

PAYING LIP-SERVICE TO SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS:

Oral storytelling, arts-based education and
the hegemony of literacy practices in school

Research

PhD research

Small scale study

An oral storytelling intervention: Creative Partnerships

Observation – contextualising

Qualitative semi-structured interviews

Storytellers, Creative Agents and Teachers

Significant library based focus

Oral re-telling of traditional tales

= ‘Non-instrumental’ practice in speaking and listening

Defining 'non-instrumental' speaking and listening

- An emphasis upon oral language in process and outcome
- A corresponding defocus upon reading and writing in process and outcome
- Linking of speaking and listening to writing counterproductive

Intellectual goals

- Participant perceptions of the benefits of oral storytelling in the classroom
- The balance between speaking and listening and literacy in primary level education
- The barriers to non-instrumental practice in speaking and listening
- The benefits of and barriers to creative forms of education more generally

Findings

Participant perceptions revealed:

Effects and benefits of oral storytelling

Implicit devaluation of speaking and listening skills in the curriculum and school:

- strongly linked to literacy-based instrumentalism and assessment within the Standards Agenda

Storytelling



Storytelling?



Story Reading



Oral Storytelling: Body language!



Storytelling research: inter-relational aspects

- Oral storytelling vs story reading – children showed a preference for storytelling, attended more, fewer unconcentrated behaviours, significantly more questioning = on average 30 during story telling vs 2 during story reading (Myers, 1990)
- More audience participation (Isbell, 2004)
- Increased use of eye contact and a de-focus on story book illustrations (Malo & Bullard, 2000)
- Participation during story reading generally involves discussion of the book's illustrations (Aina, 1999)

Oral storytelling as 'non-instrumental' speaking and listening

- Oral retelling
- Pre-existing stories
- Modelled
- Retold by children
- Using oral pedagogical processes

Involves

- Minimising attempts to reproduce narrative in writing when learning the story
- Pedagogic devices that are embedded in non-instrumental oral practice to scaffold children's learning and reinforce oral process
- For example, beanbag telling, alphabet telling, story maps, zipping in and out of character

Effects and benefits

Socio-emotional:

- Self-confidence: through the challenge of public speaking
- Self-expression: enables children to represent and understand themselves
- Emotional literacy: enables children to understand others through intra-and inter-psychological processes
- Teamwork: encourages children to work collaboratively with others

Effects and benefits

- Self confidence – through the challenge of public speaking
- Scaffolded nature of oral storytelling; predetermined rules apply = temporal/physical space for speaking; ad lib nature of oral storytelling – communicative competence
- Competence based self-esteem (specific self-esteem) vs self-acceptance/respect (global self-esteem): specific forms tend to impact upon global self-esteem more than feelings of global self-esteem impact upon perceptions of ability in specific domains (Rosenberg et al, 1995)
- “seeking the right usage of self-esteem, linking it to learning and improvement in the recognition of good performance” (Baumeister et al, 2003; p.39)

Effects and benefits

- Self expression: understanding of self
- Narrative play therapy and narrative learning (Alexander et al, 2001)
- Opportunities for self-reflection and identification with story characters

Effects and benefits

- Understanding of others through intra-psychological processes:
- Double minded understanding of self and others (Baron-Cohen, 2011)
- Perspective taking, theory of mind and experiential learning (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010)
- “empathy includes an emotional experiential component that is not a part of perspective taking” (Russ & Niec, 2011; p.28).
- = Identification with story characters
- Also, tolerance of difference – idiosyncratic story retellings

Effects and benefits

- Understanding of others through inter-psychological processes:
 - Inter-relational nature of oral storytelling (Myers, 1990)
 - Body language, facial expression – children able to gain an understanding of link between internal emotional state external markers of non-verbal communication
 - Mirror neurones (Gallese, 2001) – shared manifold of inter-subjectivity
 - Audience reading/behaviour reading

Effects and benefits

- Collaboration in the classroom:
 - Small group work
 - Constructivist learning
- “Social skills are not taught but are rather absorbed and learned through relationship” (Woolf, 2012; p.37)

Effects and benefits: communicative competence

- Fluency – ad lib, improvised speaking:

“...it is creating this thing which I believe is right at the heart of speaking, which is this rapid access to the vocabulary, this rapid editing of information, this rapid shaping, this rapid construction which we have, which we do when we speak our language – it’s all in there, and you can see the story, and you just tell what’s happening. But it’s really working on accelerating that.” (Blaine Hogarth; Oral Storyteller)

- Evidence for fluency in spoken language is best found and assessed in dyadic and multi-party talk rather than in monologic contexts (McCarthy, 2004)
- Subjective and reflective opportunities to assess fluency

Effects and benefits: communicative competence

- Scaffolding of language – ‘narrative learning’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 2007), metacognitive strategies to support language – story maps
- “layered opportunities for developing the metacognitive features of planning, remembering, understanding and reflecting on storytelling” (Cortazzi & Jin, 2007; p.645).

