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INDEPENDENT, IMAGINATIVE WRITING: LOTS OF PROBLEMS AND SOME SOLUTIONS

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This chapter describes part of a series of curriculum development projects set up to identify and tackle the difficulties of teaching imaginative story writing to children aged 7-12 years. The key aims were to develop practical teaching strategies that would work in large mixed ability classes. The projects sought to develop knowledge of writing techniques and an understanding of the writing process to help children and teachers create supportive writing communities. An underpinning principle was that teachers, rather than some pre-determined teaching sequence, should drive the curriculum. Thus, although some of the strategies were presented as teaching sequences (see Ellis & Friel, 1995), teachers were encouraged to use them flexibly to create their own teaching sequences, depending on the needs of the class.

The starting point for all the projects was to identify aspects of the writing curriculum that teachers and children found most difficult. Extended imaginative story writing, as opposed to recounts of known stories or personally experienced events, was consistently identified as the hardest type of writing, and one which presented distinct problems.

The main problems identified were:

- getting ideas
- planning and getting started
- redrafting
- keeping momentum and coherence

Getting Ideas

Helping children to generate ideas is a persistent problem for teachers. In the past Creative Writing theorists have suggested initiating exciting events to prompt original work (Clegg, 1965; Maybury, 1968). Process theorists have suggested children be encouraged to behave like professional authors by keeping 'memory drawers', 'ideas books' or 'working lists' of topics. (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986). Researchers drawing on genre theory have suggested modelling and supporting story structure and language (Lewis, 2001; Cairney, 1985).

All these suggestions have proved problematic in the classroom. The creative writing techniques were criticised in the Bullock report (DES, 1975) as producing writing that had been 'artificially-pumped' by the teacher and the process approach can be difficult to implement with large classes and (perhaps) poorly motivated children. Whilst modelling and structural prompts successfully generate content for non-fiction writing, they have to be used carefully to help children generate imaginative storylines; project teachers reported that such prompts could result in thirty near-identical stories.

Most teachers in our project were using class discussion about objects, pictures or key questions to prompt ideas and enthusiasm but recognized that this did not work well with everyone. Invariably, one or two pupils have few ideas and need additional, individual

help before they can start. Others finish quickly, often writing safe, lollipoppy and rather boring stories. The amount of individual attention required by the 'no-ideas/ slow start' and the 'quick finish/superficial story' pupils leaves little time to teach the bulk of the class. No matter how skilled or experienced, our project teachers found it hard to manage their time to ensure effective learning across the whole class. They felt dissatisfied that, lesson after lesson, the same pupils (often those in the middle-band) were left to muddle through on their own.

An analysis from the child's point of view shows why class discussion is a problematic way to teach children how to generate ideas. Firstly, it cannot ensure continuous, active participation from everyone and often relies on a core group of six-eight children to generate the exciting words and ideas that get written on the board. These tend to be children who always offer ideas and, one suspects, could probably write the story with little or no discussion. The bulk of the class are compliant but passive, happy-enough to adopt an idea suggested by others, but not actively generating ideas of their own. A few children (often those who require individual discussion with the class teacher) may be totally disengaged.

Large meetings do not provide a good forum for generating ideas. They tend to favour people who are quick-thinkers and are confident about responding instantly. Anyone who takes longer to think, or prefers not to give an instant response is disadvantaged; it becomes difficult to see past those ideas already mentioned to generate new and original ideas of one's own. It is easy to see how children can be thrown unwittingly into a passive, waiting role rather than one of active engagement.

Teacher-led discussion can also unwittingly encourage a convergence of ideas. Management studies show that when the boss is present, employees tend to suggest ideas that will win approval. Invariably these are safer and less diverse than those offered when the discussion is led by an equal. We also know that employees look to their boss to identify ideas that have potential and are more likely to adopt these wholesale rather than analyse or adapt them. This happens in class discussions too; pupils told us that they try to suggest ideas that the teacher will like and to take the teacher's cues about which are worthwhile.

