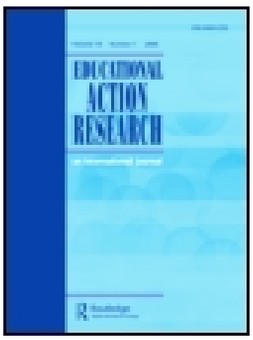
'[N]ow I can be a poetic writer': using action research as a way of reclaiming and implementing professional values in the primary school



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'[N]ow I can be a poetic writer': using action research as a way of reclaiming and implementing professional values in the primary school

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of an action research intervention to support primary aged children's confidence as writers. Set in a school where few children (the majority of whom had English as an additional language) were performing at or beyond national expectations in terms of writing, the intervention looked at how to engage children more effectively, by promoting enjoyment of writing and providing quality mentor texts to inspire the children. The school had received a number of critical inspection reports and had consequently adopted a series of measures to improve academic outcomes, which acted as a constraint on my teaching. There was a real sense that as a teacher I was struggling to put my educational values into practice. In addition, my lack of confidence in my abilities as a writer acted as a further constraint. Adopting an action research approach enabled me to develop my personal confidence as a teacher of writing, explore more effective ways to teach writing, resulting in the development of confident and reflective writers in the classroom.

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Primary; writing; confidence; action research; mentor texts; professional values

This study addresses three areas of practice arising from concerns I[1] was experiencing in my role as a primary school teacher. Firstly, I was concerned that the children, aged 8–9 years old, in my class were not performing to nationally expected standards in their writing. Secondly, whilst doing some initial exploration as to why the children were not achieving as expected, I became aware that many of them found writing hard and were not confident in their abilities as writers. Finally, I was worried about my own lack of confidence in my abilities as a writer and therefore as a teacher of writing. The issues seemed interconnected. My lack of confidence was potentially undermining my ability to teach writing in a way that would allow the children to make good progress; I was struggling to scaffold writing appropriately. Consequently, many of the children were finding writing difficult, which seemed to impact on their perceptions of themselves as poor writers. This negative image of themselves as writers was potentially part of the reason they were not performing as well as was expected.

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My context

I teach in a large primary school in the south of England. The school is situated in an area that is economically and socially deprived, and which is multi-cultural. Indeed, the vast majority of children in my class have English as an Additional Language (EAL).

In addition, the school had been subject to a series of government inspections and had frequently been judged to be in 'Special Measures' or 'Requires Improvement' – either judgement would indicate that the quality of education in the school was not strong and that the children were not making the progress that would normally be expected. In response to these inspections the school leaders had chosen to provide very strict guidelines on how lessons should be taught, both in terms of lesson content and pedagogical approaches. Clapham (2014) and Le Fevre (2014) argue, the pressure to improve children's performance can make teachers, or in this case, the school leadership, risk averse.

As a teacher in this setting, I felt I had lost my way. In a culture of accountability and performativity (Ball 2003) the pressure to meet targets and benchmarks has significantly altered how the role of the teacher has been conceived and can actually limit the quality of education (Biesta 2015). In my case, I was being told how I should teach the children in my class, so I had to follow pedagogical approaches that I felt made my teaching formulaic, tedious and repetitive. I felt unable to put my values as a teacher into practice; I was not enjoying teaching, which may have impacted on the enjoyment of the children in my class.

In turn, this reawakened my own negative feelings about writing. As a child I 'failed' the exam, known as the '11+', to get into the local grammar school. I was eventually allowed to transfer to the grammar school at the age of 13. Yet the feeling of not being 'good enough' to attend the grammar school was difficult to shift. In particular, I felt that I was not a good writer, and this feeling followed me into adulthood. When I became a teacher, I was anxious to give the children in my class a more positive educational experience, especially in relation to writing. However, my own perception of my writing ability was a possible barrier. Ofsted (2009) refers to studies that effective teachers of writing are themselves confident writers, able to model how writing is composed. Therefore, it could be that my negative perception of myself as a writer meant I was unable to teach writing effectively.

The wider context

The concerns I was experiencing are positioned within a broader context. Internationally there has been a growing emphasis on raising educational standards (Goodson 2010; Levin 2010), fuelled by the publication of international comparison data, such as the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA). These data, which rank the performance of education systems, impact on national policy, as seen by a 'policy epidemic' (Ball 2003) of educational reforms as governments seek to improve their country's outcomes (Ball 2017). There is subsequently a weight of expectation placed on schools and teachers to improve educational standards by implementing these reforms. According to Finn (2015), '[i]n contemporary British politics, education is seen as a magic bullet – the "escalator" for social mobility, a vital engine of "human capital"

formation through the development of skills for the economy'. In some contexts this has seen an emphasis on trusting teachers' professionalism, such as Finland (Erss 2018). However, in other contexts, there has been a drive towards greater prescription for teachers, whose professionalism is distrusted (e.g. Mutch 2012). In contexts like these, such as in England, teachers are increasingly subject to 'metricized, marketized and managerialist processes' as a means of ensuring conformity to policies (Hall and McGinity 2015, 4). This performative culture results in the de-professionalisation of teachers and it is debatable whether it results in a high-quality educational experience (Biesta 2015).

