

# Play and Writing in Year 2

This article tells the story of a session with a Y2 class in which we looked at how writing could be developed from role-play. The time that I spent with the children was only a little over an hour. This was much less than I should have liked, but allowed us to undertake work that was both meaningful and enjoyable.

Given the time constraints, the context for the role-play had to be established quickly. I had decided on the broad theme of ‘magic carpets’, and began the session by showing a section of Walt Disney’s *Aladdin*. This featured Aladdin and Princess Jasmine flying off on the magic carpet to the strains of ‘I can show you the world’. I started in this way because I wanted to create a shared context for the role-play, and also because I thought it likely that most children would have watched the video at least once, and would see the relevance of home literacy practices to school.

After a relatively brief discussion of the video, I showed the children the box of resources I had brought with me. This was a large cardboard box (the kind sold to store documents in) with its lid covered in wrapping paper on which was printed an old-looking map of the world. Inside the box were some lengthy sheets of fabric — blue, green and white — along with a selection of puppets and props. These included a mermaid, a seal, a magic lamp (alas, not the genuine article), a

whale, a dragon and a unicorn. I had also brought a set of ‘magic carpets’ (samples from carpet stores), a selection of travel brochures, and a book entitled *The Earth from the Air For Children*, which has outstanding aerial photographs.

## Valuing pupils’ response

I began the discussion by asking the children where they would go if they were lucky enough to possess a magic carpet of their own. They discussed

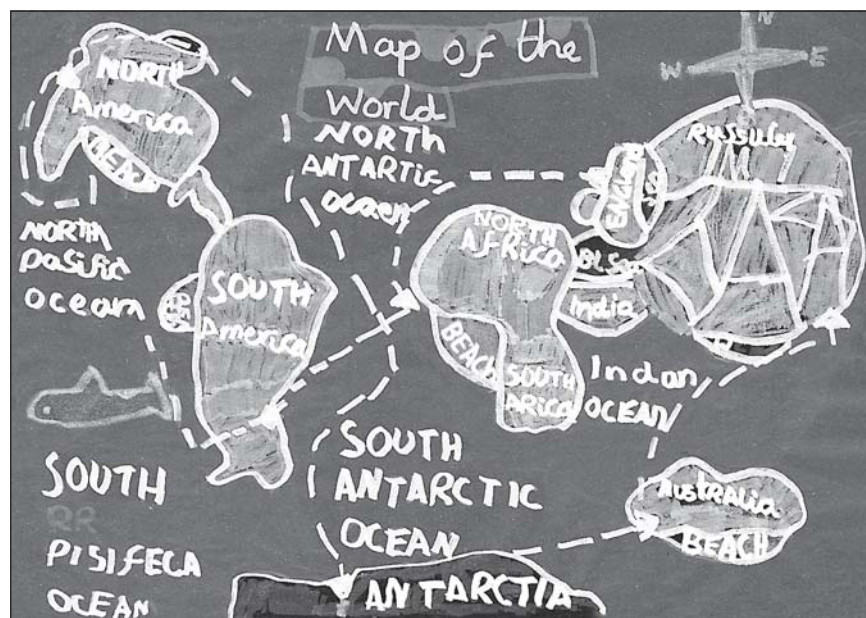
their ideas with a partner first, before we shared ideas in a group. The first child to answer suggested Florida Disney, because the carpet would enable them to avoid the queues for the rides.

