

Developing Writing Skills in Children: A Project with a Fourteen Year Old Boy.

This Paper describes how the method of story writing was used to dramatically improve a fourteen-year-old boy's functional and personal writing skills, and in the process facilitate the shift from concrete, 'here and now' thinking, to 'other-perspective' more imaginative forms of expression. John (not his real name) will be used throughout the text when referring to the individual in question.

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"As teachers, our priority is to assist children in reaching their full potential in a manner that promotes self-reliance, together with a feeling of self-worth, and, as far as possible, to become active members in the community" (Steen, 1994). Perhaps the development of a feeling of self-worth is a necessary prerequisite for self-reliance enabling the fulfilment of potential from which active community involvement inevitably follows. The emphasis placed on self-esteem by educators (Westwood, 1978) and therapists (Rogers, 1992; Glasser, 1975) is a guideline for teachers in special education.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Many children who receive special educational provision need to re-construct their thinking so that they can dissociate themselves from the often firmly established negative mental sets which only re-affirm their focus on failure, thus lowering their motivation. Seligman (1974) demonstrated the effect of early failure on subsequent effort, a concept which he described as "learned helplessness". The teacher in special education must help the child to experience 'real' success, enabling him/her to transcend this self-defeating strategy.

To help the individual realise this transition, it is necessary to establish very tangible and achievable objectives. These objectives must not just be realisable, they

must also be meaningful to the person. To achieve these objectives, optimal effort on the part of the learner is necessary, as too little effort may result in little or no learning taking place, and too much effort may result in excessive anxiety leading to avoidance behaviour and possibly no learning. The teacher is, therefore, one medium through which the individual can progress towards realising his potential. S/he is the "scaffold" which provides the support during the period of cognitive, emotional and social development (see Bruner, 1976). This process of learning should be a combination of excitement, fun and tension, in the same way as our first solo spin on a bicycle was. On that occasion, the positive aspects of the learning environment outweighed the negative ones resulting in success.

THE PUPIL

John was fourteen years of age and was unable to attend a mainstream or special school due to learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties. He was residing in a boys' home. The Department of Education had authorised ten hours educational provision each week for him.

THE PRESENTING SITUATION

John resisted essay writing and free expressive writing from the beginning and would write as little as possible. He often spelled phonically and he used no punctuation. He was diagnosed as functioning within the borderline mental handicap range. Probably the factors which affected the teaching situation most were John's impulsivity, which interfered with his application to work and his very short attention span. John also demonstrated an excessive resistance to any form of direction. This resulted in much of his work being below his capabilities. He tried to avoid demanding work and manifested a lack of persistence in relation to difficult tasks. To complicate the complicated he was highly energetic, resulting in his chewing anything available, kicking his legs, banging the table and being generally over-active.

This is an example of one of John's attempts at story writing prior to beginning the project:

*"This a story of 2 men who liked
robbing houses They loved it until
they slipped up and they got
caught and they got life = 20 years
in mount joy and they
got beaten to death"*

PLANNING THE PROJECT

Having identified John's positive characteristics, such as his sense of humour, his positive response to encouragement and his preference to work independently without being 'controlled', I decided to introduce a writing project to John.

We began the project at the beginning of October and the aim was for John to write a book of about twenty stories, and make fifty copies. Each book would be sold for one pound each, thus guaranteeing him at least fifty pounds for Christmas. This cash possibility was a definite incentive and became the source of much of the energy injected into the project by John. To sell the books John had to write letters to twenty five people (my privileged friends!) to whom a copy of the book would be sent. The remainder I would distribute.

From the beginning I decided to let John choose the topics. Various aids were used to encourage the selection of a theme, for example, a number of different items like keys, pair of glasses, a marble, or a selection of postcards, or a variety of key words from which a couple had to be chosen. These helped John choose a subject, which was invariably the opposite of the one I suggested. I encouraged him to use whatever words he could, and if he had difficulty spelling them to ask me. Children with spelling difficulties are reluctant to use much of their wide vocabulary because of their inability to spell correctly, and so resort to a 'restricted' vocabulary which gives a false impression of their ability.

An important feature which I introduced was, that I would also write a story on the same topic while John was writing his. After we had both finished he had to read my story aloud and I had to read his. In this way I not only encountered the difficulties entailed in writing a complete story, but I also had to write so that John could read and understand my writing. This offered a number of advantages to the teaching situation: my stories showed him how a story could begin, develop and end; I systematically introduced new vocabulary into my stories thus enhancing John's vocabulary; I supplied John with suitable and meaningful reading material; the use of humour and other positive writing characteristics were demonstrated to him; and an element of competition was established between us which encouraged him to improve the quality and quantity of his work. A further advantage with sharing the reading of our respective stories was that on reading his, I was able to make positive constructive comments, thereby encouraging him further. Children love to hear their stories being read back to them in a fluent manner without highlighting their errors.

This process continued for eight weeks. I made a spreadsheet containing a list of twenty five people, each of whom John had to write a letter to accompany his book. I gave him a brief account of each person (known only by their first names), what they worked at, their temperament, hobbies, and their family. Each time he wrote a letter he ticked off the person on the sheet confirming that he had written to him/her. This made the project very 'real' and exciting. After John had written each story, I typed it out, and the following day it was on his developing book. The book was laid out so that two stories could be printed on an A4 page in landscape orientation. Below is an example of a story from John's first book:

I would like to be a painter because it has good money involved. The thing I would love is painting peoples' houses and receiving my wages at the end of the week. When I am sixteen I will start my course to become a painter. I will have to do a lot of things like mix paints together and see what colour I get. But the thing is I would have to get up early in the morning and start. Ah, but I don't mind that because I know that I will get my wages. And that's the only thing I want out of it all. I will have to do a lot of tests to see if I am able to qualify for the painting job. When I had passed I would go home and tell my Ma that I had passed and I got a job. She would be so delighted with me that I done so well. She would take me out for a meal and have a nice sit down after it. Then I would watch TV and probably make something to eat before I went to bed.

