

# “Literacy through storytelling”

A CPR Success Zone Action Research Project

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Acknowledgements and Thanks to;  
Alison O'Connell of the CPR Success Zone who has been tireless in her support, enthusiasm and practical help.  
The following participating teachers and classroom assistants; Natasha Anderson, Lisa Tregoning, Cherry Chope, Penny Allen, Sue Julyan, Becky Welch, Lynda Laing, Julia Probst, Lee Moscato who were positive, hardworking and made it all enjoyable.  
And their headteachers; Stephanie Thomas, Jonathon Nurhonen, Jill Hughes, Joy Crawford, Jane Hulbert  
Further help from; Alison Norris, Jon Davey, Gordon Fenn, Jo Frost, Caroline Andrews, Kate Arthur, Demelza Doyle, Dave Simons, Ian Bruce, Tom Harman, Karen Brokenshire, Peter Brinton  
External moderation; Paul Hunkin  
Support and advice; Paul Hanbury, Jason Hurr  
Invaluable assistance on research methodology; Jill Rodd  
Administrative support; Sarah Ford  
Original suggestion; Nick Appleby  
And, of course, the essential, unpredictable, delightful and extraordinary contributions made by all of the pupils involved.

## **1. SYNOPSIS**

The project was designed to study the impact of input from a professional storyteller in raising the standard of writing outcomes in Year Six classes.  
Pre and post intervention testing (mock Y6 SATS writing task) was used as the main source of data.  
Data were gathered by marking and moderating scripts from five participating classes and five control classes before and after the input (October and March). Qualitative data were gathered from structured interviews/questionnaires with participating staff.  
This report concludes that the storytelling intervention had a significant impact on raising the standard of writing outcomes.

## **2. AIMS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Bruno Bettelheim's seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment* (Bettelheim, 1976) was the first to seriously champion the fairy tale as an art-form of great importance and meaning.

“...on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society...But more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story...”

The power of storytelling in a specific school context was subsequently developed and advocated by Betty Rosen (Rosen, 1988), Kieran Egan (Egan, 1988) and others. The National Oracy Project (NOP 1989-1991) was a catalyst for a considerable revival in storytelling by teachers, pupils and professionals. From this project, for instance, Howe and Johnson attempted to show “...how valuable a resource stories

can be for helping pupils shape their experiences, and for deepening their understanding of the world.”(Howe and Johnson, 1992).

Grugeon and Gardiner (2000) claim that “[much of the progress made by the NOP] ...was later abandoned in favour of more narrowly conceived ideas in response to the National Curriculum.”

Good practice and resolute advocacy of storytelling in the classroom did continue however, for instance, Teresa Grainger (1997), in the context of the National Curriculum says that “Storytelling can...provide significant opportunities for learning about language and literature and developing linguistic competence.”

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS, DfEE, 1998) was greeted with alarm by some teachers anxious that no specific Speaking and Listening strand was apparent.

However, Grugeon and Gardiner (2000) claim that, indeed, “...storytelling is more securely embedded in the curriculum and has regained some of the status it seemed to have lost after 1988”

It may be that the surface features of the NLS prevent some teachers from appreciating the opportunities for storytelling and related activities built in to the strategy.

The drive to raise standards in Literacy is at the heart of the current school improvement culture. Much of this concern focuses specifically on standards in writing. Currently, a primary school may expect to have its entire sweep of achievement judged on writing outcomes in Year Six (Y6) SATS.

This action research project aims to provide evidence that will support knowledge regarding effective practice in Literacy teaching, It is focused by the researcher’s professional values and based on investigating the researcher’s own professional actions. Its findings are intended to enhance the researcher’s professional practice and enable other practitioners, should they chose to, to benefit in terms of their own professional development.

The project was conceived of as a pilot study to explore the impact of focused storytelling activities in raising the standard of writing outcomes in Y6 classes.

These activities, incorporating a range of dimensions (visual, kinaesthetic, interpersonal) were offered to teachers and pupils through a framework designed by a professional storyteller (the researcher).