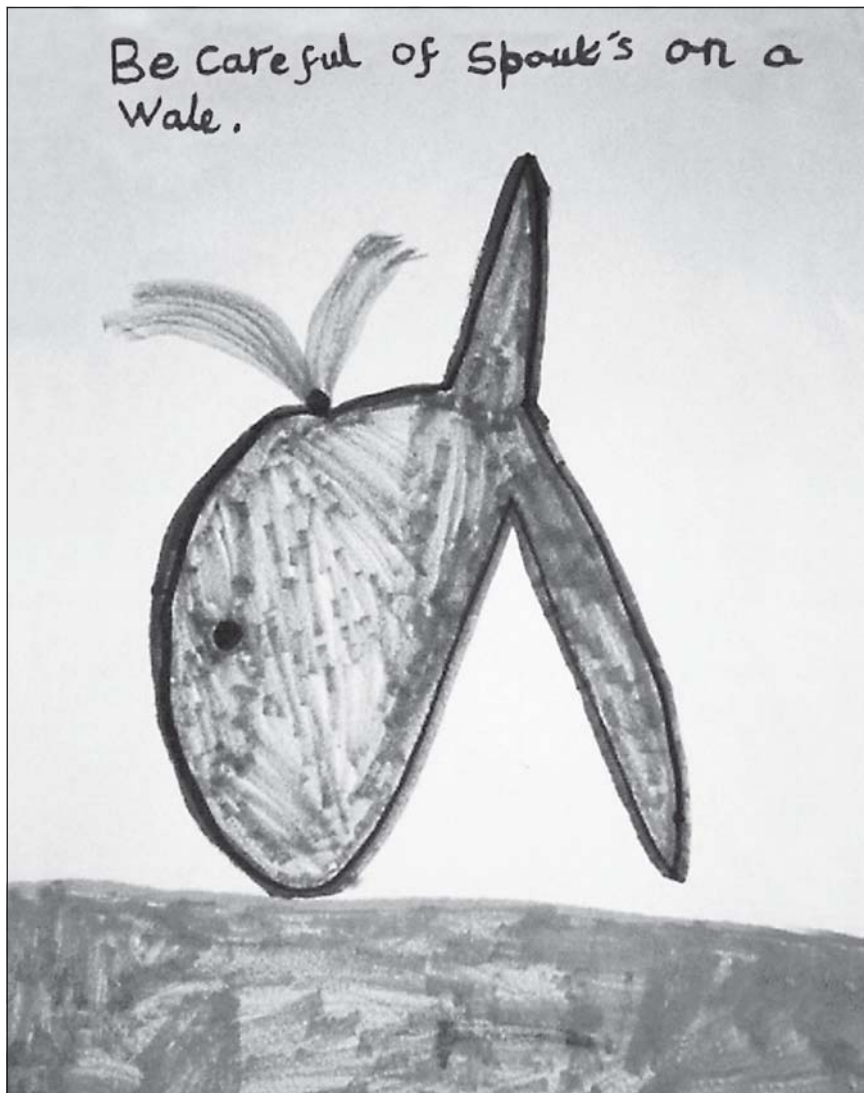
This was a perfectly good start to the discussion. Sometimes, when children make suggestions such as this, there is a temptation on the adult’s part to wish for an answer that is ‘more imaginative’. However, when asked questions in this way, children give their answers in good faith and deserve to have their contributions valued. We cannot all imagine travelling to the far off palaces of Samarkand — especially if we have never heard of them!

The discussion of where to travel to continued for a while, and I wrote everyone’s suggestion down. Then, in order to extend the discussion and create a wider range of possibilities for writing, I invited the children to come and take an object from the role-play box that had been sitting in front of them during the discussion. Every child wanted to participate in this activity, and it was a real problem to choose just a few.

It is very easy to assume that Y2 children are ‘beyond’ this kind of activity and that more formal kinds of

**Helen Bromley describes a Y2 lesson that demonstrates her theory that the best writing that children produce is based on ideas they have explored through play — the same sort of play they enjoyed at Foundation Stage.**





approach are more suitable. I do not believe that to be the case, and indeed I find it hard to understand why every Y2 classroom does not have some kind of role play facilities available to children. Activities such as this provide motivation and are extremely inclusive, based as they are on visual and tactile stimuli.

### Following their thinking

The taking of objects from the box was not only exciting; it gave the children the opportunity to take control of the lesson. For example, when the first child pulled out the very attractive unicorn puppet, it didn't produce quite the reaction that I had expected. Instead, one of the children suggested that it might be very dangerous to fly over a unicorn's horn on a magic carpet as, 'If you went too low, the carpet would get torn'.

Another child chose a sheet of blue material, which prompted a lot of

factual discussion about the dangers of being caught in the water. Suggestions were made as to how we could waterproof the carpet, and one child suggested having a carpet made of vinyl flooring. This discussion moved on to consider the possibility of designing a carpet that would travel underwater, with some ingenious solutions to the problem being offered.

When one child chose the dragon, it was decided that the carpet needed to be equipped with a fire extinguisher! Contributions like this and the ones on water were a powerful reminder of the cross curricular possibilities of role-play. I am not suggesting that this is a new notion — far from it; but it seems to me that this holistic approach to infant activities needs to return if the curriculum is to lose some of its fragmented nature.

