

Moving stories: Exploring children's uses of media in their story telling and the implications for teaching about narrative in schools.

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ABSTRACT: This article draws on data from research with six ten-year-old children investigating the role of film and media in developing understandings of narrative. I present an account of one of the children, Connor (his chosen pseudonym), whose experiences represent a telling case of the dissonance found between children's knowledge and experience of narrative and what they were able to express in their school-based writing. I propose that films, games and cartoons impact on children's storytelling in distinct ways that relate to the particular affordances of their form. I present examples of children's experiences of media enhancing what they can express in their own narrative productions. However, I argue that there are some important conditions that teachers need to be aware of, that prompt children to use their experiences of media in their storytelling. I conclude by suggesting that children must be supported to draw on their holistic understanding of narrative in order to move from one media to another when reading and making their own stories.

KEYWORDS: Children, film, narrative, literacy, story, media, games, cartoons.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns about media influences on children's writing have been circulating the teaching of English for some time. The Newsom Report, *Half Our Future* observes:

Occasionally free composition produces a shapeless mess in which the memory of many televised Westerns often seems to be still riding the range of the pupils' memory (Central Advisory Council for Education [CACE], 1963).

Anxieties about the influence of popular media on children's literacy are expressed in the context of a common discourse about the nature of contemporary childhoods with headline grabbing analogies such as *Toxic Childhood* (Palmer, 2006). For many children, however, film, television and games are their earliest experience of narrative. If when they come into school, these experiences are not valued, the impact on developing literacy can be catastrophic.

Since the Newsom Report, the potentially positive influence of film and media on children's writing has become more widely acknowledged (Barrs, 2004; Willett, 2001; Haas Dyson, 1997). Furthermore, with the rise of related degree and postgraduate courses, the cultural value of film and television is more established. In the light of anxieties about childhood, however, teachers continue to feel uncomfortable about the role of media in the classroom (Lambirth, 2004). As a result, children self-regulate their uses of popular culture in their story-writing. Meek (1988) argues that if we want to see what children have learned from the texts they have encountered, then we have to look at their writing (and this can be extended to other texts children produce). She goes on to say that, given encouragement, children

“draw on the whole of their culture” in their writing (Meek, 1988 p. 3). In the literature about the relationship between reading and learning to write, there is evidence that, given the right encouragement, children attempt to draw on all their sources and, in particular, popular culture in order to create new stories (Willett, 2001). I propose that the question, for educators, is not whether or not Westerns (or any other media) should be allowed to ride the range in children's writing. We now, with some urgency, need to address the question of how we can help children to successfully transform their ideas from one media to another.

Responding to the above report, Millard (1997), expresses a common concern about children's and especially boys' writing:

The reference in the report will strike a chord with today's teachers, equally familiar with contemporary versions of boys' narratives, that read like storyboard treatments of favourite video and television narratives, all dialogue and no narrative description (Millard, 1997, p. 40).

Here a link is made between film and problems in writing, in particular copying ideas, using dialogue too much and not using enough narrative description. Questions arise, then, both about what constitutes a good story and what is considered good story writing in school. As Willett (2001) demonstrates, ideas about what make a good story in school are ingrained in contemporary pedagogical practices and, as a consequence, children's experiences of popular culture are not often seen as appropriate choices in story composition. Bearne and Wolstencroft (2006) discuss the challenge teachers face in acknowledging what children know about texts from popular culture and what is valued in the curriculum.

Children's cultural capital in terms of text knowledge may not always square with the kinds of literacy curriculum on offer in schools (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2006 p. 72).

In the following description of Connor's experiences, I attempt to highlight what happens when a child encounters a literacy curriculum which does not square with his own experiences of narrative from films, games and cartoons. I go on to explore the need for greater attention to be paid to offering children opportunities to draw on their own experiences of popular culture in their story-telling and, in particular, the attention we as teachers need to pay in enabling children to move from one story-telling medium to another.