The curriculum in English schools has been a particular focus of reform (Ofsted 2012). Within the primary education sector, there has been a strong government drive to improve levels of literacy and numeracy, based upon concerns about the perceived poor performance of substantial numbers of children (e.g. Gove 2014). Within the area of literacy, writing is a core element. Crawford, Sobolak, and Foster (2017) argue that writing is crucial for success in the academic environment of school and life generally. Yet both Ofsted (2009) and the DFE (2012) have raised concerns that children's performance in writing is significantly lower than that of reading. The National Literacy Trust, which conducts annual surveys of children's and young people's writing, reports a number of worrying trends. One persistent trend (e.g. Clark 2014; 2016) is fewer than half of children and young people report enjoying writing – reading is consistently regarded as a more pleasurable activity. Although children and young people do appreciate that the more they write the better their writing gets, The National Literacy Trust's report (Clark 2016) shows that writing levels in schools is decreasing. Further analysis of the Trust's reports show that children in primary schools are more likely to enjoy writing than older children; between 2010 and 2015, the figure for primary aged pupils varies from 52.8% to 66.8%, compared to 34.3% to 47.1% for young people aged 11–14 (Clark 2016). Enjoyment of writing is important as there appears to be a strong link to attainment; as Clark (2016, 7) states: '[c]hildren and young people who enjoy writing very much are seven times more likely to write above the level expected for their age compared with children and young people who do not enjoy writing at all (50.3% vs. 7.2%).' In addition, a child's or young person's perception of their ability as a writer has a significant impact, with 70% who think they are not good writers, writing below the expected level for their age (Clark 2014).

Identifying my concerns

It seems that the concerns identified above (e.g. Clark 2014; 2016) reflected what was happening in my own classroom. I was acutely aware that the educational outcomes for children in my class (and the school generally) were not strong. Out of a class of 30 children, only two were working at what was considered to be above national expectations (DfE 2013), and the school leadership team had set a target that 30% of my class should be working at this level. It would be easy to blame the school context for the low attainment of the children in my class – many were from poor socio-economic backgrounds and the vast majority came from homes where English was not the first language – but I wanted to find a way that would allow me to raise the children's attainment.

Analysing the children's writing highlighted that most were using a limited range of descriptive vocabulary, their writing lacked flow and sentences were often poorly

constructed. Although this is characteristic of writing developmentally, it did show that many of the children in my class had not been offered appropriate support to move beyond this level. Discussions with colleagues highlighted similar patterns across the school. The existence of this pattern of low achievement made me question whether the imposition of a school-wide approach to writing by the school leadership team was actually hindering the children's writing development. In particular, the school was using texts to share with the children so they could deconstruct how texts are created, but these models were almost exclusively written by teachers in the school so made me query whether this was an effective means of supporting children's writing.

I was also aware from the literature (Clark 2014; 2016) that there appears to be a connection between how children see themselves as writers and how much they enjoy writing and their actual attainment. I therefore asked the children in my class to create a spider diagram expressing their feelings about writing.

Grouping their comments under general headings (as shown in Table 1) it appeared that the class were split. Half of the comments expressed positive feelings about writing and the other half were negative. These responses raised two particular concerns for me. Firstly, they were out of line with the findings of Clark (2016) where primary aged children were more likely to express enjoyment of writing – it therefore seemed that one reason, according to the literature, why children in my class might not be performing at a higher level is simply to do with a lack of joy of writing (Bearne et al. 2011; Clark 2014; 2016; Cremin et al. 2015). Secondly, if there is a connection between enjoyment of writing and levels of attainment, why weren't around half of the class (who said they enjoyed writing) working at a higher level? Also, talking to around a third of the class made it clear that many of the children mentioned handwriting and spelling as being linked to good writing. This implies that the children associated 'good' writing with these two functions, rather than seeing it as anything to do with the quality of ideas and written expression they might present. In some ways this is unsurprising; Clark's (2016) work shows that over 40% of children feel that neat handwriting is important for a good piece of writing and over 60% associate correct spelling and punctuation as characteristic of good writing. Only two children in my class saw any connection between reading and writing, which compares unfavourably to the 60% in Clark's study (2016) who did make this connection. It seemed to me that I needed to find a way to inspire the children in my class to want to write and see it as an enjoyable activity, but also to

Table 1. Themes identified from the children's spider diagrams based on their view of writing.

