

Weaving new meanings: evaluating children's written responses to a story telling resource package

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Abstract

This paper documents an evaluation of children's written responses to a story telling package used in an intervention project set up by the National Association for the Teaching of English as part of the larger *Inspire Rotherham* literacy campaign. The brief was to provide a group of primary teachers with innovative and inspirational approaches to raise the aspiration of Key Stage 2 children (age range 7-9) and to improve their skills in story writing. The schools, who were self-selecting, were given a DVD of a professional story teller narrating tales appropriate to the age group, used alongside drama and role play workshops which helped the teachers engage children in aspects of narrative. The children were asked to retell one of their own favourite stories in writing before hearing the DVD stories and then to repeat this activity at the end of the 6-week project. They were asked to include both pictures and writing. Their texts were analysed to provide both quantitative and textual data. Children were shown to have adopted many features of the language of the oral narratives they had heard in the second task improving both the structure and imagery of the stories they produced.

key word: family learning, refugees, transcultural capital, bonding capital, bridging capital, empowerment

Scope of the project

The NATE Story Spinners project, a small-scale intervention programme, was designed by the National Association for the Teaching of English as a contribution to a larger scale literacy campaign, *Inspire Rotherham*, whose overarching mission, as stated on its website is: "to reach, educate, inspire, grow and nurture today's generation to be tomorrow's confident communicators" <http://www.inspirerotherham.org.uk> (accessed 7 February 2011). NATE's contribution was made in response to teachers' expressed anxiety that recent cohorts of primary children had shown a limited knowledge of stories and consequently had a narrower repertoire of story models on which to base their own writing. The need for children to encounter different ways of telling has further been indicated by a study by Cremin et al. (2008) which found that, even in school, children are currently introduced to only a limited

number of children's authors and are able to name only a narrow range of picture books and stories. It is not surprising then that many children find difficulty in adopting an appropriate narrative voice and written style for their school texts when much of their engagement with narrative outside of school is through the moving image.

The Story Spinners project aimed to provide Key Stage 2 primary teachers and teaching assistants of children age 7-9 years with a rapid overview of the potential of oral story telling to engage children's interest in the language of the tales being heard. In addition it aimed to introduce the teachers to drama and oral activities for linking this interest to the children's growing ability to tell and write their own stories. The main objectives of the project were summed up for its participants as:

1. To encourage an interest in stories and storytelling.
2. To encourage an interest in the language of stories.
3. To improve the writing skills of Year 3 and 4 pupils

The Story Spinner (Day One, 2007) resource was provided for each participating school. It consists of a DVD box set library of 42 oral story tellings, six tales for each year of the primary phase of schooling from Reception to Year 6. The stories are narrated by a single male speaker, whose head and shoulders alone appear on screen, focusing the young viewers' attention on the facial expression and voice of the narrator and, more importantly, on the language of the tales. An accompanying teachers' booklet provides background information, plot summaries and further suggestions to support teachers' planning and teaching. During the workshop sessions, a selection of the stories appropriate to the 7-9 age groups who were participating in the project were shown to the teachers and discussed alongside the workshop strategies.

NATE consultants, Mick Connell and Lorraine Harrison, both with wide experience of working with pupils in South Yorkshire, provided three CPD sessions in which they identified key aspects of narrative structure in the oral tales which could be drawn upon to inform children's understanding of how stories work. Their teaching strategies were evolved from drama pedagogy to promote active learning. They offered ways of

working with children to focus on key aspects of storying. The strategies included responding in words and images, the sequencing of actions, the understanding of characters' inner feelings as well as outer appearance and action, and the creation of settings. Freeze framing, thought bubbles, sequence lines, use of key props and rapid sketching were all in the teaching repertoire proposed.

Background to the study

In 1987, Gordon Wells had reported from a longitudinal study of 32 children followed up from their first schooling experiences to the age of 10 that "an early knowledge of story was the most influential indicator of later educational achievement", a quotation which the United Kingdom Literacy Association has adopted as a slogan for its web pages. Just over 10 years after Wells' influential study, Millard (1997) described an increasing tendency for boys at the end of the primary stage, and particularly boys with weaker literacy skills, to draw their narrative structures from visual modalities such as film and computer games. It is now even more evident that many children's imaginations draw upon characters and story lines first encountered in digital modalities, on film, computer games and TV, more often than from the language of books. The continuing tendency for boys to draw much more than girls on digital sources has been described by Hvard Skaar (2007) who, in observing a class of 10–11-year old Norwegian who had been given a choice of multimodal resources for writing on the computer, found that the boys made far more use of ready made images and cut and paste symbols than did girls.

