

Evaluation of storytelling groups offered by the StoryBird Project under the auspices of The Story Museum, Oxford

Project visit March 3 - 4, 2010

The Story Museum would like to thank everyone involved for their time and contributions to the project.

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This report evaluates the efficacy of three storytelling groups for parents/carers and their children which The Story Museum piloted in two primary schools situated in a large, deprived council estate in Oxford. The weekly sessions lasted 60 minutes.

The report has two sections. The first introduces the StoryBird Project and outlines the evaluation-method. The second concerns the evaluation itself. This opens with a discussion of the benefits and value of the storytelling groups as perceived by participating parents/carers, their children and school staff. I then clarify the insights this offers for informal adult learning and highlight how these might effect the delivery of similar, future groups.

1. Introduction and overview of the evaluation method

The report is based on data gathered during theme-based interviews (see below) with adults and children who participated in the school-based storytelling groups conducted by a facilitator from The StoryBird Project (SBP), The Story Museum, Oxford. The Project comprised several strands. These included: (1) the facilitation of the weekly storytelling groups, (2) the creation of supporting materials, including an online story-resource and (3) several story-based programmes yet to be broadcast by a Local Radio station. The evaluation is based on verbal observations made by participants and school-staff about the first project strand.

I conducted theme-based interviews based on the narrative enquiry approach to evaluation. This approach is particularly suited to learners for whom a better capacity to articulate and communicate complex experiences forms part of their developmental goals. The interviews were planned to minimize the chances of intentional collaboration between interviewees and to maximize opportunities for the cross-validation of individual and group-perspectives. At the time of interview the interviewees were not aware who else would be or had been interviewed and when or where the other interviews happened. Where consent was granted, the interviews were recorded. On other occasions I kept written notes. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, depending on the time interviewees had available. The evaluation-method permitted easy clarification of the themes that interviewees considered relevant or important and permitted their in-depth exploration. It also enabled me to check the accuracy of my understanding and where necessary to amend this. Taken together the

interviews generated comprehensive descriptions of both the learning-situation and the learning outcomes that could be cross-referenced and examined for veracity, contradiction, coherence and (in-)consistency.

Interview themes

Emergent themes:

- Interviewees' descriptions of the storytelling groups and the StoryBird project as a whole.
- Reflections on issues that interviewees considered important with regard to this project.

Generative themes:

- What (if anything) made this experience special and how did this matter.
- Unexpected occurrences, aspects or outcomes.
- What interviewees gained from participation in this project. Turning-points in the project and their relevance.
- Interviewees' current ideas about stories and storytelling and how these differ from their earlier ones.
- Their suggestions for future groups. What must be kept the same and some ideas for improvement.

Interviewees:

Primary school One:

- *Staff:* headmaster, classroom teacher/story-coordinator and the learning mentor/family liaison coordinator (45 minutes)
Participants (in two separate interviews):
 - a. two parents/carers and four children (60 minutes)
 - b. one parent and two children (30 minutes)

Primary school Two:

- *Staff* (in two separate interviews)
 - a. acting head and learning mentor (45 minutes)
 - b. literacy coordinator (40 minutes)*Participants:* three parents (60 minutes)

Group-facilitator (60 minutes)

2. The StoryBird Project: its value and benefits from the perspective of parents/carers and staff.

2.1 Project description as elicited from interviewees.

In answer to the query 'how would you describe the storytelling group to a stranger like myself' participants stated that it was a group in which they learned 'how to tell good traditional stories to their child or children, how to make up stories, how to play with stories and how to listen to stories' so that they could make 'more

rewarding contact' with their child and also with other people. Additionally the storytelling group taught them 'easy ways to remember stories'. At this point the participants also mentioned that they received a folder with story-maps (pictorial outlines of 32 traditional stories) as well as a memory stick or CD on which the stories were told. These had been 'very helpful'. It is in my experience rare that participants in a group of informal adult learners can describe a group's focus as defined by the organisers with such exquisite precision. When they are able to do so, it often indicates that the group is well run, and that participants wholeheartedly embrace its learning goals.

Interviewees considered it important that the groups took place during normal school hours (made child-care easier) and lasted 60 minutes (as long as they would want it to last). The groups met for a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 10 sessions. Group duration varied between the groups due to various constraints within the schools. A group's duration did not appear to effect overall satisfaction. Though this may reflect these learners' (self-limiting) belief that they will have to make do with whatever comes their way.

Based on statements made by both staff and the groups' facilitator it appeared that the storytelling groups were broadly conducted along similar lines. Participants in both groups worked with the same set of stories and storytelling/storymaking techniques. Interviews with participants bore this out. However, the groups differed in terms of adult/child membership. One group was for parents or carers only. Another had parents/carers for the first part of the session, followed by 30 minutes with both the parent/carer and their child or children. In a third group the parents/carers and their children worked together for the entire session. Each adult or carer had a child or children who attended the primary school in which the storytelling group was held. All participants lived on the estate near the schools.