THE RESEARCH

The fieldwork for this research took place over two years in a primary school in Sheffield, UK, chosen because of the interest in film of the staff and head teacher. Following my presentation about the research, children in Year 5 (aged ten) were asked to volunteer for a programme of activities about film. Of the twenty children who volunteered, six were selected by the class teacher, head teacher and myself on the basis that they might particularly benefit from participation and to demonstrate a range of different experiences. Three girls and three boys were selected to take part in the fieldwork, which incorporated quite traditional methods such as interviews with visual and collaborative methods including filmmaking, photography, written and oral storytelling. These activities elicited a great deal

of talk, from which I was able to generate narrative accounts of the children's identities in relation to film and literacy.

The main focus of this research was to address the question of what children learn about narrative from their engagement with children's films. Over the two years, I engaged with Connor (see below) twice a week in term time, and this varied from being part of the formal research activities, break time chat, playground and classroom observations. Over the course of the project, Connor worked within the whole group of six girls and boys, but most often with the other two boys who were friends. It was in this group that Connor created the short narrative film discussed below. Other activities were individual, paired or whole group. In this article, I present here a particular case, that of Connor, although I refer to the whole group or the group of three boys. In the course of the project Connor's experience emerged as distinct, both in terms of his particular interest in film and in terms of how this positioned him in relation to the school curriculum.

CONNOR

When I first visited Year 5, I presented them with information about my research and how to get involved if they would like to. Throughout this activity, I asked the children in the class to raise questions if they had any. One hand went up more than any other and within minutes I had learnt Connor's name and understood that he had already been contemplating some of my research questions:

I think all children's films have a message, Miss, a moral at the end. Do you?

Later he responded to a clip from the opening scene of the film, *Mirrormask* (McKean, 2005), by saying,

Well I think that girl is going to be the main character, the one we see in the first shot and the rest of the film will be about her problem and how she solves that problem.

Connor was clearly able to apply his knowledge of children's films to a new and unfamiliar text. Namely, the main character is often shown in close-up in the earliest moments of the film, and that she has a problem and that the film will conclude by solving the problem. Most children implicitly infer this as they watch and develop an understanding of films, but Connor was able to make this understanding explicit.

Initially, I had mixed feelings about selecting Connor because I was concerned that, whilst I might have wanted to work with Connor, I did not want to choose someone who would dominate the group too much or someone who "always got chosen for everything". When I discussed these concerns with the class teacher, her response came as a surprise. She pointed out that Connor, whilst being a popular member of the class, had never responded like that to a group discussion activity before and often became detached from classroom activity. Connor described himself as having an attitude that sometimes gets him into trouble with teachers and other adults. Furthermore, the teacher identified Connor as someone who was under-achieving in literacy, something she attributed to his home circumstances. The teacher

encouraged me to work with Connor, as she felt that he had demonstrated that film was a special area of expertise and the research would be a great opportunity for him.

Film, for Connor, was not background wallpaper, something he could take or leave or something to pass the time. Film was extremely important and part of the structure of his life. He described it as part of a routine; playing sport after school, watching television, having his tea and then at night, after bath time but before bedtime, watching films. In a fleeting discussion, he named two films he had recently watched, *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin, 2005) and *Cool Runnings* (Turteltaub, 1993), both of which were screened on television in the week prior to the interview. (Neither film is specifically a children's film and neither is a popular, contemporary film targeted at nine-year-old boys.)

Connor regularly made decisions about what he watched. He commented on a number of occasions that he didn't just watch something if it was on. He didn't flick channels; he noticed if there was a film on that he wanted to watch and then set aside time to watch it. If we substituted books for films, this would be perceived by many to be highly useful, literacy-related activity.

