IMAGINATION

INNOVATION

CREATIVITY

Re-Visiting English in Education

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CHAPTER 13

CREATING IMAGINATIVE, PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES IN K - 6 ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

This chapter begins with the premise that an important focus in English in primary (kindergarten to Year 6) classrooms needs to be the enhancement of children's imaginations. The enjoyment and exploration of quality children's literature play pivotal roles in this kind of English program. If real or authentic literary texts are used as one of the cornerstones for teaching English in the primary classroom, children are able to explore, question and create many possibilities through language, continuing to develop the creativity that most of them bring to school (e.g. Egan, 2005; Wells, 1986). An emphasis on storying in talk, reading, writing and viewing multi-layered texts is central to living productively in our uncertain and increasingly changing times.

At the same time, in such a classroom there is no underestimation or devaluing of the crucial importance of literacy skill development for young children. It is my view, however, that in recent years, too much attention has been focused on teaching de-contextualised literacy skills and the decoding and technical aspects of learning to be literate with the result that English as a subject and an Art has been all but ignored in many primary classrooms. For this reason, this chapter focuses on the use of children's literature in primary classrooms as the basis for both practical and imaginative English experiences.

In this chapter elements underpinning the Quality Teaching model of pedagogy (NSW, 2003) are articulated through practical strategies for teaching English in primary classrooms with authentic, richly interpretative literary texts. It should be noted from the outset that 'text' is used in its broadest sense to mean any kind of meaningful unit of language: written, oral, visual, symbolic or digital. Examples of strategies currently in use in contemporary primary classrooms demonstrate how students' critical literacies can be developed through such meaningful engagement.

Initially, however, because the biographies of all storytellers impact on the way they see the world and tell their stories, it is important to provide a lens for this chapter. My own memories of English at school are briefly recalled because of the legacy of such traditional pedagogy on the current context.
A personal English journey

As a child at primary school in the sixties in suburban Sydney, subject English included lessons which separated out discrete elements in a rather technical way: reading, spelling, composition, handwriting, grammar, comprehension and poetry. An early reader, I was often bored in my early school years by the chanting of the alphabet and, later, by the ‘Open Road’ readers used in our classrooms. In year 3 I well remember my admiration for the school librarian who read real literature to us during our library sessions. Literal comprehension was never my forte – we had a different levelled SRA Laboratory in each grade level. I regularly got different answers to the ones at the back of the card. As a relatively accomplished oral reader, however, I was one of only a few who enjoyed our class oral reading sessions of the School Magazine: sessions which consisted of reading aloud a paragraph each around the class. I did not have the confidence to read them sight unseen, however, so counted ahead to silently rehearse the paragraph I would be called on to read. Creative writing was a mystery to me: I could never think up an interesting idea to write about on the spot. I learned to start my compositions with some recipe sentences that had received good marks in past composition tests. ‘Ominous black clouds loomed in the sky and the night was dark and listless’ was the one I used most often well into my years in secondary school (despite not knowing the meaning of ‘ominous’).

Fortunately, I was privileged to attend weekly Speech and Drama classes at the local youth club. I learned to recite for the local annual eisteddfods such great poems as ‘The Man from Ironbark’ and Juliet’s soliloquy as she takes the sleeping draught. In fact it was at drama class that I was first introduced to a range of wonderful literature.

In those days teaching English was dominated by the belief that good teaching was largely about ensuring children could regurgitate a set of de-contextualised skills and rules (with their exceptions). The single correct form of Standard English was regarded as the only acceptable model and textbooks such as ‘Let’s use better English’ were almost universally used. The assumption was that literacy was a single global skill and that once we were literate we would stay that way. There was a certainty transmitted by our teachers but without any satisfactory explanation: ‘you must never start a sentence with ‘and’; ‘never use first person when writing a formal text’... There was no acknowledgement of the need to use different discourses in different contexts to meet specific needs and purposes. Grammar was not taught strategically: it was much more about being able to identify the smallest units of speech.