The ever evolving uses of media and digital technology have introduced exciting forms of narrative pleasure to children and prompted educational researchers and some policy makers to begin to call into question a model of teaching reading and writing that relies predominantly on print-based experiences of the words on the page. Digital advances place new demands on pedagogy. Kress's work (1997, 2003), for example, has prompted teachers to reassess their understanding of the nature of children's text production which draws widely on knowledge of visual design. He has also suggested that schools are mostly unprepared to take account of children's knowledge of their "new media age":

"We are, it seems, entering a new age of the image, a new age of hieroglyphics; and our school system is not prepared for this in any way at all. Children live in this new world of communication, and on the whole seem to find little problem with it"

(Kress, 1997).

The Story Spinner project, although based on older conventions of sign making, also incorporated a

variety of modalities of meaning making, for example, drama strategies, which embodied the expression of character through gesture, costume and movement as well as in dialogue; oral story telling made dramatic use of tone, facial expression and gesticulation to engage the children's interest. In designing our method of data collection for the evaluation study, we also chose to ask the children to draw as well as write their personal choice of story not simply to illustrate it. We particularly asked the teachers to allow the children a free choice of a favourite story at the outset of the project and expected numbers of them to select narratives that reflected their interest in stories accessed in other formats than conventional storybooks. Researchers have shown that the narrative elements of popular culture have great power to capture children's interest and inform their understanding of character and action in their interactive play leading to engaged oral and written work (Dyson 2003; Marsh and Millard, 2005; Marsh, 2005, 2008, 2010; Willet, 2005, 2009). Dependence on popular culture as a model for writing, however, has been shown to limit the scope of young writers' use of language and in particular, the development of inner thought and feeling (Millard, 1997, Skaar, 2009). Because of this, I have argued for a pedagogy that would enable the fusion of children's popular fictions with traditional elements of narrative and creative writing.

The role of the teacher in this project was to engage with the children's interest through engagement with their own narrative interests and to build on this to create opportunities for exploring key aspects of story development, such as character development, through drama pedagogies such as hot-seating, role play and thought-tracking.

The NATE evaluation of its Story Spinners project set out to test two ideas in the context of the project. First that oral narratives would provide a powerful medium from which teachers could develop active learning strategies for oral story telling leading to improvements in particular features of story writing. Second that the oral language of traditional tales, which often have popular cultural versions (as in the Disney versions of well-known fairytales) presented by a skilled story teller, would be memorable and so the children would choose to make use of them in their own retellings and story writing. It is the second of these aims that is discussed¹ in this article.

The research process

Because the school's primary concern was to demonstrate an improvement in the standard of their children's written work, the researchers were asked to identify any aspects of the children's story writing skills which could be shown to have improved through

Table 1: Scoring employed for the key features of narrative

Narrative		Picture	
Character appearance, motivation, feelings, interactions	2	Character, appearance, facial expression, stance	2
Setting: descriptive details of place and time	2	Pictorial details of setting	3
Narrative structure: beginning, complication, resolution	3	Action and interaction, dialogue, speech bubbles	3
Title, use of literary language, evidence of an evaluative comment or use of a coda	3	Detailed imagery, use of colour, symbols, connection of viewer to character	2
Total	10		10

the use of the project's strategies. The short-term nature of this project, which was carried out in the second half of the Autumn term in 2009, posed problems of timing but it was agreed with the teachers that a sample of the children's work would be collected before and after the project and both would be analysed to assess if in the second task children had adopted any ways of telling from the stories they were shown. 20 children were selected from each of the 22 participating schools and the teachers were provided with a short writing frame which asked the children in the project to record their favourite stories in words and pictures. The task was then repeated at the end of the project again asking for the retelling of a favourite story. A decision to ask for both pictures and words was made in order to enable us to judge which aspects of narrative were present in each of the modalities. The request for a picture was also included to assist any of the children who had weaker writing skills to reveal more of their story knowledge.