Negative comments	
Writing is boring	8
I do not like writing	5
Writing is hard	16
I am not confident/not good/bad at writing	13
I am nervous or anxious about writing	6
Total negative comments	**48**
Positive comments	
Writing is fun	10
I am confident about writing	15
I enjoy/like writing/it makes me happy	20
Total positive comments	**45**

get them to see that expressing their ideas was a crucial part of creative writing (Cremin and Myhill 2012; Dombey 2013).

From a personal perspective, I was daunted by the school leadership's target that 30% of my class should be working beyond national expectations. I was concerned that I did not know what 'good' writing that met national expectations looked like, so how could I expect the children in my class to meet this standard? I was feeling constrained by the whole-school approach, whilst at the same time frustrated by its limited discernible positive impact on attainment levels. In short, I was a 'living contradiction' (McNiff and Whitehead 2010) – conforming to practices that I felt were inappropriate yet lacking in clarity and confidence about what I could do to change things. Collectively these issues were eroding my sense of professional self and I was deeply unhappy in my teaching. It was at this point that I felt the need to instigate change and adopting an action research approach seemed to be a sensible way to explore my concerns.

Choosing action research

Action research is about 'researching your own learning' (McNiff and Whitehead 2002). As the children's teacher, I want to provide the children in my care with the best possible learning experience. To do this, I recognise the need to be accountable, but at a personal level I want to put my values into practice and improve my own learning. Action research requires a commitment, which allows me to evaluate and experiment with my own practice in the complex ever-changing environment of the classroom. Action research provides a means to focus on two fundamental areas: my journey of personal growth and my professional journey as a teacher.

The urge for new learning requires a critical self-reflection approach, a fundamental feature of action research. It is about having a conversation with yourself (Bearne, Graham, and Marsh 2007). Cain (2011) argues that 'any inquiry into the classroom must include inquiry into the teacher,' especially if this requires the identification and implementation of my own values into practice. I came to realise, as Baldwin and John (2012) explain that in a target driven culture, teachers often talk about targets rather than about the children's learning. Regrettably, I realised this was true of my own teaching, as I have been instructed to make children aware of their 'levels' as it has become common practice during 'learning walks' by senior staff to question children about their levels and targets across a range of subjects, including writing.

Identifying what I could do about the situation

The process of reflection and exploration of my practice, as outlined above, made me acutely aware that I needed to change something if I wanted the children in my class to make progress as writers. Consequently, I looked for literature that could help me make sense of the issues I was encountering, improve my personal confidence as a teacher of writing and explore different ways of teaching writing. During this process, I became particularly interested in two approaches – the use of mentor texts and the value of reading aloud.

Mentor texts

Using texts to model writing is common practice in my school. However, the decision had been made to use texts that have been predominantly written by the teachers. These often lack the quality and sophistication of work by published authors. Barrs and Cork (2001) emphasise the link between quality reading and good writing. Their study explored the changes in children's writing when introduced to challenging texts that are read aloud. Interestingly, two of the case studies show exceptional progress being made by children with EAL, which was an issue I had been struggling with. The study had also emphasised the importance of teachers developing their own style in how to teach writing. During the project, the teachers read these quality texts aloud, encouraged discussion and allowed the children to listen to the language and voice of the author, offering a store of ideas and language, and allowing the children to draw on the tone and style of the story. By revisiting the text, the study showed that the children became familiar with the story and were able to transfer a wider range of vocabulary into their own writing. As a result of this careful scaffolding and immersion into the texts the project highlighted a marked improvement in the children's writing. Culham (2014) has similarly argued that mentor texts (defined as high-quality pieces of writing, usually from published literature) expose children to examples of excellent writing, allowing them to 'steal' what they need to add to their writing. These studies prompted me to ask whether using quality mentor texts read aloud could support the children in my class who found writing hard.

However, as Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) and Gallagher (2014) have pointed out it is not a simple matter of giving students the texts and telling them to imitate them. A text can only become a mentor text when the reader knows it well through repeated visits developing deeper insights into the author's choices and understanding the text through the eyes of the writer (Laminack 2017a). This requires careful thought and planning on behalf of the teacher.

Reading aloud

Reading about the value of mentor texts also made me appreciate the importance of reading aloud as a way of allowing children access to quality texts. Reading aloud invites children into the world of writing, allowing them to enjoy texts beyond their reading abilities, providing strategies that assist them in making connections between words and ideas, and provides a means to understand how to construct a fluent piece of writing (Wadsworth 2008). Children's writing is influenced by both what they read and what is read to them and children who listen to high-quality texts are more likely to produce stronger pieces of writing than those who listen to texts of lesser quality (Griffith 2010). Through listening to texts, read by the most 'fluent reading voice' in the classroom, the teacher (Laminack 2017b), children are able to learn more readily how to construct written texts. Listening carefully helps them to take on the style and language of the text. In other words, children learn to 'read through their ears' (Barrs and Cork 2001, 40) and hear the tunes vocabulary can bring to writing.