Sadly, even though I was technically ‘good’ at subject English, I didn’t experience the passion for it at primary school that I developed through my speech and drama classes at the local youth club. The primary curriculum of the day was pedestrian and lacked coherence and imagination. And it failed to link with the real world contexts we were all experiencing outside the classroom.

My world was about to change, however, for during the 1960s and afterwards English pedagogy began to move from this ‘bottom up’ or skills/code-based approach through a number of exciting phases. Traditional grammar was dropped from the syllabus in 1968. Secondary and University English did include introductions to Shakespeare, great poets
and some wonderful novels although the canon was very limited and decidedly British. Patrick White was, however, on our Year 12 reading list.

Much was happening in English pedagogy during my pre-service teacher education and early years as a primary teacher. 'Top down' approaches to learning to be literate (e.g. Smith, 1978; and later Cambourne, 1988) were starting to gain recognition with their emphasis on the reader's use of all language cues including their knowledge of the world and their prior language knowledge alongside letter-sound relationships to make meaning from a text. At the same time, Douglas Barnes, James Britton and Harold Rosen in the United Kingdom reported on their extensive research in schools demonstrating how crucial language is in every learning process. Their work must be seen as the precursor to later Quality Teaching elements (Newmann et al, 1996; Education Queensland, 2001; NSW DET, 2003) that focus on meaningful or 'substantive communication'; 'higher order thinking'; 'narrative' and 'problematic knowledge'. We were also introduced to literature-based approaches for teaching English by the renowned Maurie Saxby and Geoff Williams. Alongside this enthusiasm was a burgeoning of immensely talented Australian children's writers – Ivan Southall, Colin Thiele, Allan Baillie, Catherine Bateson, Brian Caswell, Isobel Carmody, Libby Gleeson, Gillian Rubenstein, Nadia Wheatley, Gary Crew, Simon French, Garry Disher, Melina Marchetta, Garth Nix, Caroline Wilkinson) and illustrators (Graeme Base, Armin Greder, Shaun Tan, Julie Vivas, Freya Blackwood – to name just a few that come immediately to mind.

In the 1980s integrated, literature-based approaches (Nicol-Hatton and Roberts, 1994) became more popular in primary classrooms because they engaged children in learning to read. At no time, however, was the importance of grapho-phonics skills or an understanding of syntax dismissed. Children were encouraged to learn to write through the writing process itself followed by subsequent editing for publication where appropriate (e.g. the work of Donald Graves). Systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994) also had a profound effect on how we came to understand language as a resource for meaning and primary students were explicitly reintroduced to grammar, albeit functional grammar this time, and writing for different sorts of texts according to purpose. Freebody and Luke (1990, 1999) also articulated the many different roles the reader plays when literate (e.g. decoder, participant, user, analyst).

Nearly fifty years after I started school it sometimes seems, however, that the wheel has turned full circle despite what we have learned about quality English teaching. For example: I constantly read in the newspapers that we need to return to teaching 'the basics' in primary schools; I sometimes observe recipe-type lessons and take home readers in which children read a 'levelled text' where the vocabulary is contrived and the meaning therefore seriously limited beyond the sentence level. And, at times, I observe children being over-instructed about particular formulae for writing a kind of text without understanding that this knowledge is only the beginning.
The current context

How to teach reading continues to create much controversy in Western countries, especially in relation to how instruction about grapho-phonetic cues should be undertaken in K-2 classrooms. The current over-emphasis on initial systematic phonics instruction followed by levelled ‘comprehension’ activities in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia can lead to a limited and technical understanding of reading, student disengagement from the reading process and pressure to teach in a linear fashion to meet the demands of particular high stakes tests. At the same time, in contrast, we are challenged by multiple and ever increasing kinds of texts and technologies that leave linear kinds of learning and understanding far behind (e.g. New London Group, 2000). Recent research into the structure of the brain and how it operates unequivocally supports the view that decoding is only a small part of learning to be literate. On its own, decoding does not create the meaning and understanding that is essential to the development of being functionally literate. On the other hand, the same research emphasises the importance of predictive and meaningful learning experiences coupled with integrative approaches to learning so that real world connections, higher order thinking and deep learning challenge students to think beyond the surface meaning of any text (see for example, Strauss, Goodman & Paulson, 2009).