Teachers of Year 3 (7–8-year-olds) and Year 4 (8–9-year-olds) classes were recruited from 22 schools to attend the workshops. Some schools included both age groups. Of these, 20 schools were able to complete both the written and drawing tasks in some form and the total number of children involved was 399. Teachers were asked to send in the work of 15 children from each class in the project. The work of 80 children who had not completed both tasks because of absence (there was snow and an outbreak of influenza at that time) was then excluded, leaving a final total of 319 children. A close analysis of the work from each class identified key aspects of narrative found in each piece. Narrative features present in the children's writing and drawing were awarded a simple numerical score, as indicated in Tables 1 and 2. Then for each class particular textual features were picked out to illustrate the kinds of progress that had been achieved (see Table 3, Figure 1).

Summary of the research findings

A marked change was found in many children's second written pieces in 18 of the 20 schools where two scores had been recorded. Large numbers of children showed an increased awareness of all the story features

Table 2: Numerical data recording overall improvement in scores between tasks 1 and 2

Improved scores	240	75%
No change	40	13
Decreased scores	39	12%
Total number of children	319	100%

that were measured. Particularly noteworthy were the following: a clearer delineation of sequence, a better use of temporal connectives and an increase in the use of literary language. In the two schools where little improvement was found the second task appeared to have been set simply as a duplication of the first and the children had included no new information either in their use of words or pictures. In addition, the tasks in these schools appeared to have been completed in a rush, the pictures drawn less carefully and few new features in the use of language.

Discussion and exemplification of the key features found in the writing

In the first research task, most children paid equal attention to completing a picture and the writing, often choosing to draw first. They had been given a choice to write about a favourite story taken from any medium including film, computer games and television and their stories were often dominated by characters from popular culture, Bart Simpson, Ursula, the witch in the Little Mermaid and Fantastic Mr Fox (film version with motorbike). Some interpreted the request to write about the story they liked most as expecting a book review format, which unfortunately limited the narrative details they could include. This worked to limit their sense of a story line with many simply outlining the main character(s) and explaining why they liked them, often giving the reason that they found them funny as in these examples:

“My favourite story is Star Wars because I like it when R2D2 came charging in and hit himself on the wall. My favourite character is Yoda because he is green and didy.

Table 3: Examples of key aspects of narrative found in the second task

Child	Narrative title	Opening line	Memorable phrases	Closing line/coda
Boy: Year 4, age 8	Will Jack play for Rotherham United?	Jack and his dad were at Rotherham's new ground	The strange man slipped some strange black gloves on Jack's hand. Jack felt his wrist warm up	Over the years, he always wore the gloves in training and matches. Guess what, he is now England's No. 1
Girl: Year 3, age 7	The Wolf's story from the Boy who cried Wolf	I sat back and waited for the people to go and I meant to slowly walk but instead I tumbled	I said, No, I want a word with you." I saw all the torches coming up the hill	Oliver got told off but I was delighted
Girl: Year 3, age 7	Princes and Princesses	One day in a busy shop with lots of people was a little teddy bear called Fluffles	Suddenly a flying cow crashed through the roof – and plummeted down. They flew over green mountains that sparkled in the sunlight	Fluffles told her the whole story of the flying cow
Girl: Year 4, age 8	Ashley and a wizard	Ashley was wondering why her name means treasure	"You saved my life, so . . . yes I will ask your question," she said to the wizard and continued her journey".	Soon Ashley and the king got married and she had all the treasure she could ever need. So that's why Ashley means treasure she often thought to herself'
Boy: Year 4, age 8	The Hidden Treasure	Once, in the ancient land of Egypt, there lived an orphan	Now, he had a problem. The thing was, the sword was magic'	His family were amazed at their new riches and John had, at last, become an explorer!

The most exciting thing is when Yoda used the force to pick the ship from under the swamp".

"My favourite story is Tom and Jerry. My favourite character is Jerry, the mouse. Tom is always chasing Jerry around the house and never catches him. Jerry maybe small but he's got a clever brain! I like it because I think it's really funny and it makes me really happy and it makes me smile. My favourite edition is Tom and Jerry and the Alien Invasion".

The examples consist of a series of statements, which are only loosely connected and show a limited development of ideas. There is also an absence of key contextual information – we as the readers are expected to share an experience of what the children see as a well-known story/programme, though in the second example the comment on Jerry shows an ability to comment on characterisation.