The key research question examined in this study is;

Would pupils’ fiction-writing improve through developing a self-image as aural storytellers and explicitly learning speaking and listening skills?

### **3. CONTEXT**

The CPR Success Zone has 20 primary, 3 junior, 3 infant, 3 secondary, 1 special and 1 nursery schools within its remit.

Five target Year Six classes were selected on the basis of the low level of external Literacy support previously provided and low results in the previous years' Y6 SATS. These schools were then invited to participate.

Five matched schools were identified and invited to act as a control population to the study.

### **4. PROCEDURE**

In order to establish baseline data all ten classes were required to sit a mock Y6 SATS fiction-writing task prior to any input.

All scripts were marked and assigned the appropriate National Curriculum level according to SATS marking scheme criteria. The DfEE mark scheme showing possible marks is tabulated in Appendix A together with a note regarding the significant number of very low scoring ('unclassified') scripts.

The process was moderated by an independent external observer.

Within a fortnight of the pre test the storytelling intervention, described below, began. The post test, a second mock SATS test, was administered on completion of the intervention. Data were collected over a four month period.

Shortly after the research period structured interviews were held with participating staff to gather qualitative data regarding their professional development (pro-forma Appendix B).

### **5. INTERVENTION**

#### **i) Introductory INSET**

The five participating class teachers with, wherever possible, classroom assistants attended an INSET day led by the professional storyteller.

The rationale for the project was shared and five core activities for story work were explored practically.

These five activities, intended to be useful within the structure of the Literacy Hour, were; Listening Partners, Storyboarding, Tableaux, Hot Seating, and Retelling.

#### **ii) Analysis of first scripts**

Once moderated, the marks from first scripts of participating schools were tabulated (Table 1, page 6)

This table clearly showed that very few pupils in the participating population were in the 'near miss' level 4 category. The population was heavily skewed towards children achieving below level three.

Marks for Y6 SATS scripts are comprised of three elements; Purpose and Organisation, Style and Punctuation. In order to gain a picture of pupil's proficiency

in each separate element the scripts scoring marks in various possible combinations were tabulated (Table 2, page 6).

Table 2 shows that many children scored marks at a higher level for Style and Punctuation than for Purpose and Organisation. These data suggested that improvement in the Purpose and Organisation of children's writing would yield the highest results in terms of raising scores to a higher level.

It was decided to look more closely at the Purpose and Organisation scores.

Each school's results gave a different profile and for each participating school a different selection of scripts were further analysed individually.

In most schools these were the scripts scoring 12 or more marks for Purpose and Organisation. If this gave too small a sample then the scripts scoring 17 or more marks in total were used.

The Level 4 criteria for Purpose and Organisation were simplified into seven markers (Coherent, Well Paced, Beginning/Middle/End, Characters, Interaction, Characterisation, Lively and Interesting). Each script was given a simple Yes/No score for presence/absence of the marker

A sample of this further analysis is given in Table 3.

These tables gave a different profile for each school but target learning objectives emerged clearly in each case (i.e. areas in need of improvement).

In all schools the lowest tallies of 'Yes' occurred for Well Paced, Beginning/Middle/End and then Characterisation or Coherence. These features thus informed the target learning objectives (with some variation between schools depending on specific details of script analysis). For example, "to be able to tell and write stories that have a clear beginning, middle and end".

### **iii) Whole school/Key Stage performance**

The storyteller visited each school for one day and gave a performance for the whole school (or the whole Key Stage as appropriate). For many pupils this was their first taste of live professional performance.

### **iv) Initial class-input**

The storyteller spent the remainder of the day working with the Year Six class and staff.

Important components in this first input were;

- explicit reference to the pupil's previously written stories in the pre test
- positive affirmations of the class's storytelling skills as demonstrated in the pre test
- clear learning objectives based on the pre test scripts
- activities constructed to engage differing learning preferences (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic components).
- encouraging teachers to incorporate similar storytelling activities into their ongoing Literacy teaching.