In recent years the ‘back to the basics’ rhetoric driven by political interests in national and international test results has meant that the need for emphasis on imagination and creativity has often been overshadowed in primary English classrooms. Sharing quality children’s literature and using it as a basis for English has taken a back seat to the development of easier-to-measure literacy skills in the heightened literacy reductionist age (Eisner, 2005) in which we are living. The over-valuing of technical decoding and grammar aspects of reading, speaking, listening and writing occurs simply because they are easier and cheaper to assess through multiple choice test items. In addition, the long-standing and highly controversial debate between a phonics-skills-first versus more balanced approaches to reading pedagogy has dominated policy and pedagogy discussions. It is much more valuable to examine how effective teachers use a range of ‘repertoires’ to meet the learning needs of individual primary children in their classrooms while engaging their imaginations (Louden et al, 2005). Primary teachers must resist the pressures emanating from growing testing regimes in many Western countries. English curricula in the primary years are in danger of continued dilution (Darling-Hammond et al, 2007) because of such regimes.

The development of creative, flexible learners and thinkers is, however, more important than ever before. Imagination and creativity are inextricably intertwined, and are our most important capacities (Greene, 1995). Primary students must become critically literate, imaginative learners and thinkers, speakers, readers, writers and viewers able to discover the deep meaning of any text in light of their own backgrounds and experiences. They can do this by taking quality texts “in hand” (Meek, 1987: 11) themselves and interrogating the range of meanings that are embedded in the layers of such literature. The next section explores what is meant by quality literary texts and provides a brief rationale for their use.
Why authentic children’s literature?

The simple answer is because, in Katherine Paterson’s words: if it’s not a good book, it’s not good enough for children (in Voysey, 2008: 220). Authentic literary texts are those that are written for a real purpose or several purposes. The main focus is not on limiting the vocabulary and sentence structure to small numbers of sounds or words with oversimplified syntax that are supposedly more accessible to a reader at a particular age or stage. The story in authentic texts is therefore intellectually challenging and evocative, the vocabulary and language structures make sense and the language use is therefore rich, rather than contrived. If images are embedded in the text, they too are interpretive rather than merely ancillary to the written text. Such evocative texts are often multi-layered and can therefore be enjoyed many times over and by different ages and stages of readers. The text itself, therefore, often does much of the teaching (Meek, 1988). The argument is often proposed that early emergent readers cannot make sense of the complexity of such texts and so must also use books in which the language is carefully contrived. There are, however, many quality picture books that include the repetition and predictive qualities that support early readers without compromising their authenticity. As Rosen and Rosen (1973: 187) wrote:

We live not only in the world of reality but also possess the power to create all kinds of possibilities and variations that may not necessarily ever have existed or are ever likely to exist...But the roots of all story-making and all story-telling, no matter how impossible the stories may seem, lie in reality.

Taking text ‘in hand’: making a start

Knowledge about a wide range of children’s literature is a very important beginning for any primary teacher. Of concern, however, is recent research that suggests teachers may not always have the knowledge. Cremin, Mottram, Bearne and Goodwin (2008) assert that primary teachers’ knowledge of a broad range of children’s literature is too often assumed. Their study of 1200 UK primary teachers concluded that while 75% read regularly, many did not feel confident about citing good authors for use in their classrooms, especially picture books and poetry. Rather, they recalled ‘good books’ from a disturbingly narrow canon. Yet the research undertaken by the National Literacy Trust (2005) suggested many young people need recommendations from their teachers and other adults about what to read. Primary teachers must develop their own love of children and adolescent/young adult literature if they are to introduce good examples of it to their students.

