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Storytelling - lessons for life

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Fred Redwood explains how storytelling offers a range of opportunities for learning

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A staffroom announcement that a storyteller is going to pay a visit won't be met with much enthusiasm at most secondary schools. Certainly, cynics' corner will mutter that it's a bit 'fluffy' – little more than a headline grabber for the bulletin and a treat for the Year 7s.

But that won't be the reaction in Chamberlayne Park School, a 'challenging' inner-city comprehensive in Southampton with specialist status in the performing arts. Here a visit from the storyteller [Michael O'Leary](#) is seen as a bonus for children learning about 'life' as well as English.

Local story

O'Leary in action is a captivating spectacle. He enters the classroom of [11-year-olds](#), all assembled for their 'extra' English lessons, playing the Northumbrian pipes and dragging a brightly painted box of who knows what treasure as if it's a sled. He lifts the lid, bringing out a huge scarf which he flourishes above their heads like a cape.

'This means,' he says, 'that it's time to sit up and listen properly.' These are children who find concentration difficult but they are instantly enrapt. 'Can I tell you a story of rotting flesh and maggots?' he begins. And he's away, launching into the local folk tale of the Wayland Smythy.

This is more than mere entertainment. Relating a tale that was first spun several centuries ago O'Leary uses language that's foreign to children of the Game Boy generation. The couple in the story 'walk out together' before she becomes his 'dutiful wife.' It's the world of 1840 when there was a 'great famine': a world of 'tinkers' and 'silversmiths' where, he says, 'every field and every hill held its own stories because there were no DVDs and no television for entertainment then, mind.' Their eyes widen further at the concept.

Moral dilemmas

But how does listening to these tales benefit children? 'These are folk tales of their own environment,' says O'Leary. 'They show the children what life would have been like for their own ancestors – what moral dilemmas they faced, what incredible hardships they endured. They are

tales of drought and snow storms and dodgy-looking strangers coming to the village. This is their heritage.'

O'Leary will also tell stories from his own life and with that as a starting point he'll get the children to talk about their own experiences in the most natural possible way. 'Thirty years ago I lived in Ireland with the gypsies. I used to put this outside for the faeries,' he says, producing from his pocket a tiny pewter tankard. 'Now you tell me...'

Storytellers

The number of storytellers in schools is growing countrywide. According to the Society for Storytelling (www.sfs.org.uk) there are now over 500 of them performing for all age-ranges from nursery to sixth form. One of the best known is Rona Barbour, aged 59, who, as well as working in schools in the north-east of England, runs teacher training courses and workshops for the corporate sector. She also uses her public speaking skills to act as master of ceremonies (MC) to the high-rollers in the hospitality suites at Manchester United Football Club. Barbour believes that storytellers can encourage children to form a code of behaviour that will serve them well through life.

'People of my generation were taught morals when we were children, sitting at table, listening to our parents discussing what our neighbours and relatives had been up to, including their little disputes and acts of kindness,' she says. 'But that doesn't happen any more. Now children are plonked in front of a screen from the moment they wake up in the morning. Texting, computers and mobile phones are taking over their lives. They aren't learning to listen.'



Rona Barbour believes that lack of communication in the home is also causing children to lose touch with their culture. 'I ask some children where their parents and family are from and they have no idea,' she says. 'Many know only the flimsiest details of the story of Christmas – they have no concept of their own culture. A visiting storyteller is the most natural way to fill this gap in their learning.'

Multi-sensory stories

Storytellers work across the age and ability range. Bernard Tagliavini is an actor and storyteller based in Sussex who regularly works with SEN children. When he performed at Newbury Public Library, Berkshire, in January his audience was made up of children with profound and severe learning difficulties. Quite obviously, a conventional reading would have been incomprehensible to these youngsters aged between 11-16, so he used Bag Books (www.bagbooks.org).

Theses are story packs with objects or materials attached which help the listener become involved in the story. So, for example, we hear the story of Kofi, who comes from Africa and the children are passed around the shape of Africa with a warm-feeling cloth to convey heat. The story, told in a few minutes, is short but dramatic and a sound or smell occurs at precisely the right moment to hold attention.

'The beauty of Bag Books is that each child participates in the group experience,' he explains, 'They all understand that there's a new sensory sensation coming to them in turn and they find that exciting.' The other library regulars learn broader lessons from Tagliavini's sessions. 'We met in the main library because I didn't want us to be hidden away in a side room upstairs,' says Tagliavini. 'It's good for the other kids who use the library to see that even those with profound learning difficulties can gain pleasure from stories.'

Communicating

Word is spreading about the relevance of storytelling in schools. Rona Barbour even managed to bend the ear of the chancellor, Gordon Brown, about the subject when he last visited Manchester United while she was performing MC duties. 'He shared a lot of my views,' says Barbour. 'If he gets into Number 10 I'll be the first one knocking on his door, asking for more support for storytelling nationwide.'

It's a request that will be seconded by 11-year-old Daniel at Chamberlayne Park School. 'I never hear stories at home and we don't have any books,' he says. 'I think the storyteller's great – he's really exciting.'

Fred Redwood is a freelance education and features writer.

This article first appeared in Learning for Life, May 2007

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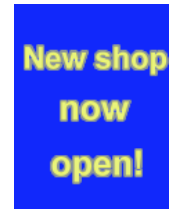
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