Use of stories

The importance of stories has been long recognised as a means of exploring new ideas and feelings, firing the imagination, extending knowledge of language and satisfying a fundamental desire to make sense of the world (Wells, 1986; Emblen and Schmitz, 1994). In short, by listening to and reading stories children become smarter (Medwell et al, 2007:124). Moreover, the experience of ‘story time’ can prove to be one of the richest and enjoyable moments in primary education. The constructivist theory of learning that underpins much research highlights the importance of the social use of language. Daniels (2002) has shown the value of ‘literature circles’, where a group of children agree to read the same book and meet together to discuss it. Each child keeps a journal in which their thoughts and responses to sections of the book are recorded and fed back into the circle. Teachers in the Early Years should set up opportunities for children to role play stories and rhymes, exploring characters, plots and dialogues. To this end, ‘story sacks’ featuring puppets of characters and other artefacts are a popular resource.

Stories do not have to be read at the close of the day, but can punctuate the timetable. There are a number of managerial issues that will influence the quality of the story session, beginning with the basics of ensuring that children are settled, comfortable and ready to listen. The choice of the story or poem (matched to the abilities, needs and interests of the children), the mode of delivery and the tone are also important considerations (Riley, 1999). After the reading, pupils should have opportunities to explore the book themselves – the use of audio and digital formats opens up considerable possibilities for teachers.
However, telling and reading stories in formal settings are skills that do not come natural to many even though narrative is the fabric of everyday life. It can be a nervous experience to move away from reading to telling a story, even for the more experienced and gifted teachers. Grugeon and Gardner (2000:2) reassure trainee teachers that everyday gossip and storytelling are part of a similar process sharing the same basic skills. Outstanding teachers soon learn to build up a repertoire of stories, beginning with a common stock of myths, fairy tales and legends.

**Figure 1** The use of stories (National Oracy Project, 1987-91)

*Task*
Practice your reading aloud by trying to read the suggested ideas relating to stories around the outside of figure 1 pausing at the right time.

From an early age, children can be encouraged to interact with the texts and to begin to develop critical reading skills. Outstanding teachers regularly draw upon children’s previous experiences as a way of connecting children to the readings.

Focus on Practice

One trainee read her Year 1 class the story of *The Three Little Pigs* (Southgate and Lumley, 1965). She then read alternative accounts, including *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Trivizas and Oxenbury, 2003) and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka and Lane Smith, 1991). Her objectives were to encourage children to look at similarities and differences in the stories and to question motives. The children assigned words and phrases from the stories to cut-out figures and used Venn diagrams to record similarities and differences. At the end of one reading she was told by an inspired six-year-old ‘Could they make up their own story about ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears?’

More able children can be encouraged to read stories from different viewpoints, and many texts lend themselves to performance with individuals taking different reading ‘parts’.

Questions to ask to extend children’s critical appreciation of stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>When is it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where is it?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is it like there?</td>
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</tbody>
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Poetry

In her survey of children’s poetry spanning 300 years, Styles (1998) points to the wide-ranging material leaving any definition of what constitutes good poetry for children difficult. For her part, she looks for poetry that has a musical language, takes risks, speaks out against injustice, and respects the audience. Most pupils enjoy poetry, especially when they hear poems read by visiting poets and have opportunities to read aloud and perform. The best starting point for effective teaching of poetry is exploring children’s personal responses (Waters and Martin, 1999). This involves making links between the characters in stories and poems and the lives of the children, taking advantage of comments such as ‘I’ve been there’ or ‘That’s happened to me.’
Ofsted (2007:5) reports that teachers’ good use of active approaches, such as drama, increased enjoyment and the quality of pupils’ responses to poetry. In the National Curriculum for England, children are required to learn about poems by ‘significant authors’ and ‘classic poems’. Poems can take many forms, including riddles, limericks, shape poems, performance poems, nonsense verse, cautionary tales, calligrams, haiku and tanka. Research suggests that while children are introduced to some excellent humorous poets – the likes of Roger McGough, Brian Pattern, Allan Ahlberg, and Michael Rosen – they are less likely to have encountered the classic works of Coleridge, Tennyson, Blake, Stephenson, Milne or Chesterton. This can be largely attributed to the limited knowledge base of teachers. According to one study, 22 per cent of teachers could not name a single poet (UKLA, 2007:6). Very few women poets were mentioned and poetry from different cultures and traditions are often ignored. This is not a new concern. Marshall (1978:46) concluded that: ‘time is one enemy, but the other is quite often the paucity of the teacher’s own knowledge of and liking for poetry.’ The development of the Internet has provided immediate access to poems from different cultures, lands and times. Outstanding teachers utilise these resources and engender a passion for poetry as a source of joy, reflection and wonder. They skilfully draw attention to the effectiveness of poetical devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration and rhyme. They also show how poetry can be used imaginatively with other expressive media such as music, art, dance and drama (Carter, 1998).

Task
Visit the Poetry Archive website and browse the Children’s section which allows you to search for poems by theme, poet and poem:
http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/home.do

References


Ofsted (2007),


Scieszka and Lane Smith (1991),

Trivizas and Oxenbury (2003),