Paired Brainstorming prior to class discussions

We found that paired brainstorming around key questions (see fig.1) overcame a lot of the problems associated with class discussions. Writing partners were given 5-10 minutes to brainstorm some possible answers to each question. The questions were considered in isolation and if one was problematic, they simply moved to the next. This ensured a wide variety of ideas. Then, each pupil identified two or three ideas that might be good cornerstones for a story. At this point the teacher initiated a class discussion.

Clarifying the purpose of the class discussions

The class discussion was short (five-ten minutes). It was set up carefully and the teacher explained that pupils might find it useful in different ways: Some, having chosen a

cornerstone idea, could link new ideas to it and begin to build their story. Others might hear a new idea, better than any of their own. Teachers explained that it was fine to adopt ideas suggested by others; all authors change their minds.

Overnight Thinking Time

Although pupils were enthusiastic after the class discussion, they were asked to sleep on the ideas. Teachers explained that all writers need thinking time and asked children to consider all that they had heard and make decisions about their own stories which would be written the following day. Teachers explained that people do their best thinking in different ways; some think when they are relaxed and alone, perhaps whilst having a bath, or lying in bed at night; others prefer to discuss their ideas with friends, family or carers. Pupils should use whichever situation, and people, they find most helpful but come to school the next day prepared to write.

Paired brainstorming followed by a class discussion removes the problems of large meetings and hierarchical structures and prevents teachers from doing the thinking on behalf of their pupils. The need for individual, written brainstorms ensures that everyone is actively involved right from the start. The non-hierarchical and decentralized nature of the brainstorm produces a wider range of ideas and, because everyone has had an opportunity to think before they participate in the larger meeting, pupils are on a more equal footing. The less confident and the more-considered thinkers are in a better position to compete with the confident, fast thinkers who usually dominate.

The requirement that children choose their own 'cornerstone' ideas means that the young writers cannot opt out of responsibility for interrogating the potential of ideas and predisposes them to measure any new ideas against their own choices. This, along with a clear explanation of the purpose of the class discussion and the ways in which pupils might find it useful, encourages active decision-making. It forces an important but subtle shift of emphasis; young writers become powerful because they see themselves as choosing from a range of options rather than desperately seeking 'an idea that will do'.

Overnight thinking time removes the time pressure (and the stress) of having to develop ideas on the spot. It means that children are less likely to be 'bounced' into making superficial choices and are more likely to be emotionally committed to the ideas they finally choose. Moreover, the explicit advice about what (and who) might help encourages young writers to establish their own networks for talking about writing. In our project, there was evidence of parents giving advice and talking to children about the difficulties they had experienced in writing at school and how they overcame them.

There was also evidence of children becoming aware of the different types of support that they personally needed; they came to recognise when it was helpful to talk to somebody else and when silent contemplation was more productive. They also learnt to whom it was useful to talk about different things; some people were good for ideas, others were good for how to say things or gave good tips on illustration and presentation.

This may be the kind of help that reluctant writers need, particularly boys who seem to have difficulty establishing such networks spontaneously. Project teachers reported that, as writing became a social and peer-focused experience rather than an isolated and teacher-focused one, pupils were writing more and were writing more frequently both inside and outside school.

Planning and Getting Started

Both teachers and pupils highlighted problems in writing plans and in using them during the writing task. Teachers reported that some plans look great but are forgotten as soon as the pupil starts writing. Other plans are so detailed that the writer drifts into telling the story. For some pupils, planning was less an anchor for creative thought than a millstone which grinds down their enthusiasm and drowns new ideas.

Almost everyone –teachers and pupils- saw the planning process as a way of deciding in advance what would happen in the story. This fits with the research findings that pupils aged 10 and 11 used their planning to generate the content but not to make the strategic decisions that could drive and channel the creative process of writing (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

Calkins (1986) notes that younger children often find it a difficult and joyless task to ‘cycle their minds back’ and write a story in detail once they have thought their way through to the very end. We found that this was also true for some older writers who reported that too much written planning made them tired or bored with the story before they began to write it.

