



Will using Thinking Maps (particularly flow maps) improve the children's creative story-making in my reception class?

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Summary

This research looks at ways of establishing story patterns through oral story-telling as a pre-cursor to developing strategies for writing narrative.

Context:

Gwenfô Church in Wales Primary School is a rural Church in Wales Primary School that serves two local villages, the West of Cardiff and East of Barry. There are 190 children on roll with 7.9% of the children qualifying for free school meals. 13% of our pupils have ALN, which is broken down into 52% School Action and 48% School action Plus. As a school consideration and implementation of interventions had been put in place to further develop those children who needed extra support in literacy, numeracy, speech and language. In line with the Welsh Assembly Government (2003:3) we believed that *"all pupils must be allowed to discover their potential"* and so those children who were considered to be our More Able and Talented (MAT) in literacy were give further challenge by attending a "Writer's Squad", and others were given time twice a week when we looked at an assortment of challenges, literacy based, numeracy applications as well as thinking and questioning skills. We have recently adopted "Thinking Maps" and have started to use them throughout the school. This year the school also took on the Badger Maths Scheme to improve maths problem solving skills. However, it was felt that, in the Early Years, MAT

children, whilst having extra challenge in classroom differentiation, would benefit from some extra input.

As part of our School Improvement Plan for 2015 – 2016 we were concerned to improve our standards in Literacy, particularly oracy and on hearing about a Creative

Writing for MAT children in the Early Years SIGlet it was decided to see if this would be appropriate for our children. The SIGlet was aimed at creative writing but on consideration, and in consultation with my Headteacher, I felt that my children in Reception would benefit more from creative story-telling initially, perhaps moving on to creative writing as their independent writing abilities matured, and therefore set out to work on this. I felt it was important to ensure, as recommended by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010 p 5) that within the early years I:

- *provide rich opportunities for all children to find learning which inspires and engages*
- *identify and document evidence of children's particular interests and abilities*
- *plan experiences which can enrich and further develop children's interests, gifts and talents."*

The reception class consists of 28 children who are routinely divided into four groups for directed teaching. Whilst only four of these children would be considered as our MAT cohort, I worked with seven children as they were used to working together in a group.

Methodology:

As this project was also to contribute to a joint ACTION research project on Creative Writing, I was influenced by discussions with my focus group made up of members of the Siglet on writing. I was influenced by the ideas of Corbett [2016] and Brigley [1985] who both advocate the importance of talk, preparation and knowledge of story formats in developing writing. I decided first that I should obtain a baseline in order to see how my interventions helped the children to move on. I was:

- interested in the children's opinions of their own creative storytelling abilities

- wanted to find a way to measure their actual progress, as well as if/how their opinions changed following our storytelling sessions

I decided to work with the group to create our own story to use as a baseline. I created a questionnaire to use as a basis for discovering the children's knowledge of stories, storytelling and their personal thoughts on whether creating their own stories was easy, or difficult.

In order to make these sessions exciting and special for the children I:

- found an old wooden chest, which was carved and used this as a "Story Box" which loved stories so much it wanted to help the children create new stories to enjoy;
- created an assortment of different character cards, object cards and place cards which I thought the box could provide for the children to use in their stories;
- decided to use Thinking Maps in order to assist the children in planning and creating their stories and therefore included some blank flow maps and bubble maps to use in later sessions.

Session 1: I introduced the children to the story box, even the sight of this box evoked excitement and interest and they loved touching it and wondering what it contained. In the drawer there were covers of familiar classroom books that we had previously read and enjoyed and we used these to talk about stories, how they are made, what an author and an illustrator are. On asking the children if they would like to create their own stories and books the children were hooked. So I asked what we would need to create a story. As a group we discussed the story book "Whatever Next?" and eventually reached the conclusion it, and indeed most books, contained a character, a setting/place and often a significant object.

Having realised this, the box then gave us **a character card, an object card and a setting/place card for our story** and we worked as a group to create a new story for the Story Box. This story-creating part of the session was really enjoyable, but consisted of lots of prompting questions from myself with lots of discussion and chatting from the children. On reflection perhaps I should have done this in a smaller group, or with the children individually in order to more fully and accurately assess the children's story-telling ability. However at the end of the session the children were excited about their story and had all contributed throughout the process.

