Speech

The importance of storytelling

From: Department for Education and Nick Gibb MP
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Nick Gibb explains how storytelling stretches children's vocabularies, expands their horizons and extends their ability to learn.

People of my generation will remember the late comedian Max Bygraves and his famous catchphrase, "I wanna tell you a story".

The reception Bygraves's catchphrase always gained demonstrates the timeless pleasure of being told a good story. This is a pleasure that National Storytelling Week celebrates, and I am delighted to be a part of the events today.

Over the years I have spoken a lot about the importance of initial literacy, and how all the evidence, both in this country and internationally, points to systematic synthetic phonics as the best way to teach young children to decode and read words.

Learning to decode words is the vital first step in becoming a confident reader. It is a necessary condition without which children will spend years struggling with reading, but it is only a first step. Today, I want to talk about the importance of storytelling, of children being read to and told stories, not only in the years before they start school but throughout their education.

A 2003 American study called 'The early catastrophe' by Professors Hart and Risley, found that an American child from a professional family will experience 2,153 words an hour by the age of 3. This compares to a child from the most disadvantaged background who will experience only 616 words an hour.

That amounts to a 30-million-word gap between the least and most advantaged 3-year-old.

Similar findings exist in the UK. According to Department for Education data on early years pupils, the widest attainment gap, when comparing pupils eligible for free school meals and all others, is in reading and writing.

Why does this matter? Because conversation and storytelling widen a child's vocabulary, and a wide vocabulary is decisive in becoming a confident reader. As the cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham has written, it is possible to read a text slightly pitched above your understanding, as the meaning of unfamiliar words can be deduced from the context. However, as the number of unfamiliar words increases, your ability to 'get the gist' drops rapidly.

So, the more words a child knows at an early age, the greater their ability to read challenging texts. This in turn increases their ability to learn more words, and so on and so forth, in a positive feedback loop of vocabulary accumulation. The word gap which researchers identify amongst children aged 3, can be a gulf by the time pupils take their GCSEs.

The reading expert Keith Stanovich has dubbed this positive feedback loop 'the Matthew effect', after the verse in the Gospel of Mathew telling the parable of the talents: "to those who have, more shall be given, but from those who have not, even what

they have shall be taken away."

As a government, we are dedicated to improving the life chances of young people. All pupils should be given the best start in life by their schooling, irrespective of birth or background. If you believe in social justice then you will want state education to do all that it can to remedy the education gap between those from advantaged, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is difficult to overstate the benefits of instilling a love of reading in a child. According to research by the OECD, reading for pleasure is more important than a family's socio-economic status in determining a child's success at school.

This finding is supported by the work of Dr Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown at the Institute of Education. From analysing the educational outcomes of around 6,000 children who participated in the 1970 British Cohort Study, they found that reading for pleasure is more important for a child's cognitive development between 10 and 16 than their parents' level of education.

Remarkably, the combined effect of reading books often, going to the library regularly and reading newspapers at 16 was 4 times greater than the advantage children gained from having a parent with a degree. These findings show that given the gift of reading, a child's life chances need not be limited by their social or economic background. Deprivation need not be destiny.

And let us not forget the immeasurable benefit that stories can have in widening a child's imagination, transporting them to entirely new and unfamiliar places - geographically, historically and emotionally. Getting lost in a good story can allow you to discover more about the world, more about humankind, and more about yourself.

We are living through something of a golden age of children's books, with 'Percy Jackson' novels transporting young readers to mythology of ancient Greece, and 'The Hunger Games' landing them in a dystopian future. It is extremely reassuring that, according to the latest annual survey from the National Literacy Trust, enjoyment and frequency of reading amongst 8- to 18-year-olds are both at their highest levels for 9 years.

Reading independently, being read to, and engaging in conversation are all vitally important for a child's development. But today I would like to make a particular case for the importance of being read stories.

Research has shown that the vocabulary of general conversation is surprisingly impoverished, compared to the vocabulary we find in written material. This was demonstrated by 2 American reading experts who ranked 86,000 word forms in the English language according to the frequency with which they occurred in written English.

The word ranked first is 'the'. 'It' is ranked 10th. 'Amplifier' is ranked 16,000th - you get the drift.