Planning Approaches and Learning Styles

It seems obvious that finding the ‘right’ amount of planning depends not only on a writer’s familiarity with the story topic and genre but also their preferred thinking and working styles (Head, 1996). Some children, whom we termed ‘Complete Planners’, liked to know exactly where their story is going, making all the strategic decisions and thinking-through the key events and much of the detail before they start. A full and detailed plan gave these young writers the security that enabled them to enjoy the writing.

For other children, whom we termed ‘Happy Accident Planners’, knowing the path their story will take kills any enjoyment and satisfaction in writing it. They preferred to create much of the storyline as they went along, ‘thinking-in-action’ and taking full advantage of ideas that occurred as they wrote. This approach could sometimes result in stories that were over-complex or lacking in coherence, with so many new characters or subplots that the storyline became incomprehensible. In contrast, stories from ‘complete planners’ tended to be coherent but sometimes rather lacked the vitality and excitement of the ‘just hatched’ idea.

'Bare Bones planning: Making and Understanding Strategic decisions or scaffolding the storyline?

Most children lie somewhere in-between these two extremes, as indeed do most adult authors. (Carter, 2001) To allow for this range, the project teachers used a 'Bare-Bones' planning format focusing on the key strategic decisions that would anchor the writing and drive it forward. The planner can be extended to detail the complete storyline but does not require it. To stop children from drifting into writing the story, plans were written on small pieces of paper (about a quarter of an A4 size). In the Bare Bones planner, pupils identified:

- The main character(s) and their personalities (In practice, this meant the name(s) and 12 -16 words describing: key personality traits, what drives them, their best/ worst characteristics and 'fatal flaws')
- The setting (5-6 words describing potentially significant aspects of place, time and atmosphere)
- The initiating event or problem that drives the story forward.
- What happens in the end

And sometimes (to target a 'complete planner' approach):

- The complications and key events along the way.

To focus on the strategic decisions within the plan, teachers got children talking in pairs, giving each partner one minute to explain why their key decisions were important. Pupils selected one of the following to tell their partner about:

- What their main character is like, and the impact of this on the initiating event problem/ ending
- The setting and the impact of this on the initiating events/ problem/ ending
- The problem or initiating event that starts the story off.

For some projects, the teachers asked the whole class to plan using strategic decisions only, creating the actual storyline as they wrote. In other projects, everyone planned the complete storyline before they wrote. In this way teachers ensured that pupils got a feel for both types of planning. Pupils were then given opportunities to decide on the amount of planning that worked for them (in terms of enjoyment and the quality of the finished product). The teacher's aim was to help individuals identify the planning approach that was most satisfying and beneficial to them.

Research shows that immature writers rely on a highly localised 'what shall I say next?' strategy, rarely considering the text as a whole (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). The framework of the written plan and the paired discussion seemed to help pupils consider the whole story. Analysis of the stories showed that the children appeared to use their strategic planning decisions more effectively to both maintain the coherence of the storyline and to generate new ideas. One reason for this may lie in the unscripted, and therefore challenging, nature of independent imaginative writing. Much of the shared writing produced within the NLS requires children to use known texts to create new ones. The first author has made the key decisions about content, structure and style and, in doing so, has defined the direction and boundaries of the story. Children inherit these and, although they may change a few, will accept and follow the majority. These decisions help to constrain the story and keep it on track. Similarly, recounts of known

stories and personal experiences are scripted events in which the writer has few problems keeping the storyline on track (because the story sequence, its characters, events and settings have already been determined). However, independent imaginative story writing is unscripted. The page is blank and the story can develop in an unlimited number of directions and involve an unlimited number of characters and events. This presents a far more complex task for the writer, who must both generate ideas to drive the storyline forward but also make and use the myriad of decisions which will constrain it and thus ensure coherence (Ellis, in press).

