Title: Progress Through Partnership

ABSTRACT

The National Literacy Strategy Framework (DfEE, 1998) requires primary children to, 'become increasingly conscious of the writer's intentions' (p.7) and The National Curriculum for English (1999) states that children should, 'use and adapt the features of a form of writing, drawing on their reading' (p.28). Developing a process approach to writing, where children are supported as they draft and redraft texts, was the aim of a university funded school-partnership project between Sycamore Junior School, in the City of Nottingham, and Nottingham Trent University. The article describes how Years 3 and 4 children developed an understanding of narrative structure and became reflective writers, as they responded to each other's work, during writing workshops.

PRACTITIONERS IN PARTNERSHIP

Brooker & Macpherson (1999) suggest that in collaborative approaches to practitioner research, the quality of the relationship between researcher and practitioner is crucial to the research enterprise. Close links have been formed between the University Education Faculty and its partnership schools and the teachers and tutors, involved in the project described here, enjoy a trusting working relationship. Educational researchers often face the dilemma of adopting a distant research approach with an emphasis on objectivity and reliability, or a grass roots position with a concern for validity and practical application. School-university partnership projects, by their collaborative nature, invariably result in teachers and tutors working closely together at the chalk-face or, as Cordingley, (1999) puts it, being immersed in the swamp (p.183). We wanted our experience to be personally emancipatory but also informative to other colleagues, and we hoped to emerge from the

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'swamp' with insights we could share at conferences (e.g. BERA, NATE, UKRA) and through the provision of inset materials for professional development in local schools.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our classroom practice was influenced by the work of socio-cultural psychologists and educationalists such as Bruner (1986), Wood (1988) and Barnes (1992) who emphasise the interrelationship between social context, interactive discourse and learning. We found Bruner's concept of scaffolding particularly useful, since it appeared to complement Vygotsky's (1978) notion of organised instruction within the learner's zone of proximal development. The metaphor seemed appropriate to our work because an important feature of scaffolding is its gradual removed as the learner demonstrates increased competence and finally independence. We also found its interactive nature, with an onus on constant interplay between teachers and learners in the joint completion of tasks, compatible with our view of effective teaching and learning.

REFLECTIVE WRITERS

Rosenblatt (1989) develops Vygotsky's (1978) notion that reading and writing are two halves of the same process. She argues that although there are obvious differences between reading and writing in that the writer starts with a blank page and must produce a text, while the reader starts with what is already written and must produce meaning, each conditions and is conditioned by the other. Successful writers constantly shift perspectives, move fluidly in and out of reader-writer positions, reflect on their work and evaluate it according to audience and purpose. Research (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) has suggested that primary age children find this reflective process difficult and make only superficial changes to their work

during redrafting. However, much of the research has taken place under controlled conditions, where children are observed as they work individually and independently, rather than in natural classroom contexts. Our experience at Sycamore Junior School leads us to conclude that primary children are likely to compose, most effectively, within a writing community where social collaboration and interactive discourse play a major role in scaffolding them as young writers. Within such a community, thinking, planning, drafting, evaluating, reflecting and redrafting constitute a writing process where children can compose and teachers can intervene to offer guidance. It is not that primary age children *cannot* engage in reflective activity and make significant changes to structural and stylistic features; simply that they need to be adequately supported. Such support comes from children themselves through peer-peer discourse and from teachers through modelling, demonstrating and discussing texts with children before and during the compositional process.

WRITING WORKSHOPS

It is essential to provide children with an opportunity to work on extended pieces of writing where they can put into practice the knowledge and skills learned during literacy hours (National Literacy Strategy (1998) Training Pack, Module 5, p. 5). However, because of the dedicated time allocated to numeracy and literacy, primary schools are finding it difficult to provide a broad curriculum and are struggling to see how it is possible to allocate additional time for extended writing. We considered the writing workshop to be absolutely essential if we were to develop process writing and encourage children to become reflective writers. Writing workshops allow children to engage in 'authorial activity'; to be authors not pupils and to experience writers' perspectives and readers' demands. We also wanted to develop a reciprocal scenario, where knowledge

