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Finding Writers in Storytelling: developing children's motivation to write through storytelling

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a small-scale practitioner-research project which worked with reluctant writers in a primary school in the North of England to explore the role of oracy in the development of literacy. Carter (2000) and Duncan (2009) point out that literacy in the form of the written word has only existed for 3% of the time humans have used language. The other 97% comprises of oral storytelling and the spoken word. Clearly we have been storytellers for much longer that we have been writers

For example the storytelling of Homer in The Iliad and The Odyssey, which literary critics readily accept as great works of literature, is now widely considered by many historians and other scholars to have actually been composed through talking (or more accurately through singing) rather than through writing (Carter, 2000, Corbett,2010). Often such stories were improvisations (similar to contemporary jazz, jamming, rap or traditional music and folk-songs) where one performance is seldom the same as another. In today's literate society it is difficult to imagine how magnificent works of art, great stories and legends came to be composed in the absence of any form of reading or writing. On the contrary, it now seems that these shared worlds of meaning came into being through the interplay of a range and combination of storytelling 'technologies' and resources. These include orally shared mental pictures, familiar sounds and words, remembered rhymes or rhythmic phrases, individual and collective accounts of day to day human experience, and the heroic tales and legends which have carried human imagination and transmitted the hopes and fears of our ancestors across the ages.

SECTION 1: Literature Review

Across the field of human history, storytelling is one of the most highly developed and widely used ways in which we make sense of ourselves, each other and the world we live in. Carter argues that telling stories is a deeply human activity, which allows people to connect with the storyteller, writer, or visionary whose ideas have inspired the story. He also points out that stories allow people to convey emotions which some may find hard to express in other forms of media and means of communication. Stories enable us to share our wants, fears and passions with a wider audience, connecting people across the ages through the power of the spoken and written word.

Andrews and Smith (2011) show how the National Curriculum (NC) in England has to date, privileged writing and reading over speaking and listening. It also assumes reading and writing to be more reciprocal than speaking and writing.

Andrews and Smith (2011) argue that,

> *"This has resulted in more time being given to reading and writing separately (with not enough time devoted to their reciprocity) and proportionately less to speaking and listening (which are almost always seen as 'going together')".*

Andrews and Smith (2011, p. 7).

The above authors, are critical of such assumptions and point to the *generative* relationship between speaking and writing in that they are both skills involving high intellectual load and language *production* (original emphasis). They draw attention to how each can complement and give rise to expression in the other (pp. 5-6). They go on to argue that the link between speaking and writing development is complex and multi-faceted and claim that this link has yet to be given full attention by the academic community.

Corbett (2011, p. 1) notes that it is 'impossible to write a sentence pattern without being able to say it – and you cannot say it if you haven't heard it'. In order to enable children to develop as writers, he claims they need to become familiar with the rhythms and patterns of the language in forms which they can hear and say.

> *"Language is primarily learned through interactive 'hearing' and 'saying' and the more varied the language patterns, the better the writing will be."*

(Corbett 2011, p.2).

The importance of the pre-requisites of literacy in speech advanced by the above authors, would not have been lost on Homer, his contemporaries or indeed his ancestors who would have recognised the importance of the 'technologies' of interactive hearing and saying. These include, shared language, imagery, language and sound patterns, social relationships and a sense of confidence in, and belonging to, a community engaged in the composition and sharing of the stories through which we make sense of ourselves and our world. Making sense of ourselves and our world is, and always has been, inextricably related to our language.

Wittenstein observes,

> *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*

(Wittenstein, 1922).

To accept as a starting point that the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, is not to suggest that the reach of our minds, of what we can say, think, appreciate, and judge, is trapped within the borders of our society, our country, our class, or our time. On the contrary, it is to see that the reach of our minds, the range of signs we 'manage to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live' (1985, p.263).