The form of the bare-bones plan (see figure 2) seems to help writers do both these tasks. It pushes the writers into making the decisions about the character, setting and plot (rather than simply identifying who/what they are). The storyline develops as a logical exploration of how character, setting and problem/initiating event interact. The planning decisions thus help drive the story forward but also constrain the number of directions in which it could go.

Paired discussion also creates an informed classroom climate in which friends are knowledgeable about each other's storylines and are well-placed to provide ongoing advice and support. It fuels interest which ensures that people are keen to read the finished product. This creates the basic conditions for a strong and vibrant community of writers.

Getting Started

Once the planning decisions have been made, getting started on the story can still be a problem. For many of the children, knowing how to begin their story was either obvious, or a source of great anxiety. Project teachers had generally tried to help children by reading examples of good beginnings and explaining the functions that story beginnings serve; that the beginning should 'grab the reader's attention' or 'make the reader want to read on'. However, whilst this helps pupils evaluate a beginning, it does not help them to generate one.

Direct-Teach Story Beginnings

Both teachers and children found it helpful to know some of the ways that stories could begin. The story beginnings that children found most useful to be taught were:

- *Traditional beginning*: "Once upon a time when the world was not as it always has been..."
- *Character description*: "Jane was small and dark with quick bright eyes. She was the sort of girl who..."
- *Place/setting*: "The attic was cool and dusty. Ribbons of sunlight streamed through gaps in the roof..."
- *Conversation*: "'You can go down the lane as far as Granny Dryden's house, but don't go into the Old Manor Garden' said Jane's mother sternly..."
- *Question*: "Why did I go in to the attic that day? What strange force compelled me up the steps..."
- *Scene*: "Jane stood in the untidy hallway with the coats piling off the hooks and mucky shoes scattered around her feet..."

- *Action*: “Knock Knock. Jane hammered her fist on the old wooden door...”
- *Object*: “The key was small, silver and obviously very precious....”

Some teachers pre-taught the options for story-beginnings as stand-alone lessons. A quick way to do this was to take a well-know fairy tale (*Cinderella* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* worked well) and ask the children, working in pairs or individually, to write just the first few sentences of the story, each starting with a different type of beginning. This work had the added benefit of making a useful and eye-catching wall display. Teachers further developed children’s knowledge of these beginnings by asking children to:

- find examples of each type of beginning from the stories of published authors;
- write a different beginning for a published story;
- find one example of a published story which began in a way that was different from those on the list
- write alternative beginnings for some of their own previously written stories, or those of their friends.

Other teachers explained all or a selection of the beginnings when pupils were writing their own stories. It was productive to give a brief explanation and let the pupils draft two different beginnings for the story they had planned. Writing partners then discussed the alternatives and helped each other choose the best beginning for the story.

Re-drafting

Research has shown that children tend to edit rather than re-draft their stories (Bracewell, Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1978). They are happy to correct surface features and maybe change a few words or phrases but rarely make radical changes as a result of re-thinking what they want to say or how best to say it. In our interviews, very few children had anything positive to say about re-drafting. Many said that the prospect of redrafting discouraged them from writing long stories. They did not see redrafting as an opportunity to reframe their thoughts, but as a task they had to do to make their writing correct, neat and acceptable to the teacher. The project teachers found it difficult to give pupils the individual advice necessary to help them redraft effectively and, without this, they felt that pupils were as likely to change the best parts of their stories as the weakest.

Short Re-drafts, Hard Edits

One way to introduce meaningful decision-making is to ask children to create alternative drafts of one short passage rather than re-draft a whole story. Activities like drafting two beginnings help pupils to see redrafting as a process of exploring alternatives. Strategic planning decisions, frequent re-reading and ongoing editing allows major problems to be prevented, or caught and remedied at an early stage. Pupils were not disheartened by the thought of a massive re-draft hanging over them.