gained during literacy hours fed into writing workshops and where work produced in workshops looped back into literacy hours. Our aim was to use literacy hours to examine texts written by adult authors but also to discuss texts being produced by children in writing workshops. We therefore, trialled a timetabling arrangement which would allow such fluidity and children drafted texts during half-hour writing workshops, which took place on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Research suggests that children from literary home backgrounds are aware of narrative genre and learn the conventions of narrative from an early age as they play, have stories read to them and begin to read for themselves (Dombey, 1988; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Topping, 1985). When we began the work in school we assumed that the children would be reasonably familiar with non-fiction writing. This was not the case. They appeared to have very little understanding of the language and organisational features of narrative genre. The children were very familiar with television soap operas and their notion of 'story' seemed to emanate from this source. Early attempts at writing stories reflected this conception in terms of structure, characters, plot and theme. The children's texts consisted mainly of dialogue and there was little sense of narrative voice or reader-writer interaction. This highlighted, for us, how easy it is to miscalculate the background experiences and knowledge which children bring to the learning context. It emphasised the need for teachers to continually evaluate children's 'zones of proximal development' and to scaffold the learning accordingly.

We decided to develop the children's conception of narrative genre by focusing on traditional tales. These have recognisable structures, definite language features and predictable characters. As Propp (1968) has shown, traditional tales often have:

➢ Someone in need of help (protagonist representing good),
➢ Someone who is responsible for the protagonists' need for help (antagonist representing wickedness),
➢ Someone who offers help (donor representing kindness and wisdom),
➢ The protagonist embarking on a quest of some kind,
➢ A plot evolving as a series of problems and solutions,
➢ A resolution occurring as a result of the protagonist's intelligence, cunning or acquired wisdom.

Through investigating the language and organisational features of traditional tales the children began to develop an understanding of how such texts are constructed. By drawing on their awareness of how adult authors *craft a text* young writers can extend and enhance the quality of their own writing. At Sycamore Junior School the children examined and evaluated various tales by seeking answers to the kinds of questions shown below.

Setting / Situation
➢ How does the story begin?
➢ Where and when does the story take place?

Character
➢ What sorts of characters do we often have in this kind of story?
➢ Can you tell what the characters are like by their:
- appearance,
- thoughts,
- speech,
- behaviour?

- ➢ Do any characters behave in ways that you expect?
- ➢ Do any characters behave in ways that surprise you?
- ➢ Do any characters repeat certain kinds of behaviour?

Plot (problem – solution – resolution)

- ➢ What is the first problem in the story?
- ➢ How is the problem solved?
- ➢ When one problem is solved does this create another problem?
- ➢ If there is another problem how is it solved?
- ➢ Are all the problems resolved in the end?
- ➢ What are the main events in the story?
- ➢ What is the most exciting event?
- ➢ Are there any unexpected things that happen in the story?
- ➢ Can you predict what will happen in the end or are you kept guessing?

Style

- ➢ Are there any special reasons why you like or do not like this story?
- ➢ Does the author use any unusual or interesting words or phrases?
- ➢ Are there any characters that are especially well described?
- ➢ Are there any characters that you really like or dislike?
- ➢ How has the author made you like or dislike any characters?
- ➢ Are there any words or phrases that are repeated in the story?
- ➢ Is there anything special about the way this author writes?

INVESTIGATING A TEXT

We chose the version of *Hansel and Gretel*, by Anthony Browne, to focus children's attention on the thinking and planning which the author may have done, and the kinds of choices he might have made when composing his text. We identified the following elements.

Opening and Setting

➢ Timeless 'once'
➢ At the edge of a forest
➢ Poor people
➢ In a time of famine

Characters

➢ Brother, sister, father, stepmother, witch.

Plot

➢ *Problem 1*   The family is poor and has nothing to eat.

➢ *Solution*   Stepmother's idea is to lose Hansel and Gretel in the forest.

➢ *Problem 2*   How can Hansel and Gretel survive?

➢ *Solution*   Hansel and Gretel drop pebbles on the forest track.

➢ *Problem 3*   Hansel and Gretel are taken deeper into the forest.

➢ *Solution*   Hansel and Gretel drop bread crumbs on the forest track.

➢ *Problem 4*   Birds eat the bread crumbs.

➢ *Solution*   Hansel and Gretel find a house.

➢ *Problem 5*   The house is a trap set by a witch and Hansel and Gretel are captured.

➢ *Solution*   Hansel and Gretel use their cunning to trick the witch and escape.

➢ *Resolution*   Hansel and Gretel find the witch's treasure. They return home and find their stepmother is dead. They are happily reunited with their father.

After we had identified the schema of *Hansel and Gretel* and discussed the process Anthony Browne may have gone through in his re-telling of the story the children were keen to write their own traditional tales. However, we recognised the need to direct their enthusiasm and support their efforts through the provision of a planning framework. The children worked in

pairs or small groups to discuss ideas, share views and try out various scenarios. We found this pre-writing, thinking, talking phase invaluable and realised that speaking and listening is, as the National Literacy Strategy (1998) states, 'an essential part of literacy' (p.3) and that effective teaching and learning is 'discursive - characterised by high quality oral work' (p.8). We devised a planning frame (fig 1) for the children to work on initially but they modified and developed this to suit their individual or collective needs.