The teacher as writer

I also appreciated that I needed to address my own misgivings about writing if I wanted to have an impact on the children in my class. Research carried out by Dombey (2013) and

Dockrell, Marshall, and Wyse (2016) made me aware that childhood experiences of writing, whether positive or negative, can be transferred into the classroom affecting how teachers see themselves as teachers of writing. This in turn can impact directly on the children's perceptions of themselves as writers and affect their levels of attainment.

Also, using good quality texts will only be effective if the teacher models the subsequent process of writing. Olness (2005) and Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) stress the importance of the teacher being a writer themself, so they experience the difficulties of writing. However, my fear that my writing was not good enough to model in front of the children created a lie of what writing was all about. Typically, I would write my models in private, so the children could not see me struggle and make mistakes. I should have made my thinking visible while writing, explaining my choices, being honest about the challenges I faced, allowing the children to help me to edit and improve my work when I struggled. Such practice would show the children that writing is hard and exposes them to the pitfalls, challenges and problem-solving strategies connected to writing, as demonstrated by the teacher modelling the process (Gallagher 2014). This would allow the children to understand that writing involves struggle and needs perseverance. As Dorfman and Cappelli (200 7) explain, the teacher must join the players instead of being the spectator. As teachers, in order to help children find their own writing voice, we need to express our own.

Being ambitious for the children in my class

The reading I undertook also involved exploring how to get all children working at the highest possible level. Eyre's (2011) report on inclusive education for high attainment argues that teachers in England are in a system that expects 'mediocrity', and that there is a 'flawed rescue mentality' (Eyre 2011, 14), which protects children from cognitively challenging situations which reduce aspirations. I believed that my expectations for my pupils were high but on reflection my use of text models, as advocated by the school, proved the opposite. This reaffirmed my desire to use high-quality mentor texts. However, I did encounter some resistance and concern from others in my school who felt that the children, especially those with EAL, would struggle with more sophisticated texts. Nonetheless, I was reassured by reading McDowell (2015), who found mentor texts increase high-level thinking skills, and allowed children to analyse the quality of the text at an individual level, taking only what they need into their own writing. Also, another issue pertinent to my context was the potential impact such texts could have on students who have EAL; Conteh (2015) has made the case that using texts with high-quality language provides good models of English for children with EAL, and promotes their general language skills.

The research focus

After reading the research I wanted to explore the impact of two particular interventions:

- Could using high-quality mentor texts support the children's development as writers?
- Would reading aloud and associated discussion support their development?

I was also conscious that the study was also about improving my own confidence and professional practice in supporting children who find writing hard and at the same time raise achievement for all children in the class. By focusing on these two interventions I hoped my confidence as a teacher of writing would also be enhanced by working alongside the children, and I would better understand what they struggled with and what they were capable of achieving.

Who was involved?

My Year 4 class of 30 children were included in the study. They had all entered the year with low writing scores. The class included 16 girls and 14 boys, and 28 had EAL. During the year only two of the class were identified as working at above national expectation. Although, I was looking at the class as a whole and the impact of the study on all of the children's outcomes, I was particularly interested to see what impact the intervention would have on eight children whose writing was below that national expected average and who I was aware felt writing was hard and that they were not good writers. This group was comprised of one girl and three boys of Eastern European origin, and two girls and two boys of Pakistani origin. Throughout this article, where students are named, I am drawing on their work.

During the study, two 'critical friends' were used; they were my class teaching assistant (TA) and a teacher colleague. My teaching assistant, who worked alongside me in the class, made observations throughout the study to capture the impact of the quality texts on the children's engagement as well as their writing. Although this practice in the classroom is the norm to monitor and assess children's progress, what was different was the observation of my teaching by the TA. This allowed me to reflect on the findings of the observations to evaluate whether the changes I was making had an influence on the children's outcomes and on my own development as a teacher of writing and served to validate the approaches I was adopting. My teacher colleague assisted by reading the children's writing; in order to validate my perceptions of the quality of the children's written work. To review the impact of the interventions on the children's writing I used four indicators chosen by Barrs and Cork (2001), which would allow me to measure the children's quality of writing. These were: 'narrative voice', an indicator which measures how well children confidently write in role; 'literary turns of phrase', an indicator which tracks how children use descriptive phrases and poetic effects; 'echoes', an indicator that explores how much the children depend on the mentor texts to scaffold their own writing; and 'sense of a reader', an indicator that measures the writer's awareness of the reader.