### **v) Twilight gathering**

After the teachers had had six weeks to explore using the approach within the Literacy Hour, the group met to share progress, successes and ideas.

### **vi) Individual meeting**

Each class teacher had an individual meeting with the storyteller to discuss specific issues relating to their own practice or class. At this meeting the target objectives were identified for the second class input.

### **vii) Second class-input**

The storyteller spent a second day with the class. Examples of the class's work were shared and pupils were affirmed in their self-image as storytellers. Learning objectives were made explicit.

Activities included;

-exploration of 'Pace' as the 'speed with which the listener sees new pictures in their mind'

-demonstrating how to re-use the plot of a known story to create a new tale with a clear introduction, build-up, climax and resolution

-use of 'hotseating' to generate dialogue and achieve appropriate characterisation

The time was also used to devise and rehearse original storytelling contributions to be shared at the presentation gathering.

### **viii) Presentation gathering**

All five participating classes were brought together in an improvised 'storytelling grotto' within the local Leisure Centre. The storyteller hosted the occasion with a variety of tales and games. Each class contributed solo, paired or group retellings and enactments.

### **ix) Swapping stories with other schools**

It had been intended to set up a network of story swapping between the classes. Guidelines on how to receive and give constructive response to stories were circulated (Appendix C). However, technical problems with internet access in the majority of classrooms meant that this, potentially powerful, aspect of the project was not properly implemented or explored.

## 6. RESULTS

### i) Quantitative Data

Table 1; Number of pupils attaining each level with first scripts

	U	<L3	L3	L4	L5
Control population	3	53	41	12	1
Participating population	6	69	32	2	0

Table 2; Breakdown of marks awarded to first scripts from participating schools

Total marks are comprised of three elements:

Purpose and Organisation/Style/Punctuation

School	Below level 3				Level 3C			3B	Level 3A			Level 4
	<17	9/4/4	12/2/4	12/4/2	12/4/4	12/4/5	12/5/4	12/5/5	15/4/4	15/4/5	15/5/4	15/5/5
A	8	1	5	2	6	3	-	-	-	-	-	1
B	14	2	-	1	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
C	12	8	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
D	8	9	-	-	2	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
E	7	3	4	1	5	2	1	2	-	2	1	-
Total	49	23	9	4	17	6	2	7	-	2	1	2

Table 3; Example of detailed analysis of 15 scripts from School E achieving 12 marks for purpose and organisation;

L4 Purpose and Organisation	SCRIPT														
	14	13	18	3	23	2	22	5	17	24	27	4	19	20	11
Coherent	-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	Y	-	Y	Y	-
Well Paced	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Y	-
Beginning/Middle/ End	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Characters	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Interaction	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y	Y	-	Y
Characterisation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Y	-	-	-
Lively. Interest.	Y	Y	-	Y	-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	Y	-
Total marks	18	18	18	18	18	20	20	20	20	20	21	21	21	22	22

Key; Y = Yes; marker present

- = No; marker absent



Table 4; Number of pupils obtaining each level on first and second scripts

		U	<L3	L3	L4	L5
Control population	1st script	3	53	41	12	1
	2nd script	4	53	39	13	1
Participating population	1st script	6	69	32	2	0
	2nd script	3	45	53	8	0

