

Reinventing Story Time

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I recently asked a group of primary school teachers what responses to literature they hoped children in their classes would develop. The main phrases they used were: 'enthusiasm, love of books, enjoyment, fascination, understanding of the power of the written word, and to spark their imagination'. They went on to complain that this was not being achieved through the Primary Strategy for Literacy. They argued that the Strategy increases children's appreciation of the structure of reading, and improves their reading and writing *skills*, but it remains to be seen whether it helps children *want* to read and write.

Research into the effective provision for pre-school children shows that young children benefit from 'sustained shared thinking' with an experienced older person (Sylva et al 2004). I argue that sharing a familiar story with children on a regular basis can provide opportunities for children to talk in a sustained way with adults. The very nature of a story is that it is an idea, and talking about stories gives children the chance to think and talk about ideas: whether they are their own, or someone else's. It also helps to promote narrative development, which is seen as vital for the development of creative writing. Researchers such as Engel (Engel 1995, cited in Riley 2006) have also found that the literature shared with infants and pre-school children not only influences their views of the world, but also impacts on the patterns and structures of their language: the 'book language' that is so important for their early creative writing.

Many children I work with also have a problem with the Literacy Hour. Able children often say it is boring, while the less able communicate the same message through lack of concentration and challenging behaviour. This is not their teachers' fault, but the result of an over-formulaic approach to teaching reading and writing, and a crowded primary curriculum that assumes that children will have all their language needs met during one hour's lesson per day. I believe that schools can develop children's love of reading and writing by reinstating story time as an established part of the primary school day. Well-planned and enthusiastically conducted story sessions with whole class of children will enhance their oral language and writing skills, as well as promoting what the Rose Report (DfES 2006) refers to as 'a good attitude towards reading'.

One school that took action on this subject is Soho Parish Primary School in Westminster. Head Teacher Rachel Earnshaw was concerned that children were not gaining from the Literacy Strategy the range of rich language experiences they needed. "Part of the problem was that time to share stories had been pushed out of the classroom, by stealth, in order to try and meet the demands of the National Curriculum. We were determined to reverse this trend, and the first step was to send our Literacy Coordinator, Faye Howard, on the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's 'Power of Reading' Project."

The project aimed to raise teachers' levels of knowledge, pleasure and confidence in children's literature, and consequently raise children's pleasure and interest in books and reading. At the heart of the initiative is the conviction that groups of children need to be involved in quality story time every day. After Faye completed the 10-day course she arranged for each class to have a core collection of quality storybooks. These books didn't go into the book corner until they have been shared with the class. During the course of a week, younger children are expected to have experienced story time with at least three books: one very familiar, one slightly familiar and one new. The core collection grows throughout the year, and goes with them to their new classes at the beginning of the new academic year.

This approach has had a dramatic effect on all teachers' approach to stories. "We now have an expectation that all classes will have a 'Read Aloud' session at least three times per week." Rachel Earnshaw explains. "Classes with older children are expected to have a novel ongoing, and listen to it being read every day."

In my work as an educational consultant supporting schools to develop children's oral skills, I take this approach a step further. I suggest that young children should hear the same story every day at story time for a week. Children thrive on repetition, and I plan to include all children in the experience. As the week progresses I aim for children to gradually become more involved, so that by the end of the week they are the storytellers and the adults are the audience.

Planning for story time is central to my approach, and we need to be aware that children in primary classrooms have a diversity of language skills, experience and learning needs. It is vital to ensure that the story is supported by toys and props that catch and sustain the children's interest, as well as help their understanding. Home made or proprietary 'Story Sacks' are ideal to illustrate a story, and provide toys and props that children can play with after the session and throughout the week. I recommend collecting toys and objects from around the school and putting these on an interactive display. As the children become familiar with the storybook their play and language often comes to resemble the sequence of the story. If adults become involved then they can develop shared sustained interest, as well as support children's narrative development.

I was asked to work at Tennyson Road Primary School in Luton, where staff were keen to develop their younger children's oral language skills: as an end in itself, and in order to have an impact on creative writing. My particular interest was to see if we could improve children's participation in and understanding of group story, by preparing the children by working in small groups. I planned simple activities and games with props that would be used at story time, to ensure that the children had the necessary understanding to be able to participate. We chose 'It's the Bear' by Jez Alborough as a good book to share. However there were certain items in the book that were out of the children's experience, and particularly a picnic hamper. I found a real

hamper and filled it full of the types of food that we might have on a picnic, and proceeded to eat our way through the contents! Later we filled the hamper with play food, and this became part of an interactive display that included labels that children wrote, a teddy bear that a child brought from home, and a copy of the book of the week. The effect was quite dramatic, with children who were usually disruptive or with limited attention span beginning to participate and concentrate more readily.

We set up a 'Listening Corner' where children could hear the story, read by me onto tape, and read the book at the same time. We encouraged the children into small world play, by setting up a builders' tray with small toys from the story, based on Helen Bromley's excellent ideas (Bromley 2003,2005)

Through this process the children became involved and enthused. We were able to draw their attention to aspects of the story and the text, at word and sentence level, in a natural way, as the week progressed, without interrupting the story or killing it with gruelling question and answer sessions afterwards. Through their enjoyment of the story we were able to lead them to other books by Jez Alborough, involving rhyme. This was a natural way of introducing the concepts of author and illustrator. By the end of the week children had spontaneously made their own books, with attempts at writing and using their own drawings. The children were enthused enough to want to hear the book several times, as well as acting out the story by themselves.

Providing children with quality story time experiences, with preparatory and follow –up activities, develops their interest in and passion for books, as well as promoting language development. Story time need only take 30 minutes per day, with enormous rewards, including improved speaking and listening, and kindling the passion for literature that will last them for life.

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Michael Jones worked as Speech and Language Therapist and teacher in mainstream and special schools, and as an advisory teacher working with children with speech, language and communication difficulties. He is an educational consultant supporting schools and parents to develop children's communication, particularly through the medium of story.

For more information visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

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Further information about StorySacks is available from www.storysacks.co.uk
For information about The Centre for Language in Primary Education see
www.clpe.co.uk/powerofreading