



Project: The early years family storytelling project

Involving families in Talk for Writing works wonders. Katie Houghton, Foundation 2 teacher at Porter Croft School, Sheffield, reflects on how involving families in the Talk for Writing approach has transformed the school.



If you had said to me at the beginning of the project, “You will be able to get four-year-old children to structure and invent stories,” I would have laughed and said it was impossible. But they can. It’s made me realise they are far more capable than I had given them credit for. If you provide the right building blocks and structure, then they can. There has been a complete change in what they can achieve, and in what I expect them to achieve.

In the autumn term of 2009, my school was lucky enough to be selected by Sheffield Council to take part in a project with Pie Corbett and Julia Strong that was investigating what difference it would make if the families of reception children were involved in the Talk for Writing storytelling approach. To enable me to measure progress, I was shown how to ask the children to “Tell me a story” at the beginning of the project and then, several months later, ask the same question. This approach to establishing what they know and what progress they have made has been a real insight. Before, I took it for granted that they could even though

they couldn’t. Now I know how to build the foundations so they can become story tellers.

The progress the children are now making needs to be set in context. The national expected level for a four-year-old entering foundation 2 (previously known as reception) would be 40-60 months. At Porter Croft, only 17% of children arrive at this level and 25% enter below 30 months. Over half the children live below the poverty line with 75% of them on free school meals. 75% also speak English as an additional language with many having recently arrived with their families in the country. But now our children are leaving Year 2 making progress in line with the national average and leave year 6 making progress above the national average.

Before the project, trying to teach children to write stories was like building a house without foundations. We were trying to get them to do something that they didn’t have the building blocks in place to do. They didn’t have the language patterns to be able to tell a story so how could they write it down?! The children were very passive. They would listen to stories being read to them but now they are actively involved in telling the story themselves so that the language and all the key storytelling sentence patterns are in their heads. Previously it was all too much. They were trying to remember a story and how to form the letters and leave space between the words. There were just too many things to do. We were setting them up to fail; not just in literacy but in all aspects of school.

Involving the families turned out to be easy. Once the children had fully internalised a story (the imitation stage of Talk for Writing) we invited the families to come in a little early to collect the children who then performed for their families and invited them to join in. This communal storytelling was the first time some of the children and their parents had heard their own voices speaking English.

This approach has gone from strength to strength. Now the families come in and join the storytelling once a half term and the children regularly take story maps home to work with their families on innovating or inventing their own stories. It has been a revelation to many of



the parents that you can make your dragon drive a car and enjoy a cup of tea in front of the fire. It's opened up the imagination of many of the parents as well as the children. It's also made homework interactive and enjoyable. Now children learn one story per half term and take home a story map and then innovate or invent their own story and take home the story map. So they share at least four stories a term with their families. They are also encouraged to take home story sacks at any time. The children don't see it as work; they love storytelling and it has become part of the culture of the school: one carpenter dad is making each of the classrooms a storytelling chair.

Family storytelling has not only brought parents into the school but has changed their attitude towards the school. It's opened up the conversation about children and learning. Parents have stopped demanding to see the writing and understand the key role that talk plays in children's development. Parents are now much more confident about how to support their children's learning at home and the children can take the lead in storytelling activities at home which builds their confidence.

What's made the difference? If you go back three years, children in Years 1 and 2 couldn't write a properly structured story. Now they can talk and write properly structured stories independently. The big difference is the level of oral rehearsal at home as well as at school. The approach has embedded the good language patterns in the children's heads so they can tell a story. It provides them with an explicit language model which is reinforced in the home. It's also made all the teachers become more explicit and careful to model the key connecting phrases for the children so they know how to speak coherently. Foundation children are now writing several pages and, when they leave Foundation 2, they can write stories. Because they have rehearsed a story orally, when they come to write it down or innovate on it they know what they are going to write so they have the space to think about the spelling and how to form the letter and the finger spacing. They can cope with the mechanics because they have the story in their head. This problem would be solved by the Talk for Writing approach alone but when you add in the parents as well, then the children's immersion in story telling language increases so they are learning stories much more quickly and then they can start focusing on the writing.

The whole school is taught in Talk for Writing style but family involvement is working its way up the school with the initial cohort, so we now have family storytelling involvement from foundation to Year 3. At the moment, we are getting the Year 3 teachers acclimatised to having such close parental involvement. The school provides lots of opportunities for teachers to observe each other teaching in Talk for Writing style so we can learn from each other. So recently the Year 3 teacher has been to see how I involve the parents. We support each other: if a new teacher comes they are shown how to teach the approach. Now we don't accept any barriers to learning. As long as the children attend school, we can help all the children achieve.

The approach has made a huge difference – the children can now express themselves and articulate their ideas. And there has been a whole series of spinoffs. It has resulted in a talk-led curriculum. We have included Communicate in Print into our approach to support children with speech and language delays – every word has a picture – just like the text maps for Talk for Writing. Now children who can't read can read their stories by looking at the pictures which builds their confidence and helps them begin to read. The children also now do Philosophy for Children. This gives them stimulus – they can now identify issues that they want to discuss and express their opinions.