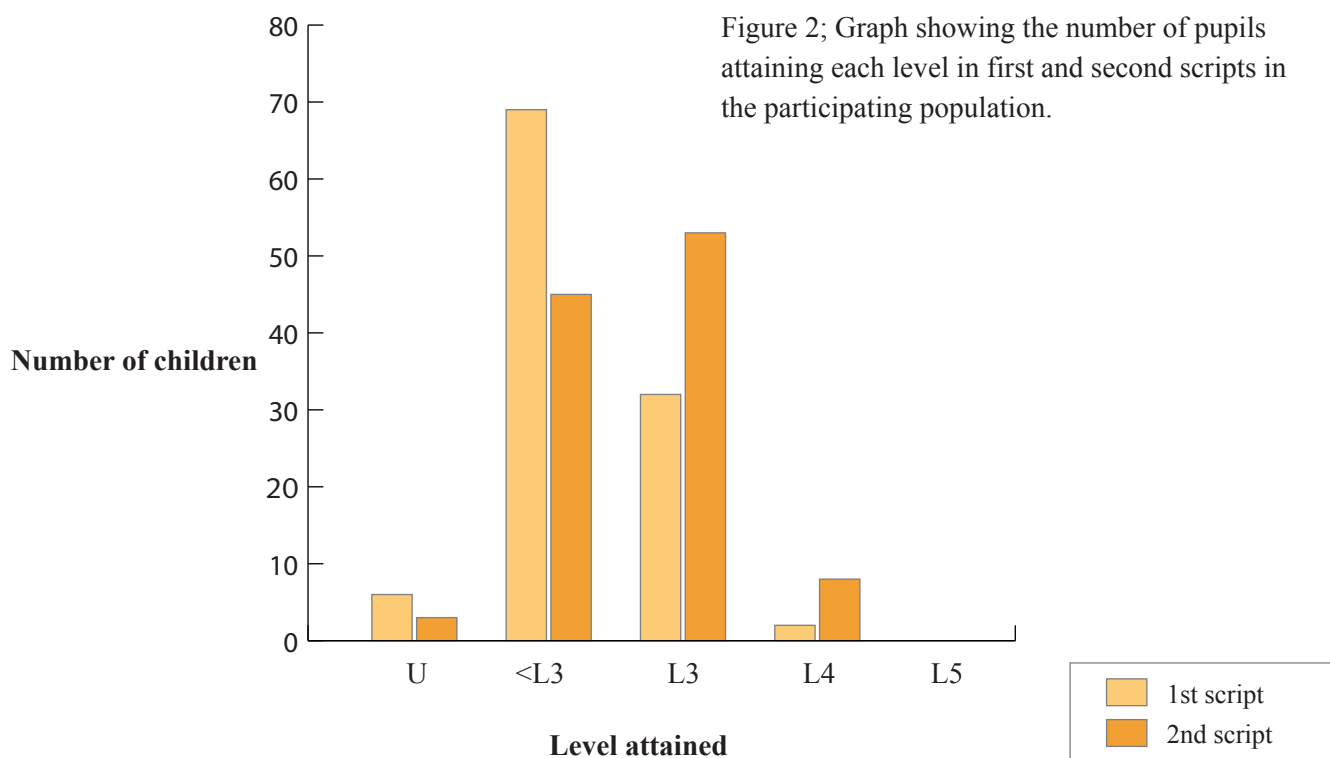
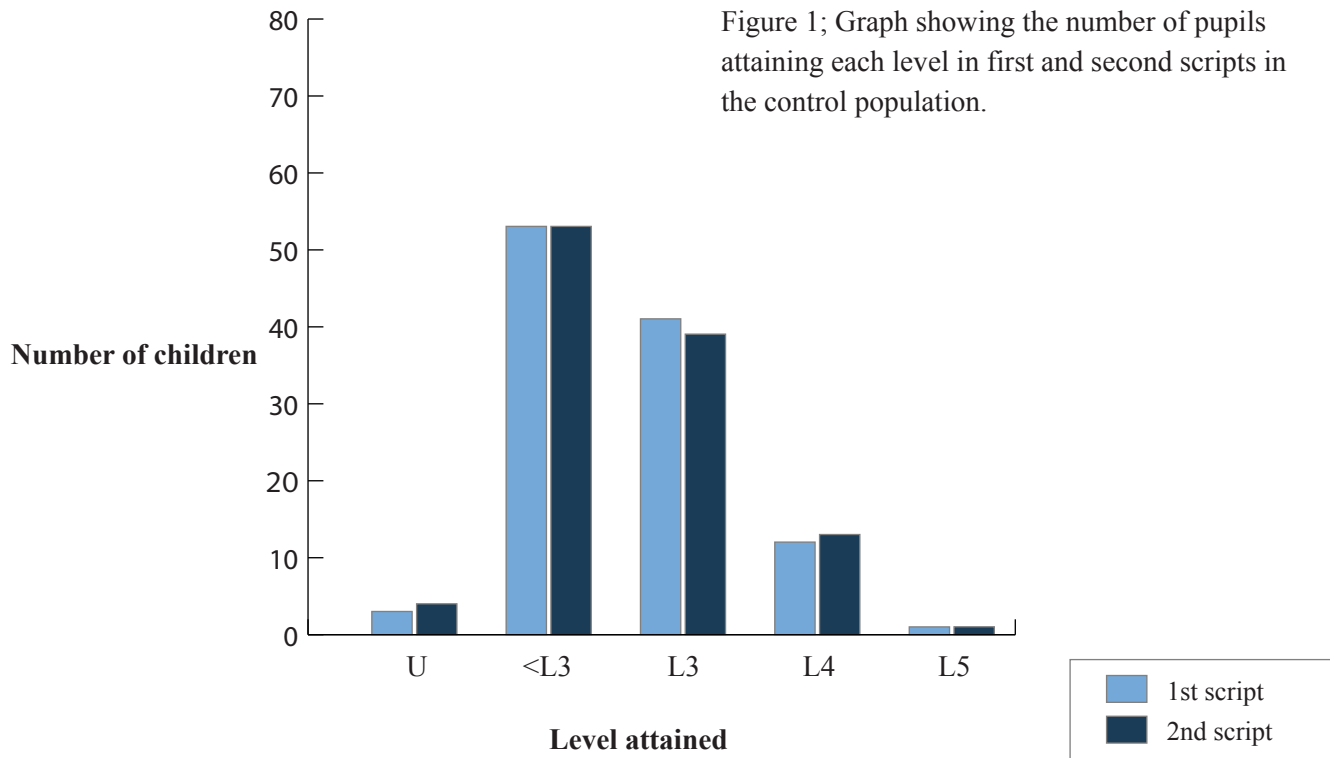