Interviewees commented more or less uniformly that it either was, or would have been, great to have the children present throughout the entire session. Participants in the adults-only group had found it 'a bit hard' to maintain a relatively clear boundary between traditional and personal stories. They initially struggled with knowing how to translate learning in the group to storytelling-application with their children at home, but that this 'got easier over time.' Participants in the two adults and children groups commented that it was great to practice with the children in the group, to learn from other parent-child pairs, to have shared homework as well as shared feedback. This built their confidence and set in motion a helpful degree of motivational competitiveness.

The actual learning content (qua stories, techniques and facilitator style) was more or less stable across the groups. This increases the reliability of the conclusions that I was able to draw after I cross-referenced the interview material for veracity, contradiction, coherence and (in-) consistency.

2.2 Participants

The StoryBird Project (SBP) recruited men and women who thought that 'learning something new or doing something for fun' was definitely 'not for them', who felt socially isolated, had few friends and received little social support. School-

staff hoped that SBP would engage adults whose child or children were making little progress in their learning and/or whose behaviour caused significant educational concern.

2.2.1 Participants' self-description prior to the groups' commencement

When the participants referred to where they and their children were at before the groups started, they spoke about themselves in similar terms. They often mentioned that they had experienced 'little sense of purpose', 'didn't get out of the house much,' 'felt quite powerless' and were 'useless' in their world. Their educational attainment and aspirations were 'not there'. Blaming themselves for their plight, some described their own and their children's lives as 'pretty miserable'. Though they still wanted a way out, they did not know how to achieve this or who to ask for help.

2.2.2 Staff's description of the participants prior to the groups' commencement

According to staff (head-master, learning mentors, literacy coordinator, teacher) quite a few parents/carers who joined the groups had 'very low achievement aspirations', as well as 'an extremely limited belief' in their own capacities. Some did not think that they could learn 'something new'. The literacy coordinator shared her concern that 'At first one or two parents were not able to even tell three little pigs – I didn't realise that could be so difficult.' Most parents/carers' relationship with the school was fragile and limited to the occasional discussion of their children's (lack of) progress. 'Some came across as very anxious, withdrawn and silent people.' Several parents were 'early school-leavers who lacked confidence'. Prior to starting the groups some adults' 'speech was characterized by a paucity of adjectives, repeated use of some basic verbs and little conceptual depth.' Staff emphasized that 'this did not necessarily reflect these parents' I.Q.', which they thought was actually rather high. However, the 'parents appeared to feel very intimidated by the school environment.'

2.3.1 What staff hoped the group-members might achieve

Without exception staff called attention to the fact that they would have been pleased if the parents/ carers had simply stayed in the group and had spoken with some contentment about the activity. They gave several reasons for this limited expectation.

The first concerned the severity of external obstacles:

- Generally the parents/carers had few kin or friends who could offer childcare or support when needed (such as a child being ill). This would occasionally cause 'inevitable absence.'
- Several adults were unemployed or had erratic work with irregular hours. A refusal to attend the jobcentre or 'not going to work meant loss of income'. This too might/would cause absences.

The return to a group after an involuntary absence is hard for most people, let alone for learners in this plight. 'It would take quite a lot for them not to drop out after the first involuntary absence.'

The second reason behind these limited expectations related to some participants' internal obstacles to learning, such as a tendency to give in to a feeling of helplessness, finding it hard to assert oneself, feeling quickly overwhelmed or out of one's depth, limited knowledge about good ways of dealing with foreseeable set-backs or disappointments such as inevitable absence, and little social support for learning efforts.

A third barrier concerned the fact that the groups took place in their child's school. As said most parents had still vivid and painful memories of their own schooling and preferred to limit contact with schools. Being able to attend a group on the school's premises meant reworking the constricting effects of these memories. Overcoming this would represent an important gain.

This difficult combination of external and internal obstacles to participation meant that the group-members' motivation to continue participation needed to be high. However, many adults were not highly motivated to be in the group at the outset. Staff thought that ongoing 'attendance would show in and of itself an increase in their general level of motivation to do something new.' This would be a significant achievement and stand them in good stead for the try-out of further educational endeavours.

2.3.2 What participants hoped they might achieve at the start of the project

Participants also mentioned that, apart from wanting 'to learn something about storytelling and story-talk', it would actually be 'quite an achievement' if they would simply be able to attend the group.