Initially, it is imperative to build a classroom culture that uses literature to look at life from a variety of different perspectives. A range of literature in different forms and with a variety of characters and themes should be frequently read and enjoyed – favourite stories, poems, rhymes, song lyrics and illustrations need to be shared and discussed. Blogs and journals with reviews of books can be read together or compiled by class members. Favourite authors and illustrators thus become expert models for writing alongside the modelling the teacher provides in her own expert reading and writing sessions. Opportunities for guided and independent time for talking, listening, reading and writing also need to be programmed daily or as frequently as possible.

Research demonstrates unequivocally that the use of Arts strategies with authentic, rich literary texts fosters students’ imaginations and develops their creativity while helping them build important knowledge, skills and understandings of what it means to be literate. Sustained use of
drama teaching and learning strategies, for example, positively affects primary students’ engagement in, and motivation for, learning (Heath, 2000; Fiske, 1999) while enhancing language and literacy development in imaginative and creative ways – see for example, Ewing & Simons, 2004; Miller & Saxton, 2004; Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; O’Toole & Dunn, 2002; Wagner, 1994. Drawing on the experience of these authors the following section provides examples of how strategies such as embodiment, literature circles, readers’ theatre and depiction of critical moments can be introduced and embedded in English programs. Such strategies provide excellent starting points for students to ‘take the text in hand’ through collaborative talk and subsequent reading and writing that can lead to deep learning and understanding.

Embodiment

There is much to be said for using our bodies to develop a closer understanding of the meanings of particular words or images. In beginning a unit of study on Reconciliation, for example, Year 5 and 6 students were asked to embody images of their feelings about their home or a special place. They immediately chose to embody concepts such as ‘security’, ‘acceptance’ and ‘comfort’ with their bodies. Asked then to depict their feeling when removed from this home and, with the knowledge they would never return, they embodied ‘anger’, ‘fear’ and ‘despair’. After transforming their bodies from one to the other and back again to the count of ten and back, the students later painted these concepts. Embodiment provided an excellent backdrop to the close study of The Burnt Stick (Andrew Hill), The Rabbits (John Marsden and Shaun Tan) and the film, Rabbitproof Fence. Much later, the students were able to write in role as one of the characters who had been taken from their families.

Recently Janelle Warhurst, Year 3/4 classroom teacher, chose Tim Winton’s Blueback for close study. She asked her students initially to:

- Find a description in Chapter One of Blueback which may have imagery in it and which helps you to build up an image in your mind about the setting of the book. You may have found other quotes which help you to imagine both characters moving in the setting or events which are unfolding. Note down any quotes you find and explain why they help you build up images.

- Create a page of favourite images in an IWB notebook using text from the book Let’s make our most memorable image with our bodies.

- Draw your most memorable image. These images will then be transferred to a mural, using calico squares, tie dying, batik, sewing and appliqué.

(Warhurst, 2009: 1)

In following this sequence, Warhurst was using the research that suggests that moving from enactment to visual representation can enhance students’ writing ability (see for example, Heath, 2000). This kind of activity seems to be particularly important for boys (Gurian et al, 2008). Later, students researched in detail one endangered marine animal or plant that is found in the Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia using internet and/or newspaper resources. They wrote a description that included its place in the ecosystem and then went on to write a marine animal narrative using rich imagery and verbs, starting with the unique setting (such as a rock pool).
Embodying Goldilocks on the arrival of Herb in the three bears’ cottage in Lauren Child’s Who’s afraid of the big bad book? or the queen when she realises Herb is the one who has drawn the green moustache on her lip and cut out her throne helps children experience the emotions and think about what they might do in a similar situation. These depictions can be recorded with digital cameras and the emotions can later be recorded in speech and thought bubbles. In this way, children begin to build up rich vocabularies that become the basis of joint and independent writing.

