

Rebecca Kuberek's development work
**Developing sensory story-telling
for students with special needs**
at Willow Dene School, Plumstead, London

Rebecca was a class teacher working in a large primary school for children with special educational needs when she joined the National Union of Teachers (NUT) Learning Circles programme. Her school caters for children with both moderate and profound disabilities and for children with autistic spectrum disorders. Many of the children Rebecca works with have difficulties in accessing the curriculum due to their issues with communication. Rebecca wondered if developing the use of sensory stories would help the children to participate in story-telling more readily.

Rebecca already used some aspects of sensory story-telling practice in her work. For example, she used large books and props wherever possible to bring the story to life for the children. However, this was not always enough to assure their continuing attention to the end of the story. Rebecca wondered if increasing the children's actual participation in the story would motivate them to listen for longer periods. She also wondered if increased attention would lead to increased understanding.

Rebecca undertook some background reading in order to learn more about sensory approaches to story-telling (Albera, Griffin, Griffin, Fitch and Gingras, 2006; Chilvers and Cole, 2006). She tried to find other teachers who had developed their sensory story-telling skills without much success, but she did find a powerpoint presentation developed by a teacher in the resources area of the Times Educational Supplement website. The story of a very busy spider was represented in an innovative way through the PPT slides. Rebecca was encouraged to experiment with using ICT as a new way of teaching through stories. She felt that the use of the Interactive Whiteboard would help the story to have a greater visual impact for the children. She therefore uploaded the busy spider story to her Interactive Whiteboard and found some props which related to it. Plastic and furry animals were to be used both during the story-telling and afterwards.

Rebecca asked one of her colleagues to observe her story-telling lesson and then give her feedback as to how she could develop her practice. Her colleague gave her some very helpful advice. Rebecca then observed another colleague's literacy lesson to gain more ideas. She then built on what she had seen, developing the story her colleague had used into a powerpoint presentation by scanning each page and inserting symbols to support the children's understanding of the text. She also inserted sound effects which appealed to the children's auditory sense and motivated them to engage with the story as they needed to press an icon to activate the sound. Rebecca and her colleague then decided to share any resources they developed.

Rebecca's continuing research led her to a firm which produced 'Story Sacks'. These sacks contain props related to a story that can be used to help to make story telling a more interactive experience. She again made the story into a powerpoint presentation and used the props to help the children to understand the focus of the story at a given moment. She was then able to introduce the sign for the prop in British Sign Language, thus developing children's language skills. The contents of the story sack were very effective in securing student involvement in the story-telling activity, but they were expensive to buy so Rebecca decided to create her own. This time, a colleague trialled the story and Rebecca observed the lesson. The children responded in a positive way to the session. The story was about a red hot chilli pepper and the children were given food to touch and taste. This gave the story a sensory dynamic which enabled the children to access the story and participate more. As time went on, Rebecca became more and more inventive with her use of sensory props. For example she used essential oils to denote flowers and water sprays to denote rain. Her repertoire continued to expand.

Once her ICT resources were made, Rebecca faced the challenge of inspiring other colleagues to take advantage of them in their teaching. In fact, this did not prove difficult. Colleagues were more than happy to adopt such innovative and effective practices. Staff now talk regularly about story-telling and collaborate much more freely. The impact of Rebecca's development work on her pupils is clear. They are more attentive during story-telling and more willing to participate, even requesting certain stories by the use of the appropriate sign. On a personal level, Rebecca feels more able to talk to colleagues about their teaching and to offer ideas which she

has developed through her practice. She continues to work on developing the ICT and story-telling aspects of her work.

References

Albera, V., Griffin, H., Griffin, L., Fitch, W. & Gingras, A. (2006) 'Educational interventions for individuals with Aspergers Syndrome'. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 41(3), 150-155.

Chilvers, D. & Cole, A. (2006) 'Using a sensory approach with children who challenge'. *Support for Learning*, 21(1), 123-145.