2.4 Would anyone come at all? Recruitment-strategies.

Staff emphasized that just getting a group together was 'a big accomplishment.' The schools used several methods to attract participants, such as a short article about storytelling in a School Newsletter, posters around the school, telling the pupils about the initiative, mentioning it to parents, offering a taster session and doing an after-school storytelling-session in the school playground for parents who were waiting to collect their child. While staff were 'thrilled to be offered the opportunity' to pilot the scheme, they had 'been anxious about even getting any parents'.

The parents/carers said that they became aware of the group by word of mouth. None mentioned the posters or the newsletter. Several adults recalled that their child previously told them about storytelling activities in the school and remembered feeling intrigued by this, even a little envious of it, and that it had 'definitely' stirred a longing to be told stories too. One woman remembered seeing the Storyteller at work in the school playground. She remembered thinking: 'I want to do that'. Not long afterwards the school's learning mentor had mentioned the storytelling group to her and she immediately decided to join. This was 'completely weird' for her, but she stuck by her decision. 'The call' was too great.

From the participants' perspective the only relevant recruitment strategy therefore involved person-to-person contact and talk about the group's focus, i.e. storytelling. It was, as participants observed, 'as simple as that – someone needed to talk to you.'

Whereas staff rather downplayed the importance of the actual content of the group for recruitment purposes, the participants stated unambiguously that they joined the group because they wanted to learn firstly how to do story-talk with their child and secondly how to tell a few traditional stories.

This divergent perception about the importance of a group's content for recruitment purposes between staff and group-members deserves further scrutiny as it has implications for the setting up of future groups in similar environments.

2.5 Meeting the educational objectives

After a short initial period of 'finding his feet' the group's facilitator sought help from an external consultant/supervisor in order to strengthen his ability to facilitate several core aspects of the group. This included how best to keep its developmental process on track, how to engage the socio-emotional dynamics and how best to pursue the group's educational objectives in the light of each participant's needs and actual achievements.

At this stage the sessions also began to follow a core pattern, namely:

- Opening ritual,
- Discussion of previous week's homework,
- Integration of homework-based learning,
- Introduction of new story/storytelling-skills,
- Demonstration,
- Creative imitative practice in the group,
- Feedback,
- Renewed demonstration and practice,
- Preparation for new homework,
- Closing ritual.

The facilitator safeguarded a playful quick-moving atmosphere in the group. He strongly encouraged the participants to try to retell a new story (or try out a new storytelling technique) as soon as possible after the group meeting - whether this was in the school's corridor, on the playground, during the walk home or at home. He also reminded the participants on a regular basis to make use of the Story-folder with the Story-maps and the Memory Stick or CD.

Once facilitators get a strong grasp of the evolving relationships between planned change processes, learning through storytelling, stages in individual psycho-social development and alterations in group-behaviour, they find it easier to translate generic objectives into specific socio-developmental and learning goals for single group-sessions.

This is important because the achievement of the group's educational goals demands that the facilitator constantly track how a chosen traditional story and its

accompanying story-based activities support the achievement (or lack of it) of these goals. The facilitator also has to consider how an activity can best be adapted to the participant's demonstrated level of skill in performing it. Finally any activity has to be so designed that participants can easily use it in their home-environment. In these groups the facilitator achieved this in an excellent way.

In this kind of learning-based group work each story and every activity must meet this triple set of requirements, while appearing to be spontaneous, light and easy. Consequently it behoves facilitators of such groups to carefully prepare and monitor each session. Because of this requirement, and in order not to get too stuck in their understanding and methodology, it is good practice to grant facilitators easy access to experienced senior colleagues or managers who understand the dynamics of their work, can identify or support what goes well and who know how to improve things that might go better if done differently.

The provision of strong internal or external management supervision of a facilitator's story-based group work appears to have been fundamental to the ultimate success and durability of this project - as indeed was a shared philosophical understanding of the goals and methods appropriate to this group-based learning praxis. In this case the facilitator's use of external supervision paid off. His more purposeful dedication to careful session-preparation and extensive reflection created the necessary results. The participants and the staff had the highest praise for the quality of his work.

When asked to spell out what they learned in the storytelling groups the participants quickly enumerated a number of things. They were delighted to say that they had learned how to

- listen to unfamiliar traditional stories;
- remember a story;
- retell stories to different listeners;
- adapt stories for children;
- play various storytelling games;
- use these storytelling games with children;
- help children to make up stories on the spot;
- engage others in meaningful conversation about a story.

These achievements accurately matched what staff and the facilitator said about the groups' achievements.

