The Mysteries of Creative Partnerships

Since 2002, Creative Partnerships, based at the Arts Council of England, has been investing time, energy, and resources to bring artists and schools together. Their goal is to "animate the national curriculum and to enrich school life by making the best use of the United Kingdom's creative wealth." This article concentrates on the partnership between two primary teachers and two dramatic artists as they planned and produced a workshop based on an inventive children's picturebook. The success of this professional development exchange hinged on (1) the strong focus on students' learning, (2) the adults' long-term commitment to the work, (3) the very different kinds of expertise the adults came to share, and (4) the adults' excitement and engagement with continual professional learning, which led to substantive language and learning opportunities for the children involved.

The Mysteries of Creative Partnerships

A children's book by the award-winning Chris Van Allsburg (1984) is entitled *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.* It is an odd tale, consisting of 14 surreal black and white drawings, each accompanied by a title and a cryptic caption. In one picture a white bird within a wallpaper pattern peels off the wall and flies away. In another, a woman sleeps while vines ominously grow out of the pages of her open book. And in the final image, a suburban house takes off like a rocket ship, shooting up into the midnight sky. The art is stunning and the titles and captions alluring. But the real mystery appears in the opening frame of the book.

It is a letter from Chris Van Allsburg, explaining that the pictures were first revealed in a meeting between Peter Wenders—a publisher Van Allsburg once knew—and an artist named Harris Burdick. Van Allsburg relates that long ago Burdick appeared in the publisher's office with his artwork. He explained that the singular drawings and snippets of prose were only samples from 14 fully developed stories he had crafted along with many more illustrations. The publisher was thrilled with the art and intrigued by the tantalizing captions, and the artist said that he would return the next day with the completed manuscripts. Instead, he never returned.

Van Allsburg told Wenders that he found it impossible to look at the art and words and not think of his own stories to extend Burdick's work. The publisher smilingly retrieved an old box with many, many stories that had been written by his own children as well as their friends. Harris Burdick's images and prose had proved to be an irresistible inspiration to the children.

Of course the frame story in the form of a letter from Van Allsburg is as much a feat of the imagination as the images themselves. There is no Harris Burdick, for the artwork belongs to Van Allsburg himself, and there's not even a Peter Wenders, though Van Allsburg humorously tries to throw the reader off by dedicating the book to Wenders. Yet the story and the artwork

are simultaneously so real and surreal that the reader can't help but be drawn in. How did the fleeting partnership between Wenders and Burdick result in such imaginative work? And what would have resulted if the artist had returned and entered into a more complex and long-term working relationship with the publisher as well as the children? Would the creativity of the children have been stifled or enhanced?

Often times when artists enter into school settings, they work briefly with children and teachers and then leave just as quickly as Burdick. Certainly a touch of the magic remains, but teachers may not feel they have the time nor the requisite skill sets to pick up where the artists left off. Conversely, in these brief encounters, artists have little time to learn from teachers, especially if they come to follow their own agendas and ignore the educational goals of the school (Weissman, 2004). And what about the children? Left to their own devices children often do accomplish wonderful things, but as Vygotsky (1978) argues wouldn't they achieve more if guided and encouraged by those who are more experienced? Egan (2005) explains:

> If we want to be able to routinely engage students' imaginations in learning, we must understand the main tools they have available for the task. We must shape our lessons to take advantage of their current skills and help develop them further…. Of course, everyone knows that engaging students' imaginations in learning is one key to successful teaching. Over the years we have seen many suggestions for how to do this, but making its achievement a routine part of the classroom experience has proven quite elusive. (pp. xi-xii)

The central argument of this article is that successful teaching often occurs in long-term *professional development exchanges* among teachers and artists, and it results in extended language opportunities for children. Here I follow the work of two teachers at Bexhill Primary

School in England with the dramatic artists of County Durham's Theatre Cap-a-Pie as they planned for, explored, and dramatized scenes from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Van Allsburg, 1984) with six- and seven-year-old children. My goal will be to unlock the mysteries of creative partnerships: how they are formed, supported, and, most important, marked by the language of creativity, collaboration, compromise, and critique as well as how such engaging professional exchanges successfully invite children into the creative process.

Creative Partnerships: The Case of Bexhill School

Unlike the "shortsighted disregard of the arts in American schooling" (Fowler, 1996), Creative Partnerships (2003), of the Arts Council of England, is investing time, energy, and resources to bring artists and schools together. Their goal is "to enrich school life by making the best use of the United Kingdom's creative wealth." In the best of partnerships, teachers and artists become colleagues, collaborating on projects that will encourage creativity based on the expertise of all involved and focused on the children's talents, interests, and needs.

For the past four years, I've been conducting research in Bexhill Primary School, located in Sunderland in the Northeast of England. Surrounded by a housing estate, the school community is characterized by what Head Teacher Joy Lowther describes as "high levels of unemployment, a range of family contexts, and little cultural diversity," for 99% of the children are of western European descent. Since the loss of the shipping and coal industries during the Thatcher years, the children of Bexhill come from families that are generationally poor, with many members of the community receiving public assistance. Because Creative Partnerships "focuses on the most deprived communities in England," Bexhill was a perfect choice for an investment in what Creative Partnerships call "the creative industries," and their offices in Durham Sunderland took up the task and invited a colleague, Shirley Brice Heath, and me to research their endeavor.