Talk for Writing has completely changed the way I teach. It has been the single most significant thing in developing my philosophy of how to teach: it forms the way I do things and makes me a much better teacher. It has helped me take a step backwards and helped the children become more responsible for their learning. Now there is more dialogue: more two-way speaking and real listening.

Below are some transcripts from the video where reception teacher, Jeanette Smith, explains:

1. Why the storytelling approach works so well in turning reception children into story tellers and story writers

'We tell the children the story initially and then we do map it out so you draw the Little Red Hen and then an arrow to the next little bit of the story and do a picture for that and then an arrow to the next little bit so you'll have, "the cat the



rat and the pig". The beauty of story mapping initially is that there aren't any words, so the children don't have to read anything – they can just use pictures and tell a story. And every single child (even nursery children) are successful at that. What happens then, as the natural progression, is that we build that into our literacy so that our children then make up their own story maps of whatever story we're doing, or they'll make up their own, but then we add captions to it. We might add a title – "the cat, the rat and the pig". So early on it's just CVC words – it's very simple. As the year progresses, and the children get better, they write longer captions and then this transfers to the written word on the page.



'So that I have children who left the other year who were writing stories at the end of the year who had started off by writing "cat, rat, pig" on the story map and progressed from that because it's something interesting to write about and they get this wealth of language about stories. The story map when we start goes home laminated. It goes home so the children tell the parents. Then, when they they've progressed to doing their own story maps, they will also go home and the children will tell their own stories that they have made up and they don't think, "Oh, I can't do this. I can't read this." It's just a really good way in to get children initially talking stories...

'When we first start doing it, we will practise it

[the whole story with the actions] a couple of times a week initially... In this school every half term we have a story-telling assembly so that all the children go in and each class does their story for that half term and we don't take the story maps in with us. So you have children as young as reception who stand in front of a school full of children and tell a story –

confidently, with big voices and actions. It's marvellous. Just from a little story map. It's amazing!

2. Why the approach works so well with children with speech problems

'When they're doing a story map as a class, they're all talking together and they've got the story map to look at to help them retell it but they are learning to use their voices out loud. For children with speech problems, that's quite often difficult because children are aware that people are listening to them and they think, "Oh they can't understand me." But because it's a story map and everybody's doing it and he's [a boy in the class with speech problems] doing the actions. If he's doing little Red Hen, then you're not saying to him, "What was that?" You know what he's saying.'

3. What a difference it makes if you involve parents

'If you involve parents, it's like most things. Children will do lots of things at school and they quite often go home and the parent says, "What have you done at school today?" and they say, "Nothing." But we know they have. When they take the story map home, the parent quite often doesn't need to say, "What have you done at school?" The child goes, "Here's my story map. I'm going to tell you my story," because they are so full of it and so confident...



'The other year I had a dad come in and he went, "I've brought this in. It's my littlun. I videoed him and I've brought it to show you." He stood at 9.00 in the morning with tears in his eyes because his son had stood up in his kitchen and told a story. Now this wasn't a child who had special needs and couldn't tell stories. He was a bright little boy. It doesn't really matter



what ability a child has. For parents, story mapping and storytelling is a success. That's one of the reason why I love it. There are lots of things that we might do that parents think their child might not be able to access. For parents, story mapping and storytelling is a success because every single child can do it. So you can have a parent that you might not speak to every day, those parents that sometimes dip in and out. They come in quickly because they have jobs to go to – and they rush off... They will come in and go "Oh, he told me his story last night." It's a shared language immediately that you can join in with parents and I really like that. I prefer that to, "I need to see you about your child" because this is always positive.

4. How to use storytelling to get all the parents involved

'I just asked parents to come in a bit early one day and said, "Could you come in at a quarter past two not quarter to three. I want you to watch your child telling a story. It's fabulous. You'll love it!" When they came in, they could see. They stand there and they are so proud. Once you've got your parents in then you say to them, "Right. Now, what I want is for you to learn the story." The parents often go, "No, I can't do that!" But I just say, "Yes you can because actually then you can go home and you can tell your child the story. And think how gobsmacked they will be when you know it and how proud they will be of you." So I send out a reminder and it's just a little note, it's not on official school paper, it's just a little note that says, "Can you please come on ... at ... o'clock to do some storytelling. There will be teas and coffee and you will enjoy it."



'I could have got all our parents here today... Generally most parents come and once you say "Your kids will be so proud," that I think is the thing that gets parents in. This is a big unit. We've got 52 parents and we get about 47 coming in to do story telling – we nearly couldn't fit them all in out there... Our parents are like every other parent in the country. They are very supportive of us as a school. I think every

parent in the country feels they want to be proud of their children. They want their children to be proud of them.

'I think we probably just don't ask them to do things like storytelling because what we do is ask parents to come in so we can talk about their child's report which, as a parent myself with my boy when he was younger, I hated. I was always thinking, "What has he done now?" Whereas, if someone had said to me when he was younger, "I want you to come in and learn a story. He's learning it – you can learn it," I would have loved it. It's a shared language. Immediately you can join in with the parents and I prefer that to, "I need to see you about your child." because this is always positive. I don't want to sound clever but it has been fairly easy to get parents in.'