



Aylesbury Aspire Project. Why effective school project teams are the key to the successful development of Talk for Writing in schools

Last year, Talk for Writing trainers Julia Strong and Maria Richards were approached by the Aspire group of schools in Aylesbury to train the staff of 6 primary schools plus some secondary colleagues. The key aspect of this training was not the two training days for all staff, first in fiction and then non-fiction, but the role of the project teams in leading the project within their schools. All the six participating primary schools took the project very seriously and sent a lead group of teachers to the project team days so that they could start to develop the approach within their teaching prior to the training days. Below Jenny Mynott, head of English at Oak Green School, who co-ordinates the local Aspire project meetings, plus Rachel Kirk, Headteacher of Elmhurst Primary School take up the story to explain why the project team approach is important and the impact the project is having on their schools. If a cluster of schools in your area would like to embark on a similar project, email contact@talk4writing.com.

How Talk for Writing is making a difference at Oak Green School by Jenny Mynott

We first looked into Talk for Writing two years ago following our Ofsted inspection that highlighted our need to rapidly improve writing levels across the school so that they were in line with our reading and maths results. A few members of staff had already attended Talk for Writing training in London a few years earlier and were enthused. I then researched this further and discussions took place at Aspire meetings, where the leaders from 6 local primary schools and two secondary schools get together to discuss and share practise in order to raise standards. It was agreed that all schools in the group would club together and train all staff in Talk for Writing as we felt the approach would not only benefit our EAL learners but also children whose exposure to language from an early age is significantly below children from other more affluent areas in the country.

Since starting the project in July 2014, the literacy leaders and other senior leaders have met for two planning meetings to discuss the direction of the project, followed by two whole

school INSET days in which staff have been trained. This has also been followed up by additional local meetings, led by the English leads in each school every half term, in which they discuss what is working well and how to move forward. This aspect of the project is proving to be very successful. There are two schools, Oak Green included, which have embraced the project and fully integrated it into their English teaching as well as across the whole curriculum. Meeting regularly to discuss issues, has enabled all schools in the project to move forward and share good practice.



Benefits noted so far:

- Staff enthused by engaging approach to inspire children
- Children enthusiastic, especially when reciting text maps
- Increased exposure to language – impacting upon EAL learners significantly
- Logical structure for teaching genre has enabled teachers to be more focussed
- Reluctant boy writers more engaged
- Cold-Hot task process shows progress – see example below
- Class displays more engaging and are used by the children easily
- Cross curricular links

Setting a cold task before a unit to establish what the children already know about the type of writing the unit will focus on (the baseline), and then a hot task at the end of the unit to show what they've learnt, has proved really powerful as these extracts from one reluctant boy writer's before-and-after work demonstrates:



Diary Writing – COLD Task

Tom

Dear diary

I had a fantastic day at the football stadium. We met most of the football players in the changing rooms but the best part was when we saw the football players score and celebrate. Sara didn't really like it she said it was boring and it was annoying when the crowd cheered and screamed. The manager was really nice and happy when they won the game and he was also cheering with the crowd. My dad bought me a kit and a scarf and it had Falcao on the back. My dad also bought a scarf and he loved it to.

Sara

Dear diary

I had the most boring day ever because ...

Diary Writing – HOT Task

Michael

Dear Diary,

OMG! I'm not alone..... There was a angry old man at the beach. I'm still stuck on this island, waiting for someone to come and save me.

At first I went deeper into the wood for sticks so I could make my fire bigger until I noticed that there was less smoke than before. I went to see what was happening. Someone was knelt down at my fire. I thought it was a orang-utan until he came closer. Anxiously I took a step back because it was an old man. He started waving his stick outrageously shouting DAMEDA! DAMEDA! When he left I was furious but when he was shouting, I was terrified. I wanted to grab his stick of him and wave in his face angrily.

The old man could speak a little English. He split his island in half at that very second. I was frightened because I didn't know where food or water was and last night I heard wolf howling deep in the forest. The only place where I could sleep is in a little cave. I don't care about that old man, tomorrow I will make another fire.

Kensuke

Dear Dairy

There was a little boy on my island. Can you believe it...?

At Oak Green we think it is fabulous. We are really running with it and are starting to see results – you can see all the evidence on our washing lines, working walls and in the books. An example is an EAL year 6 child in my class who came up as a very low level 3 and is now achieving a level 4 in the space 6 months of doing this. It's all down to vocabulary: she's now using words like spectacular, boisterous and ominous and she is using them correctly – she knows what they mean. It's just fabulous the things that she is doing. It's also been fantastic for our reluctant boy writers – who are often only inspired by football – even they are getting it. We are really excited by the impact of Talk for Writing we have seen so far and can't wait to see how our future writers develop.

