

Author's Chair

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Background:

I work at Dunmow St Mary's Primary School in Essex, where I am a Year 6 teacher and the Lead Teacher for English and for Design Technology. From September 2019, I am the OU Teachers' Reading Group Leader for North Essex and an affiliate teacher for Writing For Pleasure. I am closely involved with developing our school as a Writing For Pleasure school. For my own pleasure, I enjoy writing poetry and short fiction.

Principle(s) in focus:

My project on the **Author's Chair** addresses in particular the following strands of the Writing For Pleasure pedagogy:

1. [Build a community of writers](#)
2. [Treat every child as a writer](#)
3. [Read, share, think and talk about writing](#)

Aims:

My aims for the introduction of an Author's Chair segment in every writing session were:

- To draw attention to the importance of discussing writing amongst the community of children- and teacher-writers
- To provide an opportunity for children to ask questions about their writing to an authentic audience
- To raise the importance of an audience for every piece of writing

Description:

How I set up Author's Chair as a routine with the class

1. At the very start of the year, I shared with my new class the general 'shape' of a writing session:
 - a) Mini-lesson (5-10 minutes)
 - b) Class write while the teacher carries out pupil-conferencing (15-30 minutes)
 - c) Author's chair (10-20 minutes)
2. I shared that Author's Chair was the part of the writing session where:
 - Anyone could come to share their writing with the whole class (the Author in the Chair!)
 - The author could ask the class questions about their own writing and consider their response
 - The class could ask questions of the author
3. Children would do their writing in the session, I would conference with them, then at the end would ask who would like to share their writing with the class. Children would then volunteer - I was careful that I recognised everyone's achievements, and did not favour the writing I considered worthy of showing. The chosen author would then sit on a chair facing their class, and would read aloud sections

or the entirety of their writing. Everyone would sit in the carpet area to listen and read those children's efforts. There was a designated space where the children would carry out Author's Chair – I think it was important to move the children from their desks to this space, to emphasise the importance of listening to and commenting on one particular piece of work.

4. The visualiser proved an effective way to have the author's work clearly displayed to all the class. I found on some occasions, when the visualiser wasn't used, that other children found it very difficult to follow the author's reading, or to comment on the writing: I would go so far as to say it's necessary for the children to be able to see the writing. I soon discovered that this time was very popular with the class! I had to organise a sign-up system in each writing session allowing children to let me know if they wanted to be the Author in the Chair.

5. Some children who were anxious about sharing their writing publicly didn't want to sit in the Author's Chair - we can all understand that, and I never wanted to force anyone to present their work in this way. There were three ways in which I have overcome these issues for some children:

- a) As Author's Chair became a regular routine for the class, I wanted to make it a fun time as well as critically important to the children's writing development. I had seen on social media sites that some American schools had special Author's Chairs, decorated with fancy cloths and tinsel which seemed a great idea. Even more appealing to me and my class were the giant swimming pool floats shaped like animals or birds. The class chose 'Timmy the Toucan' (pictured!) to use as our Author's Chair. It adds some humour to the lessons and class ownership. As a result, it has also made some children keener to take part as Authors in the Chair.



Figure 2: Timmy the Toucan (our Author's Chair!)

- b) A few children felt their work initially was not 'good enough' to share. I believe that ALL children's writing should be celebrated when such hard work has gone into producing it. I tried to encourage these children by showing them how their writing was better than they thought (it really was!) but they were still shy. Finally I offered to read it for them and display it to the class. This was acceptable and since they saw how positively it was received by their peers, they have been much happier to take the Chair themselves.

- c) Some children were still lacking in confidence and so I have tried doing some 'Mini-Author's-Chair' sessions with a smaller group. While the rest of the class are working on writing, a small group listens to one of the more shy children read and discuss their compositions. The effect of this can do so much to help particular writers develop confidence.

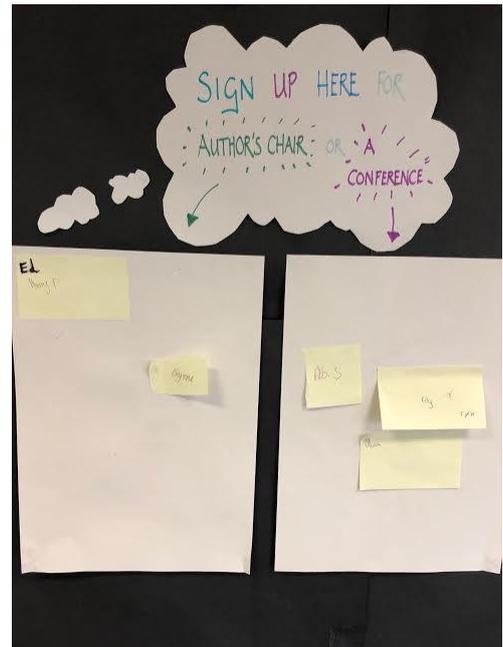


Figure 1: Sign up for Author's Chair!

Impact:

Incorporating Author's Chair has contributed substantially to the following:

- Increased confidence in sharing writing
- Developing children's critical skills of their own and others' writing
- Creating a supporting 'writing community' workshop feel in the classroom
- Developing how children 'see' the effect their writing has on an audience

What do the children say?

I surveyed the children to find out what they thought about Author's Chair. Twenty children completed the survey.

Q. What is the point of the Author's Chair sessions?

1. To share our work with the class
2. To get ideas for improvements
3. To give ideas/help each other

Of particular interest were their perceptions of how Author's Chair had already helped them by being made a regular part of each writing session.

Q. Do you think any of these writer skills have improved for you by taking part in Author's Chair sessions?

It's helped to give me more writing confidence	12
It's helped to increase my interest in other children's writing	9
It's helped to make our class feel we are a writing team	6
It's helped me to see how an audience reacts to different people's writing	8
It's helped me to ask questions about someone else's writing	7
Making comments about someone else's writing	7

Reflection:

Children initially just wanted to share their writing, often asking general questions such as 'What do you like about this?' or 'What can I improve?' Gradually though, children would come ready to ask the audience what effect they were having: 'I wanted this to be funny. What bits make you laugh most? Do you think I could make it funnier? How could I do that?'

Whether or not they were in the Chair, all the children really seemed to enjoy sharing, commenting and listening to others' writing. As time went on, and the Author's Chair became established, one of the most rewarding things for me to observe as a teacher – and I think for the individual authors – was to see the children's growing understanding that an individual's writing – *their* voice, not someone else's – could have a specific effect on the audience, that the audience reaction could be 'the making or breaking' of the success of the writing. One child said to me 'I can see that that piece is very like how H's writing we heard just now worked'. This child was not referring to *what* the children had each written, but how they had both created a similar *effect* or *inner response* in the writing.

By Christmas, the children had absorbed some of the 'meta-language' of discussing writing. The Author's Chair sessions at their best became discussions between author and audience. On one occasion, one child said: "I like your ideas but how does the whole story 'teach' the audience? That's the point of these plays we are writing."

In both these casual comments, I was very pleased to see a sort of level of writing 'analysis' far deeper than I would have expected so early on in the establishment of Writers' Workshop.

My next plan to develop the Author's Chair is to use a random generator of questions to discuss writing. These are to develop the scope of the questions so that talk doesn't go stale and to make the questions more probing.

References:

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