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Unlocking a voice

Trisha Lee introduces Helicopter Stories, an approach that can enable even the quietest child to develop their personal, social and emotional skills, while boosting language and literacy...

"ONCE UPON A TIME THERE LIVED a girl called Ella. She was very pretty, until one day she got her dress all mucky. And her mum and dad were very cross. They locked her in her bedroom for one year. And she was never naughty again."

A week ago, Martha, aged five, told me this story. She sat beside me on the carpet of a Reception classroom in London, whilst the other children were engaged in painting, or building with blocks, or moving trains along the track that filled the classroom. She was "a quiet girl, who rarely spoke" according to her teacher, and yet to me she was confident and articulate.

Later, when she stood on the stage to act out her story,

this five-year-old, who normally shied away from the limelight, twirled in her imaginary dress, before raising her hands in disgust to demonstrate how she was now 'all mucky'.

Two children from around the stage came up to take on the role of her parents. Another group of six children created the walls of her bedroom. They stood around her, forming a prison. The girl in the story looked out through the walls of children, peering at the class with the saddest of eyes. Martha was in her element.

When we applauded, she smiled coyly, the pride in what she had just achieved flushed across her cheeks. "That was a big punishment for that girl, just for getting her dress dirty," I said.

"Mmmm," she nodded, and skipped back to her place in the circle, her face alight with smiles.

Sharing stories

Helicopter Stories is the only approach I know where even the quietest child clamours to open their mouth, to share their story and imagination, to stand bravely in front of their peers and portray their deepest thoughts, characters and interactions. It's a place where children who are overlooked suddenly find themselves in an environment where their gifts are recognised and where they can shine.

A teacher reiterated this when she shared with me the story of a boy who was struggling to make friends. Days after she incorporated Helicopter Stories into her setting, his situation changed. The teacher observed the class sitting up and taking notice when they

realised how good he was at pretending to be a monster. The invitations for tea soon followed.

The personal, social and emotional benefits of Helicopter Stories continue to astound me with every new anecdote I hear. The process is simple, and can be easily incorporated into any setting on a daily or weekly basis, and the only

TRY IT YOURSELF

Using Helicopter Stories in your setting...

- Mark out a rectangular stage and invite the children to sit around it.
- Read an introductory story, stopping after the first sentence to enable children to begin acting out the roles.
- Move around the stage, selecting children in order of how they are seated, one after the other.
- Ask if anyone would like to tell their own story.
- The story can be as short as they like but it can't be any longer than the bottom of the A5 page.
- Write the story verbatim, repeating the words out loud as you scribe.
- Once you have scribed and acted two or three stories, ask if anyone would like to tell you a private story.
- Write exactly what the child dictates and say each word out loud as you scribe.
- Return to the stage.
- All stories should be acted on the day they are taken.





ingredients required are a roll of masking tape, A5 paper and a practitioner rich in curiosity.

A child tells their story. The adult scribes it word for word. The child decides which character they would like to play and then the class gathers to act the story out. This is child-centred learning. The story belongs to the individual and because the teacher does not lead, instead allowing the child the freedom to create in the way they want to, beautiful tales are born and rich learning takes place.

Revealing confidence

Based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley in *Storytelling and Story Acting*, Helicopter Stories is a highly reflective approach that engages children in one of the things they know best: making up stories. Speaking to a teacher who has been using it on a weekly basis for over a year, I was told that the one thing she likes best about the work, is the opportunity it gives her to find out what really matters to her children. Now she gets to see a side of each child that she normally never witnesses: the part where they are confident, where they have a safe space to take risks and where they demonstrate their learning at their own pace, around their own agenda.

In Helicopter Stories, children's words are respected. Once they have been collected, the class sits around a taped-out stage and the stories are brought to life. Children have the opportunity to take turns in acting them out, to play cooperatively with

each other. Throughout the process they are able to demonstrate how they take account of one another's ideas, allowing each other to interpret the stories of the class and work together to breathe new life into them. They comfortably adapt their responses, taking on the roles of listeners, storytellers and actors, and shifting seamlessly between these, as each new story emerges.

Perfect introductions

In today's digital age, how often do our children see adults write? Perhaps for a shopping list, or a scribbled note, or to record an observation. In Helicopter Stories, the thing that is most precious to the child, their story, is written as they watch. They witness first-hand how writing captures their words, and perceive how ingenious mark making is. Often they become self-motivated and find their own way to explore the connection between the spoken and the written word that is such a vital part of early literacy.

The approach has been evaluated by the Open University, who found it to have a significant impact on communication, literacy, speaking and listening. Teachers have remarked

how "children's stories have got longer and more descriptive. They are adapting ideas from their peers. The work makes the children feel like part of a group. They learn how to take turns... everyone is accepted and no one is judged."

Recently, in a school labelled 'requires improvement,' I was told that the teacher had been monitoring her children's progress towards the Early Learning Goals for six weeks prior to incorporating Helicopter Stories. Their progress was good. She carried on monitoring the children for the following six weeks as she introduced the approach, during which time the children continued to make progress at an accelerated pace.

None of this should come as a shock. As with Martha, unlocking her voice to tell the tale of a character locked away for a year, Helicopter Stories sets children free and allows us to witness their imaginations fly.

For more information, pick up Trisha's new book, *Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories*, published by Routledge. Alternatively, visit makebelievearts.co.uk or watch Trisha in action at [ow.ly/QmUaD](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmUaD)

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