

Reflective Log

Introduction

As set out in my Initial Statement, my area of interest for the remaining time of the induction period was looking at the provisions I could make for the gifted writers in my class. The question I wanted to answer was,

“What effective provisions can I make for gifted writers in my class?”

So what was the starting point for this area of study? After I completed an audit for the current provisions of gifts and talents in my School (see appendix 2), I decided that the ‘identification’ of the gifted and talented children was causing me a problem. Before I could start thinking about how to provide for the more able writers in my class, one question I needed to answer was, ‘How do you identify children who are gifted and talented?’ So this was exactly where I decided to start my research.

Literature Review

‘Identification of the gifted and talented: Theories & Definitions’

Through my wider reading I have learnt that leading theorists such as Gardner’s ‘Multiple Intelligence Theory’ (Gardner’s 1983) and Sternberg’s ‘Triarchic Theory of Intelligence,’ (Sternberg’s 1977, Sternberg, Jarvin & Grigorenko 2002) have influenced Government and Educators definitions of gifted and talented children (see appendix 4). In 1999, ‘The Excellence in the Cities’ project (DfEE, 1999) set the standard for schools to identify the top 5 to 10 per cent of children as gifted and talented. The criteria teachers were advised to use in identifying gifted and talented children shared similarities with the theories put forward by the leading theorists (see appendix 4).

Researching into this area and attending a course at Canterbury Christ Church University (see CED Log), gave me the opportunity to consider and examine all the definitions and theories. I agreed with many elements of the different definitions and it helped me to create my own definition.

“Gifted children are those who have a high level of ability in one or more academic subjects and achieve at a level advanced of the average for their age. Talented children are those who have a high level of ability in one or more creative subjects (e.g. P.E) and achieve at a level advanced of the average for their age.”

I then decided to use my definition to review the gifted and talented register for my class (see appendix 3). Having this background knowledge, my own definition and the School’s definition helped me to ensure that no child (in my class) who is gifted or talented ‘slipped through the net.’ I felt that it was preferable for a child to be on the register and have the opportunity to access the provisions I would put in place than not to be, just because they do not fit into one rigid definition (such as the School’s definition). See appendix 5 for an update on the number of gifted writers in class. However, children do not benefit from just being labelled gifted and talented (Ofsted, 2000). Therefore, this was what encouraged me to look at what provisions could I put in place for gifted writers in my class that would improve their writing ability?

The action research project

‘Planning the provisions for the more able writers and measuring their effectiveness.’

After I had completed my research into teaching strategies that are said to be effective at challenging the most able children (see Action Plan), I decided to implement them within my classroom. The four teaching strategies I decided to try out in class were,

- Activities to promote thinking skills
- Differentiated questioning
- Target setting
- Creative journals

Below, is a brief description of each teaching strategy and an evaluation of each strategy’s effectiveness at improving gifted writer’s writing ability.

1. Thinking Skills

There are five thinking skills that are highlighted and embedded throughout the 'National Curriculum' (DfEE 1999) and the 'Primary National Strategy's Excellence and Enjoyment Professional Development Materials' (DfES 2004). The five thinking skills include; information processing skills, reasoning skills, enquiry skills, creative thinking skills and evaluation skills. The National curriculum states that,

"By using thinking skills pupils can focus on 'knowing how' as well as 'knowing what' – learning how to learn."

(National Curriculum, 2000, p22)

I think this is particularly important. I believe teachers need to provide the children with the skills to become independent learners, rather than just filling them up with facts and figures. This was something I was conscious I had done in the past. Therefore, this was an area I wanted to start promoting more within my classroom. In the book 'Daily Brainteasers', (Harris-Burland & Fleetham, 2006) there is a variety of 'brainteasers' that are said to develop each of the five thinking skills, so I selected 10 literacy activities to try out in the classroom (see appendix 5).

From the children's body language I could tell that they thoroughly enjoyed each of the short daily brainteasers. However, I have found the activities took longer than planned and this had implications within the timetable. The activities reinforced certain topics the children have covered this year, such as work on alliteration (see appendix 5). For example, the activity that promoted enquiry and evaluation skills involved the children thinking of synonyms for 'said'. They wrote all the words down on whiteboards for five minutes at the beginning of the day. Later, we were able to refer back to these words in the main part of the Literacy lesson and use the words in the children's writing. This activity improved the quality of the children's writing (see appendix 5 for evidence of improvement in writing).

