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Storytelling across cultures: engendering literacy the 'Papa Rudy' way

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Abstract

This article examines the approaches to storytelling as a means of encouraging literacy employed by Professor Rudy Wilson across cultures of the United States and Nigeria. It discusses the opportunities storytelling provides for children to develop an interest in reading and to build language skills. A report on an interview with Professor Wilson (known as 'Papa Rudy' in Nigeria) is supplemented by observations of his storytelling activities in Nigeria. The researchers conclude that storytelling is a viable tool for teaching reading. Findings show that children across cultures love stories, but their level of concentration varies with the number of alternative activities to which the child is exposed. More importantly, the success of the storytelling session depends on the teacher's creative ability and flexibility.

Keywords

storytelling, reading, schoolchildren, Nigeria, United States

Storytelling helps children to develop a positive attitude to books and reading.

Introduction

Reading is one of the elements in literacy education and care needs to be taken to help the child learn how to read. The home and community are the child's first teachers. To ignore or downsize the role of parents in literary instruction is to court failure. The home influence on a child's reading readiness is pointed out in many studies (Bus, 2001; Kassow, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2007). The home environment prepares children for literacy instruction. This can be confirmed through myriads of research findings which show that the educational level reached by a child's parents, their occupational status and the number of books in the home are significantly related to the progress the child is likely to make in reading. (Heyneman and Loxley, 1983; Kamarudeen, 1984; Noble, Farah and McCandliss, 2004).

Parents must make a conscious effort to read to their children and engage them in discussions in preparedness for reading experiences. How can they do this? They can best start with storytelling – telling stories of their own life experiences, folktales from

the community and others such as can catch the attention of the child. Storytelling is a method of teaching reading that has grown popular among teachers and parents. It is an old method of imparting knowledge from generation to generation, and has been used to teach young children to develop interest in, and acquire proficiency in reading.

This study explores storytelling employed by Professor Rudy Wilson, an African American, who has told stories to hundreds of children in the United States and in Nigeria. The study looks at the viability of storytelling as a method of teaching reading. It posits that children's interest in reading can be whetted when stories are read to them. The paper reports findings from an in-depth interview as well as participant observation.

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Figure 1. Children listening to Papa Rudy's stories in assembly



Figure 2. Papa Rudy's listeners in class

Storytelling method of teaching reading

Stories are told for various purposes and they give room for sharing and creating a common experience between the storyteller and the listener. For a child especially, stories expand his worldview and take him on journeys to far away lands where he encounters interesting people and memorable events. Storytelling introduces the child to oral language patterns and develops his listening skills as well. Storytelling helps the child to develop a positive attitude to books and reading and helps in the vocabulary development of the child.

According to Papa Rudy, the subject of this study, "Storytelling makes you get pictures in your head using imagination and creating sounds in your head as well. Storytelling is thematic. You choose the story to tell based on the message you want to put across". When telling stories to children, it is better to use animal characters, as using humans as major characters in stories sometimes interferes with sending the message home as the listeners think you are talking about them. It is therefore good to use animal characters, especially when telling children stories. They hear about the experience of the animal, and identify with the emotions of the characters in the story. They thus want to hear the story again and again, and progressively, want to read the story themselves. Paley (1997) describes extensively her experiences with her kindergarten class and how the children got to discuss issues that are really quite topical, starting with reading a book and discussing it over and over, relating it to different situations. A child learns about the world

around him from literature he reads and tries to relate it to his own life experience. As Huck, Helper and Hickman (1997:623) put it,

As children search for meaning in books, they naturally link what they are reading to their own lives ... We want to encourage children to discover personal meaning in books in order to better understand their lives and to extend their perceptions of other lives.

Indeed where books are available and are read to children, and where the parents talk about the exciting things that go on in school, the child usually looks forward to school. Storytelling helps children come to terms with the environment and since they are hearing about things they like, they tend to want more and this leads to being curious and learning to love reading on their own.

The learning process is riddled with complexities which are affected by individual activities and skills that are discovered to be interrelate. (Lamb and Gregory, 1993; Goodman, Watson, and Burke, 1996; Gunning, 2000). Goodman, Watson, and Burke, (1996:23) posit that reading is characterized by a personal, ongoing, long distance discussion between the reader and the author. This distance between the author and the reader can be bridged by storytelling. When stories are told, the child listening to the story is able to identify with the character in the story and is motivated to learn more about what he has heard. The teacher, or storyteller in this case, becomes the focal point for the listener and the desire for repetition of the story sustains interest in reading.



