The Impact of the Storytelling Curriculum on Literacy Development for Children Aged Six to Seven and their Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The Welsh Government's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and pupil voice has implications for curriculum practices. This paper reports on the impact on children's literacy development of the Storytelling Curriculum that privileges children's voices (ages six to seven) and encourages them to become authors by dictating their stories to adults. In contrast to recommended practice, no formal teaching of literacy was carried out. After two terms children in Year 2 had moved to independent narrative writing, achieving high levels at the end of Key Stage 1 in writing and oracy. In addition, results on standardized reading tests showed gains of between one year and three years six months for the majority of the class. This case study analyzed children's writing and transcribed interviews with staff and children. We argue that the Storytelling Curriculum is a counter-discourse to current thinking on how to teach literacy with the potential to impact positively on pupil outcomes and support the development of pupil voice.

Background

The devolution of powers in the UK to the Welsh Government (WG) has led to a change in guidance issued regarding the education of children aged

from three to nineteen. The WG's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the basis of all its work indicates a discernible shift in thinking away from considering pupils to be the compliant recipients of education to being legitimate spokespersons on their own learning. The views of children are to be listened to and acted upon (see DELLS, 2006; WAG, 2004; DCELLS, 2008a). The School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) (DCELLS, 2008b; DCELLS, 2009), the key document to guide schools in school improvement, emphasizes the importance of involving children and young people in 'decisions about their learning'. Estyn, the body responsible for school inspection in Wales, emphasizes the importance of consulting and listening to pupils to ensure schools are 'responsive to the needs of learners' and meet 'individual needs' (Estyn, 2009: 27).

The view of children as competent and capable of making choices and driving their own learning is well documented in contemporary social theory (James et al., 1998; James and James, 2008) and in research on the impact of implementing pupil voice in schools (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, 2007). However, there has been little research into how young children can be given opportunities to initiate actions in curriculum areas. Children are used to being told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Teachers are restricted by regimes of accountability that require schools to use standardized tests to measure children's progress in literacy with the concomitant inevitability that teachers' main focus is on preparing children for the tests. This accountability for children's scores on such tests is enforced through a data-driven approach to school inspection, putting further pressure on teachers to train successful test takers. In reality the testing regime leads to a more didactic skills- and content-based approach to pedagogy at the expense of more child-centred, play-orientated approaches recommended by the Foundation Phase, even though such an emphasis is unsupported by evidence on how children learn (Raver and Zigler, 2004; Kirp, 2007; Cooper, 2009) and works against developing pupil voice.

This paper focuses on the teaching of narrative writing in Year 2 (ages six to seven) when children are in the final year of the Foundation Phase (DCELLS, 2008a) and argues for an approach that takes pupil voice seriously. The approach to literacy development adopted by the schools taking part in this research raises questions about how children learn to be literate and eschews many of the recommended pedagogic practices. The alternative practices discussed in this paper form a counter-discourse and

seek to open up different ways of developing literacy that put the child's voice at the centre of the literacy curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

The project took as its starting point the claim that narrative understanding is the primary meaning-making strategy (Hardy, 1975; Rosen, 1985; Bruner, 1990; Egan, 1992; Booker, 2004) and that classroom practices should utilize the narrative mode to plan for children's literacy development in the Foundation Phase (ages three to seven years) (DCELLS, 2008a). The findings provide an insight into what classroom processes will best encourage children to use the narrative mode to become effective storywriters. I have argued elsewhere (Lyle, 2000) that if narrative understanding is to be taken seriously as the primary mode of understanding, then it should be the starting point for planning and organizing the curriculum and classroom processes.

The Storytelling Curriculum draws on the work of Vivian Paley. A kindergarten teacher for thirty-seven years, Paley (2004) argues that anyone who spends time with young children will quickly recognize their passionate attachment to fantasy and their need to create, tell and act out their own narratives. In Paley's classroom children were encouraged to tell their stories to an adult who wrote them down, thus taking away the need to write, spell and punctuate. As they dictate their stories the children become authors and their stories become part of the class reading as either the teacher or children read their stories to the class.

