

The tiger who came to class!

When education consultant **Debra Kidd** was asked to help Girnhill infant's school's reluctant readers, she created a cross-curricular creative project on 'the tiger who came to tea'.

"A statemented child (speech and language) couldn't wait for his turn in the role play area and wanted to be recorded pretending to be the troll. He was so engaged that he 'forgot' he didn't like to talk in front of other people!" (Year one teacher.)

The 'Chrysalis project'

Thirty schools who took part in 'the Chrysalis Project' in Wakefield – a local authority-funded campaign to help the area's primary schools make their lessons more creative.

The LA provided ASTs to teach classroom teachers new techniques – and I was sent to Girnhill infants' school for a term.

I was asked to lead a cross-curricular creative project, where children would use role play, art,

Debra as the tiger!



movement and music to develop more confidence in writing. I wanted to create a classroom atmosphere where children 'can't wait' to start – where they 'forget' they don't like school/work/literacy/numeracy and instead are begging for the pen, the microphone or the puzzle. A creative curriculum, and a willingness to break the boundaries of the normal school day, can create this drive.

Stories bring learning to life in primary schools. Stories from books, stories from pictures and stories from history make the reason for lessons clear. One head teacher in the Chrysalis project said: "I realised that this is truly inclusive learning – the impact is as significant on the gifted and talented as it is on reluctant and disengaged children – they all achieved together."

It is easy to generalise about creative projects, but it is important to be specific and targeted when planning outcomes and processes for children. In Girnhill infant's school, there was concern about literacy, especially among the boys. Many children were labeled 'reluctant writers'.

At first, my creative lessons worked – but there were issues with 'flow'. The school had a timetable overhaul – to carve out long periods for this work. This made literacy and topic work more fluid.

One of the teachers explained: "We were amazed at how many children were rushing to pick up pens and get their ideas down on paper, but frustrated that we would have to stop them in full flow to move on to another 'subject'. It made no sense! So we talked to the head and rearranged the timetable so we could have whole mornings, or even days, dedicated to this work. It made a huge difference."

The tiger

In developing any new curriculum model, it is wise to consider what you want to keep from your old one. The teachers were keen to keep a focus on Healthy Eating, which was usually taught at this time of the year.

I asked the teachers: "What books do you have with characters who eat unhealthily?" The instant response was: "The tiger!"

With this new timetable, I planned a more coherent scheme of work with the teachers based on the book 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea' by Judith Kerr.

The book was perfect because the character is redeemed in the story, and assisted out of poor behaviour patterns. This allows children to place themselves in the shoes of the expert, and forces them to argue in favour of health.

Too often we approach health teaching from a deficit perspective – children are asked to share 'confessions' of poor eating habits then instructed to change. This makes the impetus to change external and creates a mental block



– one which is familiar to anyone who's dieted! As soon as you are told you can't have something, you want it.

But by helping the tiger to change his habits, children can explore the issues from a distance and make informed choices removed from their own eating habits. It's a subtle difference, but an important one.

So, with their class teacher, the children read 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea'. The tiger invades a little girl's house and eats her cake, biscuits and sandwiches then moves on to consume the entire contents of the fridge, the pantry and all of Daddy's beer. In the illustrations, the contents of tins and packages are not entirely clear.

In role as the little girl, Sophie, and her Mum, the children were asked to write a shopping list to replace all the things the tiger had eaten. When the tins in the pictures were not labeled, they needed to imagine what might be in them – contextualising the story with their own kitchens and cupboards. This task asked the children to focus on what the tiger ate – essential to the recounting task to follow.

The next morning, as the TA took a register, the class received a message. There was a visitor who wanted to speak to them in the hall. The visitor was me – teacher-in-role – as the zoo keeper. And I was mad! My tiger was sick. He had been vomiting all night and was refusing to come out to entertain the zoo visitors. What had happened? The children began to tell me what he had eaten:

"Beer!"
"Cake!"
"Biscuits!"

"You fed my tiger beer, cake and biscuits?"
I demanded.

"He took them!" the children explained.
 "He's greedy – we couldn't stop him!"
 "He had grass – that makes cats sick!"

"What was he doing out of the zoo in the first place?
 You should have kept an eye on him!"

The children were defensive– after the child asked why I had let the tiger escape, the children wanted to know. They showed complete commitment to the suspension of disbelief. One child accused (quite rightly!): "You try telling a tiger to stop eating – he might have eatened [sic] me!"



Forum theatre

We ran some 'Forum Theatre' to discuss how the evening could have gone differently. Forum Theatre (devised by Augusto Boal) allows events to be replayed with the audience shifting from 'spectators' to 'spectactors'. They can interrupt the story and make suggestions which would change the course of the narrative.

