

Writing with children in long-stay hospital care

report by Moira Andrew

Aim: The project was designed to encourage children in long-stay hospital care to explore their feelings, fears, hopes and desires through writing. I had envisaged making books with individuals and small groups and that these self-made books would mix poetry, letter-writing and diary-keeping with artwork to make a seamless whole.

These were laudable aims, exciting and full of possibilities. However, in practice, few patients met the criteria as children tend to be moved around the system and most are seen on a short-term basis or on day-visits for treatment. This meant that most of my work was done through one-off sessions and there was little opportunity for follow-up, so book-making was seldom a practical option. Poetry, with linked artwork, was the obvious way to go.

Process: Each visit begins in the schoolroom with a planning session, when the teachers consult a register of the children present that day and allocate teaching tasks. They decide between those who can come into the schoolroom and those who should be seen on the ward. As the eligible children can be aged anywhere between four and sixteen and schoolwork depends on their treatment and wellness, it is difficult to plan ahead.

Armed with details of age and stage of the child/children I will be working with, I introduce myself and try to open a dialogue with the child, based on my experience as a teacher. I offer several suggestions about what they might like to write about, backed up with an easy-to-follow structure. It is very much a teacher-pupil relationship, familiar to children of all ages. In short sessions of no more than an hour, I feel it is important that the child should feel good about what he or she has written and illustrated. Success is an essential ingredient.

Outcome: Michael Rosen has said, 'Poems are one of the best ways in which we can say big things in small spaces.' With this precept in mind, I have tried to encourage children who are spending time in hospital to put their thoughts and feelings into poetry. A poem can be of five or six lines. It is capable of being vocalised by the child and scripted by an adult. It can also be a deep and thoughtful piece of writing, giving enormous satisfaction to both poet and reader. Poetry is therefore, an ideal starting point for one-off writing sessions in the

unpredictable environment of a busy hospital. The project may not have gone according to plan, but without exception, the children became deeply involved. Some were more interested in writing, others in artwork, all produced creatively linked pieces of work.

- In some sessions the same topic was explored by children at different levels, for example, a Y3 child and a Y5 child tackled the theme of the five senses, based on the poem 'I like'. Both had the opportunity of expressing their ideas in terms of their age and ability and this very act provided an escape from the routine of scans and injections. *I like the sound of me singing and laughing.*
- Very young children often arrive clutching their teddy bears, a familiar and comforting friend in an alien place – an ideal starting point for a poem. One child wrote a 'private' *For Kitty and Teddy only* poem to her teddy thanking him for looking after her in hospital and cuddling her at night. *I like to cuddle you in the dark./I like to be with you everywhere.* Another, (non-writing) child dictated her poem and insisted putting on a pot of honey in her picture. *Pooh likes honey.*
- Two older boys, Y6 and Y7, were interested in exploring how children might have felt in WW2 air-raid shelters – their feelings probably differed little from how they felt about being locked up in a hospital ward. *It smelt of damp and sweat./I wanted to escape into the sunshine.* One of the lads said as I left, 'This is better than being in school – I have a teacher all to myself!'
- One Y5 girl who was in traction was a reluctant writer, but responded to the teacher-voice of expectation. She soon became absorbed and produced a poem called 'My house' with 'opening doors' of which she was tremendously proud. She was missing her horse and was able to incorporate it into her poem, complete with a detailed illustration. *Beside my house is my horse called Peggy-Sue.* Her mother couldn't believe how involved she had become – the power of words!
- One of the favourite themes of boys and girls of all ages is 'The Dragon's Egg' in which a curiously tactile ceramic 'egg' is the star. *The egg feels hard and cold./It's got little cracks./The muvr (mother) dragon blows out hot fire./The baby dragon is all squashed up inside.* These words were written by a bright and enthusiastic Y2 boy on traction who was interested in everything the schoolroom could offer. 'Do you have to go?' he asked. 'Can't you come back tomorrow?'

- ‘Prayer to the moon’ was a lovely piece of work by a Y5 child. She became totally absorbed in writing her poem, (in gold on black, for best effect.)

*Give me silver light old shining man,
Light to guide my way in the dark.
Give us your strength old man,
Strength to pull the tides in and out.
Show me your crescent shape old man,
The shape of a boy fishing for stars.
Show me what you’ve caught old man,
Stars like fish jumping in a net.
Catch me if you can!*

It is obvious to the reader of this prayer, that for the time it took to write it, the poet must have been totally oblivious to the hospital environment.

- There were a number of other successful poems, more on the ‘Dragon’s egg’, riddles, ‘The magic box’, ‘Knights and Demons’ and ‘Recipe for spring’. A Y9 boy wrote about a ‘Gruesome castle’ and a Y5 boy on mini-poems round a tree.
- One Y2 girl was easily persuaded to work on a rainbow poem, or as she put it, ‘A butterfly rainbow poem’. Her father was fascinated by the transformation of his little girl into a poet. ‘I never get a chance to see her like that,’ he said. Before she could finish, she was called away for an X-ray. ‘Pity,’ said Dad. ‘She was just getting into it. But thank you.’
- Another interesting poem came from the ‘All about me’ idea. A Y7 girl wrote,

*I am like a lily,
as yellow as the sun.
When I open my eyes
my petals spread out
and fold under
like an umbrella
after the rain.
At night-time
when it’s time to dream
my petals close up
and I go to sleep.*

What does she dream of in her narrow hospital bed, I wonder? Has writing her poem helped her to sleep easy?