Geertz goes on to argue that the more we can imagine and understand 'other worlds' and what it might be like to be other people, the clearer we become to ourselves, both in terms of what we see in others, that seems remote to us, as well as that which we see in others that seems familiar. Corbett (2010) reminds us how we live stories in our imagination and that,

> *Story helps us to understand our lives - to explain who we are, what has happened to us, what might happen…Narrative is like a template we place upon our lives, so that we can understand ourselves and our world. It is through narrative that we can step out of the darkness of ourselves…It is to do with the genuine functions of education.*

(Corbett 2010, p. 4).

Fisher points out that 'every lesson is a lesson in language' and that 'talking and writing are forms of thinking' (1998, p.204). Carter (2000) and Perkins (2012) show how talk can help children to imagine other worlds, to structure their ideas and their thinking and to find the best words to use and the best ways to use them. Perkins advocates that, before any writing activity, children need to have opportunities for lots of talk individually, in pairs and small groups and in large groups. Through the work of Corbett (2008), Perkins argues that language acquisition involves internalising patterns of language. Echoing the work of Carter (2000) and Corbett (2011) she illustrates how these can subsequently be extended to 'learning patterns of narrative with accompanying actions' (Perkins 2012, p. 93). Following Corbett (2011), Perkins links story-making and storytelling to 'talk for writing' on the grounds that these strategies give children content, purpose, motivation and skills for writing. For Corbett (2008, 2011), the developmental exploration through talk, of the thinking and the creative processes involved in being a writer are crucial to the development of children as writers.

Vygotsky (1986) acknowledges that, in the act of writing thought has the longest distance to travel. He also notes that writing is a relatively new development in the field of human communication. As pointed out above, Carter (2000) draws attention to how, to date, writing represents only three percent of the history of human discourse, with the other ninety-seven percent being conducted through the medium of talk alone.

Research Question:

 I was interested in the question of how KS2 children's story writing skills might be supported and developed through the use of contemporary physical and digital storytelling resources

SECTION 2: Methodology

Context

This small-scale research project was conducted in an urban school in the North East of England. The school is located on a large estate mainly comprised of local authority housing. In this small-scale research study, I explored the use of *Rory's Story Cubes* as an App for IOS and Android devices and as a physical set of storytelling dice. I wanted to explore if these resources might enable the development of children's storytelling abilities and improve their motivation to write. I was also interested in finding out if the use of physical and digital storytelling resources influenced the quality and quantity of children's writing.

The Research Study

The research study was conducted over five consecutive days. The research population consisted of twelve children who had been identified by their class teacher as reluctant writers, many of whom did not enjoy tasks that required them to use their imagination. In the first three sessions I worked with four children (two pairs at a time).There were also two focus children in the study, a child with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and 'Nicola' a child with highly developed mathematical skills for her age who was clearly disinclined to using her imagination when it came to creative writing. There were also two high- achieving English as an Additional Language (EAL) children in the group, whose parents were from affluent professional backgrounds.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected in the following ways:

1. Classroom observations (paired small groups and whole class).
2. Audio recordings of children telling their stories using *Rory's Story Cubes* in the form of physical dice.
3. Transcripts of audio recordings.
4. Photographs of storylines produced by Rory's Story Cubes in physical dice form.
5. Photographs of children's poems produced using *Rory's Story Cubes* in a digital form.
6. Analysis of individual children's stories and poems.

Data Analysis

1. During the course of this research the emerging data was discussed and findings authenticated with the class teacher.
2. Following the data collection period, transcripts of audio recordings, written stories produced by paired groups and individual children together with poems produced by individual children were analysed to identify categories and frequency of language devices being used.
3. Research field notes and classroom observation data were analysed to identify critical incidents.
4. Categories of data were then clustered thematically.

SECTION 3: Data Analysis

Research Field Notes and Critical Incidents.

The critical incidents *(in italics)* discussed below are extracts from field notes.