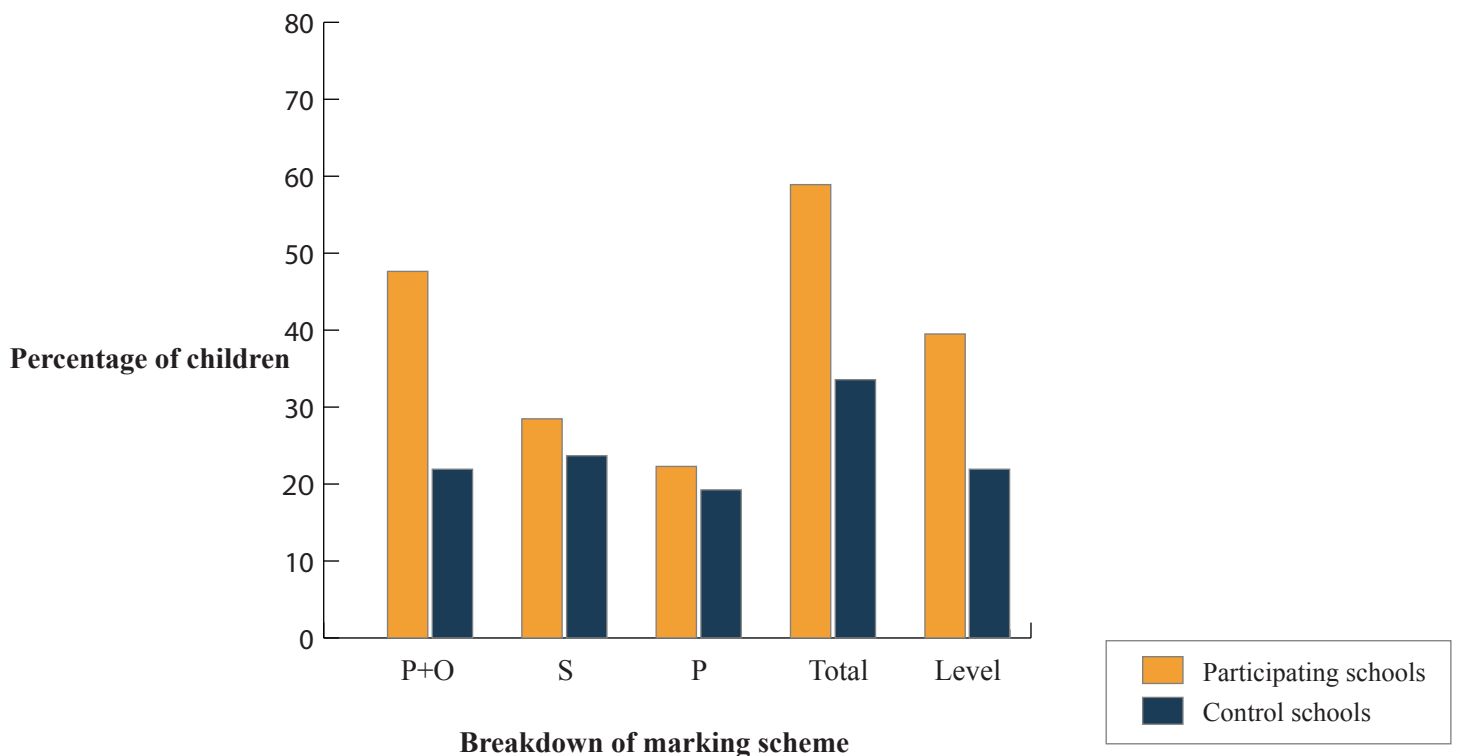