When the participants reflected on 'how come they had learned so much in so short a period of time' they said that they thought this had been possible because the facilitator knew how to make them 'feel at ease', 'understood what was going on for

them and between them', 'understood what they needed to learn', 'kept learning fun', 'knew how to encourage them when they felt discouraged', and 'had lots of stories and story-games up his sleeve' to help them stay motivated and discover the stories. Moreover, they could play 'his' story-games at home. He had also chosen 'great stories.' They loved re-telling the unfamiliar tales, liked the riddles and rhymes and enjoyed the singing of simple songs. The story-games really helped them, they said, 'to remember and expand the stories'. Additionally they had learned how to use various response-activities based on words, gestures or sounds. 'These also helped you to elaborate a story and to give a teller some creative feedback.' The latter activities, they said, had been very important to their overall learning and they now 'used them all the time at home.'

The participants had little doubt that the combined effect of unfamiliar traditional stories, 'neat' story-based techniques and a supportive facilitator style underpinned the speed and quality of their learning and had made learning fun.

2.6 Why it mattered to learn traditional stories

Participants were keen to talk about why it mattered to learn and pass on traditional stories. One parent avowed that because traditional stories deal with something unfamiliar in a different way: 'You get curious about the unknown. It makes you want to discover things.' Others vocally supported this perception.

Participants also bore passionate witness to the fact that lingering emotional distress often has its origins in shocking encounters with painful and overwhelming experiences. A lack of resolution to the impact and consequences of such encounters had rendered their relationship with unanticipated occurrences, and therefore with the unknown, fragile. When the traditional stories eased their relationship with unexpected ideas or events, their capacity to tolerate uncertainty and therefore their capacity to entertain 'the possibility of possibilities' was developed. Based on what participants said, I contend that this in turn supported the emergence of greater emotional flexibility.

Speaking about the traditional stories the adult participants also noted that the old tales gave them 'the wisdom to educate the children.' The children meanwhile stated that 'these stories make you think and help you talk with people about things.' 'The stories give you advice and wisdom.' Because stories 'were different from normal conversation' they triggered 'another kind of talk' and 'other ways of thinking about things.' This mattered because otherwise one had a tendency 'to go round and round in circles in your own mind.'

As startling, independent aesthetic objects the traditional tales quickly became allusive and normative points of reference amongst people who initially perceived that they had only their misery in common. Talking about her son's impulsive behaviour, a woman shared that when she wanted to slow him down a bit, she now said: 'Don't be like the unlucky man. Before we knew this story I would have said something like: 'Don't be stupid.' Now he listens to me more often than not, all because of the Unlucky man. We talk about these things now.' The children confirmed that what made these stories great was that 'they made you want to talk.' Because the tales could function as conversational transitional objects they guided

participants away from preoccupation with their plight and towards a reconsideration of this plight in a new way. In other words: they learned to problematize their predicament and thereby to find new, more productive solutions.

Participants not only felt that ‘knowing stories was cool’ they also talked about knowing a story as ‘being on a safe and magic island’. Once you had stories ‘in your heart’ one child said: ‘You can give advice. You are wise.’ And that, she added, was ‘neater than getting a new pair of shoes’.

These results support the notion that finding the ‘right’ stories for these participants is of fundamental importance and requires significant professional competence in folkloristic, linguistic, socio-cultural, psychological and philosophical domains. Any old story simply won’t do, especially because the chosen tales must also be unfamiliar, concise, challenging and capable of exciting interest.

2.7 What about storytelling?

All participants remarked that telling these stories created ‘a real bond’ between teller and listener. Storytelling is ‘an intimate thing to do.’ One parent thoughtfully observed: ‘You relate differently to each other when you tell a story and that difference is special.’

A staff-member stated that oral storytelling gave adults and children alike ‘a chance to have a voice and access to different cultures and heritages’, including their own. She continued that the ‘children’s parents and carers often don’t read well.’ They may not know the stories and this ‘causes a whole part of being human to go missing.’ Another member of staff observed that ‘oral storytelling taps into something deep in human nature. It is basic. It is about a way of being together that makes sense of life.’ When asked if this could not also be said about reading stories, she paused awhile and added: ‘It probably could. But reading is ultimately a solitary activity. Oral storytelling is profoundly social. It is a way of direct interaction. It develops community and life in a natural and exciting way. We need stories. We need to talk about stories.’

In addition to the contribution that oral storytelling can make to the creation of community, staff observed that a child’s and an adult’s participation in oral storytelling had a ‘powerful, massive effect on their creativity and language. If a child has no ideas about how to get started with writing a story – storytelling does it. It gives them lots of ways to find ideas. It all works and is inspiring.’