Focused Re-drafting

Another strategy is to focus the attention of the whole class on just one specific craft element of story writing. After a short, whole-class teaching input, children can be asked to re-read and re-draft their own stories (with writing partners if necessary) to make just

this one aspect more effective. Teachers found the following specific content particularly useful for focused re-draft tasks:

- Dialogue: Can this be improved to: drive story events? Add to the characterisation? Alter the pace?
- Characterisation: Can this be improved to: make characters believable? Make the reader care about what happens?
- Setting: How can this be used to: provide a clear landscape for the action? set the atmosphere? change the pace?
- Plot coherence/structure: Are the events clear? Well explained?
- Pace: When does the storyline need to move fast? Be slowed? How to use dialogue, setting, metaphors/adjectives, sentence length, vocabulary, layout etc. to achieve this.

At the end of the lesson pupils provided examples of bits of the text they had changed, and why. In this way, core teaching content was reviewed and further explored.

Children undoubtedly find it difficult to generate alternatives as part of the re-drafting process (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1982). Generating two short beginnings prompts meaningful decision-making and focuses children's attention on the effect that the writing achieves. The discussion and advice helps to create a positive classroom ethos and ensures that the reasons for decisions are explicit. Although children do not always choose the best beginning, their reasons can help teachers to identify and frame future teaching points. In the words of one teacher

"It was at first a little disheartening to see the choices children made and hear their reasons. Once the stories had been published, I took a lesson to re-visit their decisions. It was one of the best teaching sessions on writing I'd had – I felt as though I was listening and coaching, rather than just telling them what to write."
(Class Teacher of 10-11 year-old children)

Although the amount of redrafting was limited to the first couple of sentences, it involved real decision-making and an opportunity to explore the reasons underpinning those decisions. Teachers felt that, in terms of the learning payoff, this limited but genuine redrafting was preferable to a more widespread but superficial task.

Momentum & Coherence

Teachers and pupils identified different problems arising from the need to engage in ongoing planning to drive the story forward whilst maintaining a clear and coherent storyline. Teachers rated maintenance of a consistent narrator's voice and not allowing the whole story to slip into a dialogue as fairly serious problems because they were persistent. The children saw these as 'something to watch for' rather than problems, often because they felt that they were easy to identify and fairly quick to correct and therefore not 'problematic'.

Both teachers and children said that sometimes a story starts well, but runs out of steam and comes to a sudden (and for the teachers, a disappointing) end. The children were quite clear about why this happened: Sometimes young writers (six-eight year-olds) cited physical discomfort - writing made their hands hurt; older children explained that they

sometimes simply lost enthusiasm for the story. Other children had a task-orientated view and stopped because “they had written enough to fulfill the task”. There was a tendency for teachers to dismiss these issues or regard them in a rather fatalistic light but they are serious problems for children and teachers must take them seriously. Whilst teachers were irritated by the ‘how much shall I write?’ question, (presumably because they felt it implies a task-orientated view) it is not unreasonable. It was the first question that many of the contributors to this book asked, for example.

Other issues were identified as problems by teachers, but not mentioned by the children at all. These were: stories that are unclear, with poorly explained or sequenced events; stories in which the writer seems to ‘forget’ the main characters so that the story suddenly goes off at a tangent and stories in which the number of characters and subplots means the storyline becomes just too complex to handle. Very few children thought that not being clear was a problem and none identified the ‘over-complex’ story as problematic.

It is easy to see why children might fail to identify poorly explained and/or over-complex storylines as problematic. Enthusiastic writers ‘live’ the story as they write. Children can find it hard to distance themselves sufficiently to see the gap between the story in their head and that which they have written down. Flower (1979) called this ‘writer-based’ writing because the driving concern is the writer’s thoughts rather than the reader’s needs. Learning to evaluate their own writing is vital if children are to appreciate what the reader needs to know and thus improve it.

Achieving this ability to move in and out of the writer – reader positions requires children to de-centre and distance themselves from the vivid stories playing in their heads and learn to trigger their own evaluation but also to learn how to switch back into writer mode (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). It is a vital skill because it not only helps to ensure coherence for the reader, but also allows the writer to make strategic decisions that will generate further content. The ability to read and summarize the storyline so far allows the writer to reflect on the events and characters, which in turn helps generate new ideas. Thus, coherence and momentum are linked.