For Connor liking *Toy Story* (Lasetter, 1995) had become an aspect of his "ongoing" identity (Giddens, 1991 p. 54). "I'll always like *Toy Story*. I know that because it's a good film." He used the word "always" here in a nostalgic manner, acknowledging that he had moved on but also that the film had a status as the source of a story his mum told about him as a child. At the time of the first interview, his taste had changed and he used the example *High School Musical* (Ortega, 2006), which he said had real people in it and was about dancing. Connor's love of film was matched by his love of street dance, and school was an outlet for this interest. By the second phase in the project, when the group were devising ideas for their own film, he rejected *High School Musical* for films such as *Save the Last Dance* (Carter, 2001) and *Step Up* (Fletcher, 2006), which he perceived as more mature, whilst still about real people, difficult situations and dance. Like a reader of books, he sought out new film experiences because he had outgrown the ones he'd already "read".

Connor regularly talked about being able to see stories in his head:

C: it was about these two boys, brothers, and they had a real dad who was a yoga master. Anyway it was one of the boy's birthdays. They weren't twins. A big storm blew up and the two boys were separated. The father died. Then it was about seven years later and the two brothers were bought back together again.

B How do you know it was a film and not just an ordinary dream?

C: It just was.

[He looks at me as if to say can't you see it and I begin to think I am participating in a film pitch.]

B Well, it's a cracking idea for a film!

Within his idea, he encapsulated a great deal of knowledge of film. He knew that films had to have key characters, who have relationships with each other. He recognised the importance of dramatic moments, which are sometimes connected to extreme weather: the storm, or significant life events; a birthday. He also knew that films have to have a dramatic event early in the narrative, the disruption of order: the dad's death and the brothers' separation. Finally,

he showed he understood the conventional requirement for resolution: the reuniting of the two brothers. What's more he saw his idea in scenes including flashback and flash forward which signalled his understanding of the particular way film can move swiftly through time. Connor's ideas for films demonstrated complex understanding of the underlying structures of narrative and the particular ways films tell stories.

It might be anticipated that Connor is on a trajectory to becoming what the UK Film Council describe as an "avid" (UK Film Council [UKFC] & Stimulating World Research, 2007).

Avids' identities are bound up in film. It is who they are: a constant that frames and informs their perception of themselves and the wider world (UKFC & Stimulating World Research, 2007, p. 3).

It would also be reasonable to assume that Connor's love of stories in the moving image form would assist him in accessing the literacy curriculum. However, Connor's orientation towards school literacy was highly negative; he regularly said that he was not good at writing and occasionally expressed frustration about the stories he had in his head that he thought should be turned into films. He was not motivated by getting his ideas down on paper, because he became disappointed with the way his writing failed to match up with his multimodal imaginings. Evidently, Connor's avid engagement in film enabled him to infer meaning and respond to texts in complex ways but this asset did not positively impact on his school literacy identity.

When reading stories, children move readily between different forms of narrative to make meaning (Robinson, 1997). Writing stories drawing on different media, however, presents more difficulty, as Connor expresses:

Well mainly people just start with once upon a time but I think that's a bit boring really. It's what you'd use in a fairytale really. I'd start with something like – say it's like in a film – in an actual film it's come up with all't writing. And then I'd like think – cos in some films it says the film name and then something like, someone could wake up really fast and then say, "oh we're late" or something like that. And then you think, "oh what are they late for?" And then that makes it into a mystery. But I'm not that good at writing. I can think of a story in my head. I can think it through but then I'm quite slow at writing.

The scene Connor described sounds rather like the opening scene of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994), a film which he might well have seen. What he was able to both read and then articulate explicitly was the importance of setting up a question in the mind of the audience: What are they late for? This would perhaps imply a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between audience, text and the author or director of the text. However, Connor struggled to transfer this understanding to his writing. As an educator, this presented me with a dilemma about whether to accept that Connor's ideas are moving image-based and give him the opportunity to use film to tell stories, or whether to attempt to enable him to transform his filmic ideas into the written word. Kress argues that: "The means for making representations which we provide for children and for adults, are the means which enable them to be fully human and fully social" (Kress, 1995 p. 75). By limiting Connor's opportunities to draw on film in his own storytelling then, we were limiting his opportunity to be "fully human and fully social". By contrasting Connor's written work with his verbal

storytelling and film production, I am exploring what Connor already knows about stories from popular culture and the impact of different modes on what he is able to express. In order to make this comparison, it is important to offer an account of the way in which narrative is taught in schools.

