



International Learning and Research Centre

IMPLEMENTING STORY MAKING

INSIGHTS FROM SCHOOL LEADERS

DfES Innovation Unit Story Making
School-based research project

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Implementing Story Making

- a school-based research and enquiry project

Insights from School Leaders

Background

During the academic years, 2003-2005, the Story Making Project has been funded by the DfES Innovation Unit. The project has been investigating and identifying the key teaching strategies to help children internalise the patterns of language and, through the development of spoken language, to close the gap between reading and writing. These investigations have taken place in fourteen primary schools in the South West of the country, in the urban areas of Chippenham and Trowbridge (Wiltshire) and Kingswood (South Gloucestershire).

Context

The International Learning and Research Centre team has inducted and worked with groups of teacher-researchers in each school. These colleagues have participated in the development of the Story Making three stage methodology, **Imitation, Innovation and Invention**. They have closely observed and reported on the impact of Story Making on children's achievement.

As in any major school innovation the role of the headteacher has been critical. The purpose of this report is to reflect the perceptions of a representative group from the project's headteachers and to examine some key messages for further developments.

This report draws on interviews with five headteachers from project schools in Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire. It aims to provide information regarding the progress and impact of the Story Making project from the perspective of headteachers. It further aims to evaluate factors pertaining to leadership that have contributed to the project's implementation and to provide recommendations for developing practice at whole school level.

Key Findings

- the Story Making project has provided an effective strategy for schools to address issues of oracy and writing
- participation in the project has had a positive impact on the development of children's spoken and written grammatical knowledge
- interviews reveal that the project has met an overwhelmingly positive response from pupils, staff, parents and governors. The high enjoyment factor has led to increased confidence and greater creativity in language teaching

- the headteacher's leadership has been vital in stimulating interest, gaining commitment to the project and motivating staff to accept change
- project headteachers are committed to the development of a professional culture in which there is a willingness to take risks and in which innovative ideas are shared and celebrated
- collaborative enquiry-based learning has provided a powerful vehicle for teachers' professional development. This has supported middle leader development
- headteachers welcome the inclusive nature of the project which has led to improved standards in oracy and writing for lower achievers and pupils with special educational needs
- involvement in the project has led to a greater school wide understanding of the power of story as an excellent vehicle for developing oracy and writing. This has resulted in improved teacher knowledge and understanding of language development
- pupil learning and staff learning have been successfully applied across the curriculum, leading to increased confidence and improved achievement
- in schools where literacy skills are below the LEA and national average, Story Making has provided an effective means of engaging parents in language-based work. Headteachers in two of the project schools are considering the potential of the project for supporting family literacy
- teaching assistants have played an important role in the successful implementation of the project
- project co-ordination by the International Learning and Research Centre is cited as a key factor in the project's success, providing inspiration and ensuring rigour in the pace and quality of implementation across project schools

Pupil Achievement

All headteachers stated that the project had impacted positively on pupil achievement in speaking and listening and writing. The project had also provided schools with a strategy to address the gap between achievement in reading and achievement in writing.

Three of the headteachers attributed poor literacy skills on entry to their school's socio-economic context. In these schools, Story Making has provided an effective strategy for the schools to address issues of oracy and writing; cited as priorities for improvement on School Development Plans.

In one school, Foundation Stage data indicated that the performance of Reception aged pupils in the area of Communication, Language and Literacy showed marked improvement between 2002-4. This is demonstrated in *Figure 1*, showing performance in relation to the national average.

Figure 1

**Comparison of National Foundation Stage Profile and School Data:
Case Study School 'IL'**

	8-9 Nat %	IL 03	IL 04	4-7 Nat %	IL 03	IL 04	0-3 Nat %	IL 03	IL 04
CLL:LCT	50	50	85	43	45	15	7	5	0
CLL:LSL	36	36	50	47	36	47	18	28	3
CLL:R	39	32	59	54	57	41	7	11	0
CLL:W	32	29	41	53	54	50	15	17	9

CLL:LCT Communication, language and literacy: Language for communication and thinking
CLL:LSL Communication, language and literacy: Linking sounds and letters
CLL:R Communication, language and literacy: Reading
CLL:W Communication, language and literacy: Writing

Although the YR cohorts in 2002/3 and 2003/4 were distinct from each other in relation to gender balance and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs, the headteacher of the school was confident that pupil involvement in the project had added significant value to their performance.