If children are to become authors of stories they need wide exposure to storytelling, in particular traditional fairy tales. As Egan (2005) has argued, the fairy tale, with its binary opposites mediating abstract concepts, provides a wealth of imaginative stimulus and emotional engagement for the young child. As Paley (1981) says, 'Fairy tales stimulate the child's imagination in a way that enlarges the vocabulary, extends narrative skills, and encourages new ideas.'

The practice of storytelling and group dramatization that was pioneered by Paley has been used, with variations, in different contexts in the United States and elsewhere (Nicolopoulou et al., 2006). However, each context is unique, and the ways in which teachers adapt and develop the basic ideas vary from setting to setting. While we are not claiming that the findings from our research can be generalized, we are suggesting that if teachers

establish a Storytelling Curriculum they will be working with the way the young child's mind works. This has been demonstrated by Gopnik (2009) who argues that imaginative play demonstrates the young child's ability to think about things that are not actually there – a necessary prerequisite for storywriting.

In a discussion of Paley's work, Cooper (2009: 51) claims that in classrooms adopting and adapting Paley's approach, children learn to 'narrate experience through storytelling that embodies three processes: becoming a narrator, becoming an author, and making texts'.

She further argues that:

> [t]eachers cannot scaffold the foundations of literacy, language, and narrative by requiring children to perform on decontextualized sub-skill tasks. (Cooper, 2009: 52)

The implications of this for teaching literacy are profound as it challenges currently accepted 'good practice' (Paris and Stahl, 2005). Teachers would need to change their usual ways of teaching literacy.

Methodology

The research was designed to examine the impact of the Storytelling Curriculum on children's narrative writing over one year using a case study approach which drew on a wide range of sources of evidence for analysis (Yin, 2009). The research questions driving the study were:

1. What impact does the Storytelling Curriculum have on the storywriting of children aged six to seven?
2. How do children aged six to seven respond to the Storytelling Curriculum?
3. How do teachers respond to the Storytelling Curriculum?

To answer these questions the following mixed methods were used:

- analysis of children's dictated stories;
- narrative interviews with individual children;
- discussion with the whole class of children;
- narrative interviews with the class teacher, HLTA (Higher Level Teaching Assistant) and headteacher;

- teacher research diary;
- results of standardized tests.

Participants

Two schools took part in this study; the first school is the main focus for the case study with supplementary evidence from the second school that joined the project six months later. One teacher in the case study school was interviewed on three occasions and kept a research diary throughout. Three teachers in the second school were interviewed once. Four children from the case study school and three children in the supplementary school were interviewed once. A whole-class discussion was carried out in the case study school. Dictated stories by the children in both schools were analyzed. Results of standardized reading tests were analyzed in the case study school.

Establishing the Storytelling Curriculum in the case study school

Following an initial two-hour training session, the Year 2 teacher in the case study school agreed to implement the Storytelling Curriculum and to be involved as a co-researcher in this research. In October Sian told the children about it and together they designed a 'storytelling' table in the class. The children were invited to the story table to dictate their stories. Sian also immersed the children in story, sharing a wide range of books every day and using puppets and dressing up to support storytelling and dramatization of story.

Over a period of two days, all the children voluntarily dictated a story. For a term (twelve weeks) children had the opportunity to dictate a story every week. The stories were transcribed and became a focus for analysis. After a week the children started to bring stories into the classroom that they had written spontaneously at home. Sian explains:

> 'Cos they had listened to so many stories, dictated so many stories, re-told so many stories and heard so many stories they were very keen to write stories. Started coming in in the morning with stories they had written at home – I could tell they loved it because they were doing it at home and bringing them in. And again that encouraged more of them to do it because I was thrilled to listen to these stories and they all wanted to follow suit. Parents were getting involved as children dictated to parents and the story would come in to me.

In addition to the story dictation sessions, Sian held daily storytelling and storysharing sessions and each child had the chance to either read or have their stories read. Drama played an important part in the project as the children were creating stories using puppets and through role play in the fantasy role-play area and these stories later became dictated or written stories.

Sian did no formal literacy teaching with the class; instead she worked beside each child on a one-to-one basis to share their written stories with them, to enable them to see the purpose of punctuation and discuss spelling as they listened to her read their stories. Sian explains:

> When I show them the written story and they are reading back to me, I pick out the punctuation.

