

COULDN'T read, COULDN'T write, we knew we were rubbish but you should see OUR work NOW! part 2

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The first part of this article discussed how a holistic approach to learning and creative strategies, which allows for differences in learning styles, enable pupils who struggle with literacy in the lower secondary school to become successful, competent and able learners. In this part, the literacy journeys of two pupils with challenging behaviour are considered with a particular emphasis on the importance of the pupil's voice and the use of ICT in providing ways into learning. The article concludes with reflections from both the pupils and the author.

Pupils who struggle with literacy and whose behaviour is also a cause for concern can be enabled to achieve success when offered an environment which engages with their emotional and social needs. Implicit within this environment are the relationships that are established, ones built on mutual trust and understanding.

The following two case studies describe the literacy development of two boys with whom I have worked for one year.

Daniel – case study 3

At the time of writing Daniel was a very bright and articulate pupil with extremely challenging behaviour. He was also small in stature. His primary school years had been characterised by frequent outbursts and temper tantrums when he felt unable to do something or in frustration resulting in regular time out of school, coupled with missed school for illness. Although he could both read and write he did not see himself as being good at either.

Secondary school presented a real threat to his overwhelming desire 'not to be picked on by the bigger boys.' In conversation with him he told me, 'I didn't like reading aloud in class. There were words I didn't know and

I couldn't say them. I didn't like children laughing at me and I'm afraid this will happen in secondary school.' Part of his difficulty in writing lay in his inability to express what he wanted quickly. This caused frustration and a tendency to abandon a task. His manipulative skills could not keep up with his rush of ideas. Clearly he had to be helped to manage his own behaviour while at the same time enabling his not inconsiderable talents to flourish.

Talking with Daniel it became clear that whilst he felt somewhat intimidated in school this was not the case on his home territory. He was very streetwise. At home he engaged in a number of reading activities, sometimes shared with his mother, including reading the paper, his favourite comics, particularly the Simpsons, entering competitions in the comics, writing shopping lists, and reading the instructions of new video games in order to play with his younger brother. What was interesting was that although Daniel had no trouble with these reading or writing experiences at home and seemed to enjoy them, he did not see literacy-related activities at school in the same way. In his mind these were characterised by likelihood of failure and to be avoided at all costs. He disliked his handwriting, and worksheets and his messy exercise books had done nothing to engage or inspire his enthusiasm for writing.

In order to move him on in his learning I needed to:

- ★ bridge the gap between home and school
- ★ link school life with his world outside
- ★ get him excited and engaged and wanting to learn.

Spending time getting to know Daniel, often before school (regularly around 7.45 am), and talking with him enabled me to understand him and his learning needs. One of his most prized possessions was his dog. He had hand reared her from a puppy and he knew about dogs and how to care for them. This became the first important link between home and school.

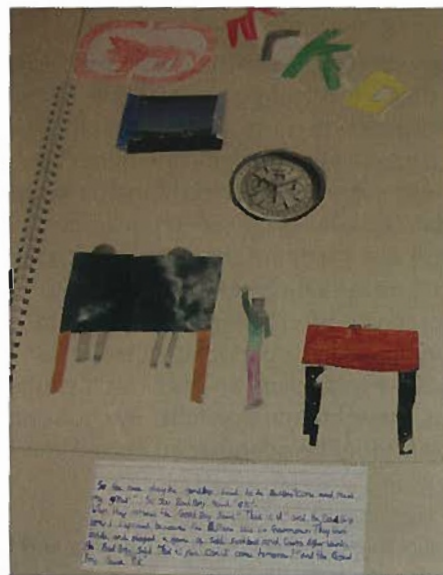
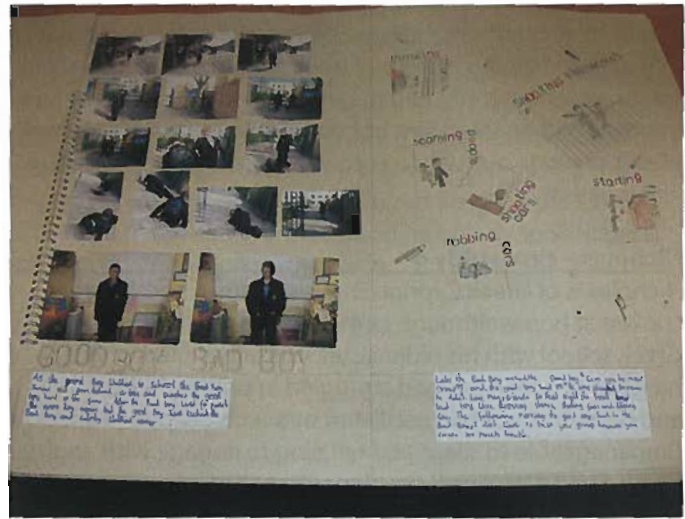
He made a realistic clay model of his dog based on a photograph and then made a large book charting the life history of his dog with ingenious ways of showing her growth through the life stages.