Insert fig 1 here.

DEVELOPING FIRST DRAFTS: THE POWER OF PEER RESPONSE

Development in children's compositional maturity may be seen in their ability to discuss their writing and reflect on conscious choices they have made about content, structure and style. Teachers are now familiar with the concept of response partners. However, children need to understand what is expected of them as members of a writing community and, specifically, how to undertake the role of critical respondent. This was established by the provision of a response partner card which children kept in their personal writing files (fig 2). The card clarified the roles and responsibilities of both the writer and response partner.

Insert fig 2 here.

Group response sessions proved to be a most productive way of helping children move between reader-writer positions. As children drafted work we transferred their stories on to overhead transparency sheets and used them as the focus for guided reading and writing sessions. In the following example Alex, aged 8, has planned his story and

written a first draft. When we discussed it with him he felt that it was fine and required only minor editorial changes. We presented Alex's draft to a group of children and asked them to offer him a response.

Long long ago in Swaziland lived a witch. Nearby lived a poor young woodcutter who was friendly with a good wizard. When people went near the witch's cottage they kept being turned into toads and newts so the wizard had to keep using the same spell to turn them back again into people. A couple of days later the wizard got turned into a wildebeest by the nasty witch so the woodcutter chopped off his head. After that all the spells were broken.

After reading Alex's story children in the group raised the following questions.

➢ What is the witch like?

➢ Does she have any pets?

➢ Why does the witch turn people into toads?

➢ What spell does she use?

➢ Where does the woodcutter come from?

➢ Whose head is being chopped off?

➢ What happens to the witch?

➢ How are all the spells broken?

➢ How does everybody feel at the end?

The potency of group discourse and collaborative response, within a community of writers, is illustrated in the transcript below where Richelle and Chanese teach Alex a

valuable lesson about the different relationship between readers and writers and speakers and listeners.

Richelle	But why does the witch keep turning people into toads?
Chanese	Yeah I don't know why she does that…'cos it doesn't tell you.
Alex	Mmm…no it doesn't does it…I know though.
Chanese	Well we don't though do we and…and if you weren't here.
Richelle	Yeah we wouldn't know…we wouldn't be able ask would we?

Alex is demonstrating the egocentricity of a young writer who, as yet, is not moving in and out of reader-writer positions as he composes texts. Through their response Richelle and Chanese are developing Alex's understanding that, as a writer, he must consider the potential distance of his audience, anticipate the questions of the reader and be more explicit in order to avoid confusion.

TALKING AS WRITERS

Compositional maturity is shown in the way that children talk about their work. In the following example Evette, an 8 year-old, is in the process of writing a traditional tale. She has opened her story with:

Long long ago in a faraway land lived a girl and her brother. They lived in a house that was in a village that was by the sea. Their father was a fisherman. Now one day their father said 'the fish have gone away.' Do you know why they had gone away? I shall tell you. It was because of the Kringle. Do you

know who the kringle is? I shall tell you. He was the most fierstest creature in all the sea.

The following extract is taken from a writing conference with Evette.

Teacher   Evette I just love this. It really does sound good when it's read out aloud. Is this how you wanted it to be?

Evette   Mmm… because it's a story for telling…more.

Teacher   More than for reading on your own you mean?

Evette   Yeah it's for someone to tell it.

Teacher   So you've written it for a storyteller really more than for someone sitting down and reading it on their own?

Evette   Yeah.

Teacher   Right…so tell me which bits you've written especially for the storyteller.

Evette   Well…like here…I've made it so's he can ask questions.

Teacher   Right…to really get people involved…so you're sort of inviting them in to your story?

Evette   Yeah and I'm going to keep doing that… to the end

Teacher   I think that's a brilliant idea. Have you remembered that from some of the stories we've read and listened to?

Evette   Mmm they do it in Kibungo.

Teacher   That's right they do don't they? I like this second sentence.

(teacher reads it aloud)

Evette   That's three things…all together…it's like a list of three things.

Teacher   Yes (teacher is absolutely delighted) and we've talked about three being

          important in traditional tales haven't we?

Evette   Mmm.