Data

To monitor the impact of using mentor texts and reading aloud a number of tools were used. Having used a spider diagram to help identify initial issues I chose to repeat this process at the end of the intervention to see whether the children reported different feelings about writing. In addition, I used samples of the children's writing from two units of work (which were part of the intervention). These were assessed by myself and my teacher colleague against Barrs and Cork's (2001) four indicators of quality texts. At the

end of the study, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the group of children who were working below the expected level and had also shown a lack of confidence in their ability as writers (although on the day this was held only six of the eight children were present in school).

The unfolding intervention

I decided to focus on narrative writing. I choose two texts I felt would be appropriate for the children's age, yet would provide different styles of writing, coming from different periods: 'Oliver Twist' by Charles Dickens (1992) and 'The Green Children,' by Kevin Crossley-Holland (1997). Both stories are based around a theme that raises an issue or dilemma and involve children with similar ages to the children in my class, which I hoped would create a connection. I chose Dickens because I believe his writing is richly descriptive and atmospheric, hooking the reader in. He is also one of my favourite authors from my childhood and an author I had studied in senior school. Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) emphasise the importance of loving the book and I knew the text would challenge the children and serve as a mentor to improve me as a writer. I picked the folk tale, 'The Green Children,' as my second text because as a class we were studying the Anglo Saxons and the story is set in that era, providing the children with cross-curricular links. It was also one of the texts used by Barrs and Cork (2001) and I was curious to find out if any of my findings would match theirs. From 'Oliver Twist' I used two particular extracts; one where Oliver asks for more food whilst in the workhouse, and the other where he first met Fagin. In addition, the children were shown extracts from other stories, such as Dracula, to help them with particular aspects of writing. As 'The Green Children' is a short story, the children worked with the whole story. These texts formed the basis of two units of work. Each unit of work lasted three weeks and these texts were used every day during their respective unit.

Introducing the texts

The following daily lessons started with me reading the text aloud while the children followed their own copy. As suggested by Corden (2007) and Dollins (2016), I encouraged the children to become writing detectives and pull the text apart, drawing their attention to the features and structure of the text, highlighting words and phrases that they found interesting or did not understand. This was aimed to develop their awareness of the construction of texts and the craft of the author with the intention of creating more reflective writers. Both authors argue that the process of reading, discussing and examining mentor texts provides children with opportunities to impact on the quality of their independent writing. Reading the text aloud to the children also allowed me to focus on phrases and words that the authors used to create atmosphere in preparation for the children's own writing.

My learning

My values both as a teacher and as a person were tested during the teaching of 'Oliver Twist'. Whilst my reading had informed me that reading texts aloud would allow all

children to access mentor text beyond their reading ability (Wadsworth 2008), I had no idea to what extent. I questioned the class to help a child, who was absent the previous day. I wanted them to explain what had happened to Oliver after he had asked for more food in the story. John, a child with a reading age considerably lower than his chronological age, called out, 'He was put into solitary confinement!' Not only did John retain what had happened in the story from the day before but he was also able to repeat the definition accurately to the class. My surprise to this child's response provided me with an insight. It made me realise that my practice had been, up to that moment, based on limited beliefs regarding the learning ability of some of the children in my class (Eyre 2011).

As the study progressed and the children became familiar with the strategies used, I noticed that they were more self-assured and openly shared ideas and thoughts about writing to assist others with their learning. I encouraged them to steal ideas from each other and myself. After reflecting on how I had introduced the mentor text 'Oliver Twist' I considered how I might improve my practice further. I found myself being more experimental and implementing strategies during the teaching of 'The Green Children.' I had come across research which implied that children would benefit from reading their own work aloud to identify lack of flow; as Culham (2014, 116) says words 'read with your eyes don't always sound right when you hear them.' Not only did I find the children enjoyed this task, it also developed their independence, with children choosing to leave the classroom to find quiet areas to read aloud to themselves and each other. This also encouraged children to value drafting work which I implemented as a result of my own writing journey. I soon appreciated that the children found the first draft allowed them to simply write, in the knowledge that they would have time to edit and improve in subsequent drafts.

During the teaching of 'The Green Children' I realised that difficulties were arising which I found frustrating and confusing. In particular, the group of eight pupils who were not achieving at the expected level in writing, were struggling with the planning of their story even though the children were using a familiar format for planning. After two further days of modelling and re-reading the story, six of these eight children were able to make progress, which underlined the importance of revisiting the text repeatedly to develop a deeper understanding (Laminack 2017a). However, I discovered that these other two children needed to have the opportunity to orally rehearse their ideas first before having confidence to move forward. The new approach to teaching helped in this regard – the mentor text acted as the 'teacher' for the majority of the children, allowing me to devote more individual attention to those who needed more support, which also enabled me to better understand what they were struggling with.

What evidence was there to show the impact of the interventions on children's attainment in writing?