We also read books that related to and tapped into his interest in action and adventure games and stories. Books that were short enough to read quickly and high in interest, such as *Captain Cranko and the Crybaby* by Jean Ure, and *Game Boy* and *Game Boy Reloaded* by Alan Durant and others in the Barrington Stoke series were greatly enjoyed by Daniel. He was encouraged to share the parts he had enjoyed most by reading extracts to his friends as a way of recommending the books. Graphic/visual books also became part of his reading repertoire and he showed a highly developed ability to interpret the interplay between text and images, often supporting the other pupils in their understanding.

The use of film linked the social activities he was engaged in at home with his friends as well as helping to inspire and develop his speaking, listening and writing skills. He made a very accomplished short animated film entitled *Good Boy, Bad Boy* which, as its title suggests, involved two characters and the influence one was able to exert over the other through various anti-social and social activities all of which were familiar to Daniel.

The film was accompanied by a book illustrated in a variety of different media reflecting his growing understanding of the intertextuality of words and images. This experience had a profound effect on his behaviour. Through the medium of film and in the process of its making Daniel considered his own behaviour and personality.



Pages from Daniel's 'Good Boy Bad Boy' book

His success came through his realization that what he was doing was of worth and that he had something of value to offer. Above all he knew that he was also very skilful in making the film. Making an animation requires an inordinate amount of patience and technical knowledge and skill, all of which Daniel acquired. He worked on this film for long periods of time independently, solving problems and finding creative solutions. Whereas once he had great difficulty sustaining a piece of work to any depth or quality, his increased maturity and the investment of his own interests had enabled him not only to create some excellent pieces of work, but also to successfully pursue an interest in film making.

Nicholas – case study 4

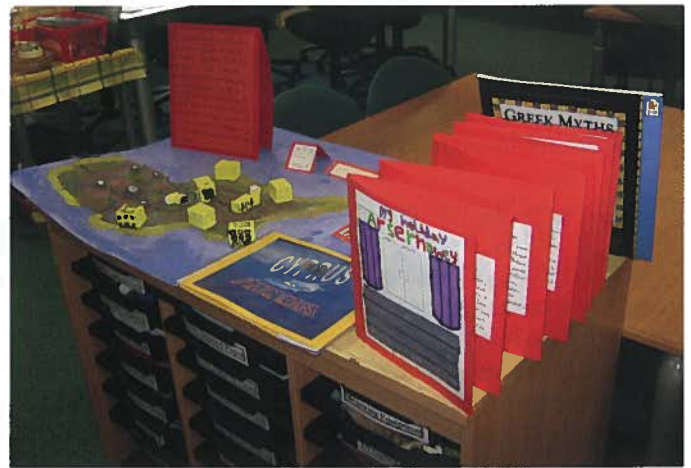
Nicholas is of Greek Cypriot/English origin. English was spoken at home although in the past he had attended Greek school with his older sister. His father died when he was two. Nicholas had struggled in primary school and his behaviour had oscillated between disruptive and unmanageable to silent and refusing to engage with adults. He also had a very well developed sense of injustice. On a positive note, Nicholas was an able mathematician and a competent user of computers.

Although there were many books in the classroom, Nicholas had no interest in them. Even though he was able to read he showed little inclination to do so and consequently was an inexperienced reader. Unless he felt certain that he would be able to spell every word correctly and his script would look pleasant, Nicholas also needed persuasion to write. What resulted was a script of short sentences, albeit correctly sequenced, about which he was completely indifferent. One reason for his reluctance to engage in conversations or volunteer information was that he just simply did not have the vocabulary and as a result struggled to express his ideas, thoughts and opinions. By choosing not to take any part in activities he safeguarded his self image as the 'cool guy'.

I needed to find ways to extend Nicholas' language, and to engage him more deeply in reading and writing. My main strategies were:

- ★ to spend time getting to know him and to talk with him about his interests, work and learning
- ★ to select books that had something for him personally and which were long enough to be considered age appropriate but which could also be read in two/three sessions
- ★ to create small reading groups with a relaxed and fun atmosphere where I could share books with some of the boys in particular
- ★ to encourage him to write about the things that interested him – to enable him to discover his voice.

Nicholas spent every summer in Cyprus with his mother's family. Gradually, as I was able to form a relationship with him, he began to talk about his experiences on the island



Nicholas's zig zag book and relief map of Cyprus

and in particular his favourite places. He made a zig-zag book to record his experiences of his last holiday in Cyprus with one experience leading to another helping him see the continuation of these. The more involved, engaged and motivated he became in this task, the more elaborate the book became. He rejected some of his first attempts, persevering until what he wrote captured the essence of what he wanted to say and all of it written in a careful and joined up script complete with appropriate illustrations before being published. He was behaving as a writer in the truest sense. He then made a relief map to scale of Cyprus and gave a PowerPoint presentation on Cyprus before an invited audience. Later in the year this work was further refined in the adding of hyperlinks to the PowerPoint. Nicholas, like many of the other pupils I work with, came to see pieces of work not as 'one offs' but as something they could return to and further refine if they wished.