Critical Incident 1: *Two EAL children often struggled to link all nine images on the dice. They decided to turn over 'problematic' dice so that they could choose other images to help them with their story. The images they chose included battle-axes and laser guns. When I asked them why they were choosing different images to the ones they rolled, they told me they were "looking for more boys' pictures". However the girls were happy to use any image dice to form their stories. The EAL children in this group while drawing their pictures and annotating them would often look at the other sides of the cubes to see if they could elaborate on a particular panel on their storyboard. This proved to be a coping strategy for both boys when tasks became difficult and offered them a vehicle to push through difficult sections of their story.*

The two EAL children (both boys) framed their stories often around science-fiction and themes (usually involving guns, armies and death). This strategy allowed them to shape their stories in creative ways drawing upon a range of literary devices to create their story.

Finding: This provides evidence that the two EAL boys had developed a unique collaborative coping strategy, which was in itself quite creative! It is also interesting to note however how they explained their choices of alternative images in terms of being "more boys pictures", while the girls in the group were happy to work with any random image generated by throwing the dice. From the limited nature of the data in this study it is not possible to make any gender-based inferences here but this is an aspect of the study worthy of further exploration,

All stories produced in this group were well thought-though with good use made of a high number of literary devices indicating that both of the EAL boys and the girls in the group were able to use the story cubes to develop their ideas and stories.

Critical Incident 2: *The focus child on this day, who was identified as having high attainment in mathematics but was a reluctant writer who did not usually engage with creating story writing activities. Classroom Observation data showed that she was highly engaged and with the study and use of the media. The focus child used adjectives to breathe life into her story. Her enthusiasm for story telling translated well from the oral storytelling session to the more conventional written sessions. She was eager to write down her ideas and produce high quality stories. In the storyboard activity where both art and literacy worlds collided she worked cooperatively with her partner discussing what to draw in each box and who would draw in which boxes. The annotations below these boxes showed that both children worked together well and worked creatively. With her partner they produced two well thought through stories using a wide range of vocabulary and creative literary devices than the class teacher would have expected.*

Finding: This indicates that the story cubes helped the focus child to 'see' story writing in a new way, which not only enabled engagement but also resulted in the use of a wide range of literary devices. The focus child's use of the story cubes showed

that if motivated properly and given the right tools to spark imagination in a fun and fluid way children who do not often engage with creative tasks can and will do so.

Critical Incident 3:...*the SEN child, who formed part of the study group engaged positively with the study and the story cube media and. Despite claiming that he had no ideas for stories he produced two very well thought through pieces of work, which he retold with intonation using a wide range of vocabulary. Prior to this session the class teacher had reported that this child struggled to come up with his own stories and simply used his "safety net ideas" reproducing events from a video game he enjoyed*

Finding: This indicates that the story cubes enabled the SEN child to develop and be more creative in his thinking. His use of intonation in telling his story implies ownership of and even pride in his story as well as pointing to an increase in his confidence as a storyteller.

Critical Incident 4: *For children who normally were not positive about writing they genuinely seem to enjoy creatively using the media and were positive themselves about their work. A tangible "feel good factor" was evident in the session*

Finding: This indicates that children in this study were motivated and may have been experiencing a sense of achievement for the first time in relation to a writing task. This lends support to the claim that the story cubes were enabling them to compose, develop and get to the end of a story. This was evident in the way that the children could not wait to tell their story as soon as they had finished them. Children were very excited by the idea of having their stories audio recorded so that they could listen to them back at a later date.

Critical Incident 5: *One of the children, identified by the class teacher as normally being a very reluctant writer wanted to write their stories down before the end of session as they wanted to remember them for tomorrow.*
Finding: The fact that this child expressed the need to write their story down so early on in the intervention (after this first session) underscores the extent to which this child was engaging in storytelling, as well as the extent to which the experience was motivating them to write. At least one child in each of the other groups asked if they could write their story down at the end of the **first** session.

Critical Incident 6: *The engagement of the focus child was possibly more positive in this second session. She developed her story to provide more clarity to the story she had created with her partner in session. There was a real desire articulate the story, and ensure that the story was framed and shaped in a conventional manner, i.e. produce a recognizable story yet retain both her and her partner's imaginative input to the story in session 1.*

Finding: This demonstrates progression and confidence building in that the focus child was becoming more and more positive about her story making and writing abilities.

