

The Power of Pictures: Key points from the original project research

Introduction:

The Power of Pictures is a project funded by the Arts Council Grants for the Arts and run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. Over three years ten author/illustrators worked with 200 teachers and the CLPE team. The project was designed to help primary school teachers to develop their understanding of the craft of picture book creation and illustration as a way of raising children's achievement in literacy. Each of the author/illustrators was filmed in their studio providing videos to introduce the authors and their ways of working that can be used by teachers in classrooms way beyond the life of the project. The project was evaluated to look at the impact of the work on the teachers, on teaching practices and pedagogy, on the author/illustrators themselves and to look at how the teaching practice impacted on children throughout the primary age range.

Summary of key findings from the project:

Discussion before writing helps children to have something to say and the vocabulary to say it

- Many of the techniques learned on the courses enable children to create characters, settings, themes and plot before they actually write - and to talk about their ideas before committing them to paper.
- Teachers commented that this 'slowed the writing down', in the positive sense that it recognises the need to prepare for writing, and they saw the direct benefits of the pre-writing activities both in the children's willingness to write and the quality of what they wrote.
- These activities give children permission and opportunity to try things out and take risks. Teachers reported that this was particularly significant for boys reluctant to write and for EAL pupils.

Giving children the time to draw or express themselves creatively helps them to prepare for and develop writing

- Children need time to think in advance of and alongside writing – drawing, sketching or sequencing pictures helps them to generate imaginative ideas.

- The teachers on the course found that children, particularly reluctant writers, have become more enthusiastic about writing. These activities, together with the discussion activities help children generate, select and develop ideas.

Teachers understood much more about the writing process having heard authors describe how they developed their ideas

- They were able to make connections between authors' writing processes and helping children to develop their writing authentically.

Teachers found that when they understood the construction of picture books they realised how much of the story - including information about character and structure - was conveyed in the pictures

- After the course they were more confident to spend more time reading the book to children and discussing the pictures and the way they combine with the text to tell the story.
- This helped them to help the children develop inference and critical thinking skills. Linger over pictures early in the text invites prediction about plot, character, theme and structure, and these possibilities can soon be modified and re-assessed as the reading continues.
- When discussing pictures children can point to evidence for their ideas and interpretations. They also showed skills of inference and deduction using the pictures to hypothesise about character, plot and emotion. In particular, teachers spoke of the benefit of using these texts with EAL pupils, who were thus more readily able to read inferentially. These essential skills for reading can evidently be developed at an early age when using picture books

Picture books are far more than just for the young or less able readers

- Traditionally picture books are used in schools with younger children. Older children are less likely to come across picture book texts unless they are used as individual reading books for less able readers.
- The course participants were teachers of all primary years. Understanding the richness of picture books meant teachers were less dismissive of them and could see there was more to such texts. They came to realise that picture books should be part of reading for pleasure and for the teaching of reading for children of all ages.

- Some picture books are indeed more suitable for older children as the messages and the complexity of the characters and drawings are more challenging, interestingly older children often needed to learn how to spend time on the pages and not just skim through.

Authors learnt about the potential of exploring their books in detail with children in the classroom, and how the texts offer many rich possibilities for discussion of themes, characters, structure and plot.

- They learned how both the drawings and written text offer models for children in their own writing, prompting them to try out ideas and expressions before writing. The authors on the project said they grew in confidence in negotiating with schools about what they might do on a visit and how they could contribute to the ongoing learning in the class, collaborating with the teacher rather than being seen as entertainment.

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