Through this early morning work, it also gave the children the opportunity to use whiteboards and I noticed that the children were much more willing to have a go at things when they know they can quickly rub it out if they wish. After discussion with the children, this observation was confirmed. One child said that when using whiteboards, they do not have to worry about spelling (so use more adventurous words), neat writing, titles, dates and they can just write down what they think very quickly. This is something I had not considered before that the presentation of work

can sometimes take the focus away from the content of the children's writing. Now I am aware of this, it is an area that will impact my teaching in the future.

Finally, many of the activities involved in early work meant the children worked in mixed ability pairs. When I observed the Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator at a local school (see CDP and appendix 1) this was a teaching strategy that she used and found effective. After I introduced it within my classroom, I found that when I compared the quantity and quality of work a child completed on their own, with a piece of work completed within a pair, the work completed in the pair was of a higher standard compared to an individual's efforts. Vygotsky (1987) said that "talk enables thought" and from my findings I would support this view. Therefore, I am going to look at using more pair work in the future and try strategies out such as Think, Pair and Share Activities.

It is quite hard to see whether this teaching strategy has been effective at promoting thinking skills overall as this was a small-scale study over a short period of time. However, from my early observations the children have benefited from taking part in them and one activity did in fact aid their writing. Therefore, I am going to continue with the short daily brainteasers over the next term and monitor the effectiveness as I go along.

2. Questioning

Throughout my reading and through discussion with my School's Gifted and Talented Coordinator, I kept coming across Bloom's Taxonomy (DfES, 2004) and so I decided to look at this in more detail. Bloom's Taxonomy (DfES, 2004) is a hierarchy in nature and is split into six layers, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (DfES, 2004). Finding out about different ways of questioning made me think about the types of questions I ask in my classroom. I realised that I asked a lot of closed questions, where I was just asking children to recall knowledge. Therefore, I decided to use Bloom's Taxonomy to help me to plan increasingly challenging questions and work to promote learning in classroom. Through my research I came across a huge amount of resources to help implement Bloom's Taxonomy within teaching. All of which helped me with my planning.

In the weekly plan (see appendix 6), I have highlighted where I applied Bloom's Taxonomy to the lessons. I found that planning the questions in advance really helped me to think about what I was trying to teach the children. It also helped me to think about who I was directing the different questions at. I applied Bloom's Taxonomy (DfES, 2004) layers to independent and group work (see appendix 6) I found this worked extremely well and at the end of the lesson the children said the worked had challenged them. See appendix 6, (Week 1, Day 1) for details of the children's task and evidence of their work.

Furthermore, my Mentor observed this lesson and confirmed I had catered for all abilities in the class effectively (see appendix 7 for lesson plan and observation feedback). This was encouraging. In future, I am going to use Bloom's Taxonomy (DfES, 2004) to help me with my planning. It will help me to focus on the types of questions I can use to challenge the most able children.

3. Target Setting

Through my wider reading I came across Hymer and Michel (2002, p3) who state that

"The primary aim of education is to excite in children and young people a passion for learning" and "to maximise opportunities for all children to reach their educational goals."

This really made me think and ask the question 'Am I maximising opportunities for all children to reach their educational goals specifically in their writing ability? And if not, how am I going to start doing so?' The National Curriculum (DfEE 1999) says that targets for children should need to

"build on pupil's knowledge, experiences, interests and strengths to improve areas of weakness and demonstrate progression over time."

Therefore, after careful thought, I decided to introduce targets in Literacy related to the children's writing for all the pupils in the class. I believe that target setting should involve the children and be attainable, yet challenging and this view is supported by Eyre & McClure (2001). Target setting was a strategy I had already started to put in place at the beginning of the year (see Initial Statement), however, I had not kept up to date with. Therefore, after reading literature that supported the idea that targets are important as they help children make progress, I decided to test this out for

myself! See appendix 8 for a description of how children's targets were set and monitored.