Literature circles

Assigning different roles to children when they are sharing a text in a small group can help students take responsibility for reflecting on different aspects of responding to a text. After taking time to learn what is required of the different roles and after a shared initial reading, each group member can be asked to concentrate on one role during a second reading. These roles can range from: a focus on important questions to discuss together, to choosing a personally meaningful image to share, to identifying interesting or challenging words, to making connections with the student’s own world, to developing a character profile. Each group member then shares their response with other group members and/or with the class more generally. This can often lead to very meaningful discussion about the book, different opinions or reactions etc. Below in Tables 1 and 2 are some examples of two literature circles’ responses for different stages of primary school:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Group member’s response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion leader</td>
<td>Where do you think the penguin came from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you think the penguin was lost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who could the penguin have belonged to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did he end up on the boy’s doorstep?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word wizard</td>
<td>I’ve chosen: ignored; disappointment; delighted; lonely. Let’s represent these emotions with our bodies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connector</td>
<td>I think the penguin really wanted the boy to see him as a friend. Sometimes there are people in my class that I really want to be friends with. They don’t always seem to understand and when they are mean to me I feel sad like the penguin. I also remembered Willy and Hugh (Anthony Browne) about friendship recently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual artist</td>
<td>I loved the image of the penguin rowing towards the boy in an upside down yellow umbrella. Let’s all have a go at drawing this part ourselves.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Literature circle roles for Year 1 response to Lost and Found (Oliver Jeffers, 2005)
Table 2: Literature circle Year five role responses to Dragonkeeper, chapter 3, p. 22-45 (Carole Wilkinson, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Group member’s response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual artist</td>
<td>You can choose to either draw the dragon stone as described on p.25 or the dragon itself described on pages 27-8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage picker</td>
<td>We should script pages 29-30 or 38-41 for readers’ theatre because they are two really important passages in the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion leader</td>
<td>What could the dragon ‘stone’ be? Why do you think the dragon was kept away from sunlight and fresh air? Why do you think the Emperor wanted to sell the dragons?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word wizard</td>
<td>Let’s compare the differences between ‘heavenly vengeance’ and ‘melancholy’. How can we speak with an ‘imperial voice’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connector</td>
<td>When I was little I remember thinking that when I did something wrong like take the last chocolate in the box I would get into deep trouble even if it seemed that nobody noticed - just as the girl did when she was forced to make the pickles. Can you remember when you felt like this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, all of these literature circle activities can lead to different kinds of drawing, talking and writing experiences.

Readers’ theatre

Oral reading is not easy for many of us, especially of an unknown piece of text. Many young children encouraged to read to their parents or caregivers often find this task daunting. Reading aloud is quite a difficult juggling act: you need to make sense of what you are reading aloud whilst silently reading ahead to make sense of the next part. Readers’ theatre provides an opportunity for students, including those in the early years of school, to read a familiar text out loud. Readers’ theatre, a form of group storytelling, concentrates on using voice and very simple on-the-spot gesture and movement to create theatre in an audience’s mind (Ewing & Simons, 2004; Cusworth, 1991). In the best scenarios, children begin with a text that they are using for close study so the language is familiar to them. This builds their confidence and prediction skills – so important in becoming capable oral readers. Utilising talking, listening, reading and writing language modes, the educational benefit of readers’ theatre lies in the process of listening to each other and oneself read for meaning using inflection, pause, pitch, pace and tone. Students can also try different meanings through emphasis on different words and come to realise that every reader brings their own past experiences and understanding to a new text. As Katherine Paterson writes:

Readers get to choose their own messages. Every reader is going to come with a different life experience, with different abilities and different imaginations and they’ll read the book differently; what they learn from the book is going to be different and what the book means to each reader will be different... A story is many faceted: it really is the writer’s exploration of a question, and so what the meaning is and what the answers are are really for the reader to discover.