Session 2: Having recorded session one I set about transcribing it and read this to the children. The children decided that it was too short and felt they could improve it, The Welsh Assembly Government state that *"pupils .. able to assess themselves and understand how to improve"* is a requirement for children's learning to improve (WAG:11). The box then gave us **a Flow Map** to help us with our story-making. Having recapped with the children the purpose of a Flow Map we set about using one to plan our story. The children took it in turns to draw a picture as we went through our story. This process was still largely reliant on me, and I regularly asked the children variations on "what next?" This group story was more coherent and structured than our initial baseline version of the story and the Flow Map certainly helped us by enabling our reviewing of the story as we went along.

We invited **a storyteller** into our class linked to our Dragon Tales topic and this was a fabulous opportunity for all the children to think about storytelling and creating their own stories. The Storyteller encouraged the children to think of a character, give them a problem and then help the character overcome the problem.

The sessions following this fell into a pattern. The children worked on their own stories and could use their own character, or one from the Story Box. The first picture in their Flow Map was of their character. Inspired by the Storytellers method we then thought of a problem, drew that and then moved on to its resolution. The children drew one picture at a

time and then came to me **to scribe their story**. I felt that this allowed the story creating process to run more freely, so that the children did not need to concentrate on writing, only their story. Even at the end of the first individual story creating session the children had used the maps with understanding of the flow, and they commented on how the Flow Maps made an easy way for them to make up their stories.

As the sessions progressed and the stories became longer and better thought-out, I felt it was time to develop their stories further by adding some descriptions. The Story Box, which liked their stories so much, gave the children **a Bubble Map**, in order to help them make their lovely stories even better! In the first two Bubble Map sessions I chose a classroom toy/character and as a group we worked on thinking of how to describe the character. I felt it important that the character to be described was someone who was **both visible and tangible**, as well as something that could have feelings, thus giving more scope for 'real' descriptive words. This approach is supported by Brigley [1985:28] when she writes that:

'It is only by the habit of close observation that we learn to describe objects
Only from imaginative sources.'

In these sessions I again acted as scribe so the children could focus on appropriate adjectives. I did split the describing session into **things the children could see, the things the children could feel** as well as spending some time on how the character seemed to be, or might be feeling. By the second session on describing words the children commented on how we could use a Bubble Map to describe objects and places as well! The third describing session I again got the children to work on their own individual characters which we would use for a story-making session in the future. The children considered a character they would like to use and drew a picture, taking time to colour them in. The children then worked with me, we stuck their picture in the middle of a Bubble Map and the children described what their character looked like, and how their character might feel or how they might behave during the story.

In the following session, the Children looked at and went through their character Bubble Map and thought about a story they would like to tell about that character. This first session attempting to include descriptive words, did require some extra input from me. The children were comfortable with using the Flow Map to construct their story and the adult to scribe their story but often forgot to incorporate words from their character Bubble Map. I continued to model how they could include their adjectives throughout this session.

As an end to the sessions, and as a conclusion for this report, I used a similar questionnaire as a basis for talking to the children about stories and their opinions on how easy/hard they found it to create and I added another question asking if there was a way to make the process easier.

What I found out/Evaluation:

The children's initial baseline revealed how difficult the children found making a coherent, group story, however, as they were aged between four years and five years and as well as considering their inexperience of this kind of activity, that is hardly surprising. I was however pleased with their recognition that this story was not great, and their eagerness to try and improve it.

Our Story

There was a little boy who went into a castle.