TEACHING ABOUT STORY: CURRENT PRACTICE

In recent years, UK teachers have increasingly experienced new policies, strategies, initiatives and testing regimes aiming to effect changes in the skills of the workforce.

Governments seek to accomplish their educational goals through imposed national curriculum strategies that emphasize central regulation, high-stakes testing and over-determined pathways to accreditation (Millard, 2006, p. 210).

Literacy has been a particular target of these new curriculum strategies, with testing regimes leading to the domination of particular pedagogies (Hilton, 2001). These changes have implications for the ways in which children encounter story in school. The UK National Literacy Strategy (NLS) commenced its focus on writing in the year 2000 with a strong emphasis on teaching grammar and spelling, word- and sentence- level objectives separated from their context, leading to “reduced time spent on written composition” (Hilton, 2001, p. 5). In conjunction with the practice in schools to teach to the Year 6 SATs tests, this led to what Frater (2000) describes as an “anxious literalism” in the teaching of writing. Hilton describes activities such as filling in worksheets, writing in missing words and learning to spot adjectives and verbs. She goes on to highlight research (Bloor, 1979), which demonstrates that these activities, whilst not without value, are unlikely to improve children's ability to write or their performance in national tests.

In other words it does not matter how able the children are at spotting adjectives or adding connectives to prescribed sentences. They will not perform well in any national assessments or indeed in the larger arenas of culture, if they cannot write clearly, imaginatively and logically for themselves (Hilton, 2001, p. 5).

Hilton is particularly critical of the practice of shared or guided writing, which she argues is based on a misappropriation of research by Hillocks (1995) about the writing process. Hilton demonstrates that potentially useful ideas about shared writing are distorted by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and NLS in the guide and training manual for teaching writing, distributed to schools and newly qualified teachers in *Grammar for Writing* (DfEE, 2000). In this document the practice of teaching separate sentence- and word-level objectives is espoused, leading to objective-led teaching. This is accompanied by a prescribed, teacher-led, guided writing process, which has become a dominant pedagogic practice in primary literacy teaching. This involves the teacher working with a whole class, leading an out loud process of writing which could be rehearsing sentences before writing them down, using specific objectives from the text, sentence- or word-level work, or discussing and explaining why one linguistic decision might be better than another. Hilton argues that this, far from allowing children to gain an understanding of the drafting and editing processes of writing, as was encouraged by Hillocks (1995), has limited children's

opportunity to undertake independent writing in order to “explore their independent writer's voice” (Hilton, 2001 p. 6).

Hilton also expresses concern at the amount of shared writing that is recommended, leading to almost constant teacher-led activities. Not only are recommended writing activities frequently teacher-led but also, when children undertake individual tasks, they are regularly based on the immediate retelling of a story. Very limited time is available in the curriculum for independent or free writing, let alone oral storytelling, drama or making stories in other media forms. Yet the latter play an important role in enabling children to explore and experiment with the ideas, pleasures and understandings of story they may have encountered in a whole range of texts (Hilton, 2001).

It is common practice in the UK to give children a W.A.L.T. (We are learning to) in each written task, for example:

- Write the beginning of a Greek myth.
- Retell a story.
- Write the beginning of a story.
- Write the middle of a story.
- Draw a story map and retell a story.
- Start a story in three different ways.

Although these activities are potentially useful opportunities for children to develop as writers, they often include other constraints in relation to the stimulus texts. The style, genre, plot and storyline are often taken directly from the text the teacher has introduced. For example, I observed children writing three different openings of Cinderella. I also observed children listening to a story and then immediately afterwards writing it down. Barrs (2001) makes a highly important distinction between a simplistic concept of modelling where children are asked to retell a story they have just heard, and the more complex, tacit, longer-term, individual process by which children absorb ideas about story and then deploy them in their own creative work.

