



## LESSON STUDY RESEARCH REPORT

# Using Lesson Study to raise standards in early writing

Lucy Parker

*Elm Tree Community Primary School, Lowestoft, Suffolk, United Kingdom*

### **Abstract**

**Background:** The purpose of the study was to improve early writing progression for struggling Year 1 pupils by using a Lesson Study approach that involved collaborative planning, teaching, observing, and reflecting.

**Aims:** The aim of the study was to improve early writing progression for a small group of unmotivated and anxious Year 1 pupils through a Lesson Study approach, focusing on using phonetically plausible spelling, building on familiar phrases/sentences, encouraging creativity with language, and providing opportunities for peer feedback and short, timed writing intervals to reduce anxiety.

**Methods:** The project used a lesson study sequence and introduced strategies such as imitating and commenting on each other's work, offering specific praise, and timed writing intervals to help boost progress for students with varying levels of confidence and anxiety in writing.

**Findings:** Lesson Study approach improved early writing progression for unmotivated and anxious pupils through strategies such as repeating structures, timed challenges, and group motivation. Pupils made progress through imitation and positive reinforcement from peers, with specific praise being powerful. Short, timed intervals for writing helped anxious writers.

**Implications:** The findings suggest that collaborative learning and positive reinforcement can improve writing skills in students, particularly those lacking confidence or experiencing anxiety. Lesson studies can be an effective way to identify and implement successful teaching strategies.

**Keywords:** lesson study; story writing; literacy; collaborative learning; primary education

## Context

As part of a school-led action research project, groups of primary schools across Suffolk identified priority areas to develop. Lowestoft Network identified writing as their priority area. With support from Suffolk's Learning and Improvement Service, it was decided to use a Lesson Study approach as a means of collaborative planning, teaching, observing & reflecting on learning in order to maximise progress. 34 teachers from eighteen Lowestoft Primary schools were involved in the project.

Elm Tree Primary School is a larger than average primary school that has recently grown from a first school to a primary school, it has moved to a new premises and has Y6 pupils for the first time this year, 2012. The majority of children are White British origin with a small proportion from Mixed Heritage or other ethnic backgrounds. It has higher than average free school meals and a high proportion of school action plus and statement of SEN children. The school has a Hearing Impaired unit and a Speech and Language unit and it runs a daily breakfast club. The school uses an enquiry led topic approach to engage children in their learning and children are taught to 'grow their own learning' by specifically focusing on 'Learning Powers' (Guy Claxton-BLP). Read, Write Inc was introduced to the school 3 years ago to provide the phonic tools needed for writing and reading and The Big Write is used throughout the school. Other initiatives in our toolkit are Talk for Writing, storytelling, guided reading, guided writing, a superb library offering lunchtime story sessions and free access, learning together (older/ younger pupils work together), numerous interventions and tutorials run by trained TLA. Numbers have recently fallen leading to the need for split year group classes. Currently we have an EY class, Y1/EY class and 2x Y1/2 classes in KS1. In KS2 there are 3 Y3/4 classes, 2 year 5 classes and 2 year 6 classes.

## Aims of the Lesson Study, Classes and Case Pupils

The aspect of the curriculum I wanted to improve was progression in early writing. I have a small group of children who have not made enough progress to go up a sub-level in writing from September 2011- April 2012.

My overall aim for this lesson study? We wanted to improve the way the identified children engage with their writing. We targeted the un-motivated, un-willing to write children, and also the anxious, frustrated writers. We wanted to help the children to use phonetically plausible spelling, build on familiar phrases/ sentences, to enjoy talking about writing/ ideas and enjoy being creative with language.

### Case Pupils

**Child 1. BD (girl) Y1:** A sociable, happy girl who started the year steadily but towards Christmas began to lose motivation to work or learn. Her Profile score on transfer to Y1 was 8, translated to 1C. Her parents confirmed that she was remarkably unmotivated at home, getting ready to go out/ eating tea, there appears to be no significant reasons or changes that have worried/ upset/ changed. She represents a group of pupils who are easily distracted; regularly give minimum effort and generally lack motivation or drive (girls and boys).