Figure 3. A teacher preparing a class for a story by Papa Rudy



Figure 4. Children listening to a Papa Rudy story

Empirical studies

Studies have shown the peculiarities of storytelling as a method of teaching reading to children. George and Schaer (1986) investigated the effects of three mediums for presenting literature to children. They discovered that storytelling and dramatization were significantly more effective than television when it comes to recalling prose content. Storytelling helps children in memorizing and being able to remember what is read.

The sight-word reading method of teaching reading is identified by Ehri (2005), and there are other methods like phonic, interactive reading (Senechal, Thomas and Monker, 1995; Robert and Neal, 2004), and the storytelling method which is being explored in this study. This has its background in indigenous folktales. It contains the rhythmical repetition which is attractive to the ear of the child. The sound often conjures up a mental picture. This system is criticized for the fact that children learn the story by heart, nevertheless the advantage of the system lies in the fact that all children enjoy repetition as well as rhyme. This method is highly successful in teaching very young children nursery rhymes.

Palmer, Harshbarger and Koch (2001) explored storytelling as a vehicle for expanding children's existing oral language and developing their literacy abilities during community-sponsored summertime programs. They posit that hearing and retelling stories "help children become familiar with the concept of story; for example the kids learn and understand that a story has a beginning, middle and an end" (p. 200).

They further remark that storytellers use transitional stories (ones usually with body movement and songs) to capture the attention of listeners, especially young ones whose attention span is rather limited. Their conclusion is that storytelling offers opportunities for developing more respect for children with diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

Brief biographical information on 'Papa Rudy'

Professor Rudy Wilson was born in Michigan during the depression in 1935. His father was a factory worker, a socialist who was active in the union of American workers. By the age of three, he was already showing signs of dexterity in speech making in school and at church. He remembers giving a speech on the topic "I am somebody". Although he got admission into the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), to study medicine, he could not cope with chemistry. He discovered that writing and speaking were his forte. He also did a little acting.

Several factors in his growing up years influenced his storytelling. He lost his mother very early in life (at age five) and had been separated from her much earlier, due to having younger siblings born soon after him. He therefore took to reading a lot because it took care of his loneliness. His many pioneer roles as a person of colour (first black teacher in Claremont, first black President of the Faculty Senate, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville (SIUE)) and his stint in the army as an intelligence officer and the storytelling experience in 1957 in Japan are worthy of note. Also, he went around Mississippi and did some short

story clips on segregation. He went around showing these clips to children.

Papa Rudy's Nigerian experience

On two different research visits to Nigeria in 2004 and 2005, one of the researchers went with Papa Rudy Wilson on his storytelling trips. The schools visited covered three different socio-economic classes. One of the schools, the University of Ibadan Staff School, is located on the campus of the University of Ibadan. This school served both the junior and senior level staff of the university. The second school, Boladayo Nursery and Primary School, Sasa, Ibadan is located in the low income area. Many of the school children are first generation literates. Either or both of their parents may not have the equivalent of the high school certificate. The third school, Sonbeam Preparatory School, in an area occupied mostly by high income earners, is in Bodija Estate, Ibadan.

Before each of the school visits, an appointment was booked with the school administrator. The book read was 'Abiyoyo Returns' by Pete Seeger. In most instances the classes were merged. The average class size was 15. The children read to were between ages 7 and 9, from Primary 3 to 5. The school administrator (proprietress or head teacher or class teacher) introduced the guest storyteller. His being an African American was a source of awe and marvel to the children across the three schools. Papa Rudy often dressed in the African Batik print and had lots of candies ready for the children.

The storytelling/reading was always done standing. First, he showed the children the title of the book, made them pronounce it, and then read them the story. The story was read with some dramatization to show a character's facial expression, physique or emotional outburst. The children participated actively in the singing or clapping or dancing. At strategic points in the story, Papa Rudy showed pictures to the children. He raised the book well above their heads and moved around so that everyone could see. Also, questions were asked about some of the actions of the people in the story. This way, he made the child predict the story from the pictures. The children always got the answers right, most likely because there were no wrong answers since the children got the moral of the story.

It was not unusual to have the children chant 'Abiyoyo, Abiyoyo' after Papa Rudy as he left their class to move on to another. All through the storytelling, the teachers hovered in the background

or sometimes moved around to maintain order. The expressions of delight at the progression of the story and Papa Rudy's animated manner of telling showed not only on the children's faces but also on the teacher's face. After closing the storytelling session, Papa Rudy chatted with the school administrator for a while, signed the visitor's book and then departed.