Table 5; Percentage of pupils showing some improvement between first and second scripts.

	Percentage of children whose performance improved in each of the following areas:				
	P+O	S	P	Total	Level
Participating schools	48	29	22	60	40
Control schools	22	24	19	34	22

Key	
P+O	Purpose and organisation
S	Style
P	Punctuation
Total	Total number of marks awarded
Level	National curriculum level attained

Figure 3; A graph to show the percentage of children whose performance improved in both control and participating schools.



## ii) Qualitative Data

### TEACHER RESPONSES TO STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### 1. In broad terms how successful has the project been?

All teachers responded positively noting their own increased range of strategies available, their pupils' response and the raising of the profile of literacy and storytelling across the school.

"Extremely successful. Huge impact on class and whole school"

#### 2. Have you perceived a change in pupil's attitude to story writing?

All teachers responded with improved pupil attitude, one highlighting the improved attitude amongst SEN pupils in particular

"They can see how to improve, they have ownership of story, they want to do it."

"They now enjoy story writing."

"Enthusiastic"

#### 3. Have you perceived a change in quality of written outcomes?

Teachers were more cautious in their response to this question (even though the quantitative data suggest grounds for optimism). Most stressed the need for a longer period to be able to consolidate learning. Two teachers referred to definite improvements in Purpose and Organisation.

Two teachers specifically mentioned improvement in boys' writing.

"Better shape. Less dependence on TV characters. Boys more confident."

#### 4. How has your own classroom practice been affected?

All teachers stressed the increased speaking and listening in their literacy teaching. One teacher specifically mentioned increased visual planning.

"It is more interactive."

#### 5. Are there any other differences as a result of the project?

Teachers reported using the ideas across the whole curriculum and the pupil's self-esteem gains from storytelling in assembly.

"We use the ideas across the whole curriculum (tableaux/hotseating)"

But behavioural improvements were also described;

"Boys working with girls, especially those with 'attitudes'."

"Improvements to behaviour as a result of clear expectations and involvement."

#### 6. Which components of the project were most important in bringing about these changes?

##### First INSET day

All teachers found this day to be very useful in setting the scene and providing a toolkit of activities.

"Important – went back and tried them in class."

##### Whole school performance

Teachers stressed the increased status that the younger children gave to the Year 6 class as they were allowed to work with the storyteller.