Pedagogical approaches which present children with direct “models” for their stories or which encourage children to base stories on ones that have just been read, depend upon crude theories of how reading influences writing (Barrs, 2001 p. 32).

These direct “models” of writing can also be seen as problematic for children for whom film or television is their central source of knowledge in relation to narrative. These children are often perceived to have a deficit of cultural experiences to draw on and in need of special interventions aimed at increasing their vocabulary and minimising the influence of popular media.

When asked about what makes a good story, all of the children in the research group, except Connor, quickly begin to talk about writing. They used the vocabulary and ideas from contemporary curriculum documents about teaching writing and particularly from an intervention currently popular in schools introduced by Wilson (2002). So, they described being given “success criteria” since being in Year 4; they referred to punctuation, wow words, rainbow writing (if you use good words, you can't use them twice), speech,

exclamation marks, connectives and power openers. All of these are identifiable as ideas they have learnt at school to help them write a good story and keys to gaining higher levels in their writing. Connor was the only one in the research group who did not immediately mention what he had been taught about story in school. He answered this question entirely differently, saying, "it depends on what sorts of stories you like". It is noticeable that, unlike his peers, he did **not** insert into his writing awkward and ill-suited figurative language, overly formal openings and inappropriate connectives. He did, however, attempt to draw on those experiences of narrative he had gained from popular culture, with varying degrees of success.

GAMES

The first substantial writing task the children undertook in Year 5 was to write the beginning of a Greek myth. Connor wrote:

Zenda and the legend of the wind waker

Long, long ago was a boy called Link and he had golden, shiny hair and he was known to be the legend of warriors. The evil gorgon had the power of strength and Link has the power of bravery and the power of wisdom.

[Loysin] the hands of Zelda. So the journey begins on lagoon island where his grandma lives. His grandma says to go and find his sister.

Connor's main character was called Link, which was also the name of the main character in a popular musical film *Hairspray* (Shankman, 2007), which Connor had seen. However, more salient was the heroic character Link from Nintendo's video game series *The Legend of Zelda*. Connor appeared to be drawing on both to invent his own character, who was the "legend of warriors". In terms of the structure of the story, Connor established a happy status quo and then introduced an enemy who caused a disruption or conflict within an otherwise "happy" scene. He worked within the conventions of a traditional story in relation to their characters and to what is suggested by the opening of the story. That is to say, we expect the hero to be involved in rescue or a battle to overcome evil. This narrative structure is also found in many quest games, which are also influenced by traditional story structures. Connor's use of language to express the qualities of their characters also reflected the influence of games. He used the phrases: "the power of strength," the "power of bravery" and the "power of wisdom". The word "power" is used here in a way that is similar to games, where characters have particular attributes such as strength which they use to defeat others and make progress. Repetition and the use of temporal devices such as: "So the journey begins", and "Long, long ago" implies a past tense – a fictional and mythical world which the reader must navigate. However, it stops short and reads perhaps like the brief back story offered to introduce new game elements rather than offering the fuller description which would earn Connor the literacy success his teacher believes he might be capable of.

In children's story writing, what Genette (1980) describes as the discourse, how the story is told, is highly valued. In the game, the discourse would be expressed through sound, music or visuals; language would be less important. However, what Connor most clearly took from games into his own story was the language. He drew briefly on one visual aspect – the "golden, shiny hair" of the main character – but he did not attempt to express what the other

modes of the game would have created. Neither did he use a first person narrator, which you might expect if the writer/game-player continues to think of him/herself as a character in the fictional world. He drew on the aspect of the game that was closest to the form in which he was being asked to work within, that of a written story. So he imitated the style of language used to establish the backstory of games rather than drawing more extensively on the aspects of the text such as setting and atmosphere, which characterise and enhance the narrative experience of games.

