The Importance of Story in Children’s Education

Carleigh Bammens

This essay examines the interplay between the four modes of expression in English - speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is a critical reflection on two journal articles which synthesises key ideas from personal experiences of education, both as a pupil and as a trainee teacher. It is suggested that there is an inherent power in story-telling that draws in the child listener, whether they are an able or less-able reader, captivating their attention and firing their imagination. It is argued that this innate ability to enter a story and create powerful images can be harnessed to the children’s creative writing. But are teachers so geared to formulaic storylines and narrow and precise assessment criteria, that children’s responses, imagination and creativity are stifled? And, in our constant search for higher standards, perhaps we need to create time for creativity.

Keywords: story-telling, creativity, speaking and listening, reading and writing

The cries and laughter of my peers reverberated in from the playground. Inside I sat alone with my mind in tireless composition though my hand ached to match its stamina. Line after line, page after page, I wrote. The magic tree was an elevator granting access to the multiple realities which lay dormant somewhere in my subconscious, opening doors onto worlds into which they could exist and through the tip of my pencil materialize. So absorbed, Miss. Foster had not dared to break my concentration. The bell sounded for break-time’s end and as my classmates bustled in, I frantically struggled to squeeze the elevator’s descent to earth onto the twelfth page.

The sense of achievement and enjoyment I got from writing that story was such that I am still able to easily recall the memory today. Not only did the task capture my imagination and allow for endless creativity, confidence in my own ability to write was dramatically increased and perhaps more importantly so was my desire and enthusiasm to write.

My observation of the equivalent age year two class today shocked me to the point of digging out my old primary school work just to confirm the existence of my story. Though comparing against my own ability as an individual, it was still highly disconcerting to find that the majority of children in the class could not correctly string together a sentence, let alone compose an entire narrative. How could such a huge difference have occurred in such a short space of time and how could the current literacy
strategy justify its present status as improvement?

The articles I have chosen explore aspects of the two factors which collaborated in enabling me to write a twelve page story at age six. Collins (2005) looks into the critical role reading aloud to children plays in their comprehension of narrative, drawing on evidence from research carried out on the observations of postgraduate students during their school placement to revise the course content for future trainees.

This article highlights the positive contribution of reading to a class in catering for many different aspects of a child’s learning. Firstly the children are all participating as equals, it ‘does not depend on individual children’s determination to read’, thus enabling weaker readers to ‘experience texts above their own individual reading ability’ (Collins, 2005, p.10.).

On my most recent placement with a year 5 class I was fortunate to have been read to by a girl attempting language of a complexity far exceeding her ability. Her motivation to choose that particular book (Indiana Jones) was simply due to previous experience and enjoyment of the movie. She stumbled over the majority of words and questioning showed a complete incomprehension of what she had just read and yet she still expressed a determined interest. We were finally forced to agree that it was in her best interests to forfeit the exciting plot for a tamer one written in language she could better cope with.

For me this was a particular eye opener as to the potential reading aloud to a class could present for this child and others like her. It moves onto another idea explored by Collins (2005, p.11.), in that children ‘develop their responses within a shared community…mediating text through discussion and questioning’. Read to a class, Indiana Jones would be both engaging and challenging, ‘unusual words seen in context, broadening the children’s language knowledge and allows them to vocalize these words within a shared context’

An added advantage is that not only are they interacting with language and ideas in the context of the literature but are also they are sharing previous knowledge and experiences with each other in achieving that collaborative understanding. This encourages the development of an empathy with one another and the story’s characters. Essentially, ‘their understanding of themselves, their emotions and the wider world can be enhanced through an introduction to a range of different narrative texts’ (Collins, 2005).

Before even considering the breakdown and discussion of complex language the teacher initially needs to captivate their audience, by ‘bringing the text alive…the children are pulled into the narrative through the sheer enjoyment of listening’ (Collins, 2005, p.10). The research also identified that the students ‘needed to get inside the novel personally and discuss it at their own level’. My school placement allowed me to do just this through the telling of a traditional Japanese tale I had become very familiar with during my previous year spent there. It represented a part of me that I had developed in Japan having been fully immersed in their alien culture and having learnt an entirely new way of thinking. I was able to communicate a feeling of their values through my own
interpretation of the unscripted story I told. I was offering them a glimpse of the magical unknown. They had my full attention and I gained theirs in return, without the restraints of a written script I was free to add actions and hand gestures communicating a strong personal connection and giving the whole scenario a powerfully strange sense of reality in which we all were involved. I tried to include as much interaction as possible through frequent pauses to share opinions and ideas, following Corbett and Moses’s (1991, p.23.) belief that ‘stories need to invite us to engage with them’. Early on one lad shouted out “This is a well good story!” and most were eager to hush others after each discussion to hear what happened next. I concluded with a Japanese song whose language only dazzled them further, heightening their curiosity and leaving them with thoughtful minds.

The story of my 6 year old self was inspired through the initial sharing of the start of a story with our lecturer and follows into Ellis’s (2003) article which links directly to the topic discussed in Collins (2005) in that it details the creation of story as opposed to its decoding. A number of planning methods are investigated and the effectiveness of their use by children in synthesizing a successful final composition is reviewed, all findings supported by interviews with the stories’ authors themselves.