An interview with Papa Rudy

In the interview with Papa Rudy (a name he was given in Nigeria), on 15th April 2008 at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, these researchers gathered that he sees himself as an outreach worker who uses stories to connect with students. On the choice of books to read to students, Papa Rudy observed that "kids love stories about animals". However, he cautioned that storytelling should be thematic. For him, there is a wide variety to choose from. He reads or tells stories to children on issues of race, homophobia, racism, drug abuse, alcoholism, human relations, social issues and general interests. He also mentioned the fact that he sometimes relies on the school reading list since these are books that children have to read later. To him, storytelling gives the teacher room to be creative. Outside of the prescribed reading materials, "you have the ability to create, stories are sometimes made up to reflect social realities, slavery, life during depression, accepting others . . ." he said.

When the researchers asked Papa Rudy what skills a storyteller should possess, he submitted that:

"A good story teller should be able to expand the story and give it life. You need to have the talent, the education, the skills . . . but you also need to read widely. Reading satisfies ones curiosity and makes one intelligent. Reading calms one down."

Here, Papa Rudy emphasizes the need for the storyteller to be forearmed. Inasmuch as it is necessary for one to be able to put life into the storytelling, skills are required also. The researchers wish to bring out the relationship here between storytelling and reading. Books provide the storyteller with abundant materials to speak from while storytelling lures the children back to books so that they can make further discoveries of their own.

Other skills for the storyteller highlighted by Papa Rudy include the need to be creative. To him, the storyteller may use vocal inflections, "you change your pitch to reflect the mood of the story". Thus in the storytelling, there will be a time to whisper, a time to shout, another time to speak with a croaky voice or

do whatever else the story calls for. He also suggests the use of costumes or any other props that can create curiosity in the classroom.

The researchers sought to ascertain the role of the class teacher in the storytelling approach to reading. Papa Rudy confirmed that:

“Teachers are important. They set the objectives. They must create a harmonious environment for the students and the visiting reading teacher.”

He further observed that since the teachers have the syllabus they can guide the storyteller or reading teacher along the desired path. Moreover, teachers “must not see teaching as a job but as a life”. They must know all the students by name and always find new ways of teaching. Papa Rudy reiterated the need for the teacher to get the students to do a biodata record. Each child should write his or her name, ambition, likes, dislikes and so on. Stories can also be woven around these data.

Papa Rudy also pointed out the pivotal role of the parents and the school. He advised that parents should read to their children every day and encourage them to write something in a personal notebook. “A parent is important in a child’s integration into society”. In addition, he said parents should teach children how to look at the whole picture and make them think.

The school has a duty to provide books in “every room, not just the library, so that when no teaching is taking place, kids can read”. Papa Rudy suggested that schools can provide additional literature. Thus if the reading material is *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, they can supply review materials on the book.

When Papa Rudy was asked about the similarities and differences between his storytelling experience in the United States and Nigeria, he identified a few. First, he said there was not much difference in his technique of teaching reading and storytelling across both cultures. However, he made some observations about the attitude of his listeners:

“Kids in America have more liberty. The kids here have more things to occupy their minds, the Internet, iPods, and computer games and so on. Nigerian kids don’t have too many conflicting interests. The kids in Nigeria can become creative thinkers.”

He further disclosed that classroom control during storytelling is better in Nigeria than in the United States. The issue of discipline during storytelling and the need to keep the children under control are key

factors to the storytelling adventure. One of the researchers who had gone around some schools with Papa Rudy on his Nigerian visits observed that the teachers acted like policemen and at intervals threatened to use the cane or asked a child to stand up if he or she was found to be disturbing or making too much noise during storytelling.

To round off the interview, the researchers asked Papa Rudy to give some advice to would-be storytellers. First, he emphasized the need to take the business of reading seriously. He noted that many children these days are not encouraged to read or think; “even auto reading machines think for the kids, you don’t have to do any addition or subtraction!” He enthused that with storytelling “the kids don’t just read, they end up as writers. Some of them get to draw and it is a good way to get into the minds of the children”.

He added that storytelling should help the children to understand difficult words, so when a storyteller uses a new word, he must try to show the children the meaning of the word through the context in which it is used. Also, the children should be encouraged to read aloud, “I let them read out the title of the book. I can get them to try the sounds. If they make mistakes, I correct them”.

The suggestion is that storytelling can be used to “teach language skills – pronunciation, teach tenses, and teach the meaning of new words and much more”.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to chronicle the experiences of Papa Rudy in his use of the storytelling approach to teaching reading. His encounters have shown that through storytelling, children’s literacy abilities and oral language skills are honed. He reiterated the role of the parent, the school and the teachers in engendering literacy and providing an enabling environment for children to develop interest in books and reading. The paper pointed out a difference in the attitude of the American schoolchildren and the strict class policing or discipline by the Nigerian class teachers. In all, the paper again gives credence to available data on the inherent values of storytelling in the teaching of reading, especially at the lower grades.

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