

‘Away With Words’

A Final Evaluation on the overall impact of the joint project between
Mythstories, The Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust and Telford & Wrekin Library
Service

Funded by Arts Council England

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12/07/2013

The evidence base for the final evaluation was gathered through:

- direct observation of storytelling sessions in schools and at the two Inspire Days at Blists Hill Museum
- discussions with pupils during the Inspire Day and in schools at the beginning and end of the project
- a visit and discussion with young people and parents at the Storytellers group in Wellington Library
- discussions with parents and school staff
- written feedback from storytellers directly involved in the project provided by Mythstories
- attendance at planning and review meetings
- academic assessment data for reading and writing provided by the schools
- email and other communications with stakeholders.

A scale of 1 to 10 (1 = least, 10 = most) was used to gather data on attitudes and enjoyment from pupils.

The data for progress is based on national curriculum levels.

1 national curriculum level = 6 APS (average points score)

An expected level for each school term is 1 APS

5 APS was used as the benchmark for expected levels of progress

Summary

Despite a number of factors that have affected the original intentions of the project, including one school withdrawing early, Away with Words has had an overwhelming positive impact both on pupil confidence and attitudes towards stories and the wider English curriculum.

The project has also been successful in providing the opportunity for a number of different arts and cultural organisations to work together for the benefit of pupils in Telford & Wrekin. It has also supported existing links between these organisations to be further strengthened and developed and provided a number of key pointers for future projects.

Positives aspects of the project include:

- a raised emphasis on speaking, listening and communication skills in all participating schools
- opportunities for pupils and staff to visit a number of different historic and cultural sites in the locality
- the well-organised and reflective way the project was managed and led by Mythstories
- memorable experiences for pupils, young people and staff
- establishing a successful Young Storyteller group at Wellington library

The impact on speaking and listening and levels of confidence

Away with Words has had a very positive impact on the pupils' use and understanding of the spoken word, developed their listening skills and contributed towards their overall levels of confidence. The feedback and evidence gathered during and at the end of the project have been overwhelmingly positive from pupils, staff, parents and storytellers.

The impact was particularly evident through the final evaluation discussions with pupils where, without exception, they spoke confidently and positively about their experiences and were able to explain how the project had supported their school work.

All pupils felt that their overall levels of confidence had increased and gave the frequent opportunities to speak for a purpose as a reason for this. Scores gathered through discussions with pupils showed an improvement of all areas of speaking for both boys and girls, notably when addressing a small group, a class or a larger group. Overall confidence levels went up but boys' scores increased more than girls

Listening skills were developed through the storytellers' use of rich and often difficult language, the complexity of the narratives and the length of some of the stories. This meant that pupils were given a real purpose for concentrated and sustained listening. This was observed in both the storytelling sessions in schools and the Inspire Days at Blists Hill.

"Thinking about it now, the challenge of the formal language might have been the reason why their concentration was so good. They realised they had to give their full attention. Listening with half an ear wouldn't be good enough. Some of the boys especially were totally engaged." – Storyteller, Inspire Day 2

The impact on reading

Data gathered from the participating schools for the small sample of pupils showed that boys made more progress in reading than girls over the time period. Boys made 5.3 APS (average points score) progress in reading which is above the expected 5 APS for the period of time. Boys' enjoyment of reading also increased.

“It’s helped me with my reading. I enjoy books much more now.” Year 6 boy Teagues Bridge Primary School

“I’ve really enjoyed the project. I want to read more. I enjoy stories now.” Year 6 boy Teagues Bridge Primary School

“Storytelling has helped me with my confidence and I put more expression in my reading. I enjoy it (reading) more.” – year 6 boy Wrockwardine Junior School

The impact on writing

In writing, both boys and girls made better than expected progress with boys scoring 5.3 APS and girls 5.1 APS. The gap between boys and girls narrowed slightly from the beginning of the project.

Boys particularly liked the practical nature of storytelling through the use of artefacts, variation in tone and quality of voice and the gruesome nature of many of the stories

I’ve enjoyed the storytelling project. It has helped us to make our stories in school more creative by introducing us to more exciting vocabulary.’ – Year 6 pupil Teagues Bridge.

This theme was echoed by other pupils who felt that their involvement in the project had supported their writing.

“We entered a 500 word short story and the Away with Words helped us to develop the personalities of the characters in the way they talked.” – Year 5 pupil Short Wood School

Continuous professional development

Where staff did attend the continuous professional development sessions at Mythstories in Wem and used the aspects immediately in class, it was seen to have a high impact on developing classroom practice.

As one pupil stated, *‘My teacher came back re-energised after the session there.’* The artefact that had been made was proudly shown and demonstrated by the teacher. An impromptu storytelling session followed, with the teacher becoming animated and showing clear enjoyment and pleasure as they demonstrated the use of the story sash. The use of the artefact with the pupils was also clearly explained.

The school that attended all continuous professional development sessions showed a full commitment to the project and forward planning by the school staff. There was a greater impact on classroom practice through the integration and implementation of the techniques and artefacts developed. An example of this was observed in one year six classroom where a storytelling area had been established and was regularly used by pupils to develop characters and explore ideas for narrative writing. Pupils in the class spoke with enthusiasm about how the increased focus on oral storytelling had helped their school work, in particular writing. It was clear during discussions with other pupils that their overall levels of confidence had increased as a direct result of the emphasis the school had put on the use of storytelling techniques.