Some of the comments from weaker writers confused television and film characters with actors, as in:

"Doctor who is my favourite character. David Tenant can act really well"

The pictures produced by such writers were also static and presented the main characters rather than the actions or interactions between characters. Sometimes the drawings had quite clearly been copied from the covers of DVD cases or book spin-offs from films. This

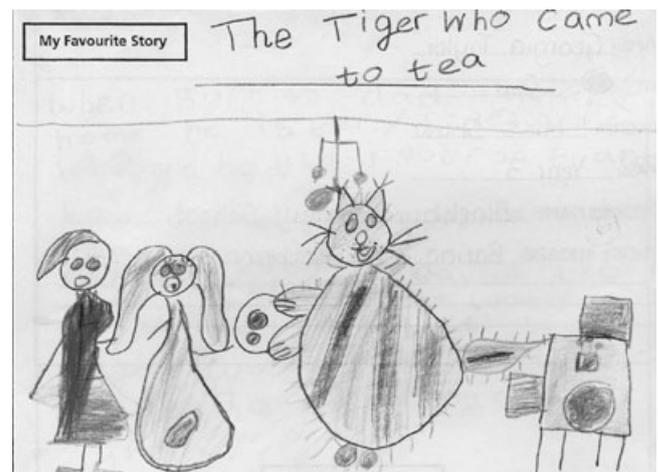


Figure 1: Girl Year 3: The tiger who came to tea

was the case for several pictures of *Fantastic Mr Fox*, a popular choice because of the recent release of the film version of the story, which many of the children had seen. However, when the pictures were based on (but not copied from) a good picture storybook, they were more detailed and interactions shown more clearly. Figure one shows a girl's picture, remembered from the *Tiger Who Came to Tea*, which shows the mother and daughter gazing at a huge tiger who is eating the contents of a large plate of food. Also pictured are the doorbell chimes which announce the arrival of the morning's visitors in the picture book version. This

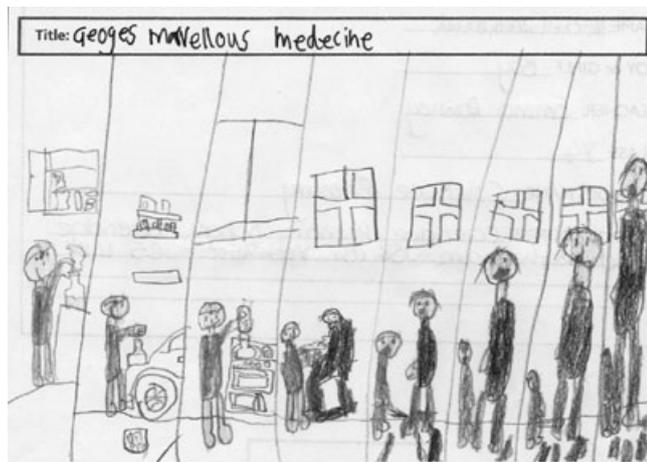


Figure 2: Boy Year 4: George's marvellous medicine

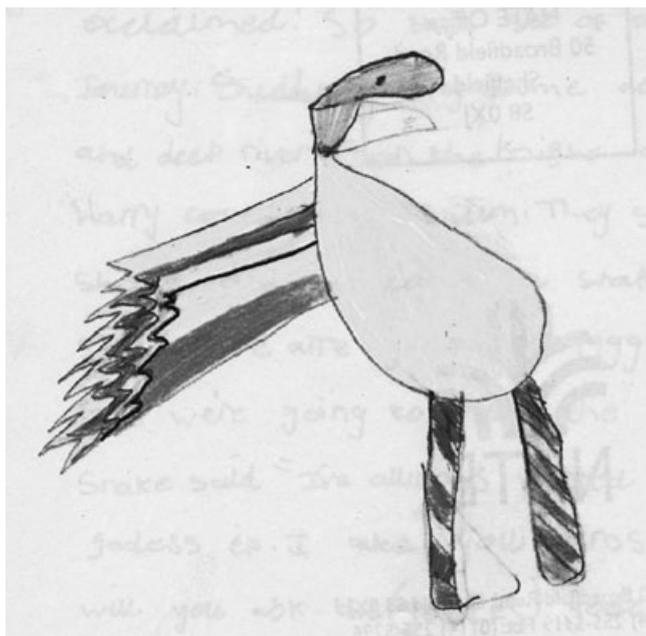


Figure 3: Boy Year 4: The story of Powan

was assessed as showing an understanding of setting and character.

More sophisticated graphic compositions included action, as in this sequential account of the grandmother rising through the ceiling from *Georges' Marvellous Medicine* (Figure 2) and the image of a snake turning into a dragon (Figure 3). Both were assessed as showing an understanding of story development.