In their studies of how children's playing of online and computer games relates to their writing Mackey (2004) and Bearne and Wolstencroft (2006) demonstrate the importance of the modal affordances of different texts. When children attempt to draw on a fairy story in order to create a game, they draw on both sources but the mode of the final outcome determines the extent to which they can use their knowledge of games. In Bearne and Wolstencroft's study, the children were creating games, if paper-based versions, which allowed them to express their knowledge of the conventions, structure and language of games in their own stories. In order for children to fully draw upon their knowledge of games, they need opportunities to create games, but they also need support to transfer their understandings and experiences of narrative, beyond narrative structure and language, from games into their writing and vice versa.

CARTOONS AND COMIC STRIPS

In all of his written stories, Connor continued to pay little attention to the narrative discourse: his concern was with structure. Therefore, it was interesting to see how in an oral storytelling game, Connor lost interest in narrative structure and became focused on description. The story began: "Once upon a time there was a princess who lived in a magical kingdom with her cat":

Connor: And the cat turned into a big werewolf. And it's claws snapped off and then big claws went "shhhw" [*demonstrates growth of claws by cat/wolf with hands*]. And it turned into a werewolf and all its, all its. It walked into the shower so its skin went down, er its fur went down again so it wasn't all spikey. And when it came out it went like that [*gestures cat/wolf shaking itself*] and went all spikey again and then it went to look for the princess and it found a pea and it ate a pea and it got poisoned [*Looks up to finish and passes story on*].

What Connor described here was something he could see and hear as he described it. His description draws on animations such as *Tom and Jerry* (Hanna and Barbera, 1940) or the more recent *Itchy and Scratchy Show* which features on *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1987). Benign paws turn suddenly into sharp claws. Fur sticks up and then appears smooth again. It is a convention of cartoons and comic strips featuring animal characters to use fur to express a wide range of meanings. The spiking up of fur to make the character look cool, scary or strong is then contrasted with wet or flat fur where the character is made to look silly, reduced to a small, timid version of themselves. This relates to the way the humour of these animations is constructed in terms of power relationships. The two main characters are set as rivals and this is expressed through visual and audio modes, drawn animation and sound effects and soundtrack, not through use of language. In his verbal storytelling Connor was

able to pay more attention to this aspect of the discourse and in doing so drew on his understandings of drawn characters in cartoons and comic strips.

Connor introduced to this story the idea that characters can be flattened, exploded, poisoned and still “live to see another day”. In this context – an oral story based on ideas from cartoons and comics – it seems that almost anything can happen and characters appear in a more random manner. All the children introduced a wider range of characters appeared from popular culture, including vampires, zombies and Star Wars characters. In this context, all of the children were less concerned with rules and were more playful. The new characters they introduced tended to be character-types who were more dangerous and action-orientated than those in their school-based writing. Despite this more playful and transgressive approach to storytelling elicited by the use of oral stories based on cartoons, the children were concerned about coherence and paid far more attention to how they were describing characters, setting and action because they were keen to take the audience – each other – with them in their storytelling. Clearly, medium and audience influence dramatically the extent to which the children immerse themselves in creating narrative. Oral storytelling is a particularly useful means of enabling children to explore their repertoires of experiences of story from popular culture (Robinson, 1997). It also enables children to gain awareness of the impact on the audience of their performance as a storyteller, encouraging them to draw on language and gesture to communicate the sounds, music and visual detail of a narrative.

FILMMAKING

Connor was the only child in the group that had tried out filmmaking at home before the research started. He had borrowed his Gran's mobile phone to experiment with a stop-motion, animation technique, with voice-over and editing in camera. When it came to the devising of a storyline for his film, he already knew what he wanted to make a film about. His film idea was clearly influenced by his interest in street dance and “talent”-spotting, reality-TV shows. During the whole period of script development, Connor resisted writing anything, but he did add to and change ideas as he started to see what would work on film. Parker (2006) found that for some children, their film productions demonstrated their understanding of narrative far more effectively than their writing: “The students' compositional skills with regard to structuring a narrative in film were far ahead of their written compositional skills” (Parker, 2006, p. 153).

