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Enhancing children's writing

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Chapter Overview

In this chapter I suggest that the study of the works of a single author not only fulfils a range of objectives but can also provide a deeper insight into how children's engagement with texts might 'empower' them and thereby influence their independent writing. It is therefore a 'way in' to literature for all age groups and abilities, and places the emphasis on the importance of the texts themselves, how these texts can be utilised as scaffolds and how texts can be used to contextualise the technical aspects of writing. The chapter emphasises the importance of a flexible and creative approach when planning to use the works of a single author, demonstrating how, given the time and opportunity, children can use the words they hear and read to find their own distinctive voice. The ideas and examples I use are taken from lessons taught during units of work which focused upon stories by Kevin Crossley-Holland. These lessons, and the resulting conversations with children and the work they produced, revealed the unique ways in which individuals reacted to the study of texts by a single author. For some it gave them a 'voice' which provided a scaffold for their own written work. For others, however, it merely provided them with the freedom within which they were able to play with and subvert existing textual structures, manipulating them for their own use. It is hoped that as this chapter is read, three key themes will emerge, which are all inextricably linked. The first of these is the power of text and how children can be empowered through reading to find their own 'voice'. The second theme relates to the impact of powerful literature on children's writing, and finally the third is the idea that 'texts can teach' – a recognition of the implicit nature of contextualisation in the teaching of all aspects of writing.



The power of text

One of our roles and responsibilities as educators is to appreciate the power of texts and recognise how, when children are given the opportunities to engage more deeply with texts, they can use this power to find a voice, both oral and written. As practitioners working within a classroom setting, I feel it is vital that we find keys to help unlock children's writing potential, not simply to raise attainment with regard to national assessment, but to provide children with the essential tools for life:

The spoken and written word are vital to life in the world outside school, and provide the medium for nearly all teaching and learning in the primary school and beyond. (Cremin and Dombey, 2007: 14)

It is often said that reading and writing are inextricably linked, developing in children as ‘a holistic package’ (Flynn, 2007: 143). A general assumption might be that ‘what children write reflects the nature and quality of their reading’ (Barrs and Cork, 2001: 35). It could therefore be concluded that the better the reader, the better the writer. Martin (2003) recognises that children are labelled as strong or weak readers and suggests that the focus should be placed more on whether a reader is *experienced* or *inexperienced* in relation to reading and that it is this which will impact on writing. He questions whether the difficulties connected with raising writing standards are based on children not reading *enough*:

They are not experienced enough as readers to write like a reader. (Martin, 2003: 15)

It is therefore essential that pupils have the opportunity to hear, and read for themselves, a wide range of texts from the chosen author, so that they are able to become ‘experienced’ readers (even if only within this narrow field). One of my concerns with using a single author was that some children might not enjoy the work of Kevin Crossley-Holland and would therefore be subjected to literature which did not interest them. (Fortunately, this never emerged as an issue, as the children thoroughly enjoyed the literature.) Although there is no guarantee that the work of a particular author will engage and stimulate an entire class of pupils, there are a number of strategies you can employ to promote an appreciation of the chosen author:

- Select an author who has the potential to inspire and engage young readers and find websites/magazine articles/autobiographies and biographies relating to the author so that children can get to ‘know’ them.
- Choose an author who has written a wide selection of books, including short stories (which could be translated for children with English as an additional language), picture books and, illustrated stories, where the words are reinforced with powerful images enabling all children to access the meaning more easily, and more complex and demanding stories to engage the more able.
- Choose texts which are strong models for children’s own writing, where the author’s voice permeates the pages and where language is used effectively.