Developing a sense of story

Many of the second stories using events taken from one of the Story Spinner tales exhibited a better sense of an opening, with language clearly derived or even fully remembered from the tales they had heard, as in the following examples:

"A long time ago in the middle of China lived a young man called Chin"

"Once, in the ancient land of Egypt, there lived an orphan"

"Long ago in a country far away called Iraq there lived a very important man called Ali Baba".

and a sense of an ending:

"...but this time, the elf did not come out and so the greedy man ended up with nothing"

"His family were amazed at their new riches and John had, at last, become an explorer"

Or, put quite simply:

"He was rich at last".

"Roberta and Jasmine had learned their lesson".

"The moral of this story is always to tell the truth".

These writers are trying out a recognisably more appropriate narrative voice with both an apt choice of the vocabulary and the cadences of the form. An improvement in writing skills was also shown in the use of literary language with thoughtfully selected adjectives and verbs, exemplified in effective descriptive details such as galloping horses, freezing, crunchy snow and the great Indian, blue sky turned dark.

A greater number of complex sentences were found in the work from the second task:

"The murderous sharks were looking at Dougal aggressively as if they wanted his salad".

"Ali's business was not going well and so he became poorer and poorer".

"When she finally got there, she saw with piercing eyes the most strange looking toad she had ever seen".

Some of the most confident writers were able to use traditional elements in the stories they set in contemporary times, an element present in some of the Story Spinner narratives. For example, as noted in Table 3, a year 4 boy has woven elements of modern and traditional narrative threads into a bricolage of the popular, the local (Rotherham football) and fantasy story telling which involved magic, a girl has given a modern twist to the boy who cried wolf, using knowledge of stories such as Toby Forward's *The Wolfs Story* in which the villain claims to be misunderstood. The second story in the table was accompanied by a picture of the boy hanging onto the tree, which he had climbed to escape the wolf.

In a school where the second task had been interpreted as a retelling of the story of Ali Baba, a much longer period of time had been spent in creating new versions. The stories combined a thoughtful interaction of word and image providing confirmation that the

children had been immersed in the language of the storyteller.

"Ali sat on some steps and said, 'If you are rich or poor the stars will always remain the same'".

"Ali Baba went back to the cave, thinking about the jewels".

"She heated up the oil and poured it into the 39 cups. 'We shall see in the morning,' she said".

These examples show that their experience of oral story telling had enabled children to remember the cadences of speech and use them to good advantage in their own retellings.

"Cross the great salt water and you will find what you seek"

"You saved my life, so.. yes I will ask your question to the Wizard' and continued her journey".

In one school, the use of good conversation modelled on the words of the storyteller enlivened rather run of the mill accounts of school trickery as in these exchanges:

"You can't say you didn't do it, Emma. We found the bank card stuffed in your bag".

"Oh no,' Mr White said furiously, 'Who's put glue on my chair?'"

Discussion and recommendations

It is now well understood that children's telling and sharing of stories whether as oral or written narratives is a matter of enculturation and not an aspect of universal qualities of mind as suggested previously by Sutton-Smith (1981). They are part of social learning. Home experience is an essential part of this enculturation, for as Heath explains: "Ways of taking from books are part of culture" (Heath, 1982). Children's understanding of what it is appropriate for them to include in their stories also depends heavily on their prior reading experience (Barrs and Cork, 2001). The latter research study found that both reading aloud and drama and role play, all the key elements used in the NATE Rotherham Story Spinner project, made qualitative differences to children's writing. Reading aloud to children helps them to focus on what Barrs (1992) had earlier described as "the tune on the page". The exclusive focus on the talking head of the story teller on the Story Spinner CDs gave primacy to the patterns of heightened speech used in narration. Our examples provided the project organisers with convincing evidence that the Story Spinner resources used in tandem with the drama strategies introduced in the workshops had impressed on the children memorable elements of language and imagery which they were able to draw from in their own writing. Although the degree of individual progress varied from school to school, this

could be attributed to the different interpretations that the teachers made of the research task and the different degrees of support given to the writing process. Nevertheless the evidence shows a remarkable development in the appreciation of narrative form in most of the participating schools.