Evette shows an awareness of some characteristics of traditional tales and has used them consciously and appropriately when composing her own text. There is a conventional opening, which establishes a timeless setting somewhere far away. The second sentence is balanced to provide rhythm and nuance for the storyteller. Evette's story has the compactness and directness of the traditional tale and her knowledge about the significance of the number 'three' is also demonstrated. The setting, characters and first problem are established quickly and concisely. To interact with the reader and provide the 'narrational intimacy' of the storyteller, Evette writes effectively in the second person.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT YOUNG WRITERS

Through examining story structures and investigating the literary devices, used by adult authors, children can develop their own writing skills. With direction from teachers: providing models, demonstrating and drawing attention to the features of texts, and through focused group discussion, children can begin to develop their awareness of how texts are constructed. By acting as response partners they can engage in reflective activity where they are encouraged to read as writers and write as readers.

One of the most striking features to emerge from our work was the way children gradually began to 'talk like authors' when discussing their own and others' texts. This enabled them to identify, illuminate and focus on issues that were relevant to their

writing. They were able to discuss their own work, relate it to models they had experienced and discuss the appropriateness of using particular structures and literary devices to enhance their own work. A growing familiarity with literary terms and concepts helped children to clarify their thoughts, identify issues and engage in lucid discussion with each other and with the teacher. Through interactive discourse, with teachers and peers, children analysed texts proficiently and according to relevant criteria. They were then able to integrate the structural and organisational features of these texts into their own repertoire and use them successfully in their own writing. From our work at Sycamore Junior School we learned that:

Successful writers:

➢ are aware of the structures and language features of different types of narrative texts,

➢ plan and discuss ideas before writing,

➢ move in and out of reader - writer positions,

➢ reflect on what they have written,

➢ make structural and stylistic changes.

Effective teachers:

➢ Provide models of texts for analysis and discussion,

➢ draw attention to salient features of text types,

➢ model critical analysis of texts,

➢ demonstrate the construction of texts,

➢ model thinking and planning,

➢ intervene to support writers during the drafting and redrafting process,

THE BENEFITS OF RESEARCH IN PARTNERSHIP

School-university partnerships bring a personal and institutional 'payoff'. They benefit individual pupils, teachers, tutors, schools and universities. Collaborative classroom research helps to bridge a harmful psychological gulf, which can develop, between school teachers and university education tutors. Teachers can be seen by tutors to be over concerned with technicalities whilst tutors may be seen by teachers to be interested only in theories and out of touch with the everyday demands of a classroom. Partnership work can break down such prejudices and help teachers and tutors move beyond potentially harmful polarised perspectives. Primary teaching requires technical skills and practical acumen but effective pedagogy must also be based on research evidence and sound theoretical principles. Teachers benefit from being updated on developments in learning theory and empirical research. For tutors, nothing impresses trainees and teachers attending professional development courses more than tutors illustrating theoretical points with examples from current teaching experience and practice in schools. In the partnership work, described here, we were able to relate Vygotskian theory to the primary classroom and apply scaffolding techniques to support children in their writing. We were able to trial a timetabling arrangement and evaluate the potential of co-ordinated literacy hours and writing workshops.

