Getting a Story for Writing by Using Familiar Text

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This project came about through discussion with a group of Reading Recovery teachers who considered that they were floundering during the writing section of their Reading Recovery lessons. While they understood their role of collaborating with their students and supporting their learning, they had two main concerns: first, their ability to scaffold their students’ learning with sufficient effectiveness to ensure improvement in each lesson; second, the quality of their conversation and its possible influence on the child’s composing.

Nine teachers in training, six previously trained teachers, and their teacher leader decided to carry out a project which would involve examining teaching practice during Reading Recovery lessons, with particular focus on the writing segment.

The notion of “…getting the child to compose and write his own stories…” (Clay, 1993, p. 28) does not initially appear to present difficulties, yet aspects of the task seem to be problematic; especially with children who enter Reading Recovery having a very small repertoire of literacy knowledge and with limited control of oral language.

Assisting such children to learn how to compose stories for writing causes concern to some Reading Recovery teachers. They don’t consider they do it well, and this may be evident in their students’ writing ability remaining well below their reading ability. They ask, “Why is it hard? What am I doing wrong? Why am I not getting the results I want?” The teachers and teacher leader set out to examine these questions by examining their teaching practice in the composing stories segment of Reading Recovery lessons.

A particular issue seemed to be setting a context in which meaningful and purposeful stories can develop naturally and productively. The creation of context for composing a message is crucial and has to come from the “genuine but short conversation” (Clay, 1993, p. 29) that precedes the composing of the story. This is the time when the teacher helps the child to go from his ideas to spoken words and where the child is learning how to shape those words into a quality message. There is a fine balance to be achieved between accepting (and therefore valuing) what the child says, and helping him to say it in a way that is going to advance his ability to control good sentence structure and use more interesting words. Teachers have to assist children to write a story that can be understood and enjoyed. They have a short time in which to do this, and the first step is talking with the child.

In the writing section, Clay says, “The child is invited to tell a story…First, talk with the child” (Clay, 1993, pp. 28–29). Following this, a short list of suggestions a teacher might use as starters for the genuine but short conversation is given; this conversation is necessary for helping children learn how to compose a message. Three of the suggestions are connected with texts:

- a story he has heard or read
- a book he enjoyed reading
- the best part of a story he has just read

In Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control, Clay (1991) discusses composing messages and notes that “…very often the urge to write comes from a story…” (p. 110).

In Reading Recovery we talk about “the language of instruction,” the “reciprocal nature of reading and writing,” and “the expectation that children will learn to compose and write their own stories” (Clay, 2001, pp. 27–30). Clay goes on to note that “This is not done by copying words and it is not about mimicking the texts in storybooks” (Clay, 2001, p. 27). But for a few children, the path to composing stories may need to take a short detour using structures in books they can read (Kelly, 2001).

Using phrases from a text for a short period is a helpful part of some children’s development as writers, particularly those whose language structures are initially limited; it may help them learn how to “…get a spoken utterance which can become the written message for that lesson” (Clay, 2001, p. 27).
While most children are able to compose their own messages following an idea taken from a book they have read or from other sources, those children who may not understand about transferring their ideas into writing (such as Reading Recovery children) are reliant on the genuine conversation and the teaching that follows it. If the conversation takes the form of a barrage of questions, the child is likely to shrink from the writing task and produce something banal from which nothing much is learned. An interesting conversation about a familiar book the child has enjoyed reading may assist the reluctant child to start to learn about composing messages. This notion formed the basis of our exploration.

Gathering Background Information

In order to plan the investigation we needed to find out what Reading Recovery teachers were doing when the conversation and composing of a story were going well. We decided to observe each other’s teaching and to make a detailed record of all the conversations and the messages composed in these lessons. Full accounts were made by the teacher leader when visiting teachers, and by the teachers when visiting their colleagues. We analysed and discussed this material in depth.

Where the composing was going well, these main features were observed.

- The teacher began the conversation with a statement that invited reply before asking questions: “That was lovely weaving you did in class. How did you do that?”
- The teacher used one of the child’s previously read books for talking about something in the story: “Father Bear really wants Baby Bear to choose the train, doesn’t he? I wonder what you’d choose.”
- The teacher refrained from altering the child’s efforts in the first few weeks, but gradually helped him to hear correct grammatical structures and extend vocabulary: “Would we say ‘Mum come to take me to hospital’, or ‘Mum came to take me to hospital’? and, “Do you know a really good word that means big—it starts e-nor…” “Enormous!”
- The teacher allowed the child to make alterations: “Hey! I forgot to say up. He kicked the ball up into the tree.” “That’s OK, I’ll help you fit it in.”