Ellis’s (2003) main focus is on how children adopt different attitudes and writing behaviours depending on the task. She argues that largely unscripted approaches encourage pupils to ‘use strategic decisions to engage intellectually with the writing process and through this create new ideas and meanings,’ (page?) and that strongly scripted tasks simply serve the purpose of a grammatical exercise which do not draw on the child’s creativity or trigger any cognitive demands. ‘When tasks orchestrate the content and structure of writing, pupils can come to believe that the writing process should be easy and unproblematic.’ (page?) I found on placement that the children quickly grew bored with writing from such a rigid plan. One girl proclaimed, “I hate writing stories!” Ellis’s (2003) research showed the ‘Complete-Story-Planner to be least popular’, speculating that ‘the problem with planning ahead may be that some of the excitement of writing the story is taken away…as you already know what is going to happen’ (Corbett and Moses, 1991, p24). My year fives were not even given the opportunity to experience the initial excitement of creating a plan of their own but each paragraph’s content was carefully dictated to them, so there’s no wonder interest and determination was lacking in the task of having to re-write someone else’s story.

Teachers’ learning objectives for story writing were usually focused on the children producing a ‘coherent structure and organization of text (86%) and descriptive vocabulary (78%)’ (Ellis, 2003, p.30.), which was the case for the pupils I worked with. Allowance for imagination and creativity is an optional extra which in any case the children are not motivated to pursue and which is not widely encouraged in schools. OfSTED (2003) acknowledge, that the ‘development of creativity is not seen as an essential element in education, but is viewed merely as a modish concept,’ (cited in Grainger, Gouch and Lambirth, 2005, p13). In the majority of cases Ellis (2003) found that ‘teachers learning outcomes were unrelated to the cognitive demands of the task and tended to focus on the qualities of the written product rather than on pupils’ writing behaviours or decisions’.
“Most teachers crouch over children’s writing almost ignoring the child. The important place where we hope the learning will occur is in the child not the piece of paper.” (Corbett and Moses, 1991, p28)

My year fives were working within their Tudor topic writing a story about a day in the life of a cabin boy. Ellis (2003) found that, ‘when writers made in-depth, conscious decisions about their characters, they were able to create the story by identifying and resolving problems. This helped to give the storyline an initial direction and, because characters must behave in reasonably consistent ways, to constrain the storyline and maintain its coherence and momentum’. With this in mind, the task of my year five pupils could easily have been enriched by simply allowing them to construct their own detailed description of a cabin boy. Developing a plot would then flow easily, incorporating ideas from their Tudor subject knowledge and working within the boundaries set by the personality of their character. The focus would still be on descriptive language, though with strengthened expression due to empathy shared with the feelings of their character.

Teachers interviewed in Ellis’s (2003) studies ‘felt that children had ‘no experience’ on which to base imaginative stories’ and that developing that ability depended on ‘inspiring them to read’. Collins agrees with Ellis, quoting from Barrs and Cork (2001) ‘that expressive reading aloud of quality literature…supports and extends children’s own narrative writing both structurally and linguistically’.

What is intricately woven into the ideas of the two articles is an awareness of the effects of qualia in shaping a child’s development. Our experiences and feelings all differ due to differences in our previous experiences and cannot be compared to those of others, which explains why ‘imagination cannot be taught through story-writing but depends on experiences elsewhere; that story writing feeds from rather than contributes to, children’s imaginative lives’ (Ellis, 2003, p.30.). Understanding qualia through sharing in the experiences of others is a necessity in attaining knowledge of the world around. Ellis (2003) identifies story as a means by which children are able to express themselves, describing the writing process as ‘creative, generating new insights and understandings through the identification and resolution of problems’. Similarly Collins (2005) believes ‘an active involvement with literature enables pupils to share the experience of others (DES, 1989, 7.3)’ and plays an important ‘role in shaping a child’s development morally, socially and aesthetically’.

The insufficiency of time devoted to narrative in primary schools is identified as problematic in both articles by Collins and Ellis. Collins (2005) found that almost half the student teachers did not have opportunity to witness their class teachers reading aloud to the pupils and more than half of the student teachers who did, observed story-reading at inappropriate times of the day, some feeling that it was ‘treated more as an end of day relaxation than as opportunities for whole class teaching and discussion.’ ‘If we think stories are important, why are they so often relegated to the fourth division place at 3:15pm every afternoon?’ (Corbett and Moses, 1991, p22)
Ellis (2003) suggests that ‘teachers faced with increasingly pressured timetables, find it difficult to justify curriculum time for children to invent and write stories’, especially as it is not seen as a necessary life skill. With all the evidence available to support the learning benefits of exploration of story, both for children’s social and educational well-being, for how much longer can it remain on the side-line?

References
Collins, F. (2005) “‘She’s sort of dragging me into the story!’” Student Teacher’s Experiences of Reading Aloud in Key Stage 2 classes, pp. 10-17.