Not only were scientific and geographical knowledge shared in this activity; perhaps most importantly, the

children's use of talk was sophisticated and varied. One of the teachers observing the lesson commented afterwards that all the children appeared to be equally able. This is an important point. Too often children's identity as users of literacy is determined by written outcomes, with proficiency in oracy being sidelined. Role-play and drama give all children the opportunity to demonstrate their intellectual abilities. Through the role-play, their thinking is made visible.

### Their ideas for writing

After discussing the mechanics and dangers of magic carpet flying, I suggested the scenario of a 'Magic Carpet Hire Shop' to the class. If we had had longer, there would have been time for role-plays linked to this scenario. As it was, I concentrated on encouraging the children to write with the scenario in mind.

We talked about the kinds of texts that would be needed in the Hire Shop, and this is a small selection of the children's suggestions:

- ◆ Advertising posters
- ◆ Descriptions of the carpets available to hire
- ◆ Forms for hiring, insurance, etc.
- ◆ Passports
- ◆ Recommended routes
- ◆ Warning signs and posters
- ◆ Maps
- ◆ Instructions for making your carpet fly
- ◆ Customer comments book
- ◆ Diaries of customers' adventures.

This was a rich and varied selection, with some ideas coming directly from the discussions we had had.

The children were then given the opportunity to work in pairs, small groups or by themselves to create one or more of the suggested texts. They could choose where to sit and whom they worked with, and a variety of writing materials were made available to them. These included a selection of felt pens, pencils and coloured papers.

The writing materials were important in motivating the children to write. One girl was particularly excited to be able to choose purple paper, because, she said, purple was 'her colour'. In looking at ways to encourage children

to write with excitement, it is too easy to forget the role of resources, and to trap them in a world of lead pencils and A4 paper or — worse still — lined exercise books. Allowing children to choose appropriate materials for the task makes the experience more authentic and contributes significantly to their enjoyment.

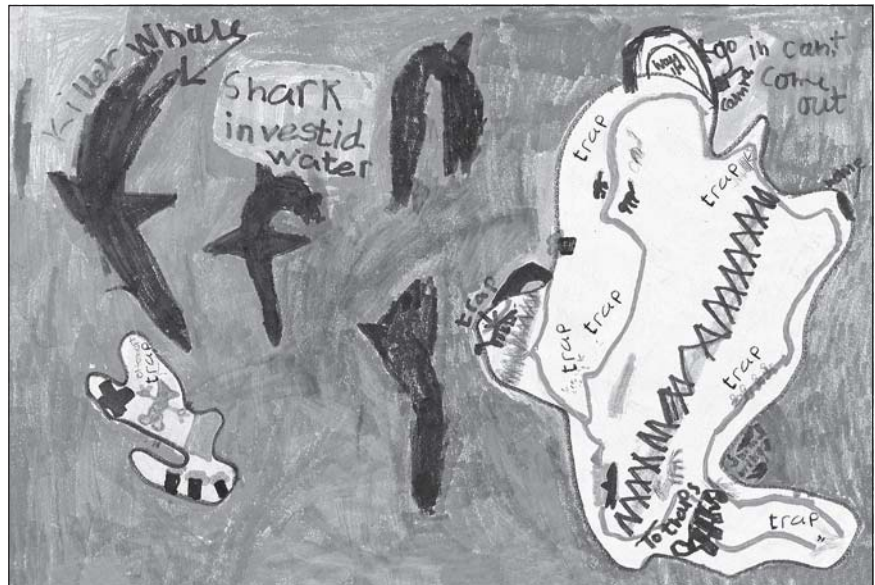
### A unique set of texts

The texts produced by the children were all unique, although some children chose the same genre. There were a variety of maps, for example, and warning posters were also extremely popular, indicating how much the whole-class discussion had fired the children's imaginations.

Jane, who wanted to use purple paper, made instructions for getting the carpet to fly: 'Tap it three times and it will move'.

The warning poster shown on page 8 — 'Be careful of spouts on a whale' — is eye-catching in its design and has been constructed with a genuine sense of audience and purpose. It is almost impossible to look at it without imagining a hapless magic carpet rider being caught unawares by a powerful jet of water from a whale. The paper chosen for the poster was extremely large in size, showing the child's awareness of the requirements of such a genre.