Successful composing was accompanied by friendly, supportive, instructive teacher talk. It resulted in a very busy work page and a story in which the child’s voice could be heard. The group agreed that their colleagues who made it look easy and who got the best from this group of children were the ones making greater use of familiar stories initially, for getting writing under way.

Setting Up the Investigation

A decision was made to target the children in most need of assistance with composing stories, namely those who entered Reading Recovery reading at levels 0–2 with very low item knowledge on An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2002) and with limited oral language. This resulted in a group of 16 children being selected from those we were teaching.

Limited oral language is a term which includes children with varying needs: those who have had very few conversational exchanges with adults or contact with books prior to school; those who have had some contact with another language in their early years but who are not proficient in that language or in English; those who are proficient in their first language but not English; and those who have found it difficult to make the transition from their homes to school culture.

Observations took place during the New Zealand autumn and winter terms, a period of 21 weeks with a 2-week break after week 10. Most children involved in the project were taught behind the glass once at an inservice session and two or three times with an observer present at their schools. Where possible, a child was taught on two separate occasions at inservice sessions so that change over time could be observed by the whole group. Teachers recorded and transcribed their conversations and analysed their chosen student’s writing on a daily basis. Scheduled visits by teacher leaders proceeded with two visits per term for the teachers in training and one for previously trained teachers; additional visits were made as requested.

For the purposes of this inquiry project only, a familiar story was used two or three times per week as a basis for conversation and story writing. By its nature, an investigation requires
some structure in which the participants can work: Some children with limited oral language may not need familiar books to support their early writing once they are comfortable with their Reading Recovery teacher.

Our objectives were

1. to become skillful at conversing with our students, especially those who found it difficult to talk;
2. to provide more real learning opportunities in the writing component of the lesson; and
3. to achieve the first two objectives by using familiar books in two or three out of five lessons for the purposes of this investigation only.

What We Discovered
This approach produced lively discussions among the group of teachers-in-training who spent the half-hour prior to each session enthusiastically sharing their conversation openers and the composing that followed.

Conversation openers included the following.

Teacher 1: What an interesting/exciting/funny story. Let’s look at the picture you like best. Tell me about it.

Teacher 2: I could tell by your voice that this part was funny. Let’s write about the joke.

Teacher 3: Mmmmm, good story isn’t it. I wonder what would happen if…

Teacher 4: My favorite page is this one. Which is yours?

Teacher 5: Show me the picture you like best. What’s happening here do you think?

Teacher 6: That was scary! What do you think about it?

As the list grew, one teacher remarked that the quality of the conversations was reliant on “…loading the voice with interest, even when you have read ’Tom is Brave’ ninety-nine times.”

The teachers explored the reason why using a familiar book was making conversation easier to achieve.
Teacher 1: We both know the book, so it is easy to talk about.

Teacher 2: A lot of useless questions are avoided because the answers are known, and we can get on with reflections about what’s happening.

Teacher 3: It’s easier to help the child shape the story and think about more exciting words.

Teacher 4: I find it so much less threatening to have the book to talk about with the child. I can be genuine and supportive.

Teacher 5: I didn’t realize how the questions I was asking were actually closing the child down. Now, on the days we don’t use the book, I have more ways of starting conversation that are productive.

Teacher 6: She’s starting to initiate the conversation now…

We noted what Clay has to say in Change Over Time, page 27:

In classrooms children who have a limited control of the language of instruction need more oral language learning opportunities as well as literacy instruction…In a one-to-one lesson for 30 minutes each day a child has a teacher who knows about his or her language and literacy progress in detail, and a little more time must be borrowed from each lesson activity to allow for more conversation.” (Clay, 2001, p. 27)

As the children’s stories were collected and analysed, we began to see a pattern emerging—a progression in the children’s efforts as they matured into the process of composing their messages. In the early stages of their lessons, the children sometimes repeated the phrases in the story when the conversation ended with, “What could you write about that?”

The teachers agreed that—particularly for those children whose oral language was limited—this seemed to be something they needed to go through in order to be able to control simple language structures for themselves, as well as to engage with the story. Following are some examples from children written across their series of lessons, together with examples of the kinds of things the teachers said.

**Weeks 1 to 4:**

Teacher: We’re going to talk about the story you just read. Show me the part you like best. That would be good to write about. Tell me what you want to say and I’ll help you write it down…

Child 1: Look in the tree. Dad said Kate. *(Hide and Seek, Level 5)*

Child 2: Ben went to look in Mum’s pocket. A plane! *(Ben’s Treasure Hunt, Level 5)*

Child 3: Ben is looking for the teddy bear. *(Ben’s Teddy Bear, Level 5)*

Child 4: Who will play with me said the little White Rabbit. *(A Friend for Little White Rabbit, Level 8)*

Child 5: Dad kicked the ball up into the tree. *(The Big Kick, Level 4)*

**Weeks 5 to 7:**

During this period, the children moved toward writing from an observer’s stance and built more interesting vocabulary in the process. Here, we noted Clay’s reminder that “…composing has to be learned… and we must be patient about it” (Clay, 2001, p. 28).