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Useful resources

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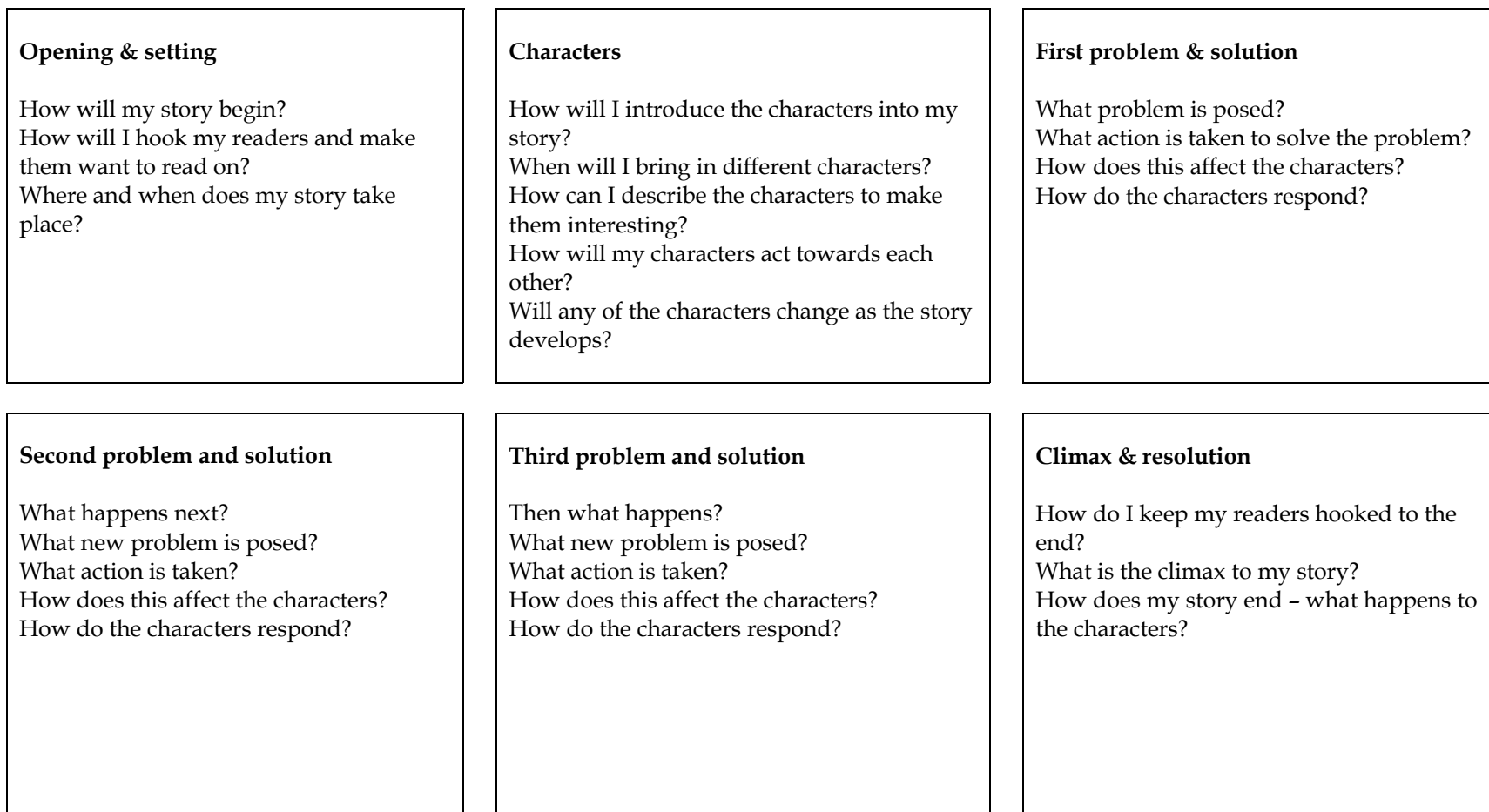
Fig 1. Planning frame for a traditional tale.

Opening & setting How will my story begin? How will I hook my readers and make them want to read on? Where and when does my story take place?	**Characters** How will I introduce the characters into my story? When will I bring in different characters? How can I describe the characters to make them interesting? How will my characters act towards each other? Will any of the characters change as the story develops?	**First problem & solution** What problem is posed? What action is taken to solve the problem? How does this affect the characters? How do the characters respond?
Second problem and solution What happens next? What new problem is posed? What action is taken? How does this affect the characters? How do the characters respond?	**Third problem and solution** Then what happens? What new problem is posed? What action is taken? How does this affect the characters? How do the characters respond?	**Climax & resolution** How do I keep my readers hooked to the end? What is the climax to my story? How does my story end – what happens to the characters?

Figure 2. Response partner cards

Writer	Response partner

When you have finished drafting
 	
Read it aloud to yourself.
 	
Ask yourself:
 	
    ➢ am I pleased with it?
 	
    ➢ is there anything I want to change or add?
 	
Now read your writing to a partner.
 	
➢ Listen to what she or he says.
 	
➢ Has she or he got any good ideas to help you?
 	
➢ Think about any changes you want to make.
 	
Show your work to the teacher.
 	
➢ Tell her or him about your ideas.
 	
➢ Listen to what she or he says.
 	
➢ Has she or he got any ideas to help you make your writing even better?
	When you read someone's work
	
	➢ Ask your partner to read his or her work to you.
	
	➢ Listen carefully as the work is read to you.
	
	➢ Then read the work yourself.
	
	Is it good to read?
	
	Say what you like about the writing. Try to find at least two good things to say.
	
	➢ Think about how the story could be improved.
	
	➢ Does it have an interesting opening and setting?
	
	➢ Are the characters well described?
	
	➢ Does the story have an interesting plot?
	
	➢ What do you think about the ending?
	
	➢ Is there any part that could be improved?
	
	➢ Can you make any useful suggestions?
	
	Is it easy to read?
	
	➢ Do any spellings need checking?
	
	➢ Do any punctuation marks need to be put in?