'How to look after yourself', by Oliver (see below), carries two warnings:



'Don't go to the Enormous Crocodile' and 'Don't go near the Unicorn'. The dangers are illustrated in his drawings: a large red cross through the picture of the crocodile, indicating a 'no go' area, accompanied by an illustration of what might happen to you should you venture near the animal's mouth; and pictures of carpets flying either behind or underneath the Unicorn's head. Routes leading to both these hazards end abruptly with the word 'Stop', thus adding extra emphasis to the idea of danger.

Oliver's work is typical of what was produced in terms of complexity. It is easy to decode the words Oliver has written; the intellectual challenge comes in decoding the images and the symbols. The children were using in their posters a combination of the

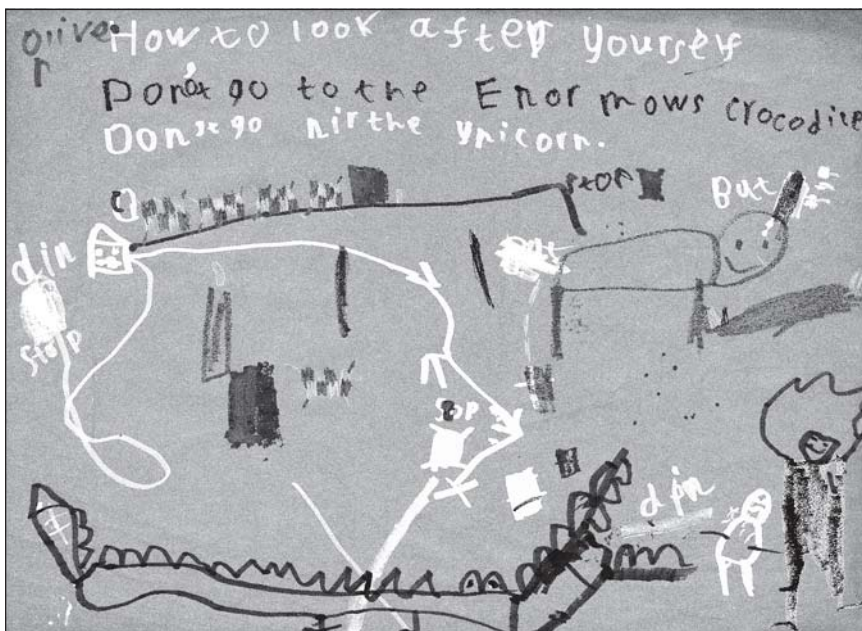
literacies they were familiar with in order to communicate meaning. This combination also appeared in their maps

A variety of maps was produced and in this activity, as in the whole-class discussion, the cross-curricular potential of the task became evident. One map (see above) showed 'shark investid water and killer whales, along with a picture of an island highlighting all the traps that had to be avoided by the magic carpet traveller. Other groups of children represented the whole world, putting in suitable flying routes for a carpet to follow.

I felt that the knowledge of the conventions of cartography shown by the children was quite remarkable. Several of the maps had compasses, with the points correctly labelled. The addition of sharks, mermaids and other nautical icons on the maps also showed an awareness of the genre and a willingness to participate in the creation of this 'possible world'.

### A 21st century map

The piece of work shown on page 10 was quite outstanding in its complexity. Headed 'Steer the Magic Carpit to Safe places', it contains a multiplicity of literacies which would merit an article all of their own! Danger signs head the piece, warning against going near the wild animals. A spiral is used in combination with writing to show a 'magic carpit's flying trail'. Travellers are warned against travelling to the sun: 'Don't go near the sun to see it . . . Use the Dark Sun Looker'. Other



instructions are also offered in this challenging piece: 'If you take a magic wand with you, give it a wave!'

Perhaps the most fascinating part of 'Steer the Magic Carpet', however, was that which informed readers that they could 'FIND THE MCSTRO' at [www.stargatmake.co.uk/more/\(mc\)site/](http://www.stargatmake.co.uk/more/(mc)site/). This inclusion of twenty-first-century web-based literacy was very new to me; I had not seen it in any text produced in such a context before — although I realise that other teachers may have seen such examples. I was amazed by the detail of the website address, showing not only knowledge of the conventions of the way in which web pages are represented but also in the use of the 'forward slash'.