By January the vast majority of the children indicated their wish to write their stories themselves.

Some of the children in the class were targeted for specific support in literacy. They were identified through the results of the All Wales Reading Test administered at the beginning of the year. This indicated six children needed additional support in reading (five of these had Band A funding for Special Educational Needs (SEN)) and a further six were deemed to have additional learning needs. A specialist HLTA provided in-class support twice a week for these children. Other than this the children followed the same Storytelling Curriculum.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed for analysis and coded manually using techniques favoured by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) to identify themes and issues which helped answer the research questions. All stories were read and coded to provide an insight into the quality of children's narrative writing.

Question 1: What impact does the Storytelling Curriculum have on the storywriting of children aged six to seven?

Eighty-three stories (two to three from each child in Sian's Year 2 class – ages six to seven) and twenty-three from the second school were analyzed and coded in a number of different ways. The initial coding focused on

analyzing the narratives for evidence of five key story elements: character, setting, plot, rift and resolution. This would indicate whether or not narrative structure as a literary tool was available to the children. This first coding revealed that many children drew on a range of influences from different narrative genres to aid their storytelling, including fairy tales, film and TV as well as real life, and a second round of coding noted the different genres. Many children used their stories to explore concepts and a third round of coding identified these concepts. Finally, stories were coded for narrative style and whether the children were using a first- or third-person narrative and looked to see whether this changed over time. Stories were also coded using three categories: (1) *actual*, involving accounts of past events that happened or could have happened; (2) *fantasy*, events that could not have occurred; and (3) *actual-fantasy*, when children mixed real events with fantasy events. When coding two different variables were identified: gender and differences between the first, second and third stories.

Narrative structure

All the children were able to dictate simple, coherent stories from the start, and the length and complexities of their stories increased over time. They clearly understood how stories work, where they come from and what stories are composed of. By their third story the majority of children had characters, setting, plot, rift and resolution. Early stories lacked a plot and a rift in the plot, but all had a beginning, middle and end.

All stories had temporal markers, usually established in the opening line of the story. Most beginnings and endings were similar to traditional beginnings and endings in fairy tales. Forty-three stories started with 'Once upon a time' and the majority were variations on this, such as 'There once was . . .', 'One fine sunny day . . .', and so on. Endings were overwhelmingly happy – only six stories had sad endings and five had neutral endings.

Only twelve stories had non-temporal beginnings. In terms of narrative style the majority were fantasy, or a combination of actual and fantasy with a minority being actual and possible stories. Only four children included themselves as characters. Every story, except one, was written in a third-person narrative.

Similar to the findings of Appleby (1978: 47) and Nicolopoulou et al. (2006), many of the stories overlapped with the everyday world with which the child was familiar: family members and friends appeared in stories as

well as fictional characters from film and television. Some children provided recounts of traditional stories and others adapted and changed these stories, while others provided completely original fantasy stories. The key influences on children's stories were fairy tales or fables (twenty-eight stories) or film or TV (eighteen), ten had a mixed influence and seventeen had a real world influence.

The superhero was a feature of some stories (eleven stories) overwhelmingly by boys (ten); some superheroes were the invention of the child, for example a series of stories about 'Cat Girl' by the only girl who included a superhero; others featured well-known superheroes including Superman and Batman. Fourteen (overwhelmingly girls, eleven) included royalty (princes, princesses, kings and queens). Animals also featured in stories as pets or as main characters (fifteen stories), equally spread between boys and girls, while people (boy/girl or man) was the third most popular main character (twelve stories), split 2:1 between boys and girls. The most popular settings for stories were a castle (fifteen stories), a forest or wood (eleven stories) or the home (ten stories). Stories based in the everyday setting of the home had characters engaging in leisure pursuits, holidays and visits to theme parks, frequently accompanied by eating food. Fantasy stories took place in forests or castles, or in places far away and times long ago.

In line with the findings of Pitcher and Prelinger (1963) the stories grew more complex over time, the difference between stories written only one month apart was dramatic in terms of number of words, characters, incidents and complexities of plot and use of imagination.