During a single author study, children need to be immersed in a wide range of high-quality literature, within which familiar themes, rhythms, structures and linguistic patterns can be identified and explored. I chose Kevin Crossley-Holland, not only because of the range of literature he has written, but because I consider his stories to be ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’. To define this type of text might be to see them as those which ‘challenge and make demands on readers; they require readers to become active and involved in the world of the text’ (Barrs and Cork, 2001: 36). This activity and involvement can be further encouraged by reading aloud – ‘bringing the text alive and lifting it off the page’ (Barrs and Cork, 2001: 72) – and this is a vital ingredient of successful and creative literacy teaching and learning. When I talked to children in my class about this, they specifically referred to *my* voice – the voice of the reader of the stories, ‘*We love it when you do the voices!*’ They felt that having the stories read *to* them helped them with their writing; one child explained this as follows:

Well, you say good words and you speak the persons out and you describe the setting.

According to Barrs and Cork, reading aloud to children allows them to ‘take on the whole feeling and rhythm of a text’ (Barrs and Cork, 2001: 116) and it is possible that when this child says ‘and you speak the persons out’ he means that the characters are made real by the very act of reading their words aloud. Being able to hear these voices is seen by some as having a significant impact on children’s writing:

'Our written voices are intimately linked to the oral voices of others' (Grainger et al., 2005: 25). The 'voice' might be the voice of the author, that of his characters, the voice of the person reading aloud, or perhaps the child's own voice inside their head which reflects the material of the text. The oral text can facilitate a 'way in', providing 'the stimulus and motivation to explore printed texts' (Reedy and Lister, 2007: 5) and makes the young *writer* considerate of potential *readers* of their own work. In this way, they can be made aware of the communicational implications of their own writing, that they are writing for an audience for whom the text needs to make sense and who need to be stimulated.

It is a vital that you, in your role as teacher, are aware of the considerable impact that reading aloud can have upon children and therefore it is a skill that needs developing. Here are some important issues to consider when reading aloud:

- Wherever possible, choose texts which you enjoy – your reading will be much more animated!
- Use a range of voices for different characters so that children are aware of who is speaking at any time. This does not mean that you have to be able to speak in different accents (I am hopeless with this!) – you can make your voice higher or lower, louder or softer, bossy or mild, etc. I was always amazed when children asked me to 'do the voices' because I did not feel that I was particularly skilled in this area, but the small changes I made to my voice clearly made a big difference to the children's understanding and enjoyment
- Practise in advance so that you feel confident with the material and can choose places where you might pause or ask the children to predict or perhaps introduce some process drama to explore a particular aspect of the story

The impact of powerful literature on children's writing

According to Benton and Fox:

Writing and reading are indivisible. The writer's sense of audience and the reader's sense of textual voice complement each other and form a social bond. (Benton and Fox, 1985: 20)

If this is the case, then literature could be seen as the key to quality writing. Children need access to what Margaret Meek would describe as 'texts that teach' (Meek, 1988). These kinds of texts provide a model of quality language and composition, while allowing the reader opportunities to interpret the text in their own very personal way. In my discussions with children following reading aloud sessions, they would often quote directly from the text they had been listening to. In one particular instance, a child recited the phrase 'slice of moon' from a Crossley-Holland story, because this use of language had appealed to her. However, when the child then went on to complete a piece of writing linked with the story she had heard, rather than just reproducing the phrase, she manipulated and reinterpreted it to satisfy her own requirements (see below).

She looked back to see if Storm was still there but no he had disappeared but yet the slim slice of moon had not changed position! It seemed she hadn't moved till Storm arrived! But where did Storm go?

The insertion of the word 'slim' has two effects, it subtly alters the meaning of the sentence and it uses alliteration to lend the sentence cadence. This indicates an

ability to recognise the prosodic element within written composition and points towards a growing awareness of the power of language and the personal power imbued upon an author as they take control over somebody else's words. The ideas and writing have clearly been influenced by the language of Crossley-Holland, providing the child with the necessary literary equipment to enable her to transform her knowledge and produce her own original creation.