These examples indicate the kind of conversation openers the teachers used.

Teacher: Let’s talk about the part in this story that you enjoyed the most. What’s happening here? (or more directly): You can use the picture to talk about what’s happening in your words. You don’t have to say the same as the book does.”
Some children with limited oral language may not need familiar books to support their early writing once they are comfortable with their Reading Recovery teacher.

Child 1: Tom can see the ball up in the tree. Tom and his Dad are looking for the ball. I can see it. (The Big Kick, Level 4)

Child 2: Sam’s ice cream fell off and Bingo ate it off the ground. (Bingo’s Ice Cream, Level 4)

Child 3: Nick wants to be a flower girl and she gets flowers so she can be in the photo. (The Flower Girl, Level 4)

Child 4: Greedy Cat looked in Mum’s shopping bag. She put pepper in it and he ate the pepper. YOW! (Greedy Cat, Level 9)

Some children took another step and put themselves in the story. This appeared to be a move towards more mature reflection. The conversation might have begun as follows.

Teacher: You could write about this story. What could you write? or Back there you had a really good start for your story. You said…. Now, start writing that.

Child 1: The cat ran up the tree because it was

Child 2: Jill said “You are the best dog in the school and I love you Gizmo.” (Bingo Goes to School, Level 9)

Child 3: Dad and me made a house in a tree. It was cool. I like looking down at my sister. I don’t want her to come up. (The House in the Tree, Level 11)

Child 4: I got a puppy for my birthday. I am going to look after my puppy. (My Birthday Surprise, Level 11)

Weeks 8 to 10
Around this time, excitement rose as the children began spontaneously retelling and eagerly joining in conversations, which sometimes ran into the danger of taking too long. The teacher frequently had to stop the flow.

Teacher: This is a good story, isn’t it? You could write something about it…or what about putting you in the story?
Discussions preceding and following a behind-the-glass session help teachers identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. The New Zealand teachers observed each other’s teaching and made detailed records of all the conversations and the messages composed in the lessons.

Child 1: Kate had to bring food so the cat would come down. The cat smelled the fish. And the trick worked. *(Tabby in the Tree, Level 12)*

Child 2: Baby Bear is really smart.

Teacher: Why do you think he’s smart?

Child 3: The old fence was all bust up so the cows pushed it down. Then they made a very big mess in the garden. The new fence is big and strong to keep them out! *(Cows in the Garden, Level 11)*

Child 4: This boy put make-up all over himself so he looked like a clown. Man, my mum would be cross if I did that. *(Michael is a Clown, Level 16)*

Child 5: The lion didn’t eat the mouse. He let him go. The lion walked into a net. “Help help” he shouted. The mouse came and helped him to get out. *(The Lion and the Mouse, Level 11)*

Child 6: This story is a bit silly. A fish wouldn’t be able to walk up the steps. It’s a bit funny. *(The Biggest Fish, Level 16)*

The preceding examples show there was no lack of teaching opportunities such as use of boxes for sound analysis and orthographic learning, use of analogy, and spelling irregular words. Children were quickly and spontaneously moving to the work page to problem solve and even telling the teacher when they thought sound or letter/spelling boxes were needed. The level of fluency and speed reached in the writing also
meant that lessons did not run over 30 minutes. By now, most teachers only used a familiar book when there was a lack of other topics that interested the child. Using a story as the basis for conversation was gradually phased out and returned to only when the child was particularly excited about what he had read.

**Weeks 11 to 15-plus:**
Towards the end of the teaching time, the conversations became relaxed and natural and most of the children's story composing was exceeding expectations. Below are some examples from the final weeks of instruction, when the child was competently composing and something in a book acted as a kind of "aide memoire" for a personal experience.

**Child 1:** I went to Kai-*iwi beach with my family and we had a lot of fun playing on the rocks. They are sharp rocks. Tyler slipped and hurt himself on a rock and we had to go home. (experience related to a story read to the child by his sister)

**Child 2:** I know why God starts us as little babies. The parents have to do all the work to teach them things, so God doesn't have to bother. (*The Flood*, Level 15)

**Child 3:** I've been to a museum. It was Te Papa and I liked being able to play the computer games. The museum is in Wellington and we went in the car. (experience related to the brochure from the museum)

**Child 4:** When we have Pet Day at school, I'm going to bring a scary pet. I think it would be good to bring a pet spider on Pet Day. It will be an enormous black hairy one so you'll scream your head off. (*Where is My Spider?* Level 17)

The following examples, also composed during the last few weeks of instruction when stories were not being used as supports, are indicative of the success of the project for some of the children whose language was particularly limited.