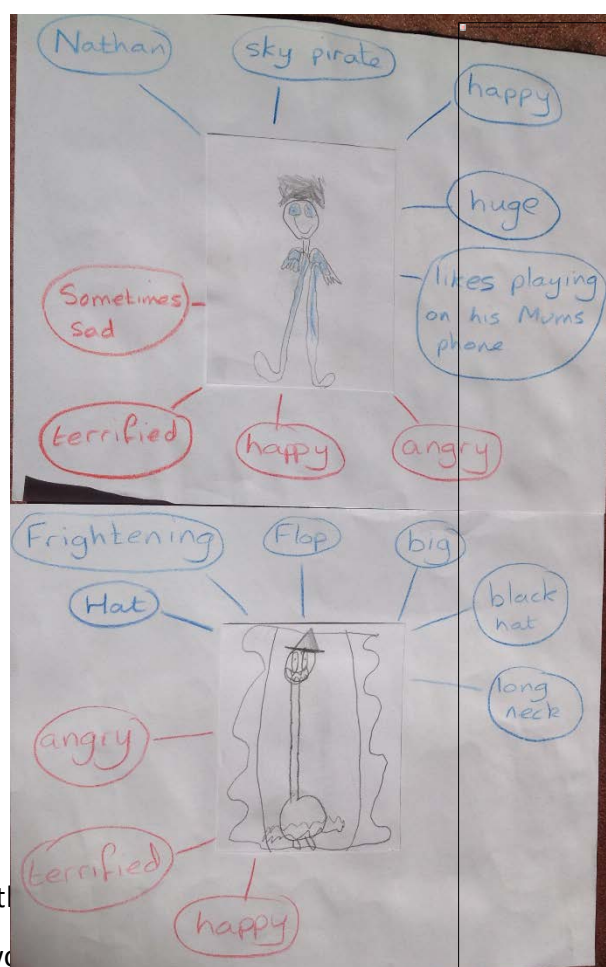
In the castle he finds a map to lead him on a treasure hunt. The map was in the scary dungeon. He didn't find the treasure straight away though.

He finds the treasure which was buried on a mountain on an island, in the middle of the sea, under a star. He lives happily ever after.

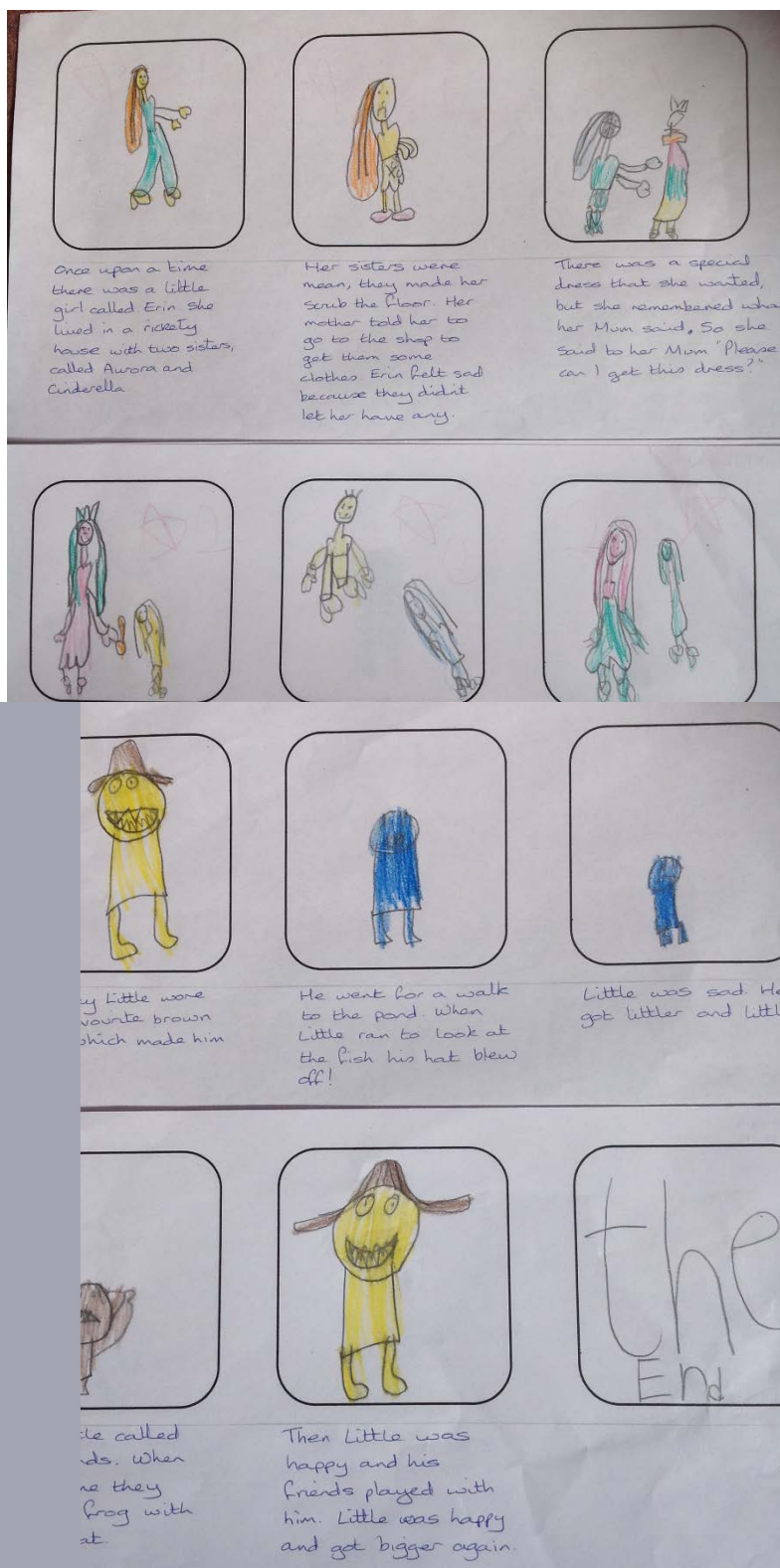
The end.

