

Lauriston Primary School

Talk 2 Text

Summary

Talk 2 Text was a series of interlinked projects exploring story-telling and visual arts at Lauriston Primary School that took place between January 2003 and July 2004. The project highlights approaches to developing children's imaginative and co-operative abilities, based on partnerships between artists and school. The school worked with a range of partners including storytellers Ben Haggarty and Roberto Lagnado and textile artist Rachael Howard.

School context

Lauriston is a popular one-form entry primary school in Hackney. Ofsted (2000) describes it as an excellent school with 'a curriculum of striking breadth, depth and imagination'. The school serves a mixed local community: 48% of children come from ethnic minority backgrounds; 28% of pupils speak English as an additional language. The school leadership has extensive experience of partnership with artists and cultural organisations, and has used the opportunity offered by Creative Partnerships to commission projects that broaden children's horizons and contribute to the development of creative teaching and learning throughout the school.

Talk 2 Text was a whole-school project linking story-telling and visual arts. A number of artists, including some of international stature, were invited to develop a series of projects with an overarching theme of developing oracy and literacy: 'we wanted to trigger reasons for writing and talking, [to use visual arts] as a vehicle for imagining' (Peter Sanders, deputy headteacher and Creative Partnerships co-ordinator). This case study covers several of the projects, which relate to Creative Partnerships' objectives to develop young people's imaginative abilities and group skills. The study also briefly explores the wider impact of Talk 2 Text on the school as a whole. It is based on interviews held in February 2005 with school staff, children, and artists Kevin McKeon and Roberto Lagnado.

The project

Children in year 1 worked with storyteller Roberto Lagnado and textile artist Rachael Howard to develop a story narrated with puppets, a project which won an Artworks Award for Working with Artists. Teacher Martha Dobbing described the process, which began with a class story-telling session, developing active listening skills. Children added characters of their own – a princess, a dragon, ants – and in small groups used textiles to make puppets for the characters, constructed by using old squash rackets and other objects. The children were then filmed performing their story with the puppets. Four children showed me the puppets, vividly describing the process of making them from a giant bag of scraps and remembering how they had acted out the story. Their fluent recall of the project underlined comments by both Martha and Roberto that the project had developed children's oracy skills, in particular that the use of puppets had allowed some very shy children to develop new confidence in speaking. They also observed that children were re-telling 'their' story in the playground through role-play, explicitly connecting playing with story-making.

Artist Kevin McKeon's brief was to work with year 4 to create 'a place where stories could happen' in the school. Kevin introduced children to the scale model-making techniques of theatre design, using paper models to generate ideas. Children made scale models of themselves as a means of understanding dimension; they worked in teams on larger models, and their design ideas were incorporated into Kevin's final model for a story-telling hut, a permanent structure now built in the grounds of the school. Children also designed stained glass panels for the hut, making viewfinders to isolate patterns in their own drawings from which they could create abstract designs.

Kevin emphasised their engagement in a creative process; learning to work through initial ideas and then select and build on the best of their work, not just individually, but in collaborating on their group models. The four children I spoke to also commented on learning to work together and share ideas 'like a unity'. They described how they used their imagination to make models, including huts in the shape of a book and an eye. They had enjoyed the process of presenting their ideas and 'turning things that aren't real into real'. They were proud of having made a lasting

contribution to the school, a place 'where year 6 can read to the infants'. The entire school was able to follow the progress of the story-hut: a temporary studio was created for Kevin in a corridor where he worked on the project and explained his processes to passing children, teachers and parents: literally, an artist-in-residence.

Children's imaginative abilities and group skills were also developed by the two projects that took place with year 5 and year 6. Year 5 'were encouraged to think about themselves' in a process of imaginative reflection started by Roberto and developed with conceptual artist Adam Chodzko. Adam asked the class to choose images and objects that represented themselves, which they used to create individual digital collages surrounding a photograph of themselves dreaming. In a second session with Adam the class created a video, working as a team to decide content and direct the film: a process that demanded high levels of co-operation and responsibility, according to teacher Aidan O'Kelly. He also commented that the project unlocked children's imagination'. The children echoed this, describing how the project had inspired them to use their own families, homes, likes and dislikes as stimulus for writing and drawing.

Textile artist Michael Brennand-Wood worked with year 6 and teacher Gwenan Thomas to create an impressive series of large-scale, three-dimensional collages. In groups of four, children first built a frame – inverting the conventional process of producing and then framing art – and then made a grid within the frame to which they attached scraps and objects chosen to represent the theme of memory. Gwenan described the way that groups overcame difficulties in co-operating, developing the communication skills they needed to plan their work. She was also struck by the originality of the children's ideas, evident in the different approaches each group took – one chose a Chinese theme; another group made coded messages; another a map. The class developed an understanding of abstract art as being generated by ideas and emotions, explored by each group in a written commentary on their work.

Reflections

Talk 2 Text resulted in creative work 'of exceptional quality' in a range of media, but for headteacher Heather Rockhold its outcomes are much wider. She describes the impact of the project on 'higher order thinking skills': it allowed children to solve problems and test different approaches. Vocabulary and listening skills were developed through discussion and interaction; emotional literacy through exploring feelings and ideas in the creation of abstract work. Peter Sanders believes that the project developed a sense of connectivity: 'a real understanding of one thing feeding another... although it's called art, it's also all about talking, about identity, community'.

In discussing the lasting impact of the project with staff at the school, two key themes emerge. One is the way that the project's approaches are embedded into the school's practice: in literacy, teachers recognise that narrative can take many forms, and that while writing may stimulate one child, another may prefer to develop ideas orally, or using a storyboard, a puppet or a digital camera. The second theme is a powerful sense of the benefit of partnership with artists. They had high expectations of the children; they involved them in professional processes; they trusted them to co-operate in the creation of the end product. This approach is now reflected in teachers' own practice. They describe a developing confidence in allowing children to take responsibility for their own learning: striking what one calls the 'delicate balance' between structure and freedom that allows children to learn creatively.