(Katherine Paterson in Voysey, 2008: 222).
For example, the teacher can initially model reading the same line from John Burningham's *Oi! Get off our Train* animals' plea with different words emphasised:

- Please let *me* come with you on your train.
- Please let *me* come with you on your train.
- Please let *me* come with you on your train.

Or, *We’re not scared* compared to *We’re not scared* in Michael Rosen’s *We’re going on a bear hunt*. Such modelling can also be the beginning of children paying careful attention to parts of speech, punctuation etc. It can lead to discussions around author’s use of italics, capitals, exclamation marks etc to communicate their meanings to readers. When older students begin to read texts that include characters’ thoughts or stream of consciousness they can also think about how such passages can be represented in a script where appropriate.

Later, once students understand the reader’s theatre process, they need opportunities to experiment more widely. They can move into selecting relevant passages and then creating a script. Some will use their own writing as the basis for a script. They can also think about the role of the narrator, how to create a sense of audience, whether some of the descriptive text can be omitted, the use of a distinctive idiolect, how the characters should be blocked for the reading and the addition of body percussion or percussion instruments to represent critical moments in the text. While often such activities can lead to a readers’ theatre performance, it is the actual process that is the most valuable part of the learning rather than the final performance. Focusing on the meaning of the author and how a text should be read encourages children to explore multiple meanings and perspectives.

**Depiction**

Identifying critical moments in a text through depiction or freeze frames and then justifying reasons for these choices can be very valuable for students coming to understand narrative structure, character motivation and sequencing. In the early childhood classroom this can mean initially asking children to depict a scene from the orienting moments in the story or its complication. A story can be read to a certain point and students can be asked to depict what happens next or find a way that the problem can be resolved. Consider, for example, what might befall the frog prince who runs into the forest to find a witch to turn him back into a frog (*The Frog Prince Continued*). Finding ways for students to engage in meaningful collaborative talk is important for deep understanding (Barnes, Britton and Rosen, 1969). Tapping individual students in role lightly on the shoulder and asking them to explain their thinking to each other and then, if necessary, justify their opinions, will lead to higher order thinking. Enacting the scenes chosen and tracking the thoughts of each of the characters at these particular moments in time will lead to more sophisticated writing.

Other strategies including ‘conscience alley’, ‘hot seating’ and ‘enactment of the expert’ also provide students with opportunities to rehearse the consequences of decisions, consider characters’ reasoning and think about potential resolutions (see for example, O’Toole & Dunn, 2002; Ewing & Simons, 2004; Ewing, Miller & Saxton, 2008).
Conclusion

Many of the activities described above will only take a few minutes as part of the English lesson but they will deepen student engagement, critical thinking and the understanding of the meanings or multiple perspectives in play. In turn, such experiences will scaffold students’ capacities for writing.

Some would argue that the kinds of texts discussed in this chapter are too complex or sophisticated for young children. They would suggest that children need to be protected from such dilemmas. Yet we only have to look at the philosophical questions asked by very young children to know what they are thinking about, and often struggling with, from a very early age (e.g., Duckworth, 1987; Wells, 1986). Our four year old granddaughter, for example, recently asked ‘What is a soul?’ after reading a story. It is our responsibility to find ways to help our children and our students come to understand the complexities, the challenges, the dilemmas and the hope that make us who we are. Through literature, children can suspend their disbelief, and imagine a wealth of other possibilities. At the same time they can develop their critical thinking and literacy skills. It is through facilitating children’s critical enjoyment and understanding of such literature that as teachers we create possibilities for enhancing their imaginations and critical literacy skills in the primary years and beyond.

Once again, Paterson (in Vovsey, 2008) says it succinctly:

I know how deeply children feel. I think that children ask very deep questions and that we as adults tend to dismiss this, and we don’t want to think that our children feel deeply because we don’t want them to hurt. But I think by not taking their questions seriously and not taking their deepest feelings seriously —whether they’re of fear, grief, anger or jealousy— we do them an enormous disservice.

(2008: 220)

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References


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