A single-author study should ensure that children have constant exposure to high-quality texts. It is also vital to leave time to discuss what they have heard or read for themselves and to make any relevant links to their own life experiences. As a result of these strategies you should start to notice some significant influences upon their writing. These might include any or all of the following:

- *Hearing your own voice (as the reader) in their written words.* This can be quite disconcerting! If, for example, you have allotted a 'gruff' or 'squeaky' voice to a particular character, young writers will often use this in their direct speech, i.e. 'Help!' she cried in a high-pitched squeaky voice.
- *Hearing the voices of the characters within the narrative.* If the texts used are of a high quality with well-drawn characters with whom children can relate, then you will 'feel' their presence within children's writing.
- *Hearing their own very personal and unique voice, reflecting their experience of life.* If children have the opportunity to identify and discuss any links between the literature presented and their own lives, this will emerge through their writing. I shall explore this further below.

To create effective and meaningful pieces of writing, children need to draw upon their own experiences and link these with what they have read. The example below shows a good example of this. This piece of writing was based on the short story 'Wrestling' by Crossley-Holland.

Princess Sophie was having a stroll around the castle when she realised she was very lonely. Her fiancée Dan, a football player, had gone to Manchester for a huge football tournament; this meant a lot to Dan because he could become very famous but nothing in the world even a football tournament would let Dan stop getting married to his beautiful fiancée! He promised Sophie he would be back in time for a fantastic wedding!

Crossley-Holland's story opening is very brief, merely setting the scene with little detail. This child's version, in contrast, fills in the gaps left by the original author, in a way which evidently pleases her as she examines the emotions experienced by the main character and the reasons behind their loneliness. This detail serves several purposes. It allows the writer to add an extra character to her narrative, who, although he never appears, provides the reason for the Princess's loneliness and adds an element of romance to the tale. Not only this, by making this character a famous footballer, the writer is also modernising and updating the original version, attempting to appeal to a wider audience with subject matter which is relevant and popular, linking fantasy and real life:

transformations from life are a part of most stories they tell. (Fox, 1993: 16)

Using football as the key theme shows that the child has thought ahead to the main part of her narrative, where, instead of wrestling, the animals have to score goals to decide who is to live with the Princess in the castle. The original story has provided the means by which the child has been able to plan ahead; she was aware of the main theme of the original tale and that her story should echo this theme. However, she also knew that she needed to find her own voice within the new

narrative; the original story has provided a platform from which she has been able to develop this voice.

By creating their own versions of stories, developing writers are able to produce what Ellis and Mills (2002) describes as a 'scripted' story, using an existing narrative, changing various elements and making it their own. Lamott (1994) describes the adoption of the style of an author as a useful 'prop' which a writer borrows until it has to be returned:

And it might just take you to the thing that is not on loan, the thing that is real and true, your own voice. (Lamott, 1994: 195)

To reinforce the powerful nature of texts, it is good practice to *re-read* stories where possible, to enable the children to 'soak up' the language and rhythms which are a significant aspect of a writer's style. Following a re-reading, I would find that children were able to remember whole sections of text and they appeared to retain them for a long time afterwards, providing them with prompts and support with their own writing. Fox (1993) believes that prosodic features – for example, repetition and rhyme – have more influence over narrative structure than the plot and certainly the repetitive nature of many of Crossley-Holland's stories influenced the children's own writing. I would like to illustrate this with one particular example.

One of the pupils in my class, despite enjoying stories and being read to, always struggled when faced with a writing task and would often sit for long lengths of time producing little or nothing on paper, if not supported. When she did put pen to paper, it was often followed by copious amounts of erasing and starting all over again. During this unit of work, however, the child produced three pieces of writing which far exceeded her normal attempts. All three compositions contain references to the original texts, whether they be direct 'liftings' or connected closely either by style, language or content. When she was asked to write in the style of Crossley-Holland the child was clearly able to find a narrative voice which echoed the literature she had experienced. However, there is more to this influence than merely her ability to adopt the features of Crossley-Holland's work. It would appear that this influence acted as a catalyst for her own ideas. The following extract below is taken from her final piece of writing in the unit of work, where the task was to write a sequel to a story called 'Storm':

'I'm going in the car are you coming with me or not' shouted Dr Grant when Annie was half way down the road. Annie jumped eagerly into the car and relaxed for the first time that night. In a twinkling they'd crossed the ford and got to the house. Just before Willa had her baby! 'What a night!' said Annie.