Participants mentioned that for them storytelling is ‘wonderful, energetic, fun and magic.’ They felt that the very act of telling stories energized them. There was ‘nothing flat about it.’ Quite independently they confirmed the above-mentioned staff-member’s perception that telling stories ‘gave you something to say.’ One woman, who in her own terms had previously been ‘very shy’, said that: ‘I now know how to think before I speak. Telling stories teaches you how to do that.’ She no longer ‘feels intimidated when I talk.’ She knows ‘she has a story to tell.’ Because she felt ‘respected’ in her role as a storyteller, she was no longer overwhelmed by the fact that ‘people actually listened’ to her. As she spoke these words her posture, voice, vocalization, eye contact and gestures bore poignant witness to her newly found

internal authority and autonomy. The broad smile on her face said it all. 'Learning to tell stories was the best thing' she had ever done for herself, and thereby for 'my son as well.'

2.8 The homework developed more than storytelling competence.

Participants commented that having homework was 'really important'. It kept them in touch with the work of the group, gave them 'something important to do' during the week, 'involved the rest of the family' in what they were learning and above all it generated interest and fun in the family.

At first kin and friends had not necessarily been supportive of the idea of 'them joining a group', but this changed over time. When asked how this had come about, I learned that mothers, partners, neighbours and even school-staff had started to actively look forward to hearing the stories and to the accompanying playfulness. As one participant commented: 'It was as if a darkness lifted.'

Because the participants learned stories that they could, and in terms of their homework 'had to share' they gradually started to feel that the stories were some kind of gift. In a parent/child interview group a child commented: 'People like the stories. They want to hear more of them.' Looking at me intensely he added: "It's a gift, you see, a real gift. You can give it away and keep it at the same time. That's what's special about these stories.'

When I shared some time later that I sometimes felt a bit hungry for such a gift myself, the group (comprising adults and children) decided without hesitation to tell me a story. They determined in no time between themselves which story this would be, why I might want to hear it, and how they could collectively tell it. I was impressed by the quality of their collaboration, the efficiency of their group-decision-making and their capacity to think creatively on their feet, without one person (adult or child) dominating the decision-making process. The group told the tale with fervour, clarity, precision and excellent expressive quality. It was indeed a gift I was happy to receive. Not just because I had been a little hungry for a story, but because it demonstrated in situ their impressive skills as storytellers, even though they had only started to learn this craft-based art a few weeks previously. When asked how this telling to me compared with how they did their homework, they commented that: "it was pretty similar.' 'You kind of sense when someone is ready for a story,' one adult noted. In another group of interviewees a parent picked up on the theme of 'longing for a story.' She placed it in another important perspective, by saying: 'My son might want a story there and then, but I sometimes tell him that he has to wait because it gives him and me something to look forward to. That's another thing I learned.' As such the doing of the storytelling homework effected the home environment in several ways. It not only generated a more story-rich home environment, it eased parent/child relationships and also lifted the people's spirits.

2.9 The story-folder and the memory-stick/CD

Participants really valued having a 'nice green' folder with colourful story-maps that outlined the main scenes of the stories they learned. They likewise treasured a CD with those very same stories. Reflecting on how and why having the folder and CD

mattered the participants commented that when they still felt shy about storytelling, the story-maps helped them to tell their stories in a somewhat offhand, summary manner. Their listeners had looked at the maps, not them. However, the fact that even this ‘roundabout’ storytelling tended to generate listener’ interest, combined with their by and large appreciative comments, really ‘encouraged’ them to give more direct storytelling a go.

The story-maps offered concrete, material evidence that they would bring ‘something good’ back home, ‘something other people liked.’ They might be ‘teased’ about attending the group, but the teasing was good-natured, and soon changed into respect and even admiration. In essence the ‘people back home’ grew to appreciate them ‘doing the course’, especially because the folder and CD gave them too some access to the stories. “It made them feel a bit included,” one child astutely observed.

In most families the folder thus quickly became an object of interest in itself. Over time most participants started to carry it about and freely used it to tell stories both within and outside the home. Their story-recipients were children, partners, parents, friends, neighbours, nieces and nephews. One participant shared that her mum, who at first has shown no interest in what she was doing, had after a while asked if she could listen to the CD. Since then ‘she asks for the stories afterwards.’ Another person’s friend also asked if she could borrow the CD. Her boy had trouble sleeping and she wondered if listening to the story CD together ‘might help him fall asleep’. The participants proudly observed that they were able to let the CD go, because they did not need it right now, they could tell their children the ‘stories by heart’.

The interviews thus produced strong evidence that the introduction of transferable, material objects (toolkits, cards, story-maps, etc.) that facilitate storytelling, but do not tell the stories in their entirety, is an extremely useful learning tool.

It matters to take note of the fact that all references to the memory-stick/CD pertained more or less exclusively to its usefulness in helping participants to learn a story or to remember it. The memory-stick/CD was, in other words, primarily seen as a great mnemonic device. Once participants knew the story, they ‘didn’t want to listen to it much’ and lent it to others. What mattered was ‘having the story inside, so that you could tell it to yourself anytime you wanted to.’ The folder, however, remained a treasured object, precisely because it did not ‘have the full story.’

