell his stories, and this was interpreted and transcribed by his teacher. The story texts did not therefore provide direct evidence of Freddie's language and were excluded from this analysis. We retained all four children from Rainbow class so that we had six children from Charrington, as from other schools.

measure of the number of *different* words used in a text ('types' are different words; 'tokens' are all words). In the following example from a story:

> *when the talking castles were still chatting along came a witch and then the witch went in between them to stop them talking*

There are 23 words (tokens) but because some of these occur more than once (*the*, *witch*, *them*, *talking*) there are 19 types – a ratio of 19:23 or 83%.

Because 'vocabulary' is often associated with 'content' words (e.g. nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, adverbs), we also adapted the measure to include the proportion of different content words in story texts. The extract above, for instance, contains seven different words in this category: *talking*, *castles*, *chatting*, *came*, *witch*, *went*, *stop*. The ratio of different content words to total words in the text is 7:23 or 30%.

We used these measures to identify changes in children's stories over time, specifically whether over time children's stories became longer, exhibited greater complexity in their structures, or used a wider range of vocabulary (i.e. had a higher type: token ratio). Note this is simply a measure of change, not of the absolute quality of children's stories. Also change may occur for a variety of reasons, e.g. increase in confidence. It is not necessarily associated with children's linguistic development.

The results of this analysis are shown below:

| Measure | Children (no. = 18) whose stories showed development over time | |
|---|---|---|
| | Evidence of change | No evidence of change |
| Word length | 8 | 10 |
| Story structure | 8 | 10 |
| Range of vocabulary (total words) | 7 | 11 |
| Range of vocabulary (content words) | 9 | 9 |

Table notes:

1. Although we have the same numbers for change in word length and story structure these are not the same set of children: there is no direct relationship between story length and structural complexity.
2. As might be expected, there is a relationship between the two measures of range of vocabulary: seven children show evidence of an increase with respect to total words and content words.
3. Only three children show evidence both of greater complexity in story structure and range of vocabulary.
4. There are differences between schools: five of the children who show an increase in range of vocabulary (both measures) come from Bournehill.