“Very, very important – all classes wanted to work with me”

### **First class input**

Several teachers mentioned the motivating factor of having a person from outside taking an interest in the children’s work

“Someone from outside praising and the objectives to work on very powerful.”

### **Twilight gathering**

Only one teacher found this meeting particularly useful. It would seem that teachers were already ‘on-track’(and busy) and the meeting was therefore superfluous.

### **Individual meeting**

Teachers welcomed the opportunity to focus on their particular issues

“Helpful – planning the next bit”

### **Second class input**

Teachers were pleased to revisit and consolidate previous learning as well as to cover new ground whilst preparing for the presentation.

“Good reinforcement”

### **Presentation gathering**

Most teachers felt that the occasion had fallen short of its potential simply because of the very noisy atmosphere (a football match) immediately outside the grotto. The idea of a presentation was said to be a good motivating idea in the preparation time.

“Really good, children felt good about themselves”

“Fantastic idea – didn’t work because of noise”

### **Swapping stories with other schools**

Most teachers had not found the time or had been frustrated by technical problems but approved of the concept.

“Hasn’t really happened – would be a good thing.”

## **7. What suggestions would you make to improve any future project along similar lines?**

Most comments revolved around the short time span of the project and suggested an earlier and lengthier intervention in pupils’ literacy careers. One teacher suggested that more ,short, focussed writing tasks as part of the storytellers input would have helped pupils breakdown the, sometimes overwhelming, task of story writing

“Should be asked at Y4/Y5 – almost too late by Y6.”

“Target younger age group to get run in to KS2 SATS”

“Best project I have been part of.”

## 7. DISCUSSION

The key research question to be answered by analysis of the results of the study is; Has pupils' fiction writing improved through developing a self-image as aural storytellers and explicitly learning speaking and listening skills?

The results clearly show a significant difference between the participating and control populations. Table 3 and Figure 1 reveal the rather small changes in the outcomes of the control population. Slightly more children were awarded L4 but fewer were awarded L3 and <L3 and a greater number of children were awarded U.

This contrasts with the substantial overall upward trend in the participating population with fewer children being awarded <L3 and U and more children being awarded L3 or L4.

A similar pattern is revealed by Table 4 and Figure 2. Not all children showed any improvement in marks gained over the four-month study period but 60% of the participating population did whereas only 34% of the control population did.

In other words; over the four-month study period the writing outcomes of the control population did not improve significantly. The participating population, however, did make significant improvement.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the intervention has resulted in a general improvement in fiction writing outcomes in the participating schools.

But, perhaps factors other than the storytelling approach itself might be responsible for this improvement?

For instance, participating teachers were highly motivated and it is likely that the second task was given higher status in the participating than in the control schools. According to several participating teachers the fact that the professional storyteller was the intended audience for the written stories was motivating in itself. Further study with even stricter parity about the setting and conditions of the tasks would be needed to resolve this possibility.

Or, the explicit sharing of learning objectives was encouraged throughout the project; might this feature of educational good practice (not necessarily related to storytelling) have had a significant effect? Once again, a closer examination of the teaching techniques of the control population would be necessary to clarify the role that sharing learning objectives played in improving outcomes.

Table 4 and Figure 3 reveal interesting information about the area of writing within which most improvement was made. In the control population a similar percentage of children made progress in each element of Purpose and Organisation, Style and Punctuation (22%, 24% and 19%). In the participating population the percentage of children improving in Style and in Punctuation was slightly higher than the control group (29% and 22%). However, the percentage of children improving in Purpose and Organisation was more than double the control group (48%).

This study had chosen to focus on Purpose and Organisation and had, in fact, put time and effort into analysing pupil's specific needs in this area. These results might well be seen as a vindication of the close scrutiny of pupil's work and analytical generation of proximal learning objectives rather than for storytelling activities per se.