Boys particularly had benefited from the approaches using artefacts and learning and recognising specific patterns in stories. One boy in particular, who had said he disliked reading and writing at the beginning of the project, explained how the storytelling had made him more confident, developed his reading skills through adding expression and making his reading ‘sound better’ and increased his range of vocabulary. His raised levels of self-esteem and wider vocabulary picked up by listening and retelling stories for himself

had also impacted on his writing levels. This was supported by the data which showed he had made better than expected progress in his writing where he made an astounding 10 APS progress. This was double what might have been expected.

Provision provided by the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust enabled pupils to experience techniques that would not have been available to them within their school setting. The production of artefacts to be used for storytelling gave a real focus to the sessions and also gave a wider cultural experience to the pupils.

The high quality and professionalism of the storytellers used in the schools visits and on both the Inspire Days was evident as pupils were captivated during the sessions. Pupils were observed to sit spell-bound as the storytellers told their tales and riddles. Despite inclement weather and lengthy periods of time sitting, all the pupils were engrossed by the sessions and were able to retell many of the stories months later. Key contributing factors to the pupils' engagement were the animated delivery of the storytellers, their expertise in matching the story type to the pupils (or in several cases, giving the pupils the choice of genre), and their use of rich language that was used by pupils in their own retelling and in many cases, their writing afterwards.

The project had a positive effect on pupils' general confidence and levels of engagement in reading and writing as well as their knowledge and understanding of traditional tales. Interestingly, many of the younger pupils did not make a direct link between overall literacy and the use of the local libraries in continuing to develop these as well as providing a place to study in the future.

Young Storytellers Group (ages 11-19) – based in Wellington Library

The young people were extremely articulate when asked about the sessions. They were all very committed to the group and genuinely appreciated the help support and guidance that the storytellers had given them over the months. The constructive criticism offered by the Mythstories staff was highly valued and acted upon by the young people, who also felt their ability to be self-critical and reflective had been enhanced by attending the storytelling club. The success of three of the group at the national Storytelling Awards is testament to the standard of support the young people received through the storytelling group. Their inclusion, as storytellers, at the second Blists Hill Inspire Day celebrated the progress they had all made in developing and honing their speaking and performance skills. They also provided aspiration to the younger pupils who attended the day.

The use of the library as a venue for the sessions had another positive benefit in that the library was perceived as a 'cool' place to be. Several of the young people have been observed working, reading or visiting the library at other times of the week and the environment has become a regular feature in their lives.

The young people spoke at length about how the storytelling sessions had enabled them to develop their confidence and communication skills. Parents also commented on the extremely positive outcomes for their child as a result of attending the sessions. These included supporting their child's attitude and ability in their school work as well as improvements in overall levels of confidence.

Parents spoke very highly of the way the sessions had been run by the Mythstories staff and the additional opportunities that had been presented through the project for their children to be involved in storytelling in the library, in the secondary schools as well as in the wider community. The Young Storyteller of the Year competition in Birmingham gave a real sense of purpose and direction to the group who *'came away buzzing and talking about what they would do when they entered next year.'* – Senior Librarian.

The storytelling sessions in the run up to Christmas were cited by the young people as being wonderful opportunities to learn new stories and share them with a different audience that, without Away with Words, they would not have experienced. Parents were proud of their children's achievements in the storytelling sessions that took place in the library.

The following observation from the senior librarian further emphasises the impact of the project:

'I have noticed a major change in the participants since they began the project last summer. Some of the younger storytellers were very reticent at first but are now confident storytellers prepared to share their stories with other children regardless of age. All of the members have become more self-assured and a bond of trust has built up within the group ... they have been prepared to take risks and try something different. Several of the members are Summer Reading Challenge volunteers and plan to share some of their knowledge with younger children during the summer holiday, for instance making Kamishibais.' - Senior Librarian.

This shows an extremely positive legacy arising out of the project.

Several of the young people said that they thought many of their peers would have benefitted by becoming involved in the storytelling club, though they also felt that the relative small number who had attended the sessions had contributed to the closeness of the existing group. The opportunity to meet and work with other young people, who they would not normally have met, was another positive arising from the project. They also felt that other young people would benefit from joining if the sessions were to continue in the future.

Many of the young people said they were now thinking about further study or a career in the performing arts which was something that they had not previously considered. This shows another positive outcome from the sessions.

All stakeholders were keen to be involved in similar future projects which would build on 'Away with Words'. The following observations may support forward planning.

Considerations for future projects

A financial contribution to the project by schools, or up front charge which would be later refunded, might support a greater commitment and encourage an increased attendance at all of the continuous professional development events and organised sessions.

Ensuring that schools have a designated 'lead', who is fully committed to the project, attends the continuous professional development sessions alongside the classteacher (if they are different staff) and understands the implications of time commitments fully.

Ensuring that staff are really clear on the monetary value of activities included as part of the project e.g. the workshop costs to a school who is not participating in the project,

Once an initial visit to the Mythstories Museum in Wem has taken place, continuous professional development could be arranged more locally in Telford, perhaps at one of the museums or libraries. This may negate the issues around distances to be travelled and encourage greater attendance by staff at participating schools.

As the length of the project over two years was felt by two of the schools to be too long a period of time, a year-long project may be more effective in gaining commitment from all schools.

A timetable of events and dates organised at the initial meeting or launch of the project may ensure better attendance at all of the events.