CURRENTS IN LITERACY

Creating Literate Worlds: The Effect of Storytelling on Children's Writing

By Robin Mello

Storytelling, as both an art form and an instructional method, has been experiencing a slow, steady renaissance over the past fifteen years. With this revival has come a plethora of information specifically aimed at educators, ranging from "how to" advice to step-by-step instructions for developing thematic units and curricula. Clearly, the power of storytelling is gaining a foothold in classrooms nationwide; however, few studies exist that formally research the effect that this art form can have on literacy learning. In response to the paucity of research in this area, and because I am both a teacher and a storyteller, I conducted a qualitative grounded study designed to examine the effect of storytelling on children's creative writing.

Method

A small group (seven boys and four girls) of participants were selected as informants for this study. The smallness of the group allowed for in-depth discussions and analysis over a long period of time. It also enhanced the reflective nature of the responses. Participants were all regular attendees of a fourth grade class located at Washington Intermediate School, in River Falls City, USA. All students were between the ages nine through twelve and of average to above-average reading ability (as measured by the Jerry Johns Reading Inventory).

Throughout the duration of this study (September-May), students were asked to participate as active listeners in twice monthly storytelling sessions executed by the researcher/storyteller. Storytelling time was usually scheduled during mid-morning, after literacy and math instruction, and before recess. During presentations, chairs and desks were moved back and a rug was repositioned so students could lounge comfortably during the listening/telling. In every case, students participated actively and with a high degree of interest; often requesting that a particular story be retold over and over again. Discussions that focused on students' reactions to the stories followed each session and were taped and transcribed for later use. The stories I read during the sessions included a wide variety of gender roles and many human protagonists (as opposed to animal or magical), but I did not focus on the gender roles nor ask questions to lead the students into considering their significance.

As part of the first and last storytelling sessions of the study, students were asked to write a story, of any length and on any subject. These stories were then

analyzed for plot motifs, place and time, gender roles, and character descriptions. Pre- and post-storytelling writing samples were compared to each other. Changes in content of student writing, gender of characters, and plot outcomes were subsequently analyzed.

Writing samples were examined with the gender of the writer and the gender roles of characters in mind. As the data were coded, a number of themes emerged. They were: a) amount and gender of story characters, b) fantasy elements, c) gender roles, d) relationships, and e) plot action. In addition, the way that stories ended was also examined.

Character Attributes

Two of the three girls in this study discussed beauty as a major attribute of female characters. Two boys also identified female characters with words such as "beautiful" and "pretty," and two girls and one boy included "beautiful princesses" as characters in their second written stories. In addition, during the first writing sample, more than 90% of male characters in stories written by both boys and girls were identified by what they did (inventor, farmer, baseball player) or by their position in the community (king, knight). Female characters were all identified as a victim, by their position in a family structure (best-friend, daughter, mother), or by attribute (beautiful, ugly, friendly).

In addition, all of the boys wrote about characters' occupations or strength.

Once upon a time there was a boy who grew to be ten feet tall. He was a knight to be. The day he was a knight he grew to be 20 feet tall. He could frighten whole armies away with a swing of his great sword. (author:boy)

In the pre-storytelling sample, two boys wrote about monsters while girls mentioned none. In the post-storytelling sample, four boys and one girl included monster characters in their stories. All monsters but one were identified by the pronoun "he." The one exception was an androgynous alien talking "planet" (written story, author: boy), with no gender identified.

Boys' Writing

In both writing samples, boys wrote about acts of violence or aggression more often than girls. Boys included five acts of aggression, five acts of violence, and six descriptions of action (exploration, competition, creation, invention) in the first writing sample. In the second writing sample, boys included one act of aggression, ten acts of violence, and eight descriptions of action.

On the way the wolf took a fake gun and put it to her head. "Pull over now!" so she did as the wolf told her. The wolf put Red Ridinghood into the trunk of the car and

took the car to Nevada. (author: boy)

One of the king's guards tried to kill the Minotaur but he didn't kill the Minotaur, so the black knight knew he could kill the Minotaur and he did. (author: boy)

When the monster had almost eaten her a man came with a sword in his hand and threw it at the monster. The sword went right through the monster's neck. (author: boy)

There was also an increase in acts of violence perpetrated by female characters in boys' writing in the second writing sample. Data show that in the pre sample only one boy described a female character and this character was portrayed as a victim of a kidnapping. In the post sample, three female characters were created by boys. These three characters were portrayed as either active or aggressive: one sailed a boat around the world, one attempted to overthrow a government, and one battled a monster. Violence perpetrated against parents and other authority figures (killing a principal, threatening an official, regicide) also increased.

Girls' Writing

In both pre and post samples, the plots of stories written by girls (with only one exception) were about relationships.