Critical Incident 7: *The SEN child managed to develop their story further and found it easier to elaborate after drawing the corresponding picture for the cube. These pictures were all interpretations of what the child was imagining and what he could see on his dice. The SEN child demonstrated that he had many varied and interesting ideas often requesting words he did not know how to spell and asking for them to be added to the group's word bank of interesting words for others to use.*

Finding: This indicates that there is a link between the interpretations of the symbols on the dice, discussion of potential meanings of symbols on the dice and the development of children's language. This may be of particular interest due to the fact that the child in this case was an SEN child. This incident also provides evidence that the use of the story-telling cubes encourages the development of sociocultural learning and practice. What is of particular importance here is that it provides some evidence of Vygotsky's (1986) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) at work, as children gained confidence in asking how to spell words they did not know and in adding to the groups word bank of interesting words for use later.

Critical Incident 8: *All of the groups knew prior to this session that the activity would end with an individual neat 'write up'. The first group were eager to personalize and customize their pair's story. All the children took different approaches to writing their individual stories. Some wrote their stories in the third person whereas others wrote theirs in the first person. Many children adapted their paired story so that the theme was the same but some of the characters differed. This was common across many of the stories. In the case of the two EAL children they wrote very different stories to each other.*

Finding: This indicates that although children composed their original stories together, they felt confident and able enough to use a variety of creative linguistic devices to make the story into their own unique version of the paired story. This provides evidence that the original story, far from limiting their imagination provides a platform for the creation of new individual stories.

Quantitative Analysis From Audio Transcripts and Written Stories

In each of the oral story-telling sessions, transcripts of the children's work were gathered. Once the transcripts had been created the total number of creative devices used in each story were quantified and analysed. This was also done for the hand-written stories to allow for comparisons across all of the sessions. The following tables present the results of this process.

Frequency Tables for Creative Literary Devices

Creative Literary Device	Total in Story 1	Total Story 2
Proper Nouns	5	9
Common Nouns	56	59
Verbs	36	39

Short Sentence	19	7
Adjectives	16	13
Adverbs	6	9
Prepositions	15	13
Metaphor	0	0
Simile	0	0
Total Creative Devices	132	149

Total Number of Creative Devices Used	381
Use of Proper Nouns	49
Use of Common Nouns	133
Use of Verbs per story	91
Use of Short	10
Use of Adjectives	84
Use of Adverbs	13
Use of Prepositions	19
Use of Metaphors	0
use of Similes	1