To assess the children's writing samples in more detail I used four indicators, highlighted below, that were used in the study by Barrs and Cork (2001). I felt these indicators would help me to identify the strengths of the children's writing over the six weeks and any progress I felt they had made. Three samples of writing from each of the children, who had previously been assessed as below the expected level in writing, were analysed using these indicators. The analysis was carried out by myself, and a selection of samples from the class

was analysed independently by my 'critical teacher' colleague. We were both in agreement about the improvements that were seen in the children's writing. Having another perspective acknowledge the improvements was important. In action research, it is a concern that the researcher becomes 'judge and jury' over their intervention and its impact, and in this case, external validation reinforced my confidence in the actions I was taking.

The children's writing

Narrative voice

One of the key outcomes for each unit of work was to challenge the children to write effectively in the first person. According to Barrs and Cork (2001) this 'narrative voice' is an indicator of how well children can confidently write in role.

All of the focus children's writing samples displayed the ability to write in role and sustain the role at length in both pieces of writing. When producing an independent piece of writing about their own world of colour (drawing on 'The Green Children') it was evident that they had developed their character emotionally. Bilaal's example was typical of the work being written:

> Every day I wanted to find my way back home to the blue country. I ran through the forest and felt the lime green grass with a touch of mint. A purple butterfly landed on my soft blue cheek. Home is where your heart is but I can't find my way home.

Literary turns of phrase

This refers to descriptive phrases and poetic effects used in the children's writing, giving their writing richness and interest. This indicator allowed me to track how the children used effective language throughout the six weeks. For Barrs and Cork (2001), this is an effective way to measure how well children are able to use language to create style.

The examples below illustrate how the lowest attaining children in my class were developing. These examples, drawn from tasks linked to both mentor texts, show how the children were developing better word choices:

> Bilaal: I have seen your beautiful, white, fluffy clouds falling like cotton candy from the blue bird sky.
>
> Luke: I felt the wind tickle my toes.
>
> Ansa: Suddenly, there was a soft movement the gentle, white wind tickled my cheeks with excitement.
>
> Aisha: When he came near me his peculiarly sharp, white teeth were crooked and danced like a broken piano.

Deploying words and phrases such as 'cotton candy', 'tickle', and 'soft movement' help to both visualise a scene and capture a sensation. Aisha has transferred ideas that she has read from other mentor texts I had used – extracts from 'Dracula' (in Cox 2014) and 'The Chimney Boy' (in Murray 2008) – during the reading comprehension lessons, into her own writing to help create a clear image of Fagan, something that was not evident in previous

work. It suggests that she has developed an awareness on how to draw on different mentor texts to create her own stories.

Echoes

This indicator allowed me to explore how much the children were able to draw on the mentor texts to scaffold their own writing. These 'echoes' would show where the children were using phrases that were similar to or written in the style of the author.

It was evident from the writing samples that the eight children I was focusing on relied more heavily on the mentor text than some of the other children, but they still displayed a narrative voice, keeping the rhythm and tone throughout, whilst also sustaining the story and writing at considerable length, as David's work shows:

> I entered the room. I saw boys smoking long, clay pipes and drinking spirits. The man I saw was ugly and smelly he was really hairy. I couldn't believe my eyes.

This example when compared to the original text (Figure 1), demonstrates how David has managed to retell this part of the story in his own words, yet keeping to the style of the author. The description of the boys mimics that in the mentor text, but the description of the man is his own.

Sense of a reader

Using this indicator allowed me to assess if there was evidence to show whether the writer was aware of the reader. Awareness of the reader is a sophisticated skill and a measure of confidence and maturity (Barrs and Cork 2001).

Vanessa and Oliver have both introduced variations into their stories but still retained the rhythm and tune of the original story. Both children have shown they have become more confident as storytellers and created a voice in both alternative endings and emotive sentences.

> Vanessa: I moved towards the light and saw purple faces welcoming me home. I skipped home and told my mum what had happened to my sister. My mum began to cry like tears that fell from the sky in the other country.

> Oliver: Each morning I hurried. I hurried in the green wood but I never give up and never cry. My heart beats and I never say goodbye.

The way they convey emotion in their stories moved me when I read them, which suggests these children were developing a voice and were able to write with feeling.

Overall, I felt there was evidence to support that the children could draw on the tone of stories when creating their own. Their use of figurative language and descriptive phrases confirms that the children had listened to my thinking out loud throughout the lessons

> Seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men. These all crowded about their associate as he whispered a few words to the Jew; and then turned round and grinned at Oliver. So did the Jew himself, toasting-fork in hand.

Figure 1. Original text from 'Oliver Twist' (Dickens, 1992, 51).

borrowing words and phrases not only from the mentor texts but from each other, myself and from other authors they had read in the reading comprehension lessons.