This article focuses on the children, not the teachers' professional development, which was an essential element of the whole project, however, the evaluations which the teachers completed at the close of the project supported our view that their children were becoming increasingly confident as story tellers though some also noted that the short time-frame did not necessarily enable the children to translate this into writing. The following are typical representations of the responses recorded in the additional comments teachers made on the evaluation form:

"Although improvement in writing may take longer to be obvious, ideas and Speaking and Listening have already improved dramatically".

"The children very much enjoyed the work done including the writing".

"I am certain this will continue to have a positive impact on my classroom practice".

"I feel that the techniques have really helped my class to write narrative without getting stuck". *"The storyteller was amazing. The children listened to him intently and used the language they had heard in their own role-plays and retellings"*.

Summary and conclusions

Our research found confirmation of our starting premise that many children's initial understanding of story genre was strongly shaped by visual media which influenced their understanding of narrative structure. The first task was dominated in a large number of schools by the choice of media stories, largely from moving image modalities, which worked to limit the development of coherent narrative accounts, particularly marked in the absence of character motivation and the static nature of the illustration. The children's recollections of media sources not only offered less support for developing an understanding of sequence, but also the interaction between characters and the feelings involved. In this first task both the language of the children's stories and the pictures they created to illustrate them held more narrative features when the stimulus had been taken from a good quality narrative text.

The second task, which was strongly linked to narratives from the Story Spinner collection, showed the children's improved understanding of both narrative structure and character development in the written versions. There was less evidence of change in the images created.

Teachers' evaluations confirmed the value of the Story Spinner resource as a way into telling and writing stories. They reported that children had found the story teller entrancing and his words had remained in their memories, expanding their language repertoire. In this project hearing stories initially without the representation of dramatic action, but with the power of the story teller's personality projected in voice, gesture and facial expression was the key to developing children's own story telling. The stories themselves and the dramatic way they were told provided teachers with a powerful medium for the drama based activities that led up to writing. Children in this study benefited from encountering both traditional and contemporary stories in oral as well as in written forms and so teachers' approaches to developing writing skills need to be informed by a clearer understanding of the particular affordances of stories accessed from a range of sources.

Children's increased experience as viewers of story on screen, as well as readers of the written word has influenced the modalities that many draw on in their own compositions (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2005). The evidence from our first task was that children's selection of stories from their media experiences encouraged less well-developed narratives. This does not, however, lead us to concur with Skaar's (2009) conclusion in his analysis of the learning involved in children's digital story making, that the incorporation of image is a less demanding and therefore, by implication, a less worthwhile experience of meaning-making than a composition in words. Rather, it leads us to suggest that what teachers need to focus on is the selection of appropriate semiotic tools for particular tasks. Teachers require good knowledge of the affordances of different modes of semiosis (meaning-making) including the digital so that they are able to help children to employ them in ways appropriate to different purposes. In the second task, where teachers gave support to the process of composing stories, story and image more often complemented one another.

Recommendations

- Children's reading and writing needs to be seen in a wider context of multimodal literacy and attention paid to the variety of ways available for telling stories so that these can be used more successfully in modelling storying with children.
- Mapping children's media interests and technological competencies can provide opportunities to help bridge home to school learning (Hill, 2010).
- Different modes of telling provide different affordances for meaning making and knowledge of this is important in supporting children's use of narrative elements such as action or character.
- Story tellers and story telling are invaluable resources for stimulating children's interest in the language of story. Teachers can use the resources of

Story Spinners to develop their own story telling skills.

- Drama and role-play strategies are effective in developing children's ability to talk about, as well as to write stories.
- Teachers' knowledge of how to evaluate children's understanding in pictures as well as words, speaking as well as writing, requires more investigation and development.
- Teachers benefit from opportunities to collaborate beyond their own school context. Time given to sharing and analysing examples of their children's writing helps in the development of a wider range of support strategies.

We end on a caveat to accompany the interpretation of our findings. This reports on a short-term study based largely on the analysis children's written data that were not always presented in the form requested by the researchers. It could therefore be argued that the children's ready adoption of the language of the stories they heard might simply indicate a short-term memory skill, rather than a deeper learning experience. What can be claimed without reservation, however, is that tales told by a skilled story teller had powerfully engaged the children's interest so that they had remembered the language they had heard and were able in this context to translate this into richer ways of developing their own story characters and narrative sequences. Most had, as has been previously noted by Marilyn Mottram, achieved a "more assured story voice" (Mottram, 2009, p. 6). This had found expression in this project through their written retellings.

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