**Child 1:** We are doing art in our class and I love painting with all the colors. I am making a picture of a butterfly with big wings. I am putting on patterns with lots of bright colors.

**Child 2:** I didn't have a bike but now I do. Te Awarangi helped me learn to ride my bike and we can have races now. We can go very very fast round the old track.

**Child 3:** One day there was a magic monster. The monster was very sad because he had no friends. One day he had an idea how he could make some new friends. He asked a cat and a dog to play with him. "Yes" said the cat and the dog. So they played together and the monster said "Thank you for playing with me" and he walked home happily. The end.

At the outset of this inquiry project, we hypothesized that using familiar books as starters for conversation and for composing could improve the quality of both. Our aims were to improve our expertise in scaffolding children's learning effectively and to converse with our students in ways that would help them to master the true nature of composing their own messages.

**What the Teachers Learned**
Throughout, teachers observed each other working with children and talked to each other about the quality of their conversations and how these affected their students’ ability to compose a story.

As the inquiry progressed, so did the teachers’ and children's enthusiasm and confidence. When observing behind-the-scenes lessons at Reading Recovery sessions, the pleasure of engaging in a short talk and composing a story about it became increasingly obvious to observers. Teachers learned the importance of
knowing exactly where the child was on the path towards learning how to compose messages and reached a fuller understanding of the role of scaffolding children’s learning.

Teachers were surprised at the growth of both quantity and quality of writing from children who began their series of Reading Recovery lessons with limited knowledge and ability. They remarked that another unexpected result was the impetus a good conversation gave to the production of the story. There was general agreement that the conversation became more natural and easy with the help of books to talk about, and that moving into exchanges about children’s own experiences benefited from use of familiar texts early in the Reading Recovery lessons.

Using familiar little books helped teachers to better understand the importance of supporting children in shaping their stories, building more interesting vocabulary, and using more complex structures. A prompt like, “Yes, it says that in the book…but how would you say it?” encouraged the forming of the complex sentences expected by the end of the child’s time in Reading Recovery. It also conveyed the value the teacher put on the child’s ideas so that in time the child’s voice in his or her message was clear.

During discussions following lesson observations, teachers increased understanding of the importance of creating context became noticeable. One teacher related an occasion when she had helped a child with very limited success to write a story about a particular subject she assumed the child knew about. She commented, “I was talking to her, not with her.” For this teacher and others, the salutary reminder is that, “Good conversations with children will be good teaching exchanges, for in conversation a teacher as speaker has to try to work out what his or her listener is understanding” (Clay, 1998, p. 2).

All the teachers learned more about the nature of scaffolding students’ learning, helping them get better at providing supportive teaching as needed. Sometimes knowing when less support was necessary seemed hard, but most teachers realized when they were assisting too much and not allowing the children to show what they could do unaided. The teachers also commented on what they had learned about creating a context in which composition could occur naturally, and how using familiar texts had helped them with this aspect.

One teacher commented, “The children want to write, and the motivation is making it much easier for them to build their (writing) vocabulary…and they want to write fast!”

We found that for some children—particularly those who enter Reading Recovery with very low reading levels and low scores on Observation Survey tasks and whose language is limited—much is to be gained from regular opportunities to write from having read a familiar book. Further, we discovered that allowing such children to use phrases from stories helps their language development and gives them the confidence they need to compose their own stories. A caution must be that the teacher consciously moves the child forward and out of this stage, so that repeating text does not become a habit.

**What the Children Learned**

The evidence indicated that as a result of using familiar texts to support writing in the early part of Reading Recovery lesson time,

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children with limited language ability were able to make impressive gains in composing messages. For some children involved in the project, learning what conversation entailed was the first step; having the shared experience of a story that teacher and child enjoyed appeared to make this achievable within the first weeks of their Reading Recovery time.

From then on, we could observe a gradual growth in ease and quality of both conversation and in the composing of the children’s messages. Reading through the examples of the children’s stories it could also be inferred that quality conversation moved them away from the banal and
“safe” phrases (I am going to… or, I went to the…) that can prevent the development of lively composing.

The project described here is ongoing and is continuing to make a positive difference to the writing component of Reading Recovery lessons in our region. We think the following observation by Clay serves to strengthen our focus on improving our teaching of conversation and writing:

Writing is a personal activity in which we compose messages which we put down to be read. The writing part of an early literacy intervention is not done just as a service to learning to read; it is not merely an activity engaged in to prepare a child to be a reader. In the end students should move forward with relative independence into any of the writing tasks demanded by the education system. And reading and writing activities should continue to enrich each other. (Clay, 2001 p. 2)

References

Children’s Books Cited

About the Author
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