



# STORYTELLING: YOU CAN JUST DO IT—WHEN YOU PUT YOUR MIND TO IT YOU CAN DO ANYTHING

## A report on storytelling by children in Ireland and the United Kingdom

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**Abstract:** Many storytelling projects in Britain and Ireland now focus on developing children’s storytelling abilities rather than adult performances. These projects are based primarily in schools and libraries, and, in some cases at museums, sports projects and play schemes. The majority of these storytelling projects serve disadvantaged communities, and so have especially supported and celebrated the storytelling of children from minority backgrounds. Such storytelling projects contribute towards a rise in literacy, increased confidence and self-esteem among children and families (especially among minority communities), and the strengthening social ties in diverse communities.

**Key words:** Storytelling, orality, literacy, writer’s residencies.

### Storytelling Residencies

Ireland and the United Kingdom have seen a rise in storytellers’ and writers’ residencies in primary and secondary schools focused on disadvantaged schools, with the emphasis on developing the children’s storytelling, *not* upon performances by adults (teachers, librarians or professional tellers and writers) (Grainger, 1997; Greene, 2010; Rosen, 1988; Ryan, 1995; Wilson, 2006). This decision emanated from Barbara Hardy’s assertion that ‘narrative... is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience but as a primary act of the mind transferred to art from life.’ Other influences included curriculum developments arising from the National Oracy Project, knowledge of the Reggio Emilia Approach, and Jack Zipes’s storytelling work (Rodari, 1996; Zipes, 1995, 2005). These schemes were supported by research in cognitive sciences suggesting the importance of oral narrative in child development (Greenfield, 1997; Wolf, 2008).

Storytelling residencies serve many purposes, mostly to improve participants’ self-esteem and confidence, and raise oracy and literacy levels (Ryan, 1998; Greene, 2010). Resident tellers usually spend a minimum of six to eight half days or three to four full days working with one class over a few weeks. Many programmes see weekly storytelling sessions over an academic



term or year. Artists begin by performing stories, but mostly set oral activities, drama games, and creative writing exercises to stimulate children's and teachers' storytelling.

This can lead to performances by students, published writing, literature studies, or the exploration of topics in other subject areas. Storytelling often focuses on students' cultural lives or has a multicultural agenda; residencies were in socially and economically disadvantaged communities, and so focus upon languages and narratives of minorities.

### **Residencies in Ireland**

Irish society transformed over the past decade; the 'new Irish', immigrants from Eastern European, Asian, African and South American countries, forming minority communities throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic. Storytelling schemes responded to such changes. Storytellers from minority communities work independently and with Irish tellers. In recent years, these projects see children and parents collect, perform and celebrate their own stories, sharing them with other groups.

Clodagh Brennan Harvey initiated storytelling sessions (workshops and discussion groups) at community centres with women from South Asian and Chinese communities in Northern Ireland. In Galway Clare Muireann Murphy established the *Community Storytelling Initiative*, using storytelling to work with marginalised communities, especially refugees and asylum seekers (Social Entrepreneurs, 2010). Aileen McBride was involved in story collection projects with Travellers such as *Scéal Éile Ballymun; Memories from the Grassy Margin* in Dublin, and at St. Catherine's Centre for Travellers in Carlow. She also facilitated storytelling workshops and international story collections with *SPIRASI*, the centre for refugees and asylum seekers in Dublin. These were discussed and promoted especially in the Storytellers of Ireland/*Aos Scéal Éireann* conference *Many Voices/Guthanna Éagsula* in 2009.

Earlier schemes in Northern Ireland provided models for these projects. Innovative storytelling residences originated in here, as a response to perceived educational and social challenge. With its recent political 'Troubles', causing a lasting impact of terror, violence and sectarianism, and the long-depressed economy contributing to such tensions, few immigrants settled there. The majority population identifies itself as 'Protestant' and 'Unionist' (preferring to



remain in the UK) while a large minority is ‘Catholic’ and ‘Nationalist’ aspiring to be part of a united all-island Irish state (Foster, 1989; Longley, 1991). This is a generalisation, as identity politics are more complex than implied, and since the Good Friday peace agreement immigration has made identities and political loyalties even more complicated.