Still, the school was already invested in a creative curriculum when we arrived. They had an active interest in the arts, particularly music, and all teachers used drama in their classrooms. For example, "hot seating"—when a child takes on a character's role and answers class questions—was a common technique. Four teachers were especially interested in drama, and in the study's first year we formed a Teacher Research Team. With the support of the Head Teacher for several days of release time, we observed individual artists, analyzed their techniques, and discussed the links between drama and the school's central goal of extending their children's language development. In that year, a stream of dramatic artists flowed in and out of Bexhill, with some successful and some not, and those results are reported in Heath & Wolf (2005).

But out of this stream, one company of players stood out—Theatre Cap-a-Pie, led by Gordon Poad and Mark Labrow. As a result, in the next two years, two teachers—Linda Nesbitt and Lesley Watson—chose to work closely with the company, and it was this interaction that I followed. Linda and Lesley are Year Two teachers (first grade in the U.S.), and their children's first years of school often mark their first experience with reading and talking about text, for the mainstream pattern of bedtime story reading has not been a part of their nightly routine (Heath, 1982). Thus, the teachers felt that opportunities for their children's expressive language were limited, both in the community as well as within traditional classroom structures.

In the second year of the study, as Linda and Lesley worked intensively with Theatre Cap-a-Pie in workshops, set up their own after-school Drama Club, and shifted their classroom curricula to include more drama, all four adults saw the children stretching into more sophisticated modes of expression through new vocabulary, grammatical structures, understandings of genre and story structure, as well as their willingness to critique by asking and answering questions of substance. These ever-developing markers of language were most

evident when the children scripted a full-length pirate play for the adults in Cap-a-Pie to perform (see Wolf, 2006). Consequently, the teachers and artists had more than a year of collaboration as well as the success of a long-term project under their belts when they began the third year of the study. They felt confident and comfortable in their shared abilities to develop yet other projects that would allow for children's maximal growth in language development.

The focus on language for these four adults makes sense. Both Linda and Lesley came to teaching later in their lives. Both had raised their children and held other jobs before they decided to become teachers. Their first jobs were at Bexhill; Linda started eleven years ago and Lesley has been there for ten. They quickly became friends, especially because they shared a very similar view of curriculum and instruction for children, largely centered on language. Lesley wanted her children to be "independent learners empowered to make their own enquiries and their own decisions." She had been inspired early in her career to help children learn to ask in-depth questions to heighten discussion possibilities. She explained:

> As part of a course I did on thinking skills, I've started to use the "Community of Enquiry" to encourage children to ask questions rather than just giving the answer. I'm looking at their questioning skills, trying to get them to move beyond just asking closed questions all the time and open up ideas and look deeper. And also debating particular questions to see what the answer might be rather than "Well, the answer is such and such." Instead, the focus is on *"What do you think?"* They're debating backwards and forwards and disagreeing and agreeing and backing up their arguments.

Linda was equally interested in stretching her children into more sophisticated language structures. Her teaching style was marked by opportunities for her children to engage in deep discussion about character motivation and intention, the significance of setting, and the multiple

messages in stories. She would often pose intriguing questions for her children to consider. For example, a discussion of *The Three Little Pigs* and the differences in the pigs' abilities to build their houses and confront the wolf led to this question: "Is it unusual for siblings from the same family to have such different characters and abilities?" This discussion was enhanced when Linda asked three children to get on the dramatic "hot seat" and answer the other children's questions as if they were the porcine siblings. Linda's lessons were full of positive confirmations of her children's thinking. Still, she never hesitated to elongate their responses with further questions and comments as well as technical vocabulary appropriate to the topic.

Gordon and Mark were also interested in children's language, though their interest increased after they began collaborating with the teachers. The actors had met in university where they studied drama and together they founded Cap-a-Pie, which focused on working with adolescents who had been excluded from regular schooling. They also worked with individual classes in elementary schools to create "A Play in a Week." Before they met Linda and Lesley, they had never worked with children so young. In their first major project together—the creation of the pirate play—the teachers insisted that their children be involved in every part of process. Over a period of several months, the children verbalized suggestions for script lines that the adult actors performed. The adults scribed the children's ideas and dialogue, continually making suggestions for revision. Yet, the flow of critique was not unidirectional from the adults to the children, for the children critiqued the adults' decisions as well. Gordon explained, "This is a new way of working for us…basically starting with the children's own ideas and refining them."

Theoretical Frame

In setting up viable professional exchanges among teachers and artists, Creative Partnerships (2003) suggests: "A key aim of these projects is to build trust and understanding among the

partners, and to develop a common language and agenda." But how do these ambitious goals align with the research literature on professional development?

Four key ideas drive the understanding of effective professional development in this piece. First, teacher learning is inextricably linked to student learning, especially if professional development is centered on addressing and filling the gaps between "goals for student achievement and actual student performance" (Hawley & Valli, 1999, p. 127). Second, teachers learn best how to address these gaps within long-term collaborations. As Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999) suggest, "…the possibilities for individual teacher learning increase greatly as professional communities move from individualistic or 'balkanized' cultures to 'collaborative' cultures, and towards what can be described as 'learning communities'" (p. 381). Lieberman and Miller (1999) summarize these ideas well: "Professional learning is most powerful, long lasting, and sustainable when it occurs as a result of one's being a member of a group of colleagues who struggle together to plan for a given group of students…. These learning communities legitimate "just in time" learning—the kind that is useful on Monday" (p. 62).