Comparable to findings by Appleby (1978), from the first to third story, almost all had shifted away from the world of the child, the home and familiar surroundings towards more fantasy. In his research there was a gradual shift from completely realistic to intermediately distanced and finally pure fantasy worlds. The girls in Appleby's sample told more realistic stories than boys; while boys ventured further afield, girls remained closer to home. This was also the case in this research. As age rises there is a gradual expansion in the scope of the world dealt with in stories, and a gradual shift towards more fantasy in the action as a whole.

An interesting feature of some stories was the exploration of concepts. Vygotsky (1986) has identified true narratives as ones that explore concepts. The most common concept explored was coded as conflict and sixteen children included this concept in their stories (fourteen boys). The second most explored concept was magic (nine stories) and the third friendship (eight stories).

Overall, the analysis revealed the children as competent and confident storytellers able to draw on a wide range of characters, settings and plots to express their creative imaginations. Interviews with the children provide more insight into the children's thinking.

Question 2: How do children respond to the Storytelling Curriculum?

Interviews with all the children and the whole class began with a narrative question: 'What do you like and not like about the Storytelling Curriculum?' In the first two interviews with individual children they both introduced the concept of imagination:

> Ella: I think it's good for us to write and read stories because when you do it helps with your imagination, 'cos you can write stories down and think more about your imagination.

Following this, in subsequent interviews I asked children whether their imagination was important to them and they all talked about their imagination and how it helped with storywriting. Imagination has therefore emerged as an important factor in promoting children's writing:

> Caitlin: My imagination gives me ideas for stories and my brain asks me questions. Writing stories makes me more imaginative and [so does] listening to stories.
>
> Maddie: I like imagination 'cos sometimes it can be funny 'cos you can make up all kinds of characters and everything and then you can make a story – put them in the story.
>
> Leo: Listening to other people's stories and they listen to yours you probably get a better imagination and you get better ideas to put in your stories.
>
> George: It makes me feel happy when I can write about my own ideas, ['cos] I can't learn if I'm told what to write about and that makes me sad . . . I learn from what's in my head.
>
> Sam: I learn to write stories from my head, I don't need the teacher. I have imagination to do stuff. Children think about their imagination a lot.

In the whole-class discussion I asked whether imagination helped their storywriting: all agreed. I asked *how* it helped and they talked at length about using the fantasy role-play area of the class and using puppets and small world play to plan and dramatize stories using their imaginations. Others commented on the value of acting out stories on the class carpet or story-stage:

Alana: I think it helps to do puppet shows, 'cos when you do puppet shows you don't really see yourself and its better 'cos when you think you are more confident you can read it on your own and if you're shy to read it out you can do a puppet show.

Children also discussed how acting and role play helped them to improve their writing skills:

George: Going into the area when it was like a play area when you use your imagination and what you want to be, sometimes it can help you do some stories it can, you can think of stuff in your mind and write it down on a piece of paper and you can act it out and get some other people to help you and get ideas from them . . . I think the role-play area is what helps you make up stories in your mind and write them down.

I asked whether others agreed with this and all but two of the class put up their hands. The value of embodying stories was mentioned frequently:

It's better acting than just practising reading and doing speaking and when I do it in front of everybody I get confident to write it down.

Working with others in the role play, puppet or small world area to develop stories was important to the children:

Their [other children's] imaginations are really good, just like mine and it's really fun working with them.

This has implications for how the teachers promote children's exploration of stories using a range of dramatic strategies. A second category to emerge was the importance of peer feedback when they shared their stories with the class that helped them improve their storywriting:

Marcus: You get more ideas from sharing your ideas.

James: When they speak I can get ideas about what I want to say.

Sam: I like my friends telling me how to write my stories better.

Most of the children thought that they learned about the mechanics of writing through writing stories:

Ella: Sometimes people understand their own writing, but sometimes people don't, so when you write you get better at writing and then you can understand your writing so you can read more stories.

Ivan: When I see my story or when I open a book I can see some punctuation and then when I write a story I can remember to put in a full stop, or an exclamation mark or a question mark.

Question 3: How do teachers respond to the Storytelling Curriculum?