Throughout both units of work, evidence from the children show more mature writing elements. There is evidence of skilful word choices, showing a growing understanding of the tones of language to create mood and a confident narrative voice was maintained throughout. The examples I believe connect with the reader. They are written with feeling and enthusiasm.

What evidence was there to show the impact of the interventions on children's feelings towards writing?

The class were asked to create another spider diagram expressing their views on writing to see whether their feelings had changed across the course of the intervention. Overall, the analysis of the themes in the second spider diagram suggests that the children felt far more positive about writing. There were 143 positive comments in the second sample compared to 45 in the first sample. There were also notably fewer negative comments (see Table 2). In particular, there were far more comments relating to enjoying and feeling confident about writing across the class. The spider diagrams also provided nine direct references about the two texts used in the study in supporting and helping the structure of the children's writing. There was also evidence to suggest that some of the children were beginning to see themselves as authors as demonstrated by these anonymous comments from the diagrams.

I can be a poetic writer
I wrote a lovely paragraph
I think I might be a poet
I try my best to be descriptive
It makes me think I am a real author
I like descriptive writing because it is poetic
I feel as a writer
I like the Green Children because it inspired me to be a writer

Table 2. Comparison of negative and positive comments from spider diagrams recorded before and after the intervention.

Negative comments	Spider diagram 1	Spider diagram 2
Writing is boring	8	1
I do not like/enjoy writing	5	5
Writing is hard	16	3
I am not confident/not good/I am bad at writing	13	0
I am nervous or anxious about writing	6	0
Total negative comments	48	9
Positive comments		
Writing is fun	10	14
I am confident/good at writing	15	23
I enjoy/like writing/it makes me happy	20	49
Writing is great/is my favourite	N/A	10
I have improved/I am better at writing	N/A	23
I am proud	N/A	11
Writing is easier	N/A	2
Total positive comments	45	143
Reference to texts		
The texts helped me/challenged me/inspired me	N/A	9

Semi-structured interview

I was particularly interested to see how the eight children in the group I was focused on felt about their writing. I interviewed them as a group a few weeks after the study had finished (although only six were present on the day of the interview), to see whether there was any change beyond the period of the intervention. The questions were semi-structured allowing me the freedom to expand and develop any views that were raised by the children. The interview was scribed by myself and my classroom teaching assistant, to ensure we captured as many of the children's comments as possible.

These children reported feeling more confident in their ability to write and were able to evaluate with some maturity how the texts had helped them with their writing. For example, it was clear they had engaged with the mentor texts and found them interesting and useful, as well as how these texts were shared with the children:

> Luke: The story helps you. Has given me lots of phrases which have made my sentences better. I didn't have lots of description phrases.
>
> Bilaal: Oliver and the Green Children were more fascinating, better texts.
>
> Aisha: There's more information in these texts than the other texts.
>
> Bilaal: Reading aloud.
>
> David: You read it out loud.
>
> Ansa: You gave us more information.

They could give also examples of how the mentor texts had supported them:

> David: It helped me to understand what was happening.
>
> Bilaal: It gave us more words.
>
> Aisha: It had more description.
>
> Bilaal: Gave us good ideas to improve our work.
>
> Frank: It helped with my sentences, making them longer.
>
> All: They helped us magpie.

The children seemed clear that the use of mentor texts had shown them how adding descriptive phrases, alliteration, adjectives and varying their sentence length had improved their writing. This suggests that they were more aware of how they could craft their writing, and were therefore more deliberative in their choices about what to include to engage the reader.

This suggests that the children were aware how the quality texts and the way they were delivered supplied them with the essential ingredients that helped them with their writing. Reading aloud was mentioned and the fact that they refer to descriptive phrases several times throughout the interview could imply listening to the texts enabled them to focus on the language as was highlighted by the teachers in Barr and Cork's study (2001).

I think the most gratifying evidence highlighted by the interview was the children's answers to the question; how do you feel about writing now? Every child mentioned either increased confidence or feeling they were better at writing. For example:

> Luke: Alright. A little bit better. My writing is more interesting.
>
> Bilaal: I feel better. I do my handwriting quite neatly now. I am quite better as a writer now because I can write better now.
>
> Ansa: I have loads of confidence now because I use lots of descriptive phrases.
>
> David: Writing is alright for me because it is better. I add more adjectives and alliteration.
>
> Aisha: I feel my writing has become better since we have done the Green Children and Oliver because I have learned lots of alliteration and descriptive phrases which I use in my writing always.
>
> Frank: I feel confident about writing because the texts help me.