Comparison Table: Use of Creative Linguistic Devices for both Oral and Written Stories
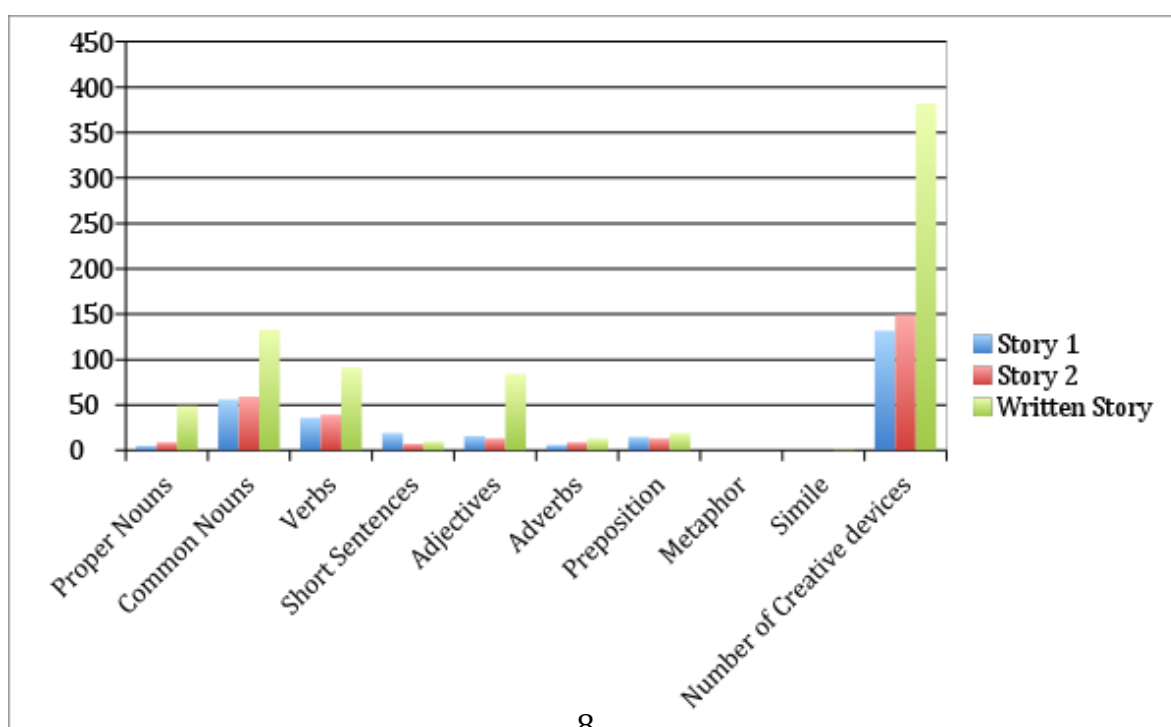
Analysis of Quantitative Data

The quantitative analysis indicates that:

1. A significant overall increase in the use of creative devices used in the children's story telling. The improvement is particularly striking when comparing the number of such devices used in the first oral story 132 as compared with the 382 used in the written piece of work an increase of 189% in the their use. Although the improvement between the first and second oral stories was 132 to 149, it is not as marked, however this still represents a 13% improvement, which in itself is significant.

2. Ignoring metaphors and similes, where there was zero usage in all 3 pieces of work and with the exception of short sentences there was an increase in the use of all other creative devices. The question is why there was a fall in the use of short sentences? Classroom observation data indicates that children were motivated by the use of the story cubes and generally engaged with the work. The fall in the use of short sentences might therefore be attributed to an overall increase in the complexity of sentence construction used by the children in their work.

3. Of particular note is the increase in the number of proper nouns used when comparing the first oral story (5 incidences) with the written work (49 incidences). The number of common nouns increased from 56 to 133, the usage of verbs increased from 36 in the first oral story to 91 and the usage of adjectives increased from 16 to 84. However it is important to note that the study was limited by the time available and the research having to fit in with other school activities. The study would have benefited from the children carrying out further written work so that a comparison of more written texts could have been carried out. However even allowing for potential sampling bias and the scale and length of the study these improvements are significant and worthy of further investigation.

4. The use of more complex creative devices show notable improvements. The use of adverbs is up by 116% with 6 being used in the first oral story and 13 in the written work and preposition usage increasing from 15 to 19 (27%).

5. These differences could be explained by the children's use of more complex and formal language in their written work as compared with spoken language. This certainly could account for some of the differences between the first oral story and the written work, However as these children were regarded by their teacher as "reluctant writers" changes of this magnitude when comparing the children's spoken and written work would certainly point to the use of the story cubes as being a positive intervention in their learning.

6. Analysing the children's work in this way as part of a longer study would I feel assist teachers in identifying where more targeted intervention and combinations of pedagogical interventions are needed e.g. the targeted development of metaphor and simile.

SECTION 5: Strengths and Limitations of the Research Methods in the Study

Research population / sampling

The Research population was identified by the class teacher who had identified all of the children in the sample as being reluctant writers. This could be seen as a strength of the research as the class teacher had in-depth knowledge about each child and their approaches and attainments in the development of writing. On the other hand, it could be argued that for this reason, the sample may not be representative of the whole population of reluctant writers in other classes and schools (Bell 2005, p.13). Furthermore the selection of the sample may be open to criticisms of potential bias from the class teacher's perception and choice of the research sample (Ball 2005, pp. 132 – 133).