This extract is the last paragraph of the child's sequel. The first paragraph contains many references to the original text, including some direct quotes. The extract above, however, is very different. The child's own voice is beginning to emerge with the clever use of words such as 'jumped eagerly' to reveal a character's state of mind. The phrase 'in a twinkling', although not original from a world-view, does not originate from Crossley-Holland's story and is effectively used by the writer to signify the short lapse of time which has passed. The final phrase – "'What a night!" said Annie' – reveals an appreciation of how the character would have been feeling and in just three words expresses a depth of understanding which is quite extraordinary. In this extract, the child has transcended her earlier dependency upon the literature she has been read and has found the confidence to find her own voice. She has overcome the writing 'block' which had prevented her in the past from producing writing which met her own exacting standards.

The importance of contextualisation

Rosen (1989) believes that children's perceptions of 'good' writing (gained undoubtedly from teacher and other adult expectations) can prevent them from writing because they are concerned that they cannot fulfil this expectation. I would concur with this, and I believe that this perception is exacerbated when the more technical aspects of writing are taught in a decontextualised way. As a result of this 'discrete' teaching, children might see 'good' writing as that which contains particular literary turns of phrase or conventions such as the effective use of adjectives, adverbs, similes or metaphors, without realising that the manner in which these devices are used is crucial to producing effective writing. Because of the nature of a single-author study, it should be possible to teach the technical aspects of writing through the many and varied texts which have been selected. During my own teaching, I was determined to do just that and yet, as you will see from the discussion below, the results were very mixed.

Here is a piece of writing produced during the single-author unit of work:

'Oh my, this storm surely can't get any worse' said Annie. She shivered. She was as cold as Antarctica and the rain was slashing her face. When Annie caught her breath she tearfully rang the doorbell. No answer. She tried again. Still no answer. She slammed her fist on the door and Dr Grant's wife opened the pale green door!

When I read this piece, I could hear the child's own narrative voice permeating through the language and style, and his use of short sentences to build tension reflects the way in which Kevin Crossley-Holland often creates his effects. These aspects pleased me! What was interesting, however, was his explicit use of specific literary conventions – the simile relating to Antarctica, the use of the adverb 'tearfully', the adjectives to describe the door – all of which seemed to indicate that the writer was very conscious of what could be seen as 'school expectations' and which, for me, learnt the piece a rather contrived air.

When asked what effect the story reading had had upon his own writing, the child commented predominantly on the technical aspects of the literature studied, as opposed to the storyline, characters or other textual features. Perhaps he believed this was what I as teacher wanted to hear – after all it was I who would be marking his work!

Frater (2004) suggests that the gap between reading and writing has been exacerbated by the explicit teaching of grammar and the mechanical aspects of writing. He believes that the enriching experience of the reading of powerful texts may reduce the need for more formalised teaching. My project revolved around the use of powerful texts and the contextualisation of any teaching relating to the writing process. Despite this, at times the children's writing reflected a desire to include what could be perceived as specifically taught conventions in order to produce work which conformed to the notion of 'good' writing. This made me aware that, however powerful the text, the role of the teacher and how they choose to use texts is crucial and the importance of embedding the technical aspects of the writing process within a whole text framework cannot be overstated. In this way, it is hoped that young writers do not lose the all important focus on composition and producing writing which provides enjoyment and satisfaction.