Initial Assessment: Nov 2011 Level P8 (1C) March 2012 Level 1C. Current Assessment: May 2012 Level 1C (on her way to 1B). Final Assessment July 2012 1B

#### Success Criteria

1. **30.4.12 I can use familiar phrases and remember a repeating structure.**
2. **28.5.12 I can adapt and invent text.**
3. **11.6.12. My word choices are interesting. My ideas are sometimes in order. My sentences are joined together. (Pushing NC1B buttons).**

**Child 2. HB (boy) Y1** represents a group of pupils who have difficulty making progress into 1C, (boys & girls). Sticking points – not using phonic knowledge to spell unknown/ more exciting vocabulary & the quantity of phrases. He can be ‘rigid’ in his thinking and has been on an Individual Behaviour Plan (IBP) in EY and autumn 2011. His frustration/anger/ anxiety would mean a physical reaction, he is reluctant to structure sentences and avoids anything challenging without 1-1 support.

Initial Assessment: Nov 2011 P8 ; March 2012 Level 1C (using APP/ the Criterion Scale; Assessment May 2012 Level 1B (I would like more evidence.) Final assessment July 2012 working at 1B.

#### Success Criteria

1. **30.4.12 I can use familiar phrases and remember a repeating structure.**
2. **28.5.12 I can begin to change text with increased confidence.**
3. **11.6.12 I can sequence my writing and select words for impact. I can use different sentence openings. (Pushing NC1A buttons)**

**Child 3 HM (boy) Y1** represents a group of children (boys) who have made little or erratic progress. Between March and May he has been awarded a statement of SEN and 1-1 support for a number of hours. He has issues beyond school and is often very tired as he wakes up as early as 4am. He is reluctant to speak and doesn’t engage with others easily. He is beginning to form some closer friendships. His phonic skills are still very low, he avoids as much writing / mark making as he can and often opts out of talking.

Initial assessment March 2012 P5. Current assessment May 2012 P6. Final Assessment July 2012 P7

#### Success Criteria

1. **30.4.12 I can use familiar phrases and remember a repeating structure.**
2. **28.5.12 I can use familiar phrases and add own ideas.**
3. **11.6.12 I can contribute words orally and group letters leaving spaces between them (Scribed/ shared writing = P7)**

### First research lesson (RL1)

Success Criteria: I can use familiar phrases and remember a repeating structure.

Resources: Funny Bones by Alan Ahlberg. 1<sup>st</sup> page 'on a dark, dark hill stood a dark, dark town. In the dark, dark town was a dark, dark etc', A2 paper, Marker Pen (story map)

Teacher: Lucy Parker. Class 29. No TA

Observers: Child 1 BD Lucy Garwood, Child 2 HB Angela Tregear, Child 3 HC Caron Thompson.

1. Repeated reading, modelled, shared, story mapping, with actions, expression, practice, performance.
2. All observed pupils enjoyed listening to reading and actions.

**Child 1:** Listened joined in actions but didn't offer suggestions at all nor did she join in with the group reading the text. Passive with partner, off task and was talking while groups were performing.

**Child 2:** Listened joined in beginning and end of group reading but distracted in the middle. Offered ideas, but inappropriate way, jumping up, shouting out, whispering, tapping, and climbing on / off chairs... When asked who he was working with replied, 'no one!' Avoided any practice and on watching others perform was shouting, 'I'll do it!' He put his hand over another child's mouth shouting, 'what about me?'

**Child 3:** Listening, but flapping arms, making noises, hands in mouth, participated intermittently with group reading, fingers in and out of mouth. Offered ideas, knew the order/ sequence of phrases, chose a partner straight away. Works with group.

3. The Post lesson interviews revealed that children liked listening and writing. Not a great deal of information.

In Lesson 2 we planned to use a lot of action, expression, repetition, and with TA support were able to plan for ability grouping (3 supported groups). We also decided to try an element of competition (writing races) to keep a repeated structure in which to write.