Still, Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) suggest that effective professional development within learning communities is marked by an "essential tension" between a focus on practicality—the development of curriculum for Monday—and a focus on intellectual revitalization. Thus, the emphasis on student learning and how to achieve it must be in constant interplay with the intellectual growth of teachers, as they learn to think not only in "just in time" modes, but also be willing to cast ahead and transform their own futures as learners.

The third idea central to this piece is that professional development is often most effective when teachers stretch into more expansive ways of thinking about their content with colleagues who have varying kinds of expertise. Ball and Cohen (1999) capture this dynamic:

> …we signal the need for teachers to be linked with a wider discourse beyond their local circle of colleagues, whether through subject matter organizations, study groups, university-school partnerships, or other groups or networks. An important goal should be to expand the community of educators and education resources to which teachers turn to inform and support their work, a shift from the pattern in which teachers focus exclusively on their own work or the work of those close by, with little external contribution, challenge, or support. (pp. 18-19)

All too often, however, when teachers join with artists or university mentors—those outside their immediate world—the emphasis is only on what the *teachers* will gain. For example, in advocating artistic professional development for teachers, Oreck (2004) stressed that the goals were to "increase teachers' understanding of and efficacy in using the arts as part of an expanded repertoire of teaching techniques and to promote active, creative, teaching and learning" (p. 55). While these are admirable goals, they do not take into account what the *artists* will learn in the exchange. Thus the fourth and final idea on which this piece is based is that for partnerships to be truly collaborative, the stream of learning must flow both ways.

The creative partnership between teachers Linda and Lesley and artists Mark and Gordon delivered on these four ideas. All focused on students' learning, especially students' creative thinking. Second, the fact that they were well into the third year of the study signaled their long-term commitment to the work. And all had committed to joining in the research project with me, knowing that the time commitment for interviews, observations, and email conversations would stretch their heavy load even further. Third, in this commitment they had moved far beyond the typical boundaries of group memberships where teachers interact with teachers and artists with

artists. Finally, in the developing exchange, all were able to articulate and provide evidence of their learning as they came to communicate their developing areas of expertise.

It is critical to note the importance of language across all four of these categories. Research reminds us that children engaged in role play "develop and display some of their most intricate linguistic and interactional abilities. During role play, children have an opportunity to practice skills in a variety of registers, some of which they may otherwise not need and thus not display" (Hoyle, 1998, p. 47). Hypothetical constructions are key as children consider what *might* happen within particular situations. The same is true when adults take on new roles, teachers talking like artists and artists like teachers, especially when they are involved in problem posing and problem solving, creating curricula, and discussing ways to engage children. As Schlegel (1998) argues, "collaboration involves more than the sharing of ideas; it involves the negotiation of the intricacies of communication that in turn reinforce the collaborative atmosphere" (p. 202).

Methods

Over the years of this study, I typically visited Bexhill for five three-day visits during each academic year. I timed my visits to observe planning meetings with Linda, Lesley, Gordon, and Mark as well as specific workshops to follow. During every visit I audio-recorded multiple interactions, including Drama Club sessions led by Linda and Lesley, the children's interactions with Theatre Cap-a-Pie, as well as classroom drama lessons or debriefing sessions led by the teachers to ask the children their opinions about how the work was going. In addition, I conducted interviews with all the adults involved—sometimes in small groups or pairings and sometimes individually—and I interviewed the children as well. I also collected pertinent artifacts, including children's writing and sketches, teachers' plans, actors' scripts, etc.

When I returned home from each trip, I transcribed the audiotapes and began my analysis of patterns in both language and learning. These were supplemented with email exchanges about developing plans as well as audiotapes and small transcripts that the teachers and artists would send me on sessions that had been conducted in my absence. With each subsequent trip, I conducted extensive interviews with teachers, artists, and children to member check my initial findings against their understandings. Thus the research includes my own transcripts and fieldnotes as well as summaries and transcripts from the participants themselves, which I analyzed for the thematic patterns reported in this piece.

This research focuses on a few days of concentrated work in the third year of the study. At this point in time, the teachers and artists were in their second year of collaboration. The first year of their partnership took many twists and turns, highlighted by the tension between creating a piece of sound theatre (the pirate play) and meeting the needs of children (Wolf, 2006). In this second year, the adults agreed to take the pressure of an elaborate production off their shoulders and engage in several smaller, contained workshop days that would center on different pieces of children's literature. The work surrounding *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Van Allsburg, 1984) represents the first of these endeavors. Thus, many of their earlier points of contention, had been resolved, and at this point all shared a commitment to children's voices.