Headteacher Rachel Kirk explains how the pilot group at Elmhurst School has helped make the Talk for Writing project effective

I was part of the Talk for Writing pilot group of teachers from Elmhurst school, last autumn term. As we plan in teams across the school, numerous teachers starting seeing the process and hearing positive outcomes from the targeted teachers and wanted to partake in the approach and so the majority of our teachers started trying parts of the approach and 'having a go' before the official staff training day

Following that day in December, teachers reported that they were inspired and enthused by the training; many had the questions which they had thoughts of whilst 'having a go' answered and staff came away with fresh ideas to try out with their pupils. They were buzzing.



As a result of the training, we invested in the following key items and ensured that everyone had these ready to go for their first unit in January:

- washing lines
- flip chart paper
- mobile flip chart boards for those classes in KS2 which didn't have them
- a selection of Pie Corbett/Julia Strong publications to start a lending library for staff to access

All classes from Reception to Year 6 completed a fiction unit in the first half of the spring term using the Talk for Writing approach. This enabled all staff to share good practice and discuss what has worked well for the pupils. The following impact has been a direct result of the training:

- There is now a consistent approach across the school to the way writing is taught.
- NQTs and less experienced members of staff have reported that there is now a structure to their teaching and they feel more confident in their own teaching and the learning of the pupils.
- Washing lines are clear evidence of learning taking place and the use of flip chart paper to create working walls has enabled us to develop more independence in our learners.
- Teachers are becoming more confident with the process and are beginning to be more creative with the model texts they are writing.
- We have started to see some real evidence of joined up cross-curricular teaching of writing linked to modelled texts used in English lessons.
- The children's vocabulary has improved.
- KS2 teachers have reported that the children are much better at writing in paragraphs.
- The whole school training has made a huge difference. There are no mixed messages between staff and therefore everyone is able to build upon the same foundations.
- There is a clear structure to the learning process.
- Children enjoy the process.
- Parents were impressed at our recent Parents' Forum when the pupils recited the modelled text that they had been learning.

In preparation for the second whole staff training day, most staff trialled a non-fiction unit.

Throughout the process, we have been part of a wider network of schools. Ourselves and a number of other local schools, who are in close partnership together, all partook in the whole staff training days together. This has been particularly beneficial for the following reasons:

- English subject leaders across the schools involved are able to have a professional dialogue about how we are teaching TfW and to support each other.
- Schools are visiting other schools to see how it is working in other settings.
- Consistent messages have been given to all the schools about the process.
- We are planning to use Iris Connect filming equipment to film parts of lessons and to share good practice across schools.

As part of the training, a 'Project Team' was set up in each school. This consisted of a few key teachers from each school who would assume the role of lead teachers in driving the project in each school. Project leader days have:

- Been very helpful to clarify specific things and to enable project leaders to be one step ahead of the rest of the teachers so they are able to offer support and advice.
- Ensured that there have been trouble-shooting opportunities both within and between schools.
- Allowed an opportunity for clarification.
- Allowed an opportunity to reflect on practise and improve it.
- Allowed time to think, reflect and discuss next steps for the partnership and individual schools.
- Enabled staff to network between schools and share good practice.

Julia Strong continues the story:

When I asked Rachel why she felt that it was important that headteachers are part of the project team, she explained that only by being a part of the project could she support her team in putting the project into action. Her understanding of the project had made Learning Walks so more productive.



When we asked all the project teams to discuss the difference they felt it had made putting the project teams at the heart of the training project, they were very clear about the difference their role had made. Their key points were these:

Effective training has to be part of a programme with time to trial ideas and reflect
It's good to have a group that understand the plot rather than have the blind leading the blind
It's allowed them to have a go – refine – reflect
then exchange ideas and reflect again
From a management perspective, the project teams felt that the project so far had shifted teaching up a level and enabled them to see much more progress on Learning Walks

Elaine Barry, the headteacher at Oak Green, is the lead of the Aspire group. At the close of the second training day she explained how pleased they were with the project:

"In our school it is very evident that our children are now walking on water and not wading through it which is how they felt before. The reason that the children are so confident now is that they have a very clear structure that has provided them with a lot of language development. This has helped them to really focus and see the nitty gritty things they need to put in their writing to get the levels up."

The project team will meet again this summer to discuss progress and decide how they want to move forward and maintain and develop the Talk for Writing approach within their schools.