## Second research lesson (RL2)

Success criteria:

- **Child 1.** I can adapt and invent text.
- **Child 2.** I can begin to change text with increasing confidence.
- **Child 3.** I can use familiar phrases and add my own ideas.

In this lesson we planned to use a repeating 'order of events' specifically to enable all children to become comfortable with what they were required to do. It also provided at least 5 opportunities to succeed in one session. It offered opportunities for children to observe peers, copy peers and finally grow into using their own ideas. This was something we noticed in the round 1 of lesson studies at Carlton Colville School with a pupil representing a similar group of children. We were interested to see if it would benefit learning across schools. Interestingly, we had observed a very physical change

in the observed pupil who with each repetition physically stepped further and further away from her initial position of right next to the teacher/ support/ comfort zone.

Teacher: Lucy Parker. Class 29. 2 x TA

Observers: Child 1 BD Lucy Garwood, Child 2 HB Angela Tregear, Child 3 HC Caron Thompson.

After displaying 6 sheets of A2 paper (each with a simple picture of hill, town, street, house, staircase, cellar) Teacher models using talk for writing, ideas for a different kind of hill, not a dark, dark hill but possibly a? ? ? breezy? ? ?.

Then repeats the following sequence...

1. Think about a town, not a dark, dark town though, how shall we describe this town? Talk to a partner.
2. Children have 1minute to go and write descriptive words on a post it and stick it on the 'town' sheet of paper.
3. How did you do? Teacher selects some juicy offerings and identifies words where children have used phonics to spell new and exciting (WOW) words.
4. Repeat

Finish by teacher modelling the possibilities of using posted describing words to write a new version of the text.... 'on a windy, bumpy hill there was a sleepy, creepy town...'

We discovered:

1. The 'writing race' had really motivated the boys. **Child 2** only needed 1 round of 'racing' to begin writing many post its, enjoying the physical 'dash' the speed having taken away the pressure of 'How do you write...?' He was happily using phonic sounds to attempt increasingly more 'WOW' words. Post session he reported, 'I love racing the timer and sticking post its.' 'I learned writing sounds.' 'To improve it I would colour in the pictures.'
2. **Child 3** also loved the 'dash' he relied on others to generate ideas initially, with each repetition his motivation to have a go and have something to 'post' began to increase. Observer noted this group of children had a lot of difficulty generating exciting ideas; decided to experiment grouping to 'motivation'.
3. **Child 1** initially would only write by copying another child's post it. She did begin to write her 'own' words but in each instance they were words that had already had been modelled by the teacher. She did use phonic clues around the room to help her sound out words. She did the minimum and stopped. She reported 'I like writing, it is good.' 'I need to be good and listen.' 'I learnt about a skeleton.'

Strategic moves for lesson 3:

- *Timed challenges*
- *Repeating structures*
- *Group to 'motivation'*

- *Create opportunities for children who need to observe and imitate others to do so in a constructive-‘learning from each other’ way, e.g. Take the time to walk around the class looking at each other’s ideas and spotting success. Encourage children to discuss & use ideas they have spotted. This, again, was another technique we found helpful with other lesson study rounds.*

### Third research lesson (RL3)

Success Criteria:

- Child 1 My word choices are interesting. My ideas are sometimes in order. My sentences are joined together.
- Child 2 I can use familiar phrases and add own ideas.
- Child 3 I can contribute words orally and group letters leaving spaces between them (Scribed/ shared writing = P7)
- Model making innovations using words collected from lesson study 2 (Post-its)
- Read it through to children.
- Children join in reading through with adult.
- Give children time to write their own story section by section.
- Groups use cards with word suggestions generated in lesson study 2 to help structure ideas.
- Take time between sections for pupils to look/ share success and use new ideas ... ‘Try an idea on’....