Over the next few months Nicholas became more talkative and less inhibited. His vocabulary increased and through listening to stories and sharing books he began to acquire book language. Some of the books that were popular with him and which helped to give him confidence were:

Dreamboat Zing by Philip Ridley

Hal the Highway Man by June Crebbin

Big Bad Raps by Tony Mitten

The Shoemaker's Boy by Joan Aiken

Thomas and the Tinnets by Jill Paton Walsh

Fair's Fair by Leon Garfield

Cinderboy by Lawrence Anholt

Daft Jack and the Beanstalk by Lawrence Anholt

And others in the Orchard *Seriously Silly Fairy Tales* series and the Barrington Stoke publications.

There were positive signs of greater commitment and motivation in reading when Nicholas turned up willingly every morning before school to share his current book with me. These sessions took different formats: paired reading/reading alternate pages, Nicholas reading independently, my reading to him. He particularly enjoyed hearing Greek myths and wrote his own version of Daedalus and Icarus in

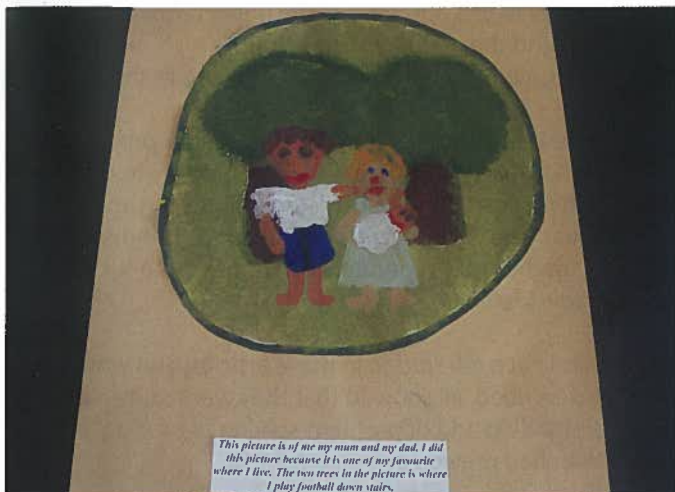
the style of a rap poem showing how much he had retained the 'cadences of the language' from these poems.

**DAEDALUS
AND
ICARUS**

*Daedalus is a dad and his son is Icarus
They are prisoners of King Minos
Daedalus sees a feather on his window sill
thinks of an idea to escape from Crete
He goes to work at building wings
to connect to the body to fly away.
Daedalus finishes the wings one night
Attaches them on and flaps away.
Icarus's dad says 'Mind the sun
Fly too close the wax will melt!'
But Icarus is so very happy
He flies higher and closer to the sun.
Icarus's feathers start to fall
remembers his Dad and what he's said.
His arms can't save him, down he falls,
Hitting the water with a splash and a thump.
Daedalus swoops down picks him up
Digs a hole and buries his son.*

The end

Nicholas had started to sign his name with his father's name inserted. Having explored and written about his experiences in Cyprus, Nicholas asked if I would help him find out about the places his father had lived. He had talked and written about his mother's side of the family and now he wanted to complete the circle by thinking about his father. This was perhaps the greatest risk Nicholas had taken so far in his learning as he began a very personal journey in exploring his feelings of loss and bereavement. We talked and he wrote a list of questions he wanted to ask about his father and his life. Nicholas drew and painted pictures and wrote about his own life starting with what was meaningful to him –where he lived, the school he attended, the places he visited and then did the same with his father's life using information gathered through his questions.



Nicholas' painting of his mother and father

His research led him to use reference books to find further information he needed and he learnt how to select the relevant parts, first in the form of note taking and the use of bullet points, and then writing it up in the book he had made for the purpose. Stories that focused on bereavement were read both on a one to one with Nicholas or as a group.

I read Nicholas Kit Wright's poem *The Magic Box* (Wright 1989) with the suggestion that he might like to make his own box in which to place special items relating to his father. We talked about how some of the things mentioned in the poem are real and others are imaginary. Over some days, Nicholas read this poem several times keeping the book close at hand. Then one afternoon he quietly took himself off and wrote the following poem.