Here are some ideas to promote children's writing which reflect the original thoughts of the writer and yet address the need to teach the technical elements of the writing process:

- Select high-quality texts which (a) use a wide range of language effectively; (b) demonstrate a range of punctuation which impacts upon how the text is read and (c) have strong structures which children can use as models for their own writing.
- Have a good knowledge and understanding of the texts you are going to use. This will allow you to draw attention to specific features and discuss how and why they are used at particular times.
- Put the focus on *why* the author has used a certain word or piece of punctuation and why they have chosen to start a new paragraph at a particular point in the narrative. Take time to discuss this and to explore the impact this has on the way the text is read.

Conclusion

Bakhtin (1986) writes that:

With a creative attitude toward language, there are no voiceless words that belong to no one. (Bakhtin, 1986: 124)

By selecting and immersing children in the works of a single author, we should be able to promote this 'creative attitude toward language' and thereby allow children to find a voice which belongs to them from the many voices to be found in the literature studied. As teachers, it is vital to realise the implications of the current mode of assessment, but it is also crucial to look beyond the potential narrowness of this focus and to consider the significant role one plays in the lives of the children in our care:

literacy can and should be about involvement and enjoyment, and has the potential to create lifelong readers and writers, as well as developing their competence. (Nicholson, 2006: 19)

If writing is not to become merely a 'product' by which children are measured (Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003), it needs to be used as a 'reflective, cognitive tool' whereby children explore their inner selves and the world around them while 'sharing and critically evaluating knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, culture, traditions and so on' (Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003: 145). Practitioners have a responsibility to find and utilise 'powerful literature' in order to provide children with excellent models for their own writing. Included in this is the importance of providing enough examples of writing by a single author so that children have the opportunity to choose preferred texts rather than have texts presented to them arbitrarily. If total immersion is to occur, there needs to be *enough* literature for children to take part in shared, guided and independent reading, providing them with opportunities to absorb the 'sounds, patterns and nuances' of the texts (Barrs and Cork, 2001: 36). Although it is not possible to predict that every child in a class will enjoy stories by a particular author, if the chosen writer has produced a reasonable quantity of literature, with a variety of themes and subject matter, it is hoped that most children will find something that appeals to them. If it is possible to fully engage the children with the works of a single author, then this can have a significant impact upon their writing:

Keeness for the work of a particular writer can be a great motivator for our own writing and studying the work of a writer in some depth – as avid series readers know – can be very satisfying. (Bearne, 2002: 90)

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Texts and authors can be chosen from a range of sources including online material, films, picture books, short stories, novels, poems and non-fiction. Although this chapter appears within the section entitled 'Narrative', it is important to consider how genre boundaries within literacy can be crossed to provide children with a 'broad and rich curriculum' (Rose, 2006) based upon high-quality literature. Given a choice, children might select a favourite poet and explore a range of poems in order to help them to find their own poetic voice; they might investigate non-fiction texts in the form of biographies and autobiographies to provide them with additional background information; and they might compare paper-based and on-screen texts analysing the impact and effectiveness of both. The study of the works of a single author is relevant and useful for children of all ages and abilities. With the proliferation of wonderful picture books available and the easy access to online material, it should be possible to provide children, from a very early age, with texts which they can enjoy and which will enable them to find their own voice, both within the classroom and the wider world.

Something to read

The seminal text *The Reader in the Writer* by Myra Barrs and Valerie Cork (published by CLPE, 2001) provides excellent case studies showing how the reading of texts and the use of drama has an impact on children's writing.

Something to think about

It is important to provide opportunities for children to make links between their reading and their lives outside of school. In this chapter I have emphasised the need to give children opportunities to discuss any links and how this can impact upon their writing. Think of some other ways by which you can promote links between home and school and how you can encourage children to draw on their existing knowledge and understanding of the world and use this in their written work.

Something to try

Select an author (preferably someone whose work you are not familiar with). Find out as much as you can about the author, making a note of where you find any information. Locate at least ten pieces of literature they have written and immerse yourself in their style, making notes of any significant features within their writing. If you find that their texts appeal, try them out in the classroom! Good luck and enjoy!

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