This finding has important implications for the production of other supportive learning materials in this field.

2.10 Unexpected outcomes. ‘Successful? Oh wow yes!’

In the course of the interview participants and staff spontaneously started to talk about areas of the groups that had surprised them. They were delighted by the unexpected outcomes, and keen to share these. Staff made statements such as:

- Successful? Oh wow – yes!’
- The fact that the women were able to tell stories in a class exceeded my wildest forecasts.

- There was a dramatic change in their confidence and articulateness... adjectives, connectives they were all there.
- There will be links to home and impacts on children.
- Now the parents want to show us what they can do.

While participants emphasized themes such as:

- I love being a storyteller.
- It changed my way of remembering things.
- It is like going back to being a small girl again.
- I now remember that my Nan used to tell me stories.

The satisfaction with the groups' positive outcomes was evidenced in the real joy with which participants talked about being able to tell stories to people, at home and also in more formal settings such as a playgroup or school. Two previously very withdrawn mothers proudly shared that they had taken the initiative to ask school staff if they could tell a story to groups of children in the Foundation year. With permission granted, they told the children the story of the Little Red Hen. According to the school's learning mentor, who witnessed their engaging performance, they were truly excellent.

The women said:

'We told the Little Red Hen in the nursery. We got the kids really involved. They joined in. It was GOOD.' When I asked what this conveyed to them about their ability to tell stories, they responded that: 'We proved it on Tuesday at the school. We were so nervous and my heart was going boom, boom. But then we did it. Then as soon as we said the first few words, they were hooked. Once we did it, it was easy.' They had realised that 'it was hard for them and for us. We were both strangers, but then we got to know each other. They realised we were not going to hurt them and then they opened up.' This is an exquisite description of what occurs in the first moments of encounter between a performer/teller and his/her audience.

Thinking about how other people might feel when they first tried to tell a story to strangers, the women elaborated: 'We would tell them that the story just slips out after a bit. When we relaxed the children relaxed. They stopped fiddling and put their hands up when we asked something. We introduced ourselves and told them that we were going to tell them a story. That this was our first time. It went really well. They wanted another one. They liked our voices and actions. We wrote a lesson plan before to prepare and also notes afterwards. And we just kept an eye on what they liked – we did that all the way through. We all gave each other a clap at the end – we had all joined in.'

This story about storytelling shows that these young mothers had not only mastered the tale they were going to tell, they knew how to deliver it, what to look out for in the delivery, how to engage the children, what to do in order to prepare for the telling and what to think about afterwards. In short - this was a very competent presentation.

Talking about the same event, the school's staff emphasized that this was not an easy audience. The children were free to leave and on other occasions might have left.

But they stayed. Moreover the women told their story to three different groups of children. 'They showed that they could incorporate children's suggestions in the told story. They also gave the children wonderful feedback.' Indeed so competent was their performance, that the Foundation staff wrote the women a letter to convey their admiration for the quality of their work. When they first started the group these parents had been really shy. It took them just under two months to come a very, very long way.

2.11 Creating a story-rich home

Their growing confidence in their ability to tell stories and to engage their children in story-related play had a direct effect on the quality of their parent-child relationship, the participants said. Not only did they feel a 'greater rightness' about the way they did things, they found it 'much easier to be in charge' and to say what they meant. Above all they 'felt much happier now'. They attributed this to the fact that they had something to get up for and to look forward to. All parents/carers and the children mentioned that 'doing the stories together' had brought them closer. They laughed more. One mother revealed that she now asks what her son 'has learned in school that day' and that he answers her. Her son happily butted in, saying 'we discuss things.'

In most families the one-way storytelling turned into two-way story-sharing. An older sibling offered, with significant pride, the following example. Recently her little brother told her 'a Baba Yaga story - plain as day.' She continued: 'It was enchanting. He brought it to life and I could picture it in my head, every single bit. I was shocked, like he taught me something too.' Not only had the experience increased her 'respect for her little brother', talking about it in the group made her feel proud that she was able to identify this type of folktale and could competently convey this to others.

Additionally parents/carers observed that storytelling 'kept the kids focussed' and 'was an efficient use of time'. One woman reported that she just used to tell her child: 'Tidy up'. Now she added: 'I tell him a story and he does what I ask.' Others commented in a similar vein saying things like:

- I tell the kids stories in bed at night: sometimes I invent them.
- Sometimes I tell an old story. I didn't do that before.
- I never used to sit down and tell my boy a story. Now I do.
- We sit down and he listens.
- I tell my little brother stories all the time, e.g. in the bathtub or on the street.
- I know that people are looking at me but I just keep on.
- My son now corrects me. He helps me improve my English.
- I say: 'wait a minute - that's me'. This is new after we met with C. (the facilitator)
- One time I was telling and my niece fell asleep and I just kept on telling.

