



Built on RSC led approaches, developed in school, a new project to enrich and improve literacy development for children in lower pathway classes

In My Mind's Eye

“We’re going to meet Mrs Blyth...we’re going to have a battle...we’re in Scotland!”

This was the enthusiastic greeting that met Mrs Jefferies, Head Teacher at Archibald Primary School last Monday as a group of Year 5 pupils hurriedly made their way to the main hall. Mrs Blyth being Subject Lead for English at the school and *Macbeth* the play under scrutiny.

Over the past four years Archibald Primary School located in central Middlesbrough has worked in close partnership with the RSC. Teaching staff at the school have honed skills, developed confidence and acquired an appetite to bring the work of Shakespeare to life for pupils. Embedded across the curriculum and applied in every year group use of RSC led approaches and accessing Shakespeare’s work has become the norm and not the exception at the school. The positive impact of the work on pupils’ literacy skills has been consistent.

“Our work with the RSC is part of our toolkit which allows children a voice to express themselves through their writing”

Anita Jefferies, Head Teacher

While literacy attainment may come more easily to some, a small number of children in lower pathway classes face a wider gap in reaching their age-related expectations. For some of these children this challenge remains throughout their journey in Key Stage 2. This was of particular relevance for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and for pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) at the school. Anita and her team felt that more could be done to strategically support and enrich literacy development for those children and for any child that may struggle with their reading and writing.

A vehicle to improve skills

With proven results Jackie Blyth, Subject Lead for English, looked to RSC techniques and strategies as a vehicle to improve skills for less able writers in lower pathway classes Years 3, 4 and 5. The result has been the development of a structured but flexible project of work called *‘In My Mind’s Eye’*. At its core is the ambition to transport children who struggle with literacy attainment, into the story and world of the play, exploring how Shakespeare’s characters feel, what they see, hear, touch and even smell! Understanding that by capturing a child’s imagination, interest and curiosity are stimulated which with skilful teacher guidance can release vocabulary and create the need to write.

Flexible in its approach, the project model is based on children producing one piece of writing every two to three weeks, beginning with a session based on RSC approaches. The session promotes an objective from the grammar section of the national curriculum with writing linked to a specific purpose and audience. Over a two to three-week period children are encouraged to plan and to edit their writing, taking into account the intended reader. Children are provided with feedback from their classroom teacher and from Jackie on the success of their writing. Each half term lower pathway classes explore a different Shakespeare text.

On this particular Monday morning, lower pathway classes from Years 3, 4 and 5 along with teaching staff join Jackie on a battlefield in Scotland (the main hall) to meet *Macbeth*. Building towards an understanding of the context of the play for pupils and for teachers Jackie vividly describes the bleak Scottish heathland. The characters and friendship between *Macbeth* and Banquo are introduced. Using techniques based on RSC rehearsal room practice to warm up mind and body the troupe prepare for battle. Forming high and low shapes and using freeze frame techniques the ensemble re-enacts the battle that has taken place before the start of the play. The children take the practice very seriously.

Later in the day Lisa, Year 4 classroom teacher uses the morning's work to inspire pupils to construct sentence cards. Hitting the criteria set down in the national curriculum for English and as part of the *In My Mind's Eye* project plan the class use the actions from the battle to learn how to use conjunctives and fronted adverbials to form sentences.

Arms around each other's shoulders

The next morning Lisa gathers her class into a space at the front of the classroom. Together the class enthusiastically recap the previous day's activity. Pupils are asked to get into pairs to take on the roles of *Macbeth* and Banquo. With arms around each other's shoulders, they tread the aftermath of the battlefield. Lisa asks what can they see, what they can hear, how might *Macbeth* and Banquo walk, how do they feel? For each question hands are eagerly raised to provide an answer,

"...dripping in blood", "choking, screaming, weeping, shouting", "broken bones cracking", "in agony", "worn out", "feeling the glory", "proud with swords in the air..."

Macbeth: Year 4 responses to the aftermath of the battlefield

Each reply is praised and, for particularly fitting answers, Lisa awards stars. The words are written onto a white board and the lesson continues to explore the likely dialogue and relationship between *Macbeth* and Banquo, *"I can't believe what's just happened!", "Congratulations – we did it", "You're the best soldier"*. Establishing that *Macbeth* and Banquo are indeed best friends the line of thought is extended by asking the class for words that are connected with friendship the class respond with words such as *"loyal", "respect"* and *"protecting"*.

"RSC approaches work in enhancing children's memory, giving them the experience that they wouldn't otherwise have, to act out the scene and to actually become those characters."

Lisa, Year 4 Lower Pathway Classroom Teacher

The class return to their seats to make notes and to jot down ideas that have been formed during the lesson. Tomorrow the class will be asked to write an account of the battle using full sentences. A scene that has been built in their 'mind's eye' over the past two days.

Asked if using RSC approaches in the classroom has impacted on children's literacy skills Lisa comments,

"You can see the difference in the writing; I don't think I could get the children to produce this quality of writing without the Shakespeare work."

Closing the gap

Although still at an early stage the project continues to make progress. Children in lower pathway classes are being given the opportunity to close the gap between their literacy attainment and that of their peers in middle and higher pathway classes.

"Everyone involved in the project has seen each child flourish as a writer who cares about their intended audience. They have made rapid progress and have a new found passion for writing."

Jackie, Subject Lead for English and Year 6 Classroom Teacher

A Wonderful Experience

In February 2017 in celebration of the work that has taken place at the school all the Key Stage 2 pupils took part in a school production of *Macbeth*. An edited, but challenging, script was developed by an RSC practitioner and then Jackie assigned scenes to each class. In preparation, teaching staff had worked with the practitioner at a professional development day in September 2016. This work supporting and strengthening the Year 4 scheme of work.

Throughout the first half term of the Spring term, Jackie worked with teachers to suggest ways in which the scenes could be developed. Teachers working with their class so that all children were involved in the scene and could suggest ways in which the scene could be improved. The children were word perfect and had managed to learn a huge amount of text.

During 'Archibald Arts Week' 244 children rehearsed and performed to parents and carers. On the Friday afternoon of that week, the children met in the main hall and performed in the round. A bag piper was hired to play the audience into the event and added to the atmosphere of the afternoon. Many parents and carers commented on how wonderful the experience had been.