I conducted narrative interviews with the teachers and asked them one key question: 'Tell me about the Storytelling Curriculum.'

One-to-one interaction

All teachers found the project emotionally rewarding as they interacted with all the children on an individual basis to write down their dictated stories and later shared the written stories with the children to discuss the secretarial aspects of writing down a story. They valued being able to tailor their interactions to meet each child's needs.

> Lovely to have that chance as a teacher to hear their individual voices.

Teachers were aware of the importance for the children of sharing their stories with the class:

> When we were reading the stories back and they were seeing what a good story looked like . . . Peer assessing went really well.

Teachers contrasted the Storytelling Curriculum with the highly structured approaches to teaching literacy with which they were familiar. Sian reflected on her previous view that it was her job to determine the activities carried out by the children in her class, that teaching should control learning.

> Before the storywriting project I was quite regimental in the way I taught storywriting.

As a result of the project teachers revised their previous understanding of how to promote literacy as they witnessed children's responses to the new approaches.

> I haven't taught them how to write – it just seems to come naturally. They go to the story table in free time and I'm fighting them off to be honest – only two can sit at a time so they know they can go to other areas in the room to write and they do.

Teachers' notions of the 'ignorant' child who needed to be taught how to write stories is fragmented and the success of the approach led them to question the way they had always done things.

> I think it is more beneficial for feedback and peer assessment rather than me standing at the front and teaching. I do feel like a bit of a cheat – I haven't done much – it's all them.

All teachers started to question their previous approaches to teaching literacy.

> We're not doing genres now – narrative underpins everything. Why are we asking them to do different genres when they haven't got the narratives? They've never gone off and done a genre on their own.

There was excitement and enjoyment for the teachers involved, for one teacher the project reminded her of 'the joy of being a child and having an imagination and loving stories'. Teachers reported, 'We underestimate what they are capable of when they don't have to write it. [The project was] Quite enlightening.'

Teachers believe that the time that had been given to reading stories and using role play, puppets and other dramatic techniques had a big impact on children's motivation and the quality of their writing over time:

> Children have been given time to read and be read to, to hear each other read, and to read their stories to the class.

Reading to the class was used to monitor children's oracy. The headteacher found that most of the children, 'have become really proficient readers who are able to read with feeling, correct intonation, expression, excitement and pause for effect. They read their stories with obvious enjoyment and pride.'

Impact on Reading

Reading was not the focus of this project; however, there was a dramatic and unexpected improvement in children's reading in the case study school. All the children were given the All Wales Reading Test in September and re-tested in May. The test is designed to identify children with reading difficulties so they can be targeted for extra support. The maximum score that can be achieved on the test is 47, which translates as a reading age of eight years eleven months. The test does not measure reading beyond that.

The post-test showed that over the course of the year, fourteen children had increased their reading age by one to two years and nine children had increased between 2 years 1 month and three years six months. No child needs additional support as they go into Year 3. It would seem that those with additional needs in literacy thrived with the specialist support

provided by the HLTA which was differentiated to meet their specific needs alongside the Storytelling Curriculum. In interview the HLTA found the Storytelling Curriculum inspirational:

> It does your heart good. If we can do that for them – what a gift. At the beginning of the year they said, 'I can't do it', now they all believe they can do it. It's lovely to see how they support and help each other.

If we look at the results of the lowest-achieving children, six of the seven are boys; four of these have identified SEN. The lowest-achieving child in September is a girl (birthday in August); she increased her reading age by one year nine months, suggesting that maturity may have been an important factor in the first test. Looking at the highest-achieving children, four are boys and three are girls, and if we look at those who made the most progress (2.1–3.6 years) we will see that there are six boys and three girls. This suggests that there is no gender difference, apart from the children with SEN. However, all but one of the seven lowest achievers in the first test are summer babies and are therefore among the youngest in the class, something that should be taken into account.

Discussion of Findings

The written stories and interview evidence indicate that the Storytelling Curriculum successfully engaged all the children in writing regardless of gender or background. The wish to narrate is powerful. All the children wanted to tell stories and all the children were able to dictate stories to the teacher. The fact that the stories told were shared in the public setting of the classroom helped to create a culture of storytelling and children were able to develop a deep and rich understanding of narrative and learnt much from each other.

