



RSC Associate Schools programme Case Study

NAME: Jennifer Jenkins

SCHOOL: St Paul's CE Primary School

REGIONAL THEATRE PARTNER: Royal Shakespeare Company

*"We know what we are, but know not what we may be" ~ Ophelia,
Hamlet by William Shakespeare*

Based primarily on *The Tempest*, but also exploring *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, I planned and delivered a weekly intervention programme (40 minutes weekly), to raise the aspirations and achievement of a group of 5 disadvantaged boys in Year 2 (aged 6-7 years) during the academic year of 2017-18. Over the course of the academic year I saw significant improvements in their self-confidence and also in their willingness to both read and write and their ability to do so. A teaching assistant worked alongside me to support activities and record progress.

I was inspired to undertake this work after speaking to the Lead Teacher and Head Teacher at Archibald Primary in Middlesbrough, another RSC Lead School. They presented the work they had done, including that done with lower achieving pupils, and I could see the potential for using a similar approach in our own school. The Year 2 cohort had a significant number of pupils with SEMH (social, emotional & mental health) issues, as well as a large number of lower-attaining boys. I was convinced that using RSC rehearsal room techniques would have a significant impact on boys fitting into both those categories. Having worked with various year groups in school during RSC practitioner days, it has always been a striking feature of the work that SEND/lower attaining boys really shine through this approach and the 'on your feet' aspect gives them opportunity to feel they are good at something that doesn't rely



solely on written evidence. I employed the help of a very enthusiastic teaching assistant, who was familiar with the RSC rehearsal room techniques and believed in their profound effect on pupils' self-confidence as well as academic development.

The boys had all scored low on the Year 1 Phonics screening test the year before, scoring 0, 3, 3, 6, 8, and all had left Year 1 at 'working below the expected standard'. They were reluctant readers due to the cognitive effort of still being so heavily reliant on phonics and were even more reluctant writers, frequently meeting any written tasks with 'I can't do it' or just plain, stubborn refusal. There was some bravado amongst two of the boys at times but in the main they presented as quiet and insular and displayed low self-esteem behaviours such as reduced eye contact and a slumped seating position.

I began each session 'on our feet', with a warm up taken from various RSC INSET days I have attended. Over time, this improved eye contact, spatial awareness and the ability to express a range of emotions through facial expression and gesture. This was particularly developed through warm ups such as 'cross the circle', 'Go, Stop, Show Me' and 'ensemble walking'. We collected this new emotional vocabulary on a washing line, accompanied by pictures of the boys using facial expression and gestures to emulate the feeling. This attempted to move their understanding of emotions beyond just 'happy' and 'sad' and over time the boys were able to use words such as 'devastated', 'livid' and 'nervous', and made attempts to use these in their verbal sentence compositions when discussing characters and their actions/reactions. Using warm ups such as 'Clapping Game' and 'Boal Handshakes' the boys' eye contact developed and their voices improved from quiet whispers to more articulate enunciations of their own and others' names.

We explored text through call and response techniques, the recital of short lines and short performance activities. The boys' enjoyment at speaking Shakespeare's words, and their enthusiasm (sometimes a little over-enthusiasm!) in their approach to tableaux and



exploring the text, developed over time, as they became increasingly used to this way of working, which was very different to other intervention groups they found themselves in. Written tasks were chosen to provide an engaging stimulus for writing and to allow for the development of simple, phonic-based reading and writing skills. The first task they were asked to do was to draw the characters from *The Tempest* and to label the characters. This work is characteristically haphazard and with little attention paid to letter formation or use of phonics for spelling. Over the course of the year, tasks such as writing a letter in a bottle from Miranda and describing the island, led the boys towards constructing phrases and simple sentences, with a marked improvement in letter formation, phonics for spelling, and some attempts at simple sentence punctuation. The boys were more willing to attempt writing and built stamina for writing so that by the end of the academic year they were able to progress from writing a couple of words to writing several sentences in each session. Writing was scaffolded by writing frames and supported by word banks where appropriate. It was easy to see progress from the first piece to the last piece of written work for each child. Using *Romeo and Juliet*, it was also possible to support the boys in their understanding of basic grammar (namely nouns, verbs and adjectives) which they had failed to grasp in Year 1, through tasks such as using adjectives to describe Juliet after exploring the balcony scene, constructing sentences to show the actions of the Capulets and Montagues at the start of the play, and the understanding of the use of ! and ? following some work on the scene where Prince Escalus addresses the feuding families.

I used the word carpet technique outside in our Forest School area to explore the island setting from *The Tempest* and this was highly motivating for the boys and generated some great vocabulary. We began work with words and phrases directly from the text of the play that describe the island setting. The boys then added to these with their own ideas and adjectives to create noun phrases. All of this was then displayed through photographs on a washing line to create a rich literary environment from which the boys could draw from for their own writing. They were able to write a description of the island using this word harvest,



as well as writing storm spells, progressing from sole sentences to larger text constructions. The use of the Caliban/Prospero dialogue, with them repeating insults, hitting the paper at the important words and stepping forward each time they felt the character had 'scored a point' against the other one, supported the children's understanding of the power dynamics between Prospero and Caliban and led to some fairly sophisticated discussion about characters and motivation which they would have struggled to access in a straight forward Guided Reading session with the teacher.

Each session included some reading activities, using words and phrases from the text that were sound buttoned (a technique where each sound in the word has a dot or dash beneath it to help children read by breaking down words into their constituting phonemes) linked to whichever scene in the play we were looking at. These included easily-decodable CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant), CCVC and CVCC words, as well as those with long vowel phonemes, to encourage them to use the phonic skills they were acquiring in other intervention groups (e.g. individual daily phonics programme and phonics booster groups). The boys also chose to use some of these words in their own writing, making use of both these and a word bank of high frequency words in the learning space and an independence in writing was seen that had previously been lacking. There was an increased confidence about writing and a willingness to be challenged.