Another piece on the same topic, 'All about me', by a Y5 girl:

*I am like waves on the sea,
angry at maths,
crashing against jagged numbers.
Yet so gentle,
when I see pen and pencils
moving towards my paper
I sway in the wind,
happy, thinking
and hardly moving.*

Is this the poet speaking?

- A favourite theme with the boys was 'The pirate ship'. The poems are written on the ship's hull, cut out and the whole displayed on a seascape.
- 'The moon's promise' was the choice of a Y9 girl, perhaps the oldest child I worked with.

*The moon's promise
The moon winks its bright eye
drawing me out into the night.
It's like a torch.
The moon reflects my drowsy face
inviting me into its mirrored depths.
It's like a silver ghost
calling me into its mysterious kingdom.
The moon says, 'Don't be afraid.
Follow my light and you will be safe.'
'I promise.'*

- A keen Y5 girl became completely involved in writing a one-poem book, 'Hiding inside'. Perhaps this piece of work is the nearest to what I envisaged at the outset of the project.

Inside a shell

There's the sound of the sea.
Inside a bulb
There's the gold of a daffodil.
Inside a grain of sand
There's the hardness of rock.
Inside an egg
There's the flight of a bird.
Inside a raindrop
There's the hint of a storm.
Inside a book
Are the words of a poet.

Conclusion: This project is not, I feel, open to analysis or data collection in the accepted research sense. I can only go by instinct and experience which suggest that it worked on several levels, for the children, their teachers, in some cases their parents and certainly, it worked well for me. I thoroughly enjoyed my participation in the project and my time with the children. Many of the poems invite us, the readers, into a child's exploration of his world, the words playing with their feelings and opening windows into their imaginations. The writing of these pieces was time-out from the alien environment in which the children found themselves and gave them breathing space to fashion words into poems and colour into pictures – almost like being back at school, a place familiar to all of them.

Moira Andrew

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For one reason and another (all valid) I was unable to organise the promised in-service training session for teachers in the hospital school at RCH Cornwall, Treliske, during the span of my project, 'Working with children in long-term hospital care'. However, as I now work one morning a week in Treliske on a voluntary basis, I agreed to run the postponed 'twilight' in-service on Wednesday 14th October. The five permanent members of staff attended - part-timers are not paid for out-of-school time – none, therefore, turned up.

The teachers began by flexing their writing muscles by working on a group poem, based on simple images of the rainbow, eg. *A rainbow is like a skipping rope, / It is like a coloured*

bridge. As we didn't have a lot of time, I dropped my usual ten-minute speed writing section and moved on to the session proper.

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This two-hour session is a collection of 'how-to' ideas, entitled 'Ways into Poetry'. For each idea, I try to show how it might be adapted for children of various ages and abilities, from reception to Years 7, 8 and 9. My work is based on the premise that art and writing are linked and how, used in tandem, each discipline can enhance the other to become a creative whole.

- I talk about a number of imaginative ways-in to poetry, beginning from 'patterning'. Children are not poets in the true sense, but they can be helped towards this goal by being encouraged to follow an established poetry-pattern. The simplest builds on image work, ie, the use of simile. We moved on to extended image, riddles and kennings. The work showed how children answered the 'What is?' question, eg. *What is water? snow? green? etc.* The children's poems are illustrated, and framed, sometimes hidden behind flaps or in pockets.
- 'Copycats' is a useful idea, especially in the hospital situation where a child can be called away for treatment and time is at a premium. So, rather than inventing the wheel every time, encourage children to follow the outline of a poem written by an established writer, eg. *Inside a shell*, by John Scotby, *'Open the door'*, by Miroslav Holub, *'Rainbows'*, by Moira Andrew, *'Prayer to the sun'*, by Roger Garfitt and many more. Look out for easy patterns that can be turned inside out by the young writers. Again, display the completed poems in an imaginative way eg. in silver pen on a black circle for *'Prayer to the moon'*, a copycat of Roger's poem
- Descriptive poems can arise from looking closely at an interesting object and making word collections. Start from wild flowers, fruit, historical artefacts etc. Encourage ideas by exploring what the object feels/looks/smells like. If children write each idea on a separate line, a poem will grow before their eyes. Display the poems as zig-zags, cut-outs and shapes.

- I move the session on to other ideas, ‘The magic box’, picture starters, sequences and lists, dialogue poems, letters and recipes, portraits, inside-out, ‘turnabouts’, found poems, mini-poems – so many imaginative possibilities, but in a two-hour session, something has to give.

In the plenary, I talk about how enthusiasm on the part of both teacher and children is an essential factor in teaching poetry. I encourage them to be inventive with new and different approaches, both in the writing and in the supporting artwork. Give children praise where it is due – even on occasions when it’s not – and the children will respond. To become writers, they must *write!* And nothing succeeds like success.

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I hope this give a flavour of the in-service session – there were many more ideas to share, but time caught up with us and everyone had already done a day’s work before they came along. I had a very generous email from Caroline Johnson thanking me for organising things. I hope the teachers got something positive from the afternoon – even if only that poetry is unstuffy, can be a lot of fun, especially when it is linked to art, and that certainly no-one should be afraid of tackling it with children.

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