The zoo keeper interrupted to ask: "Why didn't you call the zoo to say there was a tiger at your door?" We tried out the new scene – it transpired that, when the children called, there was no answer. The children were seeing that stories are written with only one possibility exposed, but many more beneath the surface. They reconstructed many other alternatives in their role play and in their questions. They were 'in the zone' and ready to learn.

The zoo keeper reluctantly admitted that the zoo should do more to educate their animals about table manners and self control. I asked if the children would be willing to help? Would they invite the tiger back to tea and teach him about eating healthily and moderately? They agreed.

Writing results

I have done this scheme of work many times since and the reaction has always been tremendous in years one and two. In a year two class, this task led the children to rush to grab paper and pens to write an invitation to the tiger. This class gave their parties some lovely titles, like 'Good mood food for tigers' and 'Terrific tiger tea'.

In the next part of the project, the children prepared for the tiger's return. They wrote invitations (writing to inform) and wrote healthy recipes for the zoo (writing to instruct). They explored the vocabulary of cooking - chopping, slicing, grating and mixing – and explored healthy eating. At the end, the children made paper models of the dishes for the Tiger. This was a practical solution to the fact that I was going to be the tiger – and I couldn't eat all the real food they would make! The children seemed OK with this.

Revealing the tiger

On the day, we were a little apprehensive. We had parents asking (a little nervously) if a 'real' tiger was coming to school. The children were excited and a little scared. How would they react to the reality - that the tiger was me in a furry hat and coat? I blackened my nose and knocked on the door.

There were wide eyes and hands over mouths. Some of the children moved away from me. Some crept closer to stroke my coat. But none looked disappointed.

The tiger was still greedy. He ate quickly and rudely and didn't say thank you. At the end he complained that there had been no chocolate cake or beer. And then he said he had tummy ache.

The children were very cross. How rude! Did I realise how much effort they had put in? They started to tell me off. They explained that they had made healthy things to eat and explained why the things I had eaten were good for me.

"Carrots have vitamin A in them, you know!"

"You can't have too much sugar – your teeth will drop out and then you won't be able to chew your meat."

They told me how disappointed they were that I didn't even say thank you. I looked sad and explained that I was just excited and hadn't thought about how they would feel. I said I would like to write a thank you letter - but that I couldn't write. The children said they'd help. A former reluctant writer was the first to come to the front, hold my hand and help me form the letters.

Follow-up

In follow-up sessions, the children wrote their own stories about teatime escapades with other wild animals. If we hadn't run out of time, we could have written new safety rules and designed signs for the zoo. But it was half term, and time to start another adventure.

And many more adventures have followed. One teacher joked to me that her class now only expects the unexpected. Registration might be taken by her one day and Moses the next. This excitement keeps learning fresh. The children see their teacher taking risks and making an effort to enthuse them. In return, they help to make the fantasy work.

When teachers relinquish some of their control, pupils learn how to take on some of that responsibility. In all the schools I worked in, these shifts in power caused radical changes in the behaviour and achievement of pupils in every year from reception to year nine.

The future?

Most of the schools are continuing the creative work they started in the Chrysalis project. Some have secured funding from Creative Partnerships to develop this work, achieving 'Enquiry and Change' school status (see creative-partnerships.com).

One of the teachers wrote to me: "My children's creative writing outcomes during an Ofsted lesson based on the Chrysalis work were deemed 'outstanding'. Yes!"

And it's not just the writing that has improved. In some challenging schools, where teachers were struggling to keep children in the building, there was a cultural shift. A year one teacher told me: "I knew it had worked when a

virtual non-attender turned up with a black eye feeling ill - refusing to have the day off because he didn't want to miss the session."

Another year three teacher said: "Our 'ping!' moment came after the project - when we realised the children could now be trusted to find their own spaces to work, stay engaged and produce strong outcomes independently. I'm not exaggerating when I say that, before, they would have absconded!"

I wanted to tell stories – and I got to tell one about a tiger. But across the Chrysalis project, there were children travelling the planet, taking a penguin home and rescuing women and children from the great fire of London. There were children becoming archaeologists, historians, scientists, space travelers and members of La Resistance. These children astounded the adults with what they were capable of.

Never let children bang their heads on the glass ceilings of your expectations. They are capable of much, much more if you give them room to create.

Debra Kidd is a senior lecturer in education at Manchester Metropolitan university. She is also the director of Integrate Education - a consultancy helping schools, LAs and colleges to bring creativity into the classroom.

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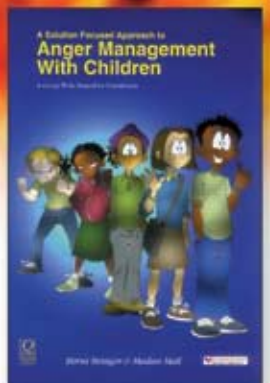

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