But what signals a shared commitment? A key feature of my analysis was attending to the discourse of the adult group—particularly in their planning, workshop, and debriefing sessions. Was their talk marked by collaboration (the use of "we" and "our"), consensus ("I agree…"), considerate disagreement ("I see what you mean, but…"), and care for each other's learning ("Let me show you…" and "Have you considered…?")? As Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) suggest:

> In a professional community of teachers, a core responsibility is to the learning of other teachers. This responsibility might entail contributing to group discussions, pressing others to clarify their thoughts, engaging in intellectual midwifery for the ideas of others, and providing resources for others' learning. If a feature of pseudocommunity is withdrawal from the public space when conflict erupts, then a feature of a mature community is the willingness to engage in critique in order to further collective understanding. (p. 980)

My discourse analysis also concentrated on the interactions among children and adults. Did the children have ample opportunity to express their ideas? Were their ideas greeted with respect as well as nudges toward further articulation? Did the children build and extend on each other's ideas rather than solely addressing the adults? Did questions stem from both children and adults alike? Thus, the quality of the conversation was key to my analysis.

Partnership in Planning

In the third year of the study, both Linda and Lesley had classes with low academic skills. As Linda explained: "My class made the least progress of any class in the school last year, and Lesley's class had had a bad Year One because of a series of substitutes. So they came into Year Two with a really negative attitude toward writing, and they wouldn't pick a pencil up." Still, the teachers' ambitions for these six-year-old children were high, for they not only wanted to expand their children's *oral* language but their *written* language as well.

In November, the teachers developed a month-long unit using *The Polar Express* (Van Allsburg, 1985)—a classic story of a boy who travels to the North Pole to receive the first gift of Christmas from Santa. Instead of simply reading the picturebook to the class, they revealed the illustrations in increments. Captivated by the art, the children began discussing potential stories

behind the pictures. Linda and Lesley followed the children's lead in dramatic ways; they turned their classrooms into trains and the children did extensive role-playing as passengers and conductors and wrote play scripts for their characters. They were so excited about their group script writing, that they asked their teachers if they could craft individual scripts so they could each experiment with dialogue. Over the course of the unit, the children learned about a variety of written genres—film reviews, speech bubbles, play scripts, and letters to Santa.

Flush with the success of this work, the teachers met with Theatre Cap-a-Pie's Gordon and Mark in December of the year to plan for an upcoming workshop in January. They brought several Van Allsburg texts with them as well as a number of other picturebooks that the artists might consider in developing the next stage of their work together. Unfamiliar with current children's book illustration, the artists were astonished with the evocative nature of the texts, but they were particularly intrigued with Van Allsburg's (1984) *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, pouring over the illustrations, reading and rereading the frame story with growing excitement.

Mark: It would be a good lead on in terms of *The Polar Express* to work with the same author. And the images are great. It's so open that there's so much space within— Is it possible for us to do things outside drama as well? I mean, this idea of writing and this idea of storytelling, rather than for it all to be physical: "Get up on your feet. We're going to be actors!" Instead, we could use that as a starting point for creative writing and develop one of these images for a scene. Just be as creative with it as we can.

Lesley: Well, the whole point is for children to become more creative thinkers. Yes, I want them to write, but that's not the be all and end all of it. I want them to get a mindset that they can carry to the next year and the next and the next.

Linda: And look how pleased they were with the work they developed for *The Polar Express*—using their creativity and taking it a step further into writing. In fact, they're *there.* They *are* writers. They *believe* they're writers. They're writing all the time. So it's an exciting time for them, and between us I think we can come up with a good plan to carry it on.

Mark: I think you're right. They'll *want to.* As soon as people are engaged, they're going to want to *produce.*

Once the teachers had shared the success of their earlier unit, the artists seemed eager to carry on. Working with the same author/illustrator would help the children build connections from their past work to their future work. And the work would be a model of arts integration; instead of limiting their own input to "on your feet" drama activities, the artists could hone their skills in providing opportunities for creative writing, a curricular task usually isolated to the teachers' domain. Linda and Lesley were happy for the artists to stretch into their areas of expertise, because as Lesley explained, the point was for the "children to become more creative thinkers"—taking on a mindset that could carry them from year to year. Linda agreed, stressing the collaboration of the group with "between *us* I think *we* can come up with a good plan to carry it on." Mark, too, emphasized the coherence of the group with the words, "I think you're right."

A critical aspect of their planning was the interplay of engagement and production. If the children were engaged, it was likely they would willingly work toward a final product.

Gordon: I'm thinking just looking at this frame [to *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*], which is just brilliant, and wondering about whether we could set up some sort of imperative about writing. We could take on the role of actors who've been asked to write something, but we're not quite sure what to do. And we could ask,

"Could anybody help us to make sense of this?" Maybe the publisher sent us this box of images— I haven't got my mind wrapped around it properly yet, but—

Mark: There's a nice section in here [Mark read the section of the frame where Wenders returned with the box of all his children's stories]. So even the idea of that cardboard box coming out or [pause] a box that's charred at some level and there are fragments of these stories that have been written. And it's like, "We have to now recreate these for the publisher. They've been involved in a fire, but we have sections, sentences, and the odd thing, and we have to work out which one goes with which picture first, which gives us a starting point for a line at least or two sentences—a frame which we can start to build around. We've got a few words, a few titles, a few illustrations, and we've got a deadline. The publishers need this. There's been a fire at the publisher's office and we've been given the job of recreating these stories, but we need some help to put these back together."