Helpful strategies such as the ‘author’s chair’ (Hansen and Graves, 1983) and ‘conferencing’ (Graves, 1983) had been tried by some of the teachers on the projects. However, they reported finding it difficult to ensure that individuals got the opportunities, teaching input and support when it was needed. The project teachers found the following sequence and structure of teaching sessions useful:

Predictable Sessions: Providing for Thinking Time, Revision, Hard-Writing and Free-Choice

Teachers on the project planned several (usually three-four) sessions during which the children wrote one extended story. Each session followed a common pattern which was explained to pupils in terms of how it would help them make good use of their time in class. For the first five-eight minutes everyone read, and edited if necessary, the story they had written so far. Some children did this alone, some worked in pairs reading aloud to a writing partner and some read their work to the teacher. The teachers determined

how each pupil worked on the basis of individual needs. Teachers explained that pupils could also consult their planning notes in this part of the lesson. In reading and editing the previous day's work, teachers emphasised the importance of reading for meaning (pupils were encouraged to make minor changes, deletions or additions to improve the clarity and style of the text) and asked pupils to identify and correct any words or sentences that looked wrongly spelt or grammatically incorrect. Where necessary, children were given further support in the form of 'post-its' saying, for example, 'I don't understand why this character would do this' or 'There are 2 spelling/punctuation errors in this line/ paragraph/ page. Please find and correct them'.

The next 15-20 minutes was 'hard writing' time. Teachers pointed out that this was not long and that children should write individually and in silence.

For the final 10 minutes of the lesson, pupils could choose whether to continue writing or work on illustrations for their story.

Project teachers were careful to explain to pupils how the structure of the sessions would support the writing process. They explained that developing a story over a number of lessons allowed 'cooking time' for ideas and that pupils could use overnight thinking time to rehearse the next 'bit' of the story. They reminded children of the people and situations outside school that could help them think and plan.

Illustration as an Aid to Planning in Action

Teachers provided plain white paper cut to different sizes and shapes for the illustrations and pupils used whatever style and materials they chose, including colouring pens, small pieces of collage material, sequins or glitter pens. Teachers explained that illustration provided an opportunity to think about the story in a different way and that it might fit the pupils' writing processes in a couple of ways:

- If the story is going well, but needs an illustration, pupils could continue writing but leave a space for a chosen size of paper, doing the illustration at a later date.
- If the story is going badly or they need a break from writing, pupils could illustrate a part of the story already written, or a part yet to come.

It was imperative to set clear ground rules for illustration. The two most crucial were:

- Only high-quality illustrations allowed. Careless or scrappy work would be re-done in the pupil's own time.
- Only one illustration per page of writing. This ensured that everyone, including those who found writing more difficult, spent most effort on the writing.

Deadlines and Time Management

A publication deadline (usually one week) was set at the start of each project. Pupils knew that by this date, their stories should be finished, with a title and a front cover. They liked choosing the title after the story had been written and found the notion of a 'working title' liberating and useful.

Pupils were allowed to use homework time and any spare moments during the day to work on their stories. Initially, teachers had to closely monitor children and remind them of the deadline and about making good use of their time. Some teachers found it necessary to teach pupils how to set their own intermediate deadlines. However, as children got more experienced, they became better at all these elements.

If children finished their stories before the deadline, they could do any of the following, optional tasks, which were pre-taught in one-off lessons, or taught briefly in 10 minute mini lessons (Atwell, 1991):

- Writing a book blurb for the back page – with the short summary
- Writing about the author
- Writing a dedication for inside the front cover
- Making borders (either by drawing or cutting appropriately sized strips from wrapping paper)
- Making posters to advertise their story

Real Readers, Real Reviews

Once published each story was read and reviewed by the teacher and by one other person. Teachers enlisted a variety of people to read stories over the course of a year. Sometimes writing partners read and reviewed each other's stories in class or as a homework task and sometimes teachers arranged for reviews by older or younger children within the school, or by parents. Sometimes children were asked to elect a reviewer from within or outwith the school. Reviewers were given questions to channel their responses and ensure that writers got helpful emotional and technical feedback.