After eight weeks, eighteen stories (containing an average of two hundred and sixty words each) were completed and fifty photocopies were made. Twenty five copies were sent to people, each of whom wrote a letter of encouragement, congratulating him on his work and requesting that he write another book. This feedback had a remarkable effect and it was probably the most exciting part of the project. John would enquire each day if any more letters had arrived. All mail was sent to me including the money and no addresses were exchanged, thus ensuring anonymity and security. The week prior to Christmas, John and myself went into town and he selected a pair of NIKE runners. What more tangible objective could a project take?

THE SECOND BOOK

The content in John's first book was very immediate, concrete and self orientated. If John could make a shift towards writing from within other imaginative contexts, it would be a very significant development. I suggested that he could easily make a hundred pounds if he produced a second book, provided he was prepared to

make a few changes with regard to the length and content of his writing. These changes would require him to accept some limited direction during the process of creating his stories. He would have to write one and a half A4 pages instead of one page, and he would have to imagine himself in different situations and write from these standpoints.

After much argument and negotiation, (and mentioning of the monetary rewards), John decided that he would try, but there was no way John was going to turn the page and do a full A4 page and another half one. Each day, John completed a full A4 page and an additional two lines from the second page, until eventually he was quite happy spending forty to forty five minutes writing on his own, totally absorbed in the activity and without the former accompanying hyperactivity, and producing a story of four hundred and fifty words. This was nearly twice the word average of the stories in the first book, a remarkable achievement after just a few months. The only contribution I made was during the discussion on deciding a topic, and to offer him correct spellings when requested. I encouraged him to use as much humour as possible. On one occasion it was necessary to 'reject' a story as John wrote half of a story from the perspective he had chosen at the beginning but then, half-way through, regressed to writing an already written story just to satisfy the length requirements. I had to accept what he had written and give very positive appraisal for what he had done well, suggesting that maybe he would complete the second part again the following day. This worked as he had only have to complete half a story instead of a full one on the following day. An example from John's second book is:

It was 12.00pm and I was on my way to Hong Kong to defend my heavy-weight belt against a Sumo wrestler. So I got on the plane and I got some cake, a cup of tea and some nice biscuits. So after I had my food I went to the bar and I got three bottles of Budweiser and ten blue, so I was having a good time. Then the tea lady came around and offered me a cup of tea and I said: "Yes please!" She gave it to me. I had a sup and the tea was beautiful. It was so nice I had a donut with it. After I was finished, I went back to my drink and I started lashing it back to get drunk. So three hours later I got off and I got my bags and then I got shown to my bedroom. I started training. I started doing sit ups. Every morning I would do them. Then I took a run around the block and took a run up to the mountains. I ran until I got to the end of the mountains. Then the fight was starting I got my suit on. I was really nervous. I shook his hand and the ref blew. Then SMACK! he went up in the air and landed with a bang, so he got up. He tried to swing but I kicked him in the wobbly bits. He went: "Aaah!"

and fell. Then he got up and I got him in the face and the ref blew the whistle and it was all over. I won the match and I got the belt. I shook his hand and then I went out. I had a shower and I got changed. I went to the airport and then I was dying for a drink so I got one. I was on the plane going home. I could not wait to get home. My wife and me kids were dying to see me and I just wanted to see them. So I got more drink and started to lash them back and I was drunk. Then I had a cup of tea and some cake. I got off the plane and my wife ran over to me and she gave me a kiss. Then my kids ran over to me and I gave them a hug. All my supporters were there. They gave me a big cheer and they lifted me up into the air. They all got on the bus and they drove us home. Then we had a party and I went into my wife and I said: "Are you alright?" She said: "Yes". It was the best fight in the world.

The same procedure with regard to letter writing and sending the story book to a wider 'network' of people was adhered to for the second book. All these people contributed generously to the project, which enabled John to experience success that he had never experienced before, I feel that he did establish a sense of self-worth that was sorely deficient at the beginning of the project six months previously. There is an energy and a vibrancy in John's writings, which was not there at the beginning of the project. They contain a fluency and manifest a remarkable awareness of appropriate social behaviour, though he does like a drop of Bud!

CONCLUSION

Some readers may dismiss the project with John as being too time consuming for the teacher. Establishing a 'network' of friends and requesting their support, as well as the time taken to print and make copies of the books, transcend the teacher's boundaries. Others may object that this project is all very well and good in a one-to-one situation, but it would not work with a class of pupils. Objections may even be raised in relation to the value and usefulness of such a project to an individual.

There is no reason why a project like this could not work with a small group. The outlets available for distribution are far greater within the school system than within a one-to-one setting. How many schools would return a pound for a book of stories produced by a class from another school? The value of writing to the individual cannot be overestimated. This project gave John the satisfaction to know that he could write expressively with enjoyment and that through writing he could give others pleasure. It also helped him become very proficient at letter writing.

Finally, the enhancement of John's self-esteem, and his active involvement in the design, creation and distribution of his book, introduced meaning into an activity which had little or no meaning for him previously. Like all projects in special education, unless the teacher is prepared to 'volunteer' the extra time, energy and commitment, he may do his job properly but he may not do a proper job. The lack of monetary reward for extra work was amply compensated for me when John wrote the following to me on the completion of his project:

"Dear Flan,
I am writing to you to say thanks very much for all you have done for me over the past few months. The thing I would really like to thank you for is for doing all my stories for me. I really appreciate it. . . ."

Surely this the greatest reward a teacher can receive from those he/she works with.

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