Linda: I think that's a good idea because we're trying to get them to be creative thinkers, but sometimes you've got to move things on. You've got a period of time to do something. So I think it's alright being a creative thinker, but if that's as far as you get and you never do anything with it— So I think actually working to a deadline, though not necessarily having a set idea of what will be the outcome, but giving them a period of time to resolve the problem is a good thing. Because sometimes if it becomes so open-ended, it can drift.

Mark: Yes, and then once it's written, or elements of it, we can get feedback even from our imaginary publisher. We could say, "Well this moment or that moment, they liked it, but would it really happen?" And they could start to question.

Linda: And become critics!

Lesley: Revision!

Mark: It *would* be revision because we could say, "The publishers are unsure whether this works." I don't know. Just getting them to justify and revise and say, "Well, maybe the magic could be *stronger* or we could put more danger in the story. Let's stage part of it. Let's act it out."

Linda: Yes, so it's not set in stone. They can revise it. This plan is giving them an opportunity to do lots of drama as well as writing because what kids want is for you to come up with something, but they like the idea of helping the adults out.

Mark: That gives us the opportunity to flip between creative writing, storytelling, and—

Gordon: Trying things out in drama.

Linda: I think this gives them so much opportunity and scope.

Mark: Yes. I think it's got to be open enough.

Linda: Yes.

Mark: And I think it builds on your *Polar Express* work. And they may not finish it within our sessions, but you can carry on in the classroom.

Lesley: Yes! And we'll do some advanced work as well.

Linda: We know we've got to do some advanced work on publishers, because obviously if the children don't understand the publisher's role, that's going to take up work-shop time. So we'll do some work on publishers so they have the background.

In this conversation, the "we" of the four adults working together stretched to include the children. Mark's comment—"we've been given the job of recreating these stories"—implied an imaginary situation in which all would help solve the problem of the publisher's demands.

While the solution to the problem would remain open to maximize the children's input, a deadline would prevent the work from drifting aimlessly. Linda's emphasis on the critical nature of a deadline links to renowned educator Sir Ken Robinson's (2001) definition of creativity:

> Whatever the task, creativity is not just an internal mental process: it involves action. In a sense, it is applied imagination. To call somebody creative suggests they are actively producing something in a deliberate way. A first definition of creativity then is *imaginative processes with outcomes in the public world.* (p. 115)

In their planning, the teachers and artists were also working toward outcomes in the public world, for their planning conversation would lead to real work with the children. This didn't mean that their plans were set in stone. Indeed, Linda cautioned against this. Instead, their conversation contained admissions that they were still in the developing stages of their plan, and they continually used hypotheticals to indicate the tentativeness of their ideas in constructions like "maybe the magic could be *stronger."* Although they were experts in their respective fields, as they edged into each other's domains, they showed their struggles to come up with the best plan. Gordon specifically said, "I haven't got my mind wrapped around it properly yet, but—" and in the midst of explaining his idea about revision Mark stated, "I don't know." Still, these hesitations and cautions served to help everyone ultimately feel more confident in their group planning, for the recurrence of "Yes!" several times and from both teachers and artists helped them to validate and build on each others' ideas.

After this meeting, I asked Linda and Lesley what they thought of the planning session:

Linda: I think what we came up with is really exciting, and I'm pleased with the way it evolved because it was a real cooperative, wasn't it? Everyone was contributing ideas and going with each other's ideas.

Lesley: That flexibility's there because we trust each other, and nobody's put at stake a task to be fulfilled no matter what. It will just evolve.

Shelby: Now were you happy with the choice of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick?*

Lesley: Yes, because as Mark said that one was the most open to possibilities. If we are going with the kids as we did with *The Polar Express*, than we can leave it open as much as is possible and the children's ideas will come out.

The teachers were "pleased" with the partnership, for it was "cooperative" as well as marked by "trust." It was "open to possibilities" with enough "flexibility" to allow the process to "evolve" with the "kids' ideas." Linda and Lesley's points were well taken, for when the teachers and artists put their plans into action with the children, the children's ideas did come out. Even more important, so did their language.

Partnership in Production

Gordon and Mark returned a month later for their two-day workshop on *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.* They worked with Linda's children in the morn and Lesley's in the afternoon, switching the sequence on the second day. They brought the publishing dilemma directly to the children, but they crafted it in a slightly different way. They explained that their "boss" in Theatre Cap-a-Pie—Jez Arrow—was demanding a new play, and he thought that the children of Bexhill could help. He gave the actors a scruffy old box of materials that would help as well. Supposedly, when the actors tried to question Jez, he exclaimed, "You're getting on me nerves asking all these questions! You get yourself down to Bexhill, and all the answers you'll need are in that box." Thus, the contents of the box were ostensibly a mystery to the actors as well.

In the morning session with Linda's class, the actors put the box carefully in the middle of her children, who quickly crowded around. They gasped when Gordon began to pull several

envelopes out of the box, and opened the first to reveal an illustration from the book—a woman taking a knife to a mysterious, glowing pumpkin. The illustration was mounted on old cardstock and burned around the edges, giving the illustration an even eerier look.

Chorus: OHHHH!

Charlene: It's lighting up!

Edward: Shall we see if it glows in the dark?