One of the most uplifting aspects of the intervention for the boys was that it elevated them to a more 'expert' status in the class setting, something they did not experience in other aspects of the curriculum as 'low achievers'. They were able to share their work with their classmates and could answer questions and do short performances for their peers when the class as a whole began work on *Romeo and Juliet*, putting them uniquely ahead of their peers on the learning journey. The boys were able to talk about their learning with their parents, often pleasantly surprising them with their knowledge of plot and quotations from the plays. I observed two of the boys sharing their work books with their parents at parents



evening, pride evident on their faces and those of their parents. The work offered them a chance to be informal 'Shakespeare ambassadors' in their peer group, and their families, and they looked genuinely happy when I would call them out for the group, expressing disappointment on the rare occasions the group had to be cancelled. They were able to see themselves as readers and writers, and as actors. At the end of Year 2 their phonics screening test score had improved to 15 (+12), 20 (+17), 29 (+23) and 38 (+30), with one child still struggling to score and being further assessed. He just happened to also be the child with the most improved grasp on vocabulary, an affinity for capturing characters through his use of gesture, facial expression and intonation when trying out Shakespeare's lines.

I have shared the impact of the work, and that of our school RSC work generally, with other teachers and they have used word carpets and other RSC rehearsal techniques with their classes and pupils with similar success, linking these to other Shakespeare texts as well as non-Shakespeare texts they have been studying. I also spoke about my work with lead teachers from our associate schools during network meetings and they were interested to see how this novel approach to intervention was impacting on lower attaining, disadvantaged pupils. Society can often hold an opinion of Shakespeare being for those who are more intelligent, more cultured, more attuned to literary history, and this intervention challenged that. The boys' parents were genuinely shocked, and perhaps still a little daunted, by the idea of their sons studying Shakespeare in Year 2, but the work they produced spoke for itself and it was easy to see progress in academic outcomes as well as self-confidence when they looked at the outcomes at parents evening.

The Shakespeare intervention group has had a positive effect on the teaching assistant who worked with me during the year. She has seen the benefits of using RSC rehearsal room techniques and has made use of these in her interventions conducted since. As a Forest School leader, the work we did outside with the word carpet activity has demonstrated how



quite complex vocabulary can be accessed even by younger and less able pupils when it is given an appropriate context and creatively explored.

My two years as RSC Lead Teacher has taught me to 'lift the ceiling' on what we can expect from young people when it comes to Shakespeare. Academic ability as judged by reading and writing scores need not always be an indicator of what is possible for pupils. I have witnessed a pattern of SEND and disadvantaged pupils rising to the challenge in RSC practitioner days (this was certainly the case when I joined Year 5 for their RSC Ovid workshop and Year 3 for their Julius Caesar work) and finding an area of the curriculum in which they can match, and often exceed, their peers. I was first made aware of this during my work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, during the Dream Team 'A Play for the Nation' campaign of 2016. A boy I had struggled with, who was exceptionally reluctant to read or write, took on the part of Oberon in the 'Whoosh! Story' from the RSC Toolkit and uttered lines from the text to release Puck, and it was magical. He then scribbled away for well over half an hour, wanting to retell the story and write spells. Shakespeare's story and language had unlocked him in a way I hadn't managed to all year. I carried this thought into my leading of the Associate Schools network, ensuring INSET always led into discussion of 2 things: 1) How RSC rehearsal room techniques could be accessed by all pupil groups of a range of ages, through adaptation and differentiation and 2) Planning for exciting and engaging writing activities that allow children to channel their excitement and make use of the rich vocabulary they have encountered. Our school has made use of RSC techniques across a range of year groups/key stages and Shakespeare plays, as well as texts such as *Beauty and the Beast* and other traditional tales, other fiction texts and history topics. We have been keen to share our work, through writing and photographs, with our Associate Schools, as well as with prospective schools, so that they can see what impact working in this way has. This year we increased our RSC Associate Schools group from 6 schools to 7 schools and the new schools were particularly interested due to the evidence that this improves writing standards as well as reading comprehension skills and pupil confidence when



approaching difficult texts. This has particularly been made evident in how Year 3 children in our school, and one of our Associate Schools, have responded to *A Comedy of Errors*, despite its complexities as a play. Their willingness to engage with it after seeing the First Encounters production and engaging with suggested writing activities in the teacher pack meant that, despite a daunting plot, they felt confident to write. This is exactly what I experienced in the smaller group intervention; attitude was the greatest hurdle but once overcome children were very happy to engage in reading and writing.

The journey towards using Shakespeare as an intervention began when I was inspired by Archibald Primary School during a presentation they made for schools interested in becoming RSC Lead Schools. This had been confirmed to me by my observations of the excellent, yet unexpected, Oberon in my class. So when we began our journey as RSC Lead School I also began the intervention work. I have used this work to show the impact RSC rehearsal room techniques can have on *all* pupils as we found, to begin with, some teachers were sceptical about its impact on lower achievers and SEND pupils. Though moving on from the school, I am leaving evidence of the impact this study has had so that the new Lead Teacher can share this with teachers in our own school and those in our Associate Schools, and the pedagogy can be discussed at future INSET days when teachers consider how best to support *all* their pupils in reading and writing following their immersion in Shakespeare. Though leaving the RSC Associate Schools programme, I hope this case study proves a useful tool in confirming that Shakespeare really is for everyone.