My Box

I will put in my box

*A star fish which I love
From the country I love
A picture I love of me and my Dad*

I will put in my box

*A pinch of lovely yellow sand
from the country we love
and the transparent sea from Cyprus*

I will put in my box

*The frame of a glass
and the picture of a wedding day
with the colours of ripe fruit*

I will put in my box

*The journey to another country
The sound of a favourite son
And the smells of the cooking in a caravan*

I will put in my box

*A training ground for a favourite football team
A Dad who plays with me
And a stand in a stadium full of cheering crowds*

I will put in my box

*Aphrodite's rock from Cyprus
A chat with my dad
And a dive into the sea*

I will put in my box

*The deepness of the sea
The snaking movement of a scuba diver between the rocks following
the fish wherever they go
And the smooth silent waters where I swim*

I will put in my box

*A go kart we have made
A fast track to race on
And a driver who never crashes*

I will put in my box

*The kindness of an elderly grandmother
The company of an amusing uncle
And the happiness of a playful cousin*

I will put in my box

*A warm hug from my Dad
A light kiss on the cheek
And the thrill of an adventure story*

*My box is so sparkly and colourful
If you look at my box and compare
It to another box you can see
My box is the best.*

*I shall lie in my box
On the yellow sand and sunbathe
Then I would get my go cart and race
My Dad home.*

By Nicholas

Over the course of the year, Nicholas became a happier, confident and more self-assured person who now saw himself as a successful learner. Through building on his interests and skills, his reading and writing were further developed within meaningful contexts. He was also helped to build up his confidence and sense of purpose and identity.

Pupils' reflections

Both these boys were clear in their minds as to what had helped them make progress. Reflecting on their journey in becoming readers, both boys commented on the books offered to them to read: 'Having books that were interesting' and 'The longer the book the more interesting it is.'

This point was reiterated by Nicholas who said, 'It's easier now I can read all of the book not just the first few pages.'

He also explained how reading helped him know new interesting words and how this in turn helped his spelling. 'I now have the confidence to try and spell words I don't know', he said.

Daniel expressed how much he had liked having time to read a book, 'I liked having time to take the book away and sit and read to myself then you can really get into it. Before it was always too hard and I never had time to do this.'

In appreciation of his place within the group he added, '..... I was also frightened what the other children might say and their reactions – now I know that people like what I do and say.'

In reflecting on his progress in writing Daniel described how writing 'about anything makes it easier and having time to explain all your ideas and using drafts as well, I found this less frustrating.'

He went on to explain that now 'I have the confidence to do something (use the animation equipment) I can try other things.'

Other ways into writing were also enjoyed by Nicholas who commented how doing drama was 'fun and it helps you work out your ideas' and with regard to his paintings and models, 'I knew what I was going to do if I had a picture in my head.'

Being known and understood by the teacher and having high expectations was seen to be of some importance to Daniel in helping him to become a successful learner:

'The teacher knows when your work is your best or not, if the teacher knows what you are able to or not able to do then it helps your confidence as you can practise and get better, it helps if you are understood.'

The importance of being part of a community of learners was significant for both boys particularly in a film project they had been involved in: 'I liked having my ideas included and the activities we did together.'

In recognizing how engaged he had become in the group and how much he had benefited from the support of other pupils, perhaps one of the most telling comments was made by Nicholas when he said, 'I never liked being separated off from other children and feeling like I was the only one who couldn't do something. I like working with others; it helps me become more confident.'

My reflections

Reflecting on these case studies and on my teaching with so-called 'failed' pupils who struggle with literacy, I have tried to describe in the two articles something of my role in helping these young people to become successful readers, writers and users of oral language as well as young adults.

Fundamental to this approach is the importance of knowing each pupil and the need to observe pupils well, and in so doing to highlight our awareness of how pupils think.

We need to interact strongly with pupils at the precise point each one has reached in their cognitive growth, to discover what each one can do through listening, looking and questioning, and rigorously move forward, extending and building up the child's confidence in himself as a successful and capable learner.

The pupils I have referred to in these articles, and working in the way described, all showed that they were quite capable of understanding and of problem-solving at a far greater depth than had previously been thought.

Failure in school lies not in the pupil but in the methods used to teach that pupil as a result of what Poplin (1988) calls 'the reductionistic nature of our methodologies.'

Programmes come and go and they are often repeated under different guises, but the one thing that takes time and is guaranteed success is looking at the individual learning styles and strengths and weaknesses of each pupil and linking the message of teaching reading and writing to this, rather than merely addressing the 'deficits' in their lives.

It is significant that the pupils mentioned in both articles began with their own areas of knowledge and experience in their journey to become literate. Their attention and imagination were engaged because they wrote about subjects that mattered deeply and personally to them and their writing gained from the knowledge that it was genuine communication, that there was a context, a purpose and an audience. If we are to help pupils understand themselves and develop as successful readers and writers, then acknowledging and nurturing their experiences, feelings, ideas and thoughts and encouraging the pupil's way of talking and writing about them is crucial.

Note

Both the children mentioned in this article are on the special needs register. The children's names have been changed.

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