Further reference was made to Foundation Stage data as a useful indicator for measuring the impact of Story Making. Recognising the importance of oracy to learning in all areas one headteacher believed that notable pupil gains in Communication, Language and Literacy and Knowledge and Understanding of the World were attributable to involvement in the project.

The gains in children's spoken and written grammatical knowledge and understanding were perceived by all headteachers to be particularly significant. At the *imitation* stage of learning headteachers reported that pupils successfully internalised new vocabulary appropriate to a narrative context. This fully supported vocabulary enrichment programmes in place to address poor literacy skills in YR.

Headteachers further reported that children's growing repertoire of spoken temporal connectives and adverbial phrases were being successfully applied to their narrative writing. From pupil interviews and work scrutiny it was evident that involvement in the project had led to the acceleration of children's knowledge and understanding of syntax. It was generally felt that the pupils' acquisition of language features through Story Making was enabling them to write more coherently and helping them to develop their use of sentence punctuation and paragraphing.

All heads referred to the use of visual narrative planning formats and commented positively on their impact on children's learning about story structure. In one school the introduction of these formats was felt to complement work on mind-mapping as part of a whole school focus on thinking skills.

Headteachers recognised the relevance of children's learning from the Story Making project to other curriculum areas. The process of learning through *imitation*, *innovation* and *invention*

had been successfully applied to different genre in two schools, resulting in improved pupil knowledge and understanding of text features.

In relation to whether pupil performance was determined by gender, one headteacher described a culture of low self-esteem where girls rarely spoke in lessons; believing their silence to be the level of compliance welcomed by teachers. In this context the project provided an effective means of addressing girls' oracy. Lesson monitoring by the headteacher indicated that levels of interaction increased when girls engaged in Story Making activities. Verbal rehearsal of stories through repetition, active participation through role play and positive praise contributed to improved confidence and achievement.

Enquiry-based learning

This school-based enquiry project has provided teacher-researchers with the opportunity to work collaboratively to develop practice. Headteacher reflections indicate that this model of working has strongly supported teachers' continuing professional development and provided all participants with leadership experiences.

Headteachers consider the process of school-based enquiry to be successful in embedding practice and supporting assessment for learning. The sharing of ideas and experiences with teachers in other contexts across two LEAs is regarded as having greatly enriched teacher learning. In depth scrutiny of work samples at training sessions is positively viewed by headteachers as a valuable opportunity for teachers to extend their subject knowledge and sharpen their assessment practices.

The participation of at least two teacher-researchers from each school is also considered to be particularly effective in building capacity for improvement. It is widely felt that the Story Making training workshops served to refocus and re-energise teacher researchers and hence development work within schools.

'Collaborative enquiry has been very supportive and is a significant factor in the success of the project'

'School-based enquiry provides a strong sense of ownership and has been a powerful strategy for improving areas of weakness in our school'

'The initiative is being driven by the teacher-researchers. They have been inspired by the project's leadership and used their enthusiasm to motivate the team'

(evidence from project headteachers)

In order to develop and sustain the impact of the Story Making project, teacher-researchers have taken on a mentoring role, team teaching alongside colleagues and leading staff meetings and Inset training sessions. These have served to build capacity across the school, vital for future development as schools face the challenges of staff mobility and induction. As expressed by one headteacher, *'it's so important to keep the flame and purpose going in order that practice becomes embedded across the year groups.'*

Teaching assistants have played an important role in the successful implementation of the project in individual schools. All headteachers felt that further training and development would extend and enhance this role, particularly for the management of intervention groups for lower achievers across year groups. An enquiry-based approach to learning for teaching assistants was felt to be an effective strategy for professional development and capacity building.