The children were quick to understand how to use the Flow Map and used it happily and with increasingly pleasing results. Even the first use, as seen in the picture below, the children were keen to include the arrows and follow the story through regularly as they worked on creating the story.

Examples of individual Bubble Maps, scribed by an adult.



Examples of the Bubble Map to help include descriptive words



The improvement in the children's story-making is clear to see, however it is difficult to assess this with data. The children's current Language, Literacy and Communication levels range from 4.12/O4c to 4.23/O4c, which is well above the national average of 3.35/O3b, but

this is to be expected as they were considered to be MAT pupils before we embarked on this process.

The children during the sessions realised for themselves the uses of the Thinking Maps and were quick to suggest ideas to use them for other things. The final questionnaires indicated that two of the four children identified as MAT, felt that story-telling was easier now, and also said this was due to using the Maps. The other children in the group also mentioned that the Maps helped them in the process.

My conclusions and recommendations:

Throughout this study I have given great consideration as to how to help children become independent in creating and telling their own stories, in order to help further their thinking and learning skills. Indeed as Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010:15) states *“Storytelling provides a myriad of opportunities for promoting possibility thinking – at any point children can be encouraged to think of alternative directions that the story might take, promoting innovation and creativity.”*

My question was whether Thinking Maps could help the children who are More Able and Talented in my Reception class, and clearly the Flow Maps have helped by giving them a specific structure on which to hang their stories, this is seen in their stories and in their final questionnaires.

Having begun to incorporate Bubble Maps to add more description to their stories is another step in the story-making process and I believe continuation of this practice will also be of great benefit. All the skills they have learnt, and are still learning here are transferrable, and will stand the children in good stead when they progress on to Creative Writing.

These sessions have enhanced the children's understanding of an author's work and built upon their enjoyment of stories. It has given some of the children more confidence in their own story-making abilities, as seen in the questionnaires, but has given all of the children the tools to help create a story.

1. Giving the children a love of stories and storytelling is important, but giving them a structure that will help them in this process, is even more beneficial.
2. Having these models for crafting their own stories will aid them in their creative writing in the future.

I would like to continue this process further by consolidating the children's use of Bubble Maps in the same way I did with the Flow Maps and giving them opportunities to make stories independently, at home or at school. I would also like to consider using Circle Maps and possibly even Double Bubble Maps with the children to enable further development of their story writing by defining the context of their stories as well as possibly moving on to comparing and contrasting characters, items and places in their stories.

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