Some families, particularly among the unemployed, working and lower middle classes, tend to congregate in specific estates, maintaining persistent sectarian segregation. In such cases, some ‘Protestants’ (supposedly the province-wide ‘majority’) are isolated, becoming a minority among ‘Catholics’, and vice versa. Storytelling is one cultural form shared by all, without political connotations sometimes associated with music, dance and sport. Storytelling schemes were devised for reasons stated above, but also to bring children and teachers together. *Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU)* saw Protestant and Catholic schools sharing activities to expand appreciation for each other’s cultures (CCEA, 1997; Whitehouse, 1990). Not only did tellers perform for *EMU* programmes, they facilitated the development of children’s and teachers’ storytelling by exploring oral histories, local legends, and folklore by leading workshops and arranging children’s storytelling performances for their peers and families.

*Word in Action* used storytelling to develop oracy and literacy across the curriculum in secondary schools while *Listen Up!* had primary and secondary school children learning to tell stories and using orality as a lead in to creative writing, both involving Catholic and Protestant schools equally (Ryan, 1995, 1998). *Sharing Stories* brought together generations with primary pupils collecting elders’ stories and stories by mentally disabled adults were celebrated in *Blue Horizons*. These schemes, integrating Catholics and Protestants, provided models for the more recent multicultural projects.

### **Residencies in the UK**

Throughout the UK storytelling schemes centred on inner-city schools with highly diverse ethnic and racial populations. As in Ireland, projects aimed to develop oracy and literacy, inspire creative writing, or develop students’ self-esteem and confidence. Storytelling consistently focused on the children’s stories, family narratives, and local histories. Therefore



schools serving minority communities or multi-cultural populations saw storytelling draw from and celebrate many traditions and languages.

*Expanding the Frame* responded to the National Literacy Strategy, a highly regimented curriculum, and used folklore of Ireland, Irish/Scots Travellers, the Caribbean, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India to provide storytelling materials and methods. *Steps to Storytelling* drew on storytelling traditions from cultural backgrounds of students in London secondary schools to develop oracy across all curriculum subjects. *Flintshire Legends* and *Writing Together* had primary and secondary pupils collect local and family stories which they developed as class anthologies, picture books, or performances. Informal educational settings (football clubs, libraries, wildlife centres, museums and galleries) have had several schemes. Footballers and coaches in *Kick into Reading (KiR)* tell stories to motivate children's reading. Players and coaches often relate personal stories or traditional tales reflecting their cultural backgrounds and, with many foreign players in English clubs, some bilingual performing has featured. For students visiting museums, tellers from represented cultures perform and help children create stories to contextualize and form a response to museum artefacts (Johnson, 2006; Greene, 2010; Wilson, 2006).

### **Outcomes**

Storytelling residencies celebrated children's cultural backgrounds, brought diverse groups together, and had an impact on literacy, self-esteem and confidence. In the video documenting the project, several children state what they like best is that when they tell stories, people listen to them. One child concludes that storytelling isn't difficult, it's easy, that it proves 'when you put your mind to it, you can do anything' (VAC, 2001-2). From the start reports on *Word in Action* and *Listen Up!* indicated a raise in literacy levels. One student confided: "You know that story we had to make up in History class about the Famine? You said not to write it down, but I wrote it for English homework. I wrote six pages—I never wrote more than three pages before. And I got a B+. I never got a B before" (Ryan, 1998: 11).

His English teacher corroborated the influence of storytelling on student learning:



I work with the History teacher, and do a reading and creative writing lesson based on what the boys have just learned about the Famine. For the first time, they didn't have to revise and look things up again. The boys had loads of facts at their fingertips, facts they remembered about the Irish famine which they picked up from the storytelling (Ryan, 1998: 11).

Secondary school students and teachers reported that those on storytelling schemes saw reading ages rise by 2.3 to 3 years over the month of the scheme (VAC, 2001-2).

English secondary school students have claimed in interviews and surveys that storytelling improved their reading ability and range of reading habits. Librarians monitoring schemes like *KiR* reported that children taking part showed a 73% increase in library membership, using the library 25% more frequently than students not involved (NLT, 2010). Football clubs also monitored families coming to matches after their children participated in sports-literacy programmes, and saw increased attendance by members, particularly women, of minority communities.

Although a side effect of the project, the fact clubs attribute storytelling to increased match attendance supports the belief that children develop through a strong socio-cultural networks. Jim Sells of the National Literacy Trust points out that literacy is not solely achieved through reading lessons. It is a communal effort, and children need to be in a community of readers. Storytelling, as a social act and social art form (Wilson 2006) encourages networks making a community whose members all engage creatively with language to the benefit of all, especially children (Ryan 2009). As Rodari claimed, "Every possible use of words should be made available to every single person"—this seems to me to be a good motto with a democratic sound. Not because everyone should be an artist, but because no one should be a slave.' (Rodari, 1996, 4)

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