We have been unable to complete this last lesson using lesson study observers. (Ofsted, illness, time to fit 4 cycles in) so I intend to teach the lesson and use TA support to work with and observe the 3 pupils. I found that grouping to ‘motivation’ enabled the ‘imitation/innovation’ cycle and surprisingly the least motivated had not only imitated word choices but then generated their own vocabulary. Child 3, in particular made strong progress and was engaged in the physical process of writing which was a first. He was as delighted with himself as I was! Interestingly when I mapped out APP progress the 2 motivated writers (writing at NC2B) had also been extended without needing a different input. Child 1 and 2 enjoyed their work, used emotive vocabulary and wrote with much more focus.

### Impact on pupil learning and progress

- Pupils who lack confidence to write independently make more progress when teaching offers opportunities to look, imitate (copy) others especially if the teacher asks children to comment on the ideas they have seen and reinforces the learning desired, e.g. phonetic spelling, courageous words, more than 1 idea etc. This seems to be because it turns copying into a

positive 'learning from each other' experience and shows the pupil that they are using a valuable learning technique.

- Pupils who lack confidence to write independently make more progress when teaching offers opportunities for pupils to comment and congratulate each others' success because specific praise from peers is very powerful.
- Anxious writers who are concerned about 'doing it right' make more progress when given short, timed intervals to write in because there isn't time to worry.
- Anxious writers who are concerned about 'doing it right' make more progress when given 'more than you would think necessary' repeated structures to work within because, like buying a new pair of shoes, they can have a jolly good look, have a think, try them on, see if they fit, take them for a bit of a walk and see how they feel and then 'bingo!' buy into the whole writing/ shoe buying thing!
- Children make more progress in writing if they have been encouraged to play with the language involved because they have more fun and fun makes you smile and smiling shows pupils that you are pleased with their learning.

### Impact on practice and future teaching

- The impact of Lesson Studies has been felt from session 1.
- Making multiple observations from one session is a valuable source of information.
- Identifying children that represent what you want to unravel is vital.
- Very quickly you all gain 3x ideas, 3x solutions, 3x pupils that make progress, 3x years of experience, 3x viewpoints on assessment, 3x planning power, 3 x support if all goes pear shaped!

The process has built relationships that are constructive, the observation/ planning/ delivering cycle really does feel a joint& severally responsible process, really any one of the team could deliver the lesson. This feels like the opposite of other observations and allows progress to be more rapid because no individual is being judged and everyone wants to see what happens next!

My teaching certainly will include the findings of our lesson study and I have found myself, when stumped, thinking, what would Angela, Caron and Lucy say? I would be interested to see if Lesson Study within one school can be as effective, you are then working within familiar relationships which alter the dynamics. I did find that the cycle of lesson study meant that within a half term/ term I was missing chunks of teaching time, I would like to experiment with different time structures, e.g. what would happen if you used all 3 sessions within 1 week? What about High Schools & Primaries working together?

## Impact on departmental and school approaches to teaching, learning and CPD

I know that our school is already experimenting with Lesson Study in KS2 and would welcome Lesson Studies in KS1.

There is an impact on class teaching time and the logistics of seeing a sequence of Lesson Studies through will need consideration. The positive impact for children and teachers does balance the equation very quickly. It is difficult to see that impact before you have actually begun the process, you can hear about it but remain sceptical, it really comes to life once you have got stuck in to round one, it generates its own energy once unleashed!

We will, I am quite sure, be feeding back to Governors and teaching staff at school. I would be delighted to pass on the positives to others.

## Personal reflections

I have really enjoyed the opportunity to observe children over a period of uninterrupted time, seeing themes repeating in 3 different settings, and the support of colleagues. Similarly I have found the opportunity to see how other schools record data, use APP grids, level a piece of writing far more useful than moderating sessions in the past.

I feel that I have much more accurate information about the children observed and am surprised to find that the perception that child 3 is less 'switched on' than child 1 is totally wrong! I particularly like having the documented evidence from an independent observer to back up that fact when it comes to 'surprising' others for various reasons.

## References

Corbett, P. (2003) How to teach Story Writing at Key Stage 1 (Routledge, London)

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