



How Talk for Writing can transform children's writing

Ian Clennan, headteacher of Selby Community Primary School, explains how the Talk for Writing approach rescued writing from the doldrums in his school and has the potential to transform writing in all schools.

Selby Primary School, serving a catchment area that is in the top 10 most deprived catchment areas in North Yorkshire, is a 3 to 11 primary school, taking 2 year olds for the first time this September. The proportion of pupils receiving Pupil Premium funding is well above National indicators and mobility is also above National indicators.

When I took up my first headship in spring 2008 the school was slowly improving in all areas, with the exception of writing. Autumn 2008 saw the school hit the headlines as being one of the worst performing 150 schools in England. We always felt we were doing all we could and the results in writing never seemed to change: both reading and maths results increased steadily over the next few years but the writing outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2 remained static despite all the best efforts of the team.

2008 Level 4+	22%	Level 5 =	5%
2009 Level 4+	57%	Level 5 =	17%
2010 Level 4+	48%	Level 5 =	23%
2011 Level 4+	48%	Level 5 =	15%

Data improvements were happening in EYFS and also Key Stage 1, along with a brand-new creative curriculum. I started to look at writing research and came across the idea of Talk for Writing, something we had not considered during the previous years even though we had seemed to try every other initiative and idea that we were either told to do or we thought we could do.

In order to consider if this would be an option good for us, I took 5 staff to observe Jamie Grossmith at Belton Lane Primary in Lincolnshire where we immediately saw the missing link in our writing provision, that would ultimately result in developing good quality talk and vocabulary through giving the children the imagination and creativity they lacked during independent writing. It was agreed we would trial Talk for Writing in 3 classes.



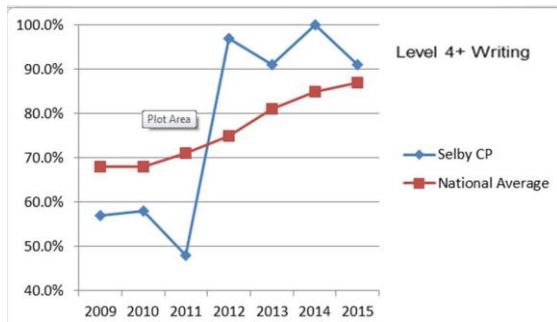
The trial

In all honesty, it never happened! We flooded Pie Corbett courses with staff, determined to ensure all members of staff in the trial felt they had the skills and professional development to make sure this would work. A month into the trial, the 3 classes had become the whole school with the exception of Early Years. Having tried to explain to the governors the reasons behind the change, we agreed to look at the results from 2011 onwards as a mark of our success as the children would have only had a few months to change their writing methods because we had started Talk for Writing in 2011.

Impact

Since 2011 we have learned many things; the most important being that we had made things too easy for the children for far too long. We have increased our expectations for all pupils, with an increased emphasis on vocabulary use and development – which has led to some truly remarkable pieces of writing from the same catchment area of children that in 2008 achieved 22% Level 4. By 2014 we were immensely proud to have achieved 100% Level 4 with good progress for all pupils.

2012 Level 4+	97%	Level 5 =	10%
2013 Level 4+	91%	Level 5 =	15%
2014 Level 4+	100%	Level 5 =	33%
2015 Level 4+	91%	Level 5 =	31%



The focus on increasing our expectations has also led to a significant increase in Level 5 writing alongside improved writing outcomes in Key Stage 1: Level 3 writers being at 28% for the last two years.

Talk for Writing Training Centre

In September 2014 we became a Talk for Writing Training Centre. After many years of stalking Pie Corbett, we are very proud to be delivering training open mornings and bespoke training packages to schools in the area and beyond. Talk for Writing is a process where we are constantly learning and reflecting. Open mornings allow us to share our experiences, learn from those attending and, more importantly, show what can be done when a whole school really gets behind a project and is determined to drive it with momentum. In the last year, we visited two of our Talk for Writing Training Centre partner schools: we re-doubled our efforts to focus on improving our children's handwriting skills after a visit to St. George's (Wandsworth) and action planning around the quantity of writing and effective feedback after a visit to Penn Wood (Slough).



I'm asked many times, "Can this work in my school?" Well, yes, it can. If it can work with a catchment in a deprived area, then why can it not work anywhere? We know and feel we are doing things right for the children, giving them the best experiences, through a creative curriculum that inspires them to be amazing writers. If you are thinking about Talk for Writing as an option for your school, my advice would be to go and see the results, create an action plan and be determined that it will work by ensuring there are no obstacles to achieving success. Looking back, we couldn't have made the journey we had if I hadn't taken an initial risk to change the whole curriculum and, as a non-English specialist it was a risk I worried about until I could see the benefits across the school. Also, as a school leader, you have to have trust in every member of staff to deliver high quality teaching. I have been very lucky to be surrounded by like-minded people whose determination, drive and inspiration has enabled us to have such a positive effect on the lives of so many children, by helping them become amazing, confident writers.

Find out more about Talk for Writing Training Schools at www.talk4writing.co.uk/training-centres/