In addition to mentioning these important effects on the quality of the parent/carer-child relationship, the participants observed that their own and their children's language had improved. As one mother said: 'The more you tell, the more

words just keep coming. It is just about confidence and knowing how not to get muddled up.’ Others confirmed that the language they and the children used at home was ‘definitely getting better.’ A woman who spoke English as a 2nd language pointed out that because she had a different native tongue than her children, it was really important that she now wanted to do vocabulary practice together with her children. The kids, she said, ‘help me to learn’.

2.12 The field has changed into a park

During one moving interchange a woman underlined that the storytelling group had changed even more than her relationship with her daughter, her daughter’s behaviour, her girl’s renewed pleasure in going to school, her significantly increased reading ability, or the fact that their conflict over the girl’s reluctance to read had come to an end - each and everyone one of these ‘meant the world’ to her. But what had really brought it home that she now lived in ‘another world’ was what had happened ‘only the other day’. She and her daughter had been walking past a rather derelict field of grass when the child had mentioned that the field had changed for her, simply because of her mother’s story.

Some days earlier the mother apparently told her daughter for the first time that there used to be ‘big trees on that field’. They had fallen down during an ‘awful, violent storm’. She shared that she had loved those trees and had been upset when they were felled by the wind, were roughly cut and taken away. The trees had never been replaced. During their recent walk the girl, who spent the previous year ‘not feeling right in herself’ and therefore being ‘a bit difficult’, had said: ‘I’ll always remember that you were upset about those trees, mum. Maybe we can bring them back one day.. .’

They both looked at me. Then her mother added: ‘You know that field used to be called a park.’ The girl piped up: ‘It’s a park now – in my eyes.’

At this point we witnessed transformational learning in action. The retelling of this story and its impact was a moving experience for us all.

2.13 Wholly unexpected effects of the storytelling groups

In the course of the interviews most participants and staff wanted to speak about the entirely unexpected effects of these storytelling groups. These include:-

A licence to read:

One girl mentioned that she now had a license to read, simply because she had learned how to tell a story. When asked to elaborate she commented that prior to being able to tell a story, reading had meant to her: ‘more silence.’ For some time she had felt as if she was going to pop with stories. Now that she could tell stories, she could read more. The stories had a way of getting out. Another child commented that after the storytelling she wanted to read more, because she wanted to discover more stories. But to her too, the storytelling about once-read stories made all the difference. She also did not want to read ‘into silence’. It was okay, she said, to be silent if you wanted to keep the story for yourself, or to keep it a secret. But most of the time you

wanted to talk about it. You needed to know, the children said, how to tell a story in order to trust that reading wasn't meant to shut you in.

Learning to speak better

Though unaware of this child's comments, a school's literacy coordinator picked up a similar thread about the relationship between reading and speaking, saying that she had indisputable evidence that storytelling had a good effect on children's capacity to articulate ideas, to describe perceptions, fantasies and experiences and helped them to engage in constructive social interaction. The gap between what they read and how they spoke about their reading was closing.

Staff repeatedly said that this project 'is a great bonus for all – not just because of what happens in the corridors, but also because the people who are in the group now tell their personal trouble stories differently. The stories are more contained, purposeful. They are clearer about the kind of help they need. That also makes our life easier.'

A bonus for the entire school

A third surprising effect consisted of the fun this project gave to the entire school community. Staff greatly looked forward to the storytelling days, even though they were not in the groups simply because of the buzz that the groups created in the corridors. On hard days it was 'what kept you going. It could get as basic as that.' Another staff member added: 'The overall initiative has brought an energy and engagement to our school – and it has also given me a way to help my teachers do things differently in the classroom that make a real difference.' The learning mentor continued: 'You can really see the difference in classes where there is lots of storytelling'. A headmaster picked up the thread: 'There you find high attendance, high mood and motivation, high learning, a great shift in the pupils' attitude towards learning and an unbelievable speed of skills acquisition.'

I feel this is me – I can do it

The parents/carers loudly sang the praises of the change that participation in these groups had brought them. One woman spoke for many of them, when she said: "I realised the lack of confidence in myself. Now I can push myself to do something. Now when I face a challenge I feel I can do it, or part of it. Now I feel that I can. Now I feel this is me - I can do it. I am who I am...it's a lot of change. It gave me a lot."

Others joined her and expressed that they want to carry it on, because they love telling stories. One parent noted: "All my life I've been doing jobs I don't enjoy. Maybe I can have this as a career and do something I can enjoy. C. (the facilitator) opened my eyes again. Maybe I have the talent. Maybe I will find myself in this field. I have been looking for myself for a long time and maybe this is the true me.'