The peer group became very important as an audience for stories and as peer assessors of each other's stories. The children clearly valued hearing each other's stories, learning from each other's ideas and producing unique contributions for the class library. The public nature of the storytelling and the gradual takeover of the story reading by the children has impacted on the children's capacity to read a story and the capacity of the class to listen to each other. Evidence from interviews suggests that there were improvements in the relationships between children: they became more cooperative, more collaborative and respectful of each other's ideas and contributions.

There was no pressure put on children to take part, and no requirements for what their stories should be like. The diversity of stories told testifies to the variety of narratives the children were interested in telling. The narrative skills of the children were developed very quickly; in just one month in Sian's class the quality of stories improved beyond what the teacher had ever experienced before using more traditional methods. Children needed no support in structuring the genre of storytelling; this seemed to come naturally, supported by their immersion in story. There are also strong indications that children's oracy has been enhanced.

The big surprise for the teachers was the impact the project had on the children's wish to write. Unprompted, stories started coming in from home in both schools; at first, parents were asked to write down their children's stories and then children began writing them independently. This is evidence of an internal theory of motivation. The children were not writing in response to instruction, rewards, or threats of punishment, they were writing because they wanted to and because they enjoyed it.

That the children are engaged by the Storytelling Curriculum is evident from the sheer number of stories they wrote and how they valued the chance to put their imaginations to creative use. All of this was achieved without any formal teaching of the genre of narrative and without any requirement for the children to write stories. The what, where and how of storywriting was left completely to the children.

Overall, the evidence suggests that children's participation in story dictation and subsequent storytelling to the class, with the opportunity for peer review and one-to-one discussion with their teacher improved their narrative writing skills. As children appropriated the mechanics of writing for themselves their writing skills developed for their own purposes.

The children have achieved high levels in oracy, reading and writing. As the headteacher reports:

> We're not a year down the line yet, but standards have risen dramatically. And yet we haven't had to do that much. The children are writing because they want to write – they are in charge of it. The teacher is the facilitator, we haven't ticked any boxes or done any formal tracking, but by the end of the year the children are in excess of what we thought they would attain without us doing any formal teaching. The children choose how, where, when and what to write – there are no constraints. Now they are going to Year 3 with massive writing skills and a love of storytelling and writing.

Conclusion

It would be premature to draw firm or generalizable conclusions on the basis of data analyzed here; however, evidence suggests that when children are allowed to choose when to write and what to write about and have the opportunity to develop stories using dramatic techniques, all children are motivated to write. Story dictation and subsequent telling of their stories to the class, combined with one-to-one sharing of their stories with their teacher, led to high levels of achievement in dictated and independent writing. It suggests that immersion in story, role play, puppets and other drama-based approaches support high levels of achievement in the four key language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The contrast with a drilling-and-testing approach to writing is marked. The children appropriated the skills of writing, they weren't taught them; they used writing for their own communicative purposes as they were driven to produce stories. The move away from a transmission approach to teaching writing, the abandonment of a step-by-step planned approach to literacy development had no negative effects on children's outcomes. Those children identified with additional learning needs were provided with direct skills teaching by an HLTA, suggesting that direct teaching of literacy skills may be beneficial for those children experiencing difficulties, but is not necessary for the majority of children.

Storytelling draws on children's innate understanding of narrative (Bruner, 1990) to help them become authors. Through composing their own stories and listening to the stories of other children, they gained understanding of how they could use language and their imaginations to create their own worlds through writing. Participation was voluntary, they were allowed to tell any story they wished at their own pace, reflecting their own interests, concerns and abilities. The Storytelling Curriculum is relevant and personalized to the needs of the child and therefore supports the requirement of the Welsh Government for approaches that move children away from being compliant recipients of education to becoming legitimate spokespersons on their own learning.

We are not suggesting that other genres of writing will come as naturally to children as storywriting; these may have to be taught. We do believe, however, that in the Foundation Phase children can learn the basics of reading and writing through engaging in the cultural practice of creating

their own stories to be shared with others. The skills developed in this way will provide them with a firm basis to extend their writing repertoires as they enter Year 3.

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