Charles: It must be MAGIC!

Hillary: There might be more different pictures than that one.

Tom: It might make a story when you've opened them all.

Carlton: Put them in order!

Linda's children quickly began to see the story potential in the pictures, and together they exclaimed over the details of the illustration and saw the possibilities for the pictures to be interrelated. Perhaps, as Carlton suggested, there was a sequence they could discover.

Gordon and Mark started the afternoon session with Lesley's class in the same way, but before they could pull out the envelopes of pictures, Carl leaned into the box and shouted, "I found some words!" The words were several of Chris Van Allsburg's titles for the illustrations in his book, and they were written in flowing script on old cardstock. The actors quickly shifted gears to follow the children's lead, and Gordon read the titles out loud. He then distributed the titles to several children, and they held the strips of cardstock with wonder.

Chris: If we follow these, we might get to something.

Gordon: Like what?

Mary: There might be hidden hints in there.

Lester: They're hiding a message, I think.

Daniel: These have been written in ink with a feather pen.

Gordon: What would that mean?

Daniel: That they were written years and years ago.

Dean: Because we don't use feather pens any more.

Jane: They must have been in there for ages!

Teresa: This could make a sentence.

Jennifer: A sentence to make a final something.

Lester: It couldn't because it has to have full stop.

Lesley: Yes, there might be some missing punctuation.

Teresa: [Pointing to the unopened envelopes]. But there's got to be something in these!

Gordon: Yes, shall we open one? Jez gave us this for a reason, didn't he?

Michael: He wanted us to make a story.

Mary: This must be the story, so they'll be pictures.

Gordon: Do you think there are pictures in all of them?

Rachel: Each picture might give us a clue for a story.

Michael: Well, we won't find out unless you open them!

Gordon: Shall we do that?

Chorus: YEAH!

The children's groupthink was most notable in the fact that they built on each other's ideas. Mary's suggestion about possible "hidden hints" in the illustrations led Lester to concur: "They're hiding a message." Daniel's observation about the feather pen led him to speculate about the age of the writing, and Dean quickly confirmed the lack of such instruments in present day writing, while Jane surmised that the words then "must have been written ages ago." The children's ideas ranged from the construction of sentences to points of punctuation. Moreover, the children's language was marked by mental state verbs ("I think"), hypotheticals ("might," "could," and "if…then" constructions), as well as logical arguments. As Jane later remarked, "If you open all of them and put them pictures together and put all these words into making a sentence, it might help us to find a story."

As more pictures were unveiled, the children came up with myriad narrative possibilities. They had so many ideas Gordon jokingly commented, "You could just *burst* with ideas. It's possible. It happened once, and it wasn't very nice!" Encouraging them to look even more closely, the actors placed the pictures around the room and asked the children to stand next to the "scariest" and then the "one with the most mystery." They stressed independent thinking: "Which one do *you* think is the funniest? Don't worry about what anybody else thinks." The children split up and stood by the picture each felt had the most humor, and they had sound explanations for their choices. Intriguingly, three of the children stood off to the side, and when Michael was asked about his stance he said, "I don't think any of the pictures are funny."

Like Linda's children, Lesley's class felt strongly that the pictures they were working with could be sequenced if only they could pick out the pattern, and their comments and conjectures came out in a "swarm" of overlapping talk—a conversational term coined by Tannock (1998) as

a marker of heightened engagement. They tried several different sequences and came to several different conclusions. For example, one illustration showed several children riding a small cart on a railroad track propelled by a sail and moving off into the distance. Studying the illustration, Mary explained: "This has *got* to be the last one because they sail away to the land of happy."

On the second day of the workshop, the teachers and actors led the children even further down the trail of story. They asked the children to match the titles to the pictures, and even though their matches were different from Van Allsburg's, the children had many justifications for their choices. Rather than sequencing the illustrations, the artists and teachers suggested that each held a *separate* story, and the children were to choose their favorite illustration and work with a small group of peers and one of the adults to brainstorm ideas for possible scenes. Studying one illustration of a large ship crashing through a city that resembled Venice, one group of boys from Lesley's class explained the reasoning behind their choices:

Michael: 'Cause it's so strange. Because it's looks so deserted.

Gordon: Yes, there are no people there at all. It's like a ghost ship.

Michael: There are loose bricks falling off, and the ship looks like a big Titanic. It broke into two and sunk. It ran into big iceberg. [The children had a short discussion about the Titanic, before Gordon turned to another child for his reasoning.]

Daniel: 'Cause the boat hit the building.

Lesley: What do you think happened, Daniel?

Daniel: It came in the night in a big gush of wind and waves that brought it in.

Richard: 'Cause it's wild. 'Cause it's been pushed there by a tsunami.

In this conversation, the boys were drawn to the "strange" and "wild" look of the illustration, as the giant ship—much too big for the city's canals—crashed into a building, tipping over a tower. They brought their background knowledge to bear on their explanations, using historical information (the Titanic) as well as more recent current events (the tsunami). In addition, they used sophisticated vocabulary to explain their thinking. Michael described the city as "deserted," and Daniel felt that the ship was driven by "a big gush of wind and waves."