The sequence and structure of these sessions works because it supports the children in behaving like writers and gives them responsibility for behaving like writers. It is the antithesis of the single session 'hit and run' approach to story writing.

Finding ideas and getting started is the hardest part of any creative endeavour. One long story, developed over several days, means that children learn what it feels like to be 'on a roll' with their writing as their ideas develop momentum. They also live with the story for long enough to care about telling it well.

Some teachers initially felt that allowing children to discuss their work outside the classroom was a form of cheating. They worried because they couldn't be sure how much help children had been given. It is worth remembering that this was once the view on teaching reading; that parents should stay out of it and leave the professionals to do their job. Children reported that the wider discussions helped them realise the gap between the story in their heads and that written on the page. It generated valuable advice and made them realise that they are not alone in facing particular difficulties. However, it clearly did more than this; teachers reported that involvement of a wider circle helped children realise that writing can be an enjoyable activity which cements social relationships and that everyone faces similar difficulties. If we are serious about creating communities of writers, we must encourage children to discuss writing with anyone and everyone they know.

Overnight thinking time and discussion helps children to summarise where they are up to in the story and decide what they need to write next. It allows children to mentally rehearse their writing for the next day and this circumvents the need for major re-drafts. The break means that each day children bring fresh eyes to the editing task. Teachers reported that the short focused burst of writing helped some reluctant writers, who were disheartened by the idea of a whole writing lesson, but were more willing to accept the idea of a 15-20 minute burst.

Illustration provides a legitimate way for children to take a break from their writing. Taught as part of the writing process, it can help pupils focus on the main events of the story, enabling them to address crucial strategic questions such as ‘What have I said so far?’ and ‘What do I need to say next’. The potential of illustration to facilitate writing was new to many teachers and children and the idea took some time to ‘bed-in’. Where teachers had poor class control, or found it difficult to maintain the focus on writing the story, illustration provided an unhelpful distraction. However, there was evidence from some teachers that the integration of writing and illustration developed visual literacy in the form of a heightened awareness of the different styles of illustration, the effect of page layout on a reader and a deeper understanding of the functions that pictures can serve within the text.

The publication deadline gives the project impetus and allows the children to manage their time. By targeting the whole class for a writing project, the teacher was able to create a sense of purpose, urgency and momentum that is hard to achieve when groups are working to different timescales on different projects.

In conclusion

The aim of any writing curriculum should not be to coach good bits of writing from children but to create independent writers, able to use their knowledge and discuss their work in a way that prompts the development of further understandings. In the past OFSTED has commented that “...too much time is spend on pupils practising writing rather than being taught how to improve it.” (Ofsted, 2000). However, the opposite situation is just as undesirable: Too much teaching without opportunities for independent practice will produce wonderful stories but superficial learning. Children need a balance.

Providing this balance is a complex business. It requires teachers to support children in thinking like writers but also, in equal measure, to give them *responsibility* for thinking like writers. In our projects, support came from direct teaching input showing children how to use a variety of process and craft techniques; through the judicious use of writing partners and through lesson structures and sequences designed to provide help and feedback when it was needed. Children’s responsibility was promoted by the emphasis on cornerstone planning and ongoing planning decisions; the use of thinking time and discussion outwith the school day; clear expectations about the quality and quantity of writing; clear deadlines and the prospect of real readers. Both support and responsibility

were promoted by the strategies, which helped children tap the social, emotional and intellectual energies of their home communities.

Teaching for balance means that the teacher must be knowledgeable and in charge, able and willing to make decisions. In the words of one project teacher:

“In the past, I think I’ve always looked for good ideas for lessons. What I’ve realised is that I needed more than that. I needed teaching points and activities, but I also needed to analyse what was going on and organise all these things so that the children were making as much of an effort as I was. I don’t think that was always the case before.”

6045 words

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