This was certainly the case for Connor, whose story had a strong narrative arc from the first moment he thought of it. His film told the story of two friends who entered a talent contest to do street dance and fall out because of the competition between them. The story also featured a headmaster who wanted his own favourite pupil, a ballet dancer, to win. The story ended by consolidating the friendship and the boys jointly winning the competition. Connor's film production was a far more complex narrative structure than he managed to achieve in his writing, often because his ideas for his writing were ambitious and he didn't manage to finish them, rather than because he had simple ideas in his writing. He drew on television drama in his combination of the main storyline, the boys' friendship, and the secondary one, in which the headmaster shows his bias.

Connor spent a long time choosing costumes for the film, bringing in street dance-style clothes. Once wearing these clothes and filming the first scene, the boys began to invest their characters with more meaning. So they decided their characters would greet each other in a similar way to the “ghetto handshakes” of films like *Step Up*, to imply that their characters were “cool” and “street”, but also to show that they were friends and that they would always greet each other in this way. They also chose a spot in school, because they wanted to use the fencing behind it which they felt made it seem more real and urban and less like a school than most of the other shots.

There were many moments in the process of production, including script-writing, casting, filming, acting, editing and selecting the sound track, that suggested that Connor was highly engaged by the process and keen to make decisions about each choice that was made in order to ensure the final film was as close as it could be to how he imagined it. For example, in storyboarding his script, something he was not enthusiastic about, Connor drew everything in long shot. When it came to filming, even shots he was in, he took a lead in determining where the camera should be and soon realised that a long-shot would not have the impact he wanted. He changed to close-up in order to ensure the audience could see the emotions in the two boys' faces.

Throughout the process of production, therefore, Connor showed an acute awareness of the potential impact of the film story on its audience. This understanding of the particular way film creates meaning is not common in children's school-based film-making (Burn & Parker, 2001). I attribute this to Connor's immersion in film and his experiments with making home movies. Barrs (2004) identifies children's immersion in books as key to developing their ability to write stories. For Connor, film was the form in which he thought of stories “in his head” and in this form his decision-making was driven by an awareness of audience. This is a highly prized skill when found in children's writing, but in Connor's writing it was distinctly absent. His writing did not take the reader with him. He assumed the audience had knowledge of the scenario, which he had not fully explained in language. It could be argued that what he missed out were the things the audience would be able to see, hear and infer if watching this story as a film sequence or playing a game. This was demonstrated when Connor attempted to write a story of the film he made:

Step to the Challenge

One day there was a couple of kids speaking to each other on the school yard. One kid called Zak (the big show off) and all the others we don't need to discuss anyway. Another kid called Joe (Zak's best friend) was walking up to Zak.

Joe: Hay Zak What's up?

Zak: Have you heard about the talent competition, I'm so going to win.”

Joe: Can I enter?

Zak: Yea but it costs £1 to enter

So he entered. The next day the competition started Joe was first.

Joe: I was ok I got two yeses and one no.

Zak: My turn.

When finished he came out and said,

Zak: Did you see that I was wicked.

Joe: Stop bragging you loser.

The next day Zak was up against Joe in the challenge.

Zak: You may as well just give up Joe.

Joe: What and back down from a loser like you. No way.

This retelling of the story he devised for film relies heavily on dialogue and lacks description. It is in fact almost entirely a script of the dialogue. As with the mythical story influenced by a game, Connor took the language from the film and did not even attempt to replicate other aspects of the text such as costume, sound, shot or sound-track in his writing. Sarland (1991) and Millard (1997) observed differences in the way boys and girls read texts, noting girls' greater concern with emotion and causality and the boys' greater interest in action and information. This is evident in their writing, too, and perhaps also reflects boys' engagement with film rather than with print texts:

When pupils, who are already sophisticated consumers of visual narrative, write a story, they often use methods absorbed from these media to convey the action. This gives their writing a filmic quality that may seem jerky and undeveloped in contrast to the writing of those which make use of more literary conventions (Millard, 1997, p. 124.)