When the children turned to writing about their illustrations, Mark suggested that the boys in this group might think about creating a page of the "captain's log" that had been found. Working quickly with Lesley—who was leading this group—Mark explained that the children could decide what day the log would represent: "What did the log say? What was happening on this particular day? Is it from when they started the journey? Or was from the day before this or on the day it actually happened? Wherever you think it's best to place it."

Turning to her group, Lesley explained the purpose of a captain's log, and the boys wrote dialogue for both the day of the crash and the morning after, with the captain exclaiming over his lack of control and despair with the accident. But then they decided on another scene that explored how the illustration came to be. They placed Jez—Mark and Gordon's "boss"—in a "light aircraft" flying over the scene and taking this "photo." He then got on his mobile to a friend before calling for help, concerned for the small boats on the water. Because the children had never been to Venice and perhaps because of their understanding of the tragedy of 9/11, they decided the city was New York. With Lesley acting as scribe, they wrote the following script:

> I'm having a trip in a light aircraft over New York. You'll never guess what I've just seen! A big ship has just crashed. There's lots of smoke. The ship is burning where the engine is. There's oil leaking into the water. The water's on fire, and it's making trails,

> and the fire is spreading onto the land. It's bright red and orange and yellow. I can smell the diesel. I can hear the water gushing. I can see the small boats. It's getting darker with smoke. Now I can't see. I have to go! [The children decided that Jez would then send a text message to the Army, and they wrote this text as well.] HELP. HELP. SHIP ON FIRE. SMOKE BLACK. FIRE SPREADING. SEND HELP TO SMALL BOATS.

This scene resulted from the flexible planning among artist, teacher, and children. Following the boys' decision to work with this illustration, Mark suggested that the writing might center on a page from the captain's log. Although there were no people to be seen in the illustration, actors must take on character roles, so a captain made sense. Lesley presented Mark's idea to the children, and they followed up with their own thoughts. But they were even more interested in the origin of the illustration and transformed it into a photo taken by Jez himself, for they remembered that their ultimate task was to provide Jez with a narrative for a potential play. Placing him in a central role was sure to please him. And writing such a scene pleased themselves, for they followed with yet another scene of a man in the city who witnessed the crash and also called for help, for his own family was on board ("You've got to *believe* me! You've *got* to help my wife and son!")

In creating these scripts, Lesley urged the boys for more elaborate writing through multiple questions. For example, in the Jez-as-pilot script she asked: "What does Jez see? What does he smell? What should he do now? Who would he call for help?" As a result, these six-year-old boys generated a detailed text that showed Jez's amazement with the scene below, and their script is full of sensory descriptors—the smell of the diesel, the gushing sound of the water, and the bright colors of the fire. The children also demonstrated their understanding of genre, for the telephone call to a friend was distinctly different from the text message with its clipped phrases.

Throughout the day, as they worked with other groups in Lesley's class as well as with Linda's children, the actors and teachers demonstrated flexibility in their on-the-spot planning, which led to a wide variety of small productions. Some children insisted on developing scenes that combined two or more of the illustrations. Others developed a single scene played out in three different ways, thus giving the audience a chance to decide on the best way to go from there. Some children acted out their scenes, while others, like the boys in Lesley's class spent the entire time creating multiple scripts. Yet, no matter the production result, the process was very similar, filled with children's talk as they shared ideas, asked questions, provided potential answers, discussed and debated possibilities, and ultimately decided on scenes. And their teachers and artists continually nudged them to further thinking, as the adults made suggestions (the captain's log), provided vocabulary ("Misticable? Ah, you mean despicable."), and asked multiple questions ("Where do you think the rocket ship house is going?").

In the debriefing that followed the workshops, Lesley worried that the boys in her group had missed out because they hadn't had a chance to actually *act* with either Mark or Gordon. They had been "stuck with their teacher." Linda and the artists, however, disagreed.

Linda: But I think it's valuable looking at it in a different way. We've all had different experiences. Now they've seen other possibilities, and next time they might choose to act more.

Gordon: Well, if it is going to be child led, there's always the potential that some are going to have richer experiences than others. But from the quality of your group's experience, I tell you that I was *inspired* by what they did, which is an important part of Creative Partnerships—that artists get inspired by what the children do. Listening to their work made me think about doing radio theatre, which I had

never considered before. And you had three different perspectives and different media—someone on a mobile, then the texting— It was really clever.

Lesley: Well, it was. But I didn't do it. *They* did.

Mark: But that's what we mean by child led, isn't it?

Gordon: Though you were asking a lot of questions, weren't you?

Lesley's willingness to critique her own work was typical of the adults in this partnership, as was the support the others offered. Unwilling to sit back and be satisfied, all reflected on how they might do it differently and how their learning in one experience might enhance the next. Their four voices and four perspectives enriched the conversation. Even more important, their work was child led, allowing more voices to enter and often change the direction of the discussion.

After this debrief, the adults began to plan their next experience together. Cap-a-Pie later returned for another two-day workshop where the children did much more talking and writing about *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick,* and each class created a short, final performance. The teachers took up the work in their classrooms as well. As one example, they took the children to the beach and helped them take their own digital photographs of found objects as well as things they'd brought from home to add mystery. Back in their classrooms, they wrote questions about their peers' photos and developed mystery narratives for the ones they found most intriguing. Like Carl who peered into the box and exclaimed "I found words!" over these many experiences the children found many more words to express their ideas both orally and in writing.