May and Allison shared the same bedroom together. They were pals. One day May was very very very sick. Allison wanted to help May but she did not know how to. But then one summer day May got better and Allison and May's family were so happy. The End. (author: girl)

In the first writing sample, 57% of the characters in girls' stories were female. Descriptions of female characters increased to 85% in the second sample and over 80% of these characters were described in terms of their relationship to others.

Once upon a time there lived a girl and her family. Her name was Jane and she is 10 and her older brother John is 11 and her younger brother Bob is 7 and her younger younger brother Ed is 4, her younger younger younger brother is Ned and he is 9 months old. (author: girl)

Girls' inclusion of violent or aggressive acts remained fairly consistent. In the first set of stories, girls included two acts of aggression; three acts of violence; four descriptions of action such as flying, teaching, and rescuing; and ten acts of friendship. In the second sample, girls mentioned one act of aggression, three acts of violence, five descriptions of action, and nine descriptions of friendship.

In the first set of stories, girls concentrated on passive scenes of a domestic nature.

Once upon a time there was a duck and a dog who were best friends. The duck was

swimming on the pond with her baby ducklings. This duck had five ducklings. The dog had four puppies. The liked each other very well. (author: girl)

Once upon a time a long long time ago there was a velveteen rabbit that was soft and cuddly and warm. A little boy found him in the ditch and brought him home and brushed him off and he look a bit better than before. (author: girl)

In the second set of stories, girls described more active plots.

It turns out the daughter was killing everybody and throwing their bodies to the monster in the sea. (author: girl)

She had long black silky hair. She had blue eyes. One day her father said 'cut your hair!' She said no because I am so beautiful. He cut her hair. (author: girl)

Endings: Living 'Happily Ever After'

There were no major differences in the endings of boys' and girls' stories between the first and second writing sessions. Sad and ambiguous endings such as heroines disappearing, or characters caught in an eternal time warp, were described almost as often as happy endings, for example, finding a long lost friend or "living happily ever after."

This finding correlates with interview data. Stories that ended in tragedy or ambiguity, were just as "interesting" to students as those with the more traditional "happily ever after" endings. Three girls and two boys expressed disappointment and annoyance during discussions that "they (the female characters) didn't go back and marry the guy."

Changes

In both the first and second set of stories, the gender of the writer influenced the number of male and female characters. In the pre sample, ten of the twelve characters described by boys were identified as male and two as female. In the second writing sample, nine of twelve characters in boys' stories were male and three were female. Girls included a more even distribution of characters by gender. In the first sample, ten of eighteen characters were male and eight were female. Five of ten characters were male in the second writing sample. Examination of the second writing sample shows that changes in gender roles also occurred. Boys wrote about female characters with more frequency and these characters were given more active roles within stories, such as a girl who fights a monster, a princess who sails a boat solo, and a princess with magic powers. The majority of female characters in stories written by girls were identified by their familial and/or social relationships in both samples.

Boys also produced stories that included more descriptions of emotion in the post sample. Two stories mentioned how the hero felt after saving or rescuing victims. Four characters were described in terms of their relationship to others (friends, daughters, sons). In addition, plots written by girls focused on action and contained more description in the second sample. Girls' stories also included more fantasy elements in the post study sample.

Findings

Though the sample for this study was relatively small, I did find some marked differences in the students' writing after their exposure to traditional storytelling. After hearing stories told aloud, boys began to write more about relationships between characters in the second sample. They also included more active and assertive female characters. In addition, there were more fantasy images in both girls' and boys' stories than previously. Although plots from girls' stories were less active than boys, the girls' writing did begin to focus more on plot action -- along with more fantasy -- during the second writing sample. In addition, girls mentioned the physical beauty of female characters more often than boys.

Analysis of writing samples suggests that hearing traditional stories, especially ones that focused on gender roles and relationships, began to have an impact on the ways boys wrote about relationships. In addition, storytelling seemed to have made an impression on both boys' and girls' use of proactive and aggressive female roles. It also impacted girls' use of fantasy and imagery. Inclusion of storytelling in the classroom encouraged students to explore their understanding of story structures (such as character and plot development) as well as enhancing their story comprehension.

It is recommended, therefore, that storytelling be included in literacy activities in order to encourage students to deepen their ability to explore and analyze textual material. Findings from this study also suggest that the telling of traditional texts in educational environments enriches the linguistic life of students. This enrichment, in turn, can influence classroom discussion and the development of language skills. Stories can also furnish students with a broader cultural lens with which to explore the world. Therefore, educators are encouraged to use stories as models for teaching literacy skills, encouraging critical thinking, as well as presenting multicultural perspectives.

1 Storytelling is the art and craft of relating a cultural or traditional text to an audience without the use of memorized scripts, books, or other literary devices. The function of the storyteller is to tell a tale orally. Storytellers rely upon their manipulation of language in order to relate a anecdote and often make use of dramatic skills such as short and long range gesture, narration, characterization, vocalization, and mimetic action.

2 The names of participants have been changed to assure anonymity.

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