Millard attributes the jerkiness of film-influenced writing to the way that film is edited. However, I observed Connor paying greatest attention to the sequence of events of the film as expressed through language. We know he has a sophisticated understanding of how film makes meaning but he is unable to draw on this in his writing. It is as if he perceives writing to be a single mode in which he cannot draw on sound or image. In his written story Connor, as narrator, told the audience explicitly not to pay attention to the "other" characters so perhaps what he needs to learn is a range of ways to signal what to pay attention to.

When teaching children to write stories, aspects that are valued through assessment include story structure, attention to the discourse (for example, descriptive language), and clear time arrangements (for example, use of paragraphs). These attributes, in addition to complex sentence structure, good hand-writing, accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar are specific to written narrative discourse. Children are also taught about and understand character and plot and they implicitly understand how the two interrelate. They work intertextually, drawing on a wide range of sources. However, what appears to be challenging is the movement from one media to another in the production of the text. Connor left gaps in his written version of his film and his written story based on a game. These gaps, in films, games, and cartoons, are filled by the use of visual, audio and spatial elements, which the audience understand because they implicitly recognise the conventions of filmmaking. Whilst children have an understanding of these elements based on their experiences as viewers of these texts, they need support in order to make use of them in their text production. This provides further evidence that teachers need to pay attention to developing media as well as print literacy.

CONCLUSION

Where the context allows, children work actively across media to make meaning from the stories they encounter (Robinson, 1997) and they also attempt to do so in their construction of stories. When they are offered opportunities to create stories in a range of media forms, some children can demonstrate an understanding of story far richer than they can express in writing. When the teacher shares their own popular culture interests and values those of the

children, the children are more able to draw on their holistic knowledge and understanding of narrative. However, neither tolerating nor even welcoming popular culture into the classroom is enough.

Millard (2005) emphasises how children's understandings of "narrative forms in different modalities may support one another" (Millard, 2005 p. 162). Reid (2003) argues that film (for example) can be used to scaffold writing and that students can learn about narrative by "shuttling" between the two forms of film and print in order to engage with the different modes of each form. Reid proposes that print and film studied together help to make explicit what they have in common and what is specific to each form. Morris (2005) identifies the need to make explicit children's understandings of the language or grammar of film. Marsh and Millard (2000) also suggest that children need to understand how to deconstruct visual texts, recognising the different and similar ways they signify meaning. Making stories in other media clearly contributes to children being able to develop and extend their engagement with story in that form, but it does not necessarily aid them in creating that story as effectively in another media. A great deal more thought needs to be given to supporting children moving between storytelling modes, and developing skills across the range of forms of expression.

However, how we might begin to do this work with children has not yet been sufficiently debated or researched. Without this discussion, we might miss opportunities to enable children to become engaged in the process of constructing and shaping stories, something which is central to their literacy development. It became evident that in order for Connor to enact an identity in relation to learning that was both motivated and curious and to be able to demonstrate his "fund of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) about stories, he needed to be invited to draw on his particular love and rich repertoire of films, cartoons and games. It is not difficult to imagine that with support, Connor's attitude to literacy could alter and his skill as a story-teller could achieve greater recognition. In order for this to happen, he would need to be able to transform his narrative ideas from one medium to another. This is a compelling argument for the study of narrative in schools to both incorporate popular culture, moving-image texts, and to engage with strategies for developing media literacy alongside print literacy. At a time of change and a move away from curriculum and pedagogy which has dominated the teaching of narrative for the last nine years, it would be timely to learn from Connor's telling experiences.

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