When I discussed this map with the boy who produced it, he told me that the web site he had included would

## Inclusive learning

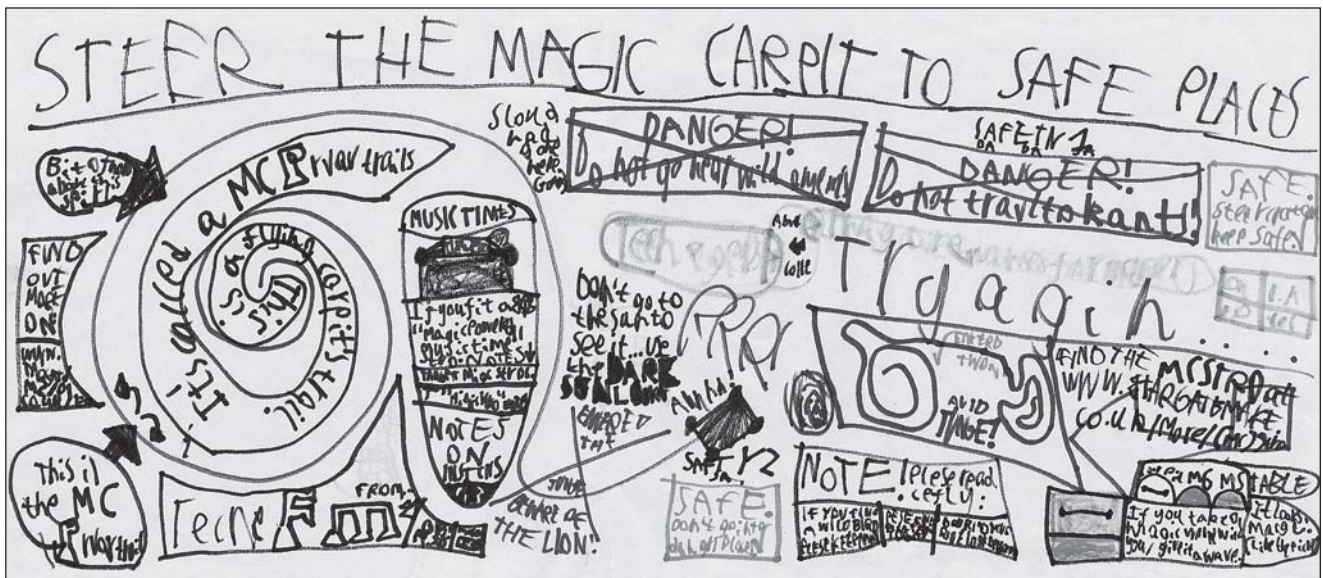
What was even more remarkable about 'Steer the Magic Carpet' was that the child who produced it had some degree of autism, and often had difficulty with class work. He produced it, working on his own, with a level of engagement that was fascinating to watch. The originality and individuality of the piece would be hard to fit into a curriculum 'box', but they show a knowledge of genre that is way beyond what might be expected for a child of this age.

Gordon Wells (1986:43) talks about the 'compelling evidence that children actively construct their own hypotheses' about the ways in which language is patterned and used. There was certainly evidence of such hypotheses at work in the texts produced in this Y2 session. I would reiterate my comments from my article in the last *PEM*, and

to the children. Role-play boxes such as the one I used are easy to create and need not take up a lot of space. Schools can create a collection of such boxes around popular themes, to be used not only at KS1 but also at KS2, and in relation to a wide range of curricular areas.

As noted in the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project, *Language study should start from what the children can do, from their positive achievements in language and from the remarkable resources of implicit knowledge about language which all children possess.* (Carter 1991: 4)

Using role play and drama is one way in which we can rise to this challenge and ensure that children have the opportunity to show us what they know and can do, rather than being boxed in by inappropriate expectations and activities.



give me details of portals that a carpet could travel through to reach further faraway places. One can only speculate on the kinds of knowledge that this child was drawing on to create such a text. Sadly, as I had to go and work with another class, I did not have time to discuss with him at length his inclusion of a web site. However, it is worth mentioning that many computer games have linked sites on which players can find 'cheats' or learn special techniques for playing more successfully. It is interesting to see such literacies making their way into school.

say that allowing knowledge about the patterns of language in complex texts to be made explicit in this way is absolutely vital if children are to succeed as writers in school. No published 'support' materials would have encouraged the production of these texts. Such materials create a context in which it is impossible for children to do anything except follow the pattern of language dictated by the publisher.

Using role play means that the same objectives as published materials are aiming at can be met and exceeded in a way that is much more meaningful

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## References

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