The process of dissemination by teacher-researchers through whole school training, mentoring, team teaching and peer observation is favoured by all headteachers. Such practice has provided teacher-researchers with opportunities to monitor and evaluate school progress with the project's strategies, thereby contributing to school self-evaluation. In two of the schools visited this positively contributed to middle leaders' development.

Motivation

All the headteachers in this survey strongly emphasised the high enjoyment factor of the Story Making project. They reported that pupils and staff had demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive response to the range of Story Making activities experienced in their school contexts. Headteachers made reference to the inclusive nature of the project, citing examples of progress made by their lower achievers and pupils with special educational needs. One headteacher felt that Story Making had built in opportunities for differentiation by ability **and** individual pupil learning style, making it accessible for all children. This promoted a 'can do' attitude and impacted positively on children's confidence and willingness to take on new learning challenges.

Such positivity was evident among staff and the wider school community:

'The project has enriched teamwork; it's given us a real buzz'

'My teacher researchers live and breathe it..... and the children just love it!'

'It's important never to underestimate the importance of fun and enjoyment when embracing change of this nature'

'It's been a real motivator for getting parents through the door.....we desperately need them on board with language-based activities'

(evidence from project headteachers)

In two of the schools where literacy skills had been below the LEA and national average, Storymaking has provided an effective means of engaging parents in language based work. Both headteachers are considering the potential of the project for supporting family literacy.

Leadership Factors

Headteachers from the five project schools are experienced leaders and managers of change. When invited to comment on the leadership required to lead an innovation programme such as Story Making they offered valuable insights:

'Story Making has required us to take risks, break the mould and think outside of the box'

'It's prompted a pedagogical review in relation to language teaching'

'We have an ethos of learning from mistakes; laughter being a vital ingredient!'

(evidence from project headteachers)

Headteachers reported that governors had been very supportive of the project. In one school the teacher-researchers had led a hands-on workshop for governors to promote an understanding of Story Making processes.

Governors contributed to the monitoring and evaluation of the project through lesson feedback and attendance at whole school story performances. Governor feedback was overwhelmingly positive and many acknowledged the contribution made by the project in supporting the school to address areas of weakness and underachievement.

Interviews revealed that the project headteachers are committed to a professional culture in which there is a willingness to take risks and where innovative ideas are shared and celebrated. Leadership by the headteacher, governors and teacher-researchers has been vital in stimulating whole school interest, gaining commitment and motivating staff to embrace change.

All headteachers in the survey were excited by the rich learning opportunities presented by the Story Making project for themselves, their staff, pupils and wider school community. They believed the project inspired high achievement through creativity and all looked to further embed Story Making practices at whole school level.

Headteachers cited project co-ordination by the International Learning and Research Centre as a key factor in the project's success at individual school level. All strongly recognised that the project leaders had provided the inspiration and drive behind the development, ensuring rigour and setting a pace for implementation. Headteachers stressed that the quality of the support and challenge provided by the Centre's team had made a significant impact on its success.

Recommendations

- a process of school-based enquiry has driven the project providing an effective strategy for schools to address standards in oracy and writing. The collaborative nature of the enquiry has enriched learning, enabling teacher-researchers in different contexts to share ideas and develop practice.

The successful application of this process demonstrates the potential of school-based enquiry as a strategy for professional development. Evidence of its potential to build capacity for learning at whole school level suggests it can be usefully considered as a key strategy for school improvement.

- teaching assistants have played an important role in the successful implementation of the project supporting both individual pupils and small groups. Headteachers recognise the potential of Story Making as an intervention strategy for lower achievers and pupils with special educational needs and would welcome a training programme for their teaching assistants. A school-based enquiry approach to professional development through the Story Making project could make an important contribution to current training programmes for teaching assistants, particularly in view of the current Remodelling agenda.
- the project has been successful in engaging parents in language-based work. Headteachers have highlighted the potential of the project for supporting family literacy. This warrants further study.

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