Two parents have already joined the Parents Teacher Association and hope to apply for the role of School Governor in the future.

Storytelling matters, all parties said, because ‘it does not cost money’ and ‘you can take it anywhere.’

3. Lessons about informal adult learning

In the above pages I have in some depth discussed the main lessons that the Story Museum may draw from this project in relation to Informal Adult Learning. In order not to repeat myself I will simply enumerate some of these here:

Recruitment

Consider the vital role of word-to-mouth advocacy for a course or project, and how this can be creatively done.

The content matters

Do not under estimate the core importance of a group’s content to attract participants.

Topics

Choose course content that promises the alleviation of issues that matter to the participant (e.g. participant/child relationships) and will strengthen their ability to achieve this betterment in a creative, skills-enhancing manner.

Shame or blame

Do nothing that shames or blames the participants, do many things that make them feel good about themselves, and enable them to tell some really good stories about what they did with their day.

Connectivity

In planning the curriculum start where the learner is at, or even a bit below, while keeping expectations truly high. Use a theme-centred approach.

Skilled facilitators

Facilitators must be able to facilitate several core aspects of the group at once. This includes how best to keep its developmental process on track, how to engage its socio-emotional dynamics and how best to pursue the group’s educational objectives in the light of each participant’s needs and actual achievements.

Provide supervision

Without strong supervision this kind of content-based emancipatory group-work is likely to flounder or at least to slow down.

Homework

Design creative homework that raises the participant’s status at-home and will probably improve their experience of their home circumstances.

Predictability

Give sessions a predictable pattern and adopt a steady, warm facilitator style.

Feedback

Make feedback creative and pleasurable by using response-tasks.

Problematization

It would be useful if this core concept could inform the Museum's informal adult learning initiatives.

Learning-strategies

Design learning strategies around two core sequences:

- demonstrate (an act), imitate, vary and initiate it.
- tell something, imagine it, map it, step it, embody it. re-tell it, invite feedback, and repeat.

Traditional stories

Familiarity with unknown traditional stories eases troubled people's relationship with unexpected ideas or events, increases their capacity to tolerate uncertainty and develops their capacity to entertain 'the possibility of possibilities.'

Loose no time - therefore do not hurry

As one participant said: 'C. didn't rush us. He worked out the pace we needed to take things. In every session you want to try a little bit extra, stage by stage and all together.'

Teach 'the courage to hope'

Enable the participants to understand the corrosive effects of hopelessness and learned helplessness, and create numerous opportunities to surmount these.

Turning points are unpredictable

Accept that a participant's turning point will be unique to them and unpredictable, even though the facilitator needs to do everything in their might to facilitate it. In the words of one participant: 'At the first workshop the facilitator said: 'Come on stand up.' I felt really nervous. Then I said: 'Come on.' Then 'Let's do it!'

The group matters – fairness means equal attention for everyone

Nurture fairness. Make people feel welcome. Acknowledge absences. Welcome returners. Be fair to everyone and grant each person the same amount of time to speak or receive the group's attention. No more, but also no less.

Enjoy laughter

Learning happens more quickly and more creatively in a group that has grown together and where individuals feel safe enough to make a fool of themselves in a containing environment.

Don't forget the corridors and other thresholds

Do ask participants how things went, what they did, discovered or learned. They need to tell their story, and discover what it means to receive interest.

Support confidence - 'Now I feel I can do it.'

As one participant observed: 'I soon realised the lack of confidence in myself. Now I can push myself to do something. Now when I face a challenge I feel I can do it, or part of it. Now I feel this is me - I can do it. I am who I am...it's a lot of change.'

Changes in social support for learning

Help learners understand that initially their family, friends or partners may well be critical of their effort to learn something. They may even be destructive or unkind. But after a while most will come round. As one participant experienced: ‘Initially the family were critical. Now they say: ‘Well done. We’re happy for you.’

4. The future or where next?

Given the project’s undeniable success the Story Museum needs to clarify at the earliest possible date how participants and school-staff can develop their storytelling practice. The participants and the schools want skills-consolidation, follow-up planning and guidance in this regard. I trust that this will be provided. While I have ideas about how this might be achieved, these are beyond the remit of this report.

In addition to a continuation of the StoryBird project, I sincerely hope that the staff of the Story Museum will replicate these groups elsewhere, including settings where adults and children, though economically comfortable, may nonetheless experience significant psychosocial deprivation.

5. Thank you

Irrespective of what happens next, I most sincerely congratulate the staff of the Storymuseum, the school staff and the participants with their remarkable achievement. It has been a genuine privilege to receive your stories.

Enfield, March 18, 2010.

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