Scope, Scale and Timing of The Research

The small size of the research population in this study, together with the limited time over which the study was conducted, does mean that the findings must be treated with care and that any generalizations we may able to draw form this work will at best what Bassey has described as 'fuzzy',

> *"The fuzzy generalization arises from studies of singularities and typical claims that it is **possible, likely or unlikely** that what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere"*

(Bassey 1999, p.12).

Clearly this research project would benefit from a further larger scale and more longitudinal piece of work. However, the positive outcomes indicated by the quantitative analysis, my classroom observation and the positive views of the class teacher are encouraging and worthy of further investigation.

Multi-Method Approach

A particular strength of the study is that it has not relied solely on qualitative or quantitative research methods but used a multi-method balance of both to 'triangulate' data and demonstrate 'concurrent validity' (Cohen and Manion 2000, p. 122) to strengthen the warrant of the findings of this research study.

Classroom Observation

Bell (2005) points out how observation can often reveal characteristics of groups or individuals that would not have been possible to discover by other means. The unstructured nature of the observations in this study enabled me to spot significant events / critical incidents during the intervention. This is also a limitation of the study in that events that seem significant to me may not be deemed to be significant by others. Perkins (2012) cautions that classroom observation is not easy. She offers seven principles of observation, focus; expectations of the lesson; record objectively; reflect on what you have observed; ask question; drawn conclusions and plan future learning. While the open ended nature of this study precluded a predetermined focus for observation, the design conduct, analysis and reporting of this study endeavor to encompass Perkins' remaining six principles of observation.

Naturalistic Approach

The research design did not adopt a positivistic-experimental approach which would have necessitated the use of control groups and experimental groups and my acceptance of the role of detached observer capable of complete objectivity. Instead, I opted for a more interpretive paradigm which rejects the subject-object view of reality in favor of the view that,

> *"The social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the Individuals who are part of the on going action being investigated"*

(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000 p.19).

SECTION 6: Summary and Conclusion

The findings of this small-scale research study support the work of Carter (2000), Corbett (2008, 2011) and others, who draw attention to the important relationship between speech and writing development.

Overall, this research study lends qualified support to claims that the use of *Rory's Story Cubes* in the form of both digital and physical media, progressively increased children's motivation to write and improved their use of creative linguistic devices. This claim could potentially be made for other similar storytelling devices.

Children's increased motivation, deeper engagement in their learning and greater confidence in themselves , as storytellers and creative writers, were evident in both the qualitative and quantitative data strands of this research.

An interesting follow-up to the study would be to repeat the *Rory's Story Cubes* research intervention as described in this article and to follow this up with more targeted interventions using Corbett's (2011) *Talk for Writing.*

This complementary use of the open-ended nature of the pedagogy underpinning *Rory's Story Cubes,* coupled with the clear structures and research-informed principles supporting Corbett's (2011) *Talk for Writing*, could help to identify if/how this combination of pedagogical interventions might lead to improvements in children's language and writing development.

Finally, Andrews and Smith (2011, p.2) note with concern that that 'writing practices are getting out of touch with the multi-modality and practices of the digital age'.

While I share their concerns, I would go further and argue that many of today's writing practices are not only getting out of touch with the multi-modality and practices of the digital age, they are also losing touch with the multi-modality and practices through which our pre-literate ancestors became literate in the first place!

If we underestimate the vital link between oral storytelling and writing in the pedagogical practices we use to develop children as writers, then we will lose much of the legacy of Homer and others who sparked the flame of literacy.

In closing, I hope my small contribution to educational research will demonstrate the value of teachers engaging in educational research to bring about improvements in practice. Otherwise, as Wellington (2000) asks 'Why do it?'

Word Count 4696 including abstract and excluding references.

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