Effects and benefits: communicative competence

- Problems of oral communication/behaviour – opportunities for helping children with expressive language difficulties develop an emotional vocabulary and develop the “capacity for self-narration” (Warin, 2010; p.178)
- = ‘identity capital’ - links to specific self esteem

Playing-field leveller

- “Allowed the non-usual suspects to shine” (Julia Barden, Creative Agent)
- Pygmalion Effects (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) ameliorated
- Shifting learner identities from performance-avoidance to the promotion of more adaptive mastery-approach goals (Dweck & Elliot, 1983)

Participant perceptions

- ‘...it’s definitely opened my eyes to the extent that storytelling can help build confidence in children, and see how the lower able can perform against the higher able – they come on a par, which is really powerful...it’s brought children on that I never thought would be able to do something like that, so....maybe I’ve had low expectations of them, but seeing what they’ve done in this, it just goes to show that if they can do that with the storytelling, then they can do that elsewhere as well.’ (Roland Morris, Teacher)

Lack of support for non-instrumental S&L

1. Lack of oral processes in S&L practice
2. Focus upon written outcomes and literacy assessment
3. Lack of experience and understanding of oral storytelling

1. Lack of oral processes

Lack of process-based oral storytelling and non-instrumental speaking and listening in the curriculum:

Storytelling tends to be content-based so that:

“while storytelling may appear in the form of folk tales and so on, that doesn’t mean they are told orally”. (Jean Heath, Creative Agent)

Participant perceptions

...if you look at speech in a different context the only thing is to speak confidently and creatively for different purposes, it doesn't necessarily say 'tell a story', and that's all they say on that...there's nothing explicitly about storytelling apart from tell stories effectively... (Kate Leech, Class Teacher)

What they tend to do from my experience is when it comes to things like traditional tales, they tend to look at storytelling, and that's where I've pushed schools to go beyond that and go beyond storytelling, beyond just traditional tales...and I think a lot of it is about story reading...(Julia Barden, Creative Agent)

2. Written outcomes and literacy assessment

Drive for written outcomes and the linking speaking and listening to writing

= Connected to the assessment goals and literacy targets of wider Standards Agenda

Participant perceptions

...some schools are very fixated on writing, and so speaking and listening work and oral storytelling work is seen very much as a precursor to getting it down on paper... (David Keele, Oral Storyteller)

...because a lot of the focus I think is getting kids to write...they do want kids to speak and often to present, but I often think they want them to do it as little adults rather than as kids, so I think that there is a waiting on the written word because of this desire to get kids to write. (Julia Barden, Creative Agent)

Participant perceptions

...they might have a really well-rounded education and they're smart and bright and able to think for themselves and be independent learners, but if they can't tell you what the main features of the opening paragraph of a newspaper is, you've technically failed...(Sarah White, Class Teacher)

And it's awful really, that that's the assessment focus - if they can't pick up a piece of paper and see their mastery of story then it doesn't count, well they don't even know it's there.'(David Keele, Oral Storyteller)

...the government don't look at [speaking and listening], so you can push that to the side. (Roland Morris, Class Teacher)

3. Experience & understanding

Lack of experience and understanding of oral storytelling and oral processes:

Connected to ITT, and also hegemonic ideas in relation to storytelling and the legitimizing norm of literacy

Participant perceptions

D: My experience in teacher training was that it [speaking and listening] wasn't addressed, I don't remember it being addressed...

I: So that's speaking and listening skills generally, or storytelling more specifically?

D: Oh, certainly not storytelling! I don't remember that...
(David Keele, Oral Storyteller)

...I think teacher training's quite poor really, when I did it...I don't feel that it prepared me for teaching in a classroom, and certainly we didn't look at anything like storytelling and things like that... (Roland Morris, Class Teacher)

Participant perceptions

K: No, I don't think there's anything about storytelling in the National Curriculum...there is storytelling but I think a lot of people see that as read a book... (Kate Leech, Class Teacher)

J: Yeah, I don't think they see it as storytelling. And I don't think I would have if done if I hadn't seen David working – I don't think I would have known. (Jane Smith, Class Teacher)

Participant perceptions

And then, this vagueness...and I've asked and asked and asked, 'what are the criteria for assessing it?', and it's all terribly subjective. How do you tell – I can tell because I've listened to thousands of storytellers – how somebody's getting on, how in control of it they are, but to a teacher who hasn't got that experience, how do you know? (Blaine Hogarth, Oral Storyteller)

National Oracy Project (1987-1993)

- Raised standards in S&L as a result of explicit guidance and engagement with oracy in schools:
- “...many teachers were sufficiently encouraged to face up to the challenge, and children...contributed willingly, in well-structured Standard English, and were able to question, listen and explain...It was also more apparent that pupils of modest attainment were pushed to their personal limits in such oral work.”
- (DES, 1992: In Johnson, 1995; p.19)

Hegemony of literacy

- Power, legitimizing norms and ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971)
- Stories primarily understood as coming from books
- Latest version of NC – removal then reinstatement of S&L as a PoS; emphasis upon phonics, spelling, punctuation, grammar and ‘polished’/literacy based forms of speaking and listening
- Procedural display (Bloome et al, 1989), IRE and inauthentic questions (Searle, 1969)

Sociocultural theories of learning: Vygotsky

- Language as the “primary medium for learning, meaning construction, and cultural transmission and transformation” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; p.2).
- ‘Social structure of personality’ (In Valsiner, 1987) – inter-psychological and intra-psychological processes = socio-emotional effects and benefits.
- Collaborative learning in ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978) - extends children’s thinking and scaffolds their learning.

Overall suggestion

A devaluation of non-instrumental forms of speaking and listening in the English curriculum in primary education:

‘...the foci and the specifics of the S&L curriculum are attended to less probably than any other area’ (David Keele, Oral Storyteller)

Consequence

- Literacy is un-problematically linked to spoken language in process and outcome during the schooling of primary age children

Implications

Impact of literacy-based instrumentalism on:

- Learning and development
- Pedagogy
- Quality of spoken language practice

In addition: unexplored in research

Recommendations

- Guidance
- Orality as an end point
- Assessment of S&L NC?
- Research

Conclusion

What kinds of learning are sacrificed in the promotion of the text-mediated instruction that predominates in school?

A balanced view of literacy learning is currently missing in educational policy and prescribed practice. Learners are therefore subject to narrow and instrumental pedagogic approaches that teach them what to think, and not how.

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