However, two points can be drawn from these data;

- concentrating on Purpose and Organisation was not to the detriment of Style or Punctuation.
- Purpose and Organisation carries higher marks in the scheme and consequently had greater impact on level awarded

If the improvements seen in the participating population are due to the storytelling intervention, it is still not possible to say which of the activities used are most beneficial. The structured interview responses shed a little light on which activities teachers have incorporated into their on-going teaching style. All teachers stressed the increased 'interactive' nature of their teaching and more frequent use of speaking and listening tasks. However, specific questions on each of the 'tool-kit' of activities might have yielded useful information.

Further study would require a closer tracking of strategies utilised by teachers, their frequency and their effectiveness in the teachers' professional judgement. Also, it would be revealing to discover whether certain activities have remained in the teacher's repertoire in the longer term.

The issue of gender is worth raising briefly as a possible focus for future study. The data appeared to show a complex interaction between pupil gender, performance, class teacher gender and the intervention. Unfortunately the control and participating populations were not matched in this respect and the results appeared to be contaminated by this factor.

The next study and its component intervention is currently in an advanced stage of planning. It is intended to address some of the issues raised here whilst simultaneously maximising the effectiveness of the intervention. Rather than working with a single class in five schools, this subsequent study intends to work with the whole staff of eight schools

## **8. LIMITATIONS OF STUDY**

How generally applicable might the findings of this study be?

The project took place entirely within the geographical area of the Camborne, Pool and Redruth educational action zone. By its very definition this is an area with a very high proportion of pupils considered to be disadvantaged educationally and/or socio-economically. This might be considered to be a factor when applying the study's findings to other demographically defined areas.

This area has a strong cultural identity, one which is shared by the storyteller; the fact that the storyteller was able to mirror and affirm pupil's Cornishness is again a factor that might affect the transferability of results to other cultural situations.

Similarly, although the initial impetus for the project had been the desire to raise the number of pupils achieving Level 4 at Y6, it was immediately apparent from the baseline data that such a target was unrealistic. The majority of pupils improving moved up to level 3 – which is still below the nationally expected level for Y6 pupils. It has not been demonstrated by this study that similar improvements would result when commencing with a higher achieving population.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This report concludes that the storytelling intervention did have a significant impact on raising the standard of fiction writing outcomes.

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### APPENDIX A

Table from DfEE Mark scheme showing possible marks awarded for each element:

	Purpose and Organisation	Style	Punctuation
Just below level 3	9	2	2
Level 3	12	4	4
Level 4	15	5	5
Level 5	18	6	6
High level 5	21	7	7

A significant number of scripts failed to meet the lowest criteria in the mark scheme. Scripts not meeting the minimum criteria for Style or Punctuation (i.e. for 2 marks) were given zero marks for these elements. Scripts not meeting the minimum criteria for Purpose and Organisation (i.e. for 9 marks) were given 6 marks for this element. The DfEE mark scheme has 'Just below level 3' (<L3) as its lowest category for scripts attaining 13 to 19 marks in total. This study introduced an extra category 'Unclassified' (U) for scripts attaining less than 13 marks.

APPENDIX B

LITERACY THROUGH STORYTELLING

A cpr success zone project

PARTICIPANT STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Name of Interviewee

School

1. In broad terms how successful has the project been?
2. Have you perceived a change in pupil's attitude to story writing?
3. Have you perceived a change in quality of written outcomes?
4. How has your own classroom practice been affected?
5. Are there any other differences as a result of the project?
6. Which components of the project were most important in bringing about these changes?

First INSET day

Whole school performance

First class input

Twilight gathering

Individual meeting

Second class input

Presentation gathering

Swapping stories with other schools

7. What suggestions would you make to improve any future project along similar lines?



## APPENDIX C

### RECEIVING STORIES

When you get the stories, read them in pairs or in small groups and ask these questions;

1. Coherence - does it make sense?
2. Structure - has it got introduction, build up, climax, resolution?
3. Characters- do they interact (direct speech?)?, are they different from each other?
4. Pace - is it boring or rushed or does it flow at a good speed?

Keep your comments POSITIVE - say what you LIKED about the story and then email your comments back to the storyteller!