Conclusion

At the end of the first two-day workshop, Gordon and Mark asked the children to describe their favorite events. Many liked acting, while others enjoyed writing or the warm-up exercises.

When it was Kate's turn, she smiled up into Gordon's face and said, "Being with you." But then she turned to the group and said, "Being with everybody." Charmed, Gordon repeated: "Being with all of us. All of us together. That's a lovely sentiment."

It is. But being together extends well beyond a sentiment and into positive professional planning and substantive results for children. Think of it in these terms: In drama—whether on the stage or in classroom workshops—playwrights and actors exist in the world of "as if." What would the world be like if such and such occurred? Knowing what I know about this character, how would s/he respond when faced with this dilemma? What about the interrelationship among characters; if one character says or does this, how will it affect another? How, in other words, can we ponder the mysteries behind events and characters' motivations and intentions?

The same "as if" world can emerge in creative partnerships among teachers and artists. What would professional development look like if it focused on the connections between teacher learning and student learning? How would the learning benefit from long-term collaborations that emphasized both practicality and intellectual revitalization? What if the professional development brought teachers together with adults with very different areas of expertise, such as artists? Finally, what if the concentration was not simply on the teachers' learning but also on the artists'? In the case of this study, the mysteries of effective creative partnerships depended on turning these four hypotheticals into realities.

For this workshop, Jez—Theatre Cap-a-Pie's "boss"—set the challenge, and the box of words and illustrations he supposedly sent provided the inspiration to help the children enter into the "as if" worlds of multiple narratives. But just as Van Allsburg (1984) stood behind *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick,* and not some fictional artist or publisher, Linda, Lesley, Gordon, and Mark stood together behind this plan. It was they, not some fictional "boss," who discussed,

designed, debated, and debriefed the plan, and their devotion to child-led curriculum meant that the decision making went well beyond the initial planning, for flexibility was needed continually throughout the two days as well as beyond.

We know that children are all too often silent in school. As Egan (2005) reminds us: "While young children live in an oral culture, it is too often the case that their oral cognitive tools are not adequately developed. What many students who are having difficulty with literacy need is a richer orality to build literacy on" (p. 30). Egan goes on to explain that one of the central cognitive tools is mystery:

> Mystery is an important tool in developing an engagement with knowledge that is beyond the students' everyday environment. It creates an attractive sense of how much that is fascinating remains to be discovered. All the subjects of the curriculum have mysteries attached to them, and part of our job in making curriculum content known to students is to give them an image of richer and deeper understanding that is there to draw their minds into the adventure of learning. (pp. 5-6)

The results of the creative curriculum that Linda, Lesley, Gordon, and Mark designed stretched their children's language through mystery. As a result, the children asked and answered multiple questions, pondered possibilities, agreed and disagreed, tested out new vocabulary, and brought their background knowledge to bear on the issues at hand. Their discussions ranged from points of punctuation ("…it has to have full stop.") to the emotional aspects of dialogue ("You've got to *believe* me!"). By casting themselves into mystery, they entered into the adventure of learning.

The teachers and artists shared in the adventure, for they too entered into the language and learning that come with creativity, collaboration, compromise, and critique. As Gordon said, "…an important part of Creative Partnerships [is] that artists get inspired by what the children do."

Yet, the adults also inspired each other. As they worked together over the years of their partnership, they learned to lean on each other, take further risks, reflect on their decisions, and offer alternative possibilities. Linda and Lesley increased their facility with dramatic techniques and used these strategies to open up even more space for "kid talk." Gordon and Mark learned to listen more attentively to *all* children's voices, and they found that children's literature could be used to enhance children's written language. In highlighting mystery and closely attending to children's oral and written language, the adults developed a language of their own—one that emphasized their excitement and engagement with continual professional learning.

It's true that educational policy makers may hear the word "mystery" and be dismissive, especially since mystery is marked by things we don't yet know. Yet the absolute unpredictability of our future world stands in stark contrast with typical approaches to education. Robinson (2005) argues "Much of what we teach in education is about not being wrong, about not taking risks, about knowing there's a right answer and it's at the back and you're not to look yet" (p. 4). That's not mystery; that's certainty—a sure footedness that actually weighs you down. For the Bexhill children, a traditional "one-answer-only" curriculum would be particularly disabling for they were not raised in the swirl of language that characterizes many mainstream families.

Teachers, too, can become deskilled in an atmosphere that stresses standardized test preparation and "teacher-proof" curricula instead being challenged to lean on their own innovative ideas. And artists, though often characterized by risk taking and divergent thinking, are all too often excluded from conversations that center on the education of the young. But the Bexhill teachers and Cap-a-Pie artists had a unique and long-term opportunity for cross curricular and cross disciplinary work—an opportunity that is much too rare in American schooling. As Egan (2005) suggests, they shared the rich orality needed to build a more engaging literacy curriculum.

Thus Linda, Lesley, Gordon, and Mark's collaborative conversations and curricular planning – leading to such rich language results for the children—emphasize that effective creative partnerships depend on mystery, knowing that behind what we know there is always more to learn.

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