This suggests that the study has had a significant influence on how the children feel about writing and suggests that they find it easier than they did prior to the study. Griffith (2010) and Dollins (2016) both highlighted that the constant use of mentor texts can provide reassurance and confidence as the children become familiar with the text. When asked whether they still found anything hard about writing, five of the six children said spelling and handwriting was still an issue for them and contributed to making writing hard for them. Interestingly, the compositional aspects of writing were not seen as a major issue. Their concerns about these transcriptional elements of writing makes me wonder if the children are reacting to the curriculum targets, they have to meet to progress in writing. Olness (2005) highlights how having to spell correctly could limit word choices when writing. This is not to say that children should not be taught and encouraged to spell correctly but this could be a task when editing to publish. I also asked the children whether they felt they were 'better' writers now, and all agreed this was the case. I asked the children to rate themselves between 1 and 10 on how good they thought they were as writers before and after the study, 1 being not good and 10 being very good. The results showed that the children believed that they had significantly improved as writers. This suggests that the strategies used and engaging with high-quality texts had a significant impact (see Table 3).

Table 3. The children's self-rating of their improved confidence as writers.

Child	Before	After
Luke	4	9
Bilaal	5	10
Ansa	4	9
David	5	10
Aisha	4	8
Frank	6	10

Discussion

I wanted to explore how I could improve my practice in the way I taught writing, which would impact on how the children felt about their ability as writers and also whether this had any impact on their attainment. By using mentor texts (produced by published writers rather than by teachers) and making effective use of reading aloud I changed my classroom practice and was able to teach in a manner with which I was professionally satisfied. The evidence derived from this study suggests that the use of mentor texts and reading aloud has contributed to the development of my professional practice, raising achievement in writing and helping the children who found writing hard and enabled me to provide a more positive learning experience for the children in my class. I feel this study has given me more faith in my professional judgement about how best to support the children I teach. I also realised I had to have higher expectations of the children I taught. Engaging with literature, such as Barrs and Cork (2001) gave me alternative ways of seeing what I could do.

The study has helped me develop my practice. The implementation by the teacher of the text to demonstrate the writer's craft through reading aloud and discussion is essential for the text to support children's writing. As Culham (2014, 19) claims 'no one but the teacher can take and make the materials work'. If I want my children to be better at composing written work, they need to see and hear what good quality writing looks and sounds like. The quality texts have mentored not only the children but also me as a writer throughout the study. As the study unfolded, I found it less uncomfortable modelling writing in front of the children. Observations by my TA identified that I had a new sense of confidence and passion as a teacher of writing. The discussions of the texts not only supported the children but also developed my understanding of how to craft better sentences. My fears about making mistakes gave way to the realisation that the children needed to see me make errors and share in my difficulties (Gallagher 2014). The children and I became collaborators in writing. Throughout the study, I believe I have developed the attributes that Griffith (2010) states make a teacher of writing. I have discovered a joy in teaching writing, as the children have responded with enthusiasm to the rich quality texts we have used.

The study's impact on the children as writers

I found very similar outcomes to the study carried out by Barrs and Cork (2001) when analysing the writing samples from 'The Green Children.' All the children had grown as storytellers sustaining the tone of the original text and taking on the language of the author. My 'critical teacher' colleague identified that the children showed a mature understanding of the nuances of language and wrote with a confident narrative voice which supported my judgements. Writing stories in the first person also proved very successful (Barrs and Cork 2001; Dorfman and Cappelli 2007). It extended the children's writing and was successful in developing their voice, as they were able to write from inside the story and from a different viewpoint using their senses to make their writing emotive. Perhaps more importantly is the fact that the vast majority of children in my classroom find writing enjoyable – some still encounter difficulties and feel writing is hard, as they view the transcriptional elements of writing as a measure of success, but they find pleasure in writing and are confident in their abilities to write well.

Conclusion

The process of doing action research has allowed me to research the concerns surrounding my practice and I feel has had a profound effect on me as a teacher and as a person. Before introducing quality mentor texts into the classroom, I struggled to deliver lessons with mediocre texts as models. I was frustrated and a living contradiction. Since introducing mentor texts and reading aloud, passion has been restored to my teaching and the classroom has become filled with tuneful vocabulary and voices eagerly sharing their ideas and descriptive phrases. My change in practice has hopefully made the children appreciate the joy of writing and enhanced their belief in themselves as developing writers. I have been surprised and delighted by how much I feel I have developed throughout this study; I have grown in confidence as a teacher of writing and have found a way of putting my educational values into practice. I am less concerned now about the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball 2003). Adopting an action research project has allowed me to engage critically with educational change and has been a means for me to reclaim my professional values and identity as a teacher; as such I feel I am providing a better educative experience for the children I teach (Biesta 2015). I would like to conclude with a quote, from one of the children, which illustrates why this study has been such a worthwhile journey for all of us in my Year 4 classroom:

> [N]ow I can be a poetic writer. But I never knew that it was inside of me.

Note

1. Although this is a jointly written article we have chosen to use the first person in the exposition to reflect the fact that this study was based in experiences of one of the authors, Steph Weber, and also hopefully to make the writing more engaging.

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