I found that the children really enjoyed setting their own educational goals. They said that they enjoyed the fact that they knew one particular aspect of their writing they needed to improve. Within the first two weeks of introducing this teaching strategy some of the gifted writers had already achieved their target and were onto their second target and as a result their writing improved (see appendix 8 for evidence of this). It was not just these children that benefited from target setting as some of the average writers in my class achieved their targets too. However, there were a few children who did not show any ambition to achieve their target and as a result their writing did not improve (e.g. the children were still not using full stops in their writing). From my findings, I have decided that next year I will continue with Literacy targets but I will think about how I can encourage the children who were less enthusiastic about achieving their target, to want to achieve it.

4. Creative Journals

Finally, Andrew Lambirth (2006) says that although the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching (NLS) may help more able children in so far as it provides clear learning objectives, opportunities for children to work at their own pace and differentiated activities, Montgomery (2003) warns that because of the huge content based nature of it, it is unlikely that more able pupils will have enough time to work at their appropriate level. This is an issue I can relate to.

In my teaching of Literacy so far, I frequently feel under pressure to move on to the next topic even if I have not covered everything in as much detail as I would have liked. However, I have learnt that in the NLS (DfEE, 2002), it does say that where appropriate teachers should feel free to extend the literacy hour. Andrew Lambirth (2006) holds the view that children need to be able to write at length. They need a chance to apply their learning and extend their knowledge outside of the literacy hour. Again, this is something I struggle to find the time to allow the children to do. Therefore, I decided to introduce the children to the idea of a creative journal to see if providing the children with the time to write a length would improve their writing.

Over the period of two weeks, I allocated periods in the timetable to allow all children to write at length. I was pleasantly surprised with the findings. When I looked at the gifted writers creative journals, there were examples of adventure stories, acrostic poems, alliteration and reports (see appendix 9 for examples of the children's work). All of which were aspects of Literacy we had covered in class. Introducing these journals, allowed the gifted children to apply knowledge that they had learnt in the Literacy hour in their own time. Even though all the children in the class had access to their own creative journals, there was a small number of children that did not write anything in their journal and those children that used it as a drawing book! However, the gifted writers used it and said they loved the extra writing time! I have not seen the gifted children's writing improve directly as a result of implementing this teaching method, however this maybe due to it being a small-scale study over a short period of time. Therefore, I am going to continue with next year and assess and review the children's writing over the year.

Summary

In Summary, I feel that I have successfully put provisions in place for the most able writers, yet at the same time made sure all the children have access to the curriculum. I am confident that the writing levels of the gifted children have improved over the year and this was confirmed by the recent SATS results (see appendix 10). The last action I took was to look at the gifted writers and compare their KS2 results with their KS1 SATs results (see appendix 10). All of the gifted writers came up on a level 3 for writing and all of them are now on a level 4 for writing. Of course there are limitations with just looking at SATS results alone, but these findings along with my findings outlined in the Reflective Log and the appendices (where there are examples of where direct input has had a positive impact on a child's writing ability) have helped me to conclude that I have put effective provisions in place for gifted writers.

Concluding Statement

Since February 2007, I have had the opportunity to use my NQT release time to research what provisions I can put into place to improve gifted writers in my class. During this period of time I have discussed key issues with staff, visited Canterbury Christ Church University Library and attended a Gifted and Talented course there. I have also liaised with the Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator at another local primary school. My Action Plan helped me to focus on specific targets and break objectives down into achievable steps. Reflecting upon my experiences in the CPD has also helped me to realise how far I have come and how much I have learnt over the last year. I feel the work I have put in over the year has paid off and consequently helped me to complete my action research project.

As a result of my findings, this School year (2007-2008) I am definitely going to continue with the teaching strategies I have found do challenge the more able writers. The teaching strategies are:

- Activities to promote thinking skills
- Differentiated questioning
- Target setting

I also plan to provide opportunities within the timetable for children to write at length through the ideas of Creative Journals. Although this teaching strategy did not directly improve the children's writing I feel this might of been due to the short amount of time I have had to test it out within the classroom. To keep me focused on challenging the more able writers over the next year (2007-2008), one of my Performance Management Targets is to aim to raise the number of level 4 writers within my class. I hope to do this by continuing with the teaching strategies mentioned above and to set up a writing club for gifted writers at lunchtime (a target in my Action Plan from last year). I will assess and review the impact my teaching has on the children's writing with my Performance Management Reviewer throughout the year.

In summary, this research project has not only helped me to become a more effective teacher but has had a positive impact on the gifted children's writing ability. All in all, I feel this has been a worthwhile research project.

Kathryn Bousfield

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