Using this data, the researchers then measured different forms of written and spoken English. In children's books, the average word is ranked 627th most frequent. The average word used in conversation between university graduates, however, ranks only 496th most frequent.

In other words, even highly educated people use less sophisticated vocabulary when speaking than the words used in a typical children's book. Which is why it is so important not just to talk to children but to read to them as well. Story time is a crucial part of any primary school's timetable, as it has such

power to build a child's vocabulary. The type of story or book being read can be more challenging than a book the child chooses to read for him or herself.

Of course, National Storytelling Week celebrates the oral tradition of storytelling: fables, folk tales and fairy lore. As long as human civilisation has existed, we have shared stories. For those looking to communicate a message, encapsulating it in a well told story has long been the most effective method.

Would the teachings of the Bible have been so powerful had Jesus never told the story of the Good Samaritan, but simply instructed his followers to care for all humankind? Would children the world over know that 'slow and steady wins the race', had the ancient Greek slave Aesop not parcelled that message in his fable 'The Hare and the Tortoise'?

Aesop and Jesus were not just good storytellers, they were expert cognitive psychologists. Humans are hard-wired to remember stories, to the point that psychologists have referred to stories as 'psychologically privileged' in the human mind.

The best teachers have always based their lessons, knowingly or unknowingly, on this insight. As some psychologists suggest, a good story encourages the listener to be continually making small inferences, working out how the narrative is going to develop and resolve, thus keeping their attention throughout.

For mathematics teachers introducing pupils to the concept of volume, you can do a lot worse than retelling the story of Archimedes in the bath. Few children can forget the image of Archimedes running through the streets of Syracuse naked, exclaiming 'Eureka!'.

If a history teacher wants pupils to learn about the African-American struggle for civil rights, the stories of Emmet Till and Rosa Parks can capture attention and aid memory like little else. If a science teacher wants pupils to remember the properties of antibiotics, then the story of how Alexander Fleming first discovered penicillin is ideal.

I understand that Snail Tales are currently undertaking their own controlled trial looking into the benefits of storytelling for long-term memory, and I look forward to hearing their findings.

But to return to the question of ensuring all pupils become confident readers.

Mastering the mechanics of decoding has to be the first objective - it is the gateway towards being a successful reader. This is best achieved through structured schemes of systematic phonics, with plenty of practice reading books that are consistent with the level of phonic knowledge the child has been taught.

The second objective of the English curriculum is practice - encouraging children to improve the fluency and speed of their reading by reading large numbers of books. The more you read, the more vocabulary you acquire and the easier it becomes to comprehend.

For this reason, I would like to see every pupil in years 3 to 6 of primary school reading at least 1 book a week. 'A book a week' should be the mantra for anyone hoping to eliminate illiteracy in this country.

The third objective of the English curriculum is to help pupils read more challenging books. Teachers should set for their classes those books that are slightly more challenging than the ones pupils would elect to read on their own. And that too involves teachers reading to their pupils.

From my own education I remember being read to throughout my time at school: from 'Stig of the Dump' at junior school, to Alastair MacLean, Hammond Innes, and L P Hartley's 'The Go-Between' in the third year of secondary school. After the first couple of pages read to us by the teacher, pupils would take it in turns to read aloud the next sections. We did this, I remember, with 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' in the fourth year, 'Great Expectations' in the fifth year and even on into the sixth form where we read together as a class D H Lawrence's 'The Rainbow' and Steinbeck's 'The Grapes of Wrath'.

This process gave me the confidence to take on challenging books, that were much more difficult than those I would otherwise have chosen. And it worked - I went on to read many more MacLean, Dickens, Lawrence and Steinbeck books thanks to my teachers.

I do question why, when I am on school visits, I see teachers in the first 3 years of secondary school already using English literature lessons to prepare for GCSE-style questions. Instead of GCSE-style analysis of the text, should those lessons not be used to spread the sheer enjoyment of reading, through introducing pupils to a wide and varied diet of English and world literature? I am sure this would be far better preparation for their eventual examinations than a premature obsession with exam technique.

And this brings me to the fourth and final objective: the canon. It is important that schools introduce pupils to the great works of English literature, that lend pupils an intellectual hinterland to draw upon for the rest of their lives. Of course, the exact make-up of the canon will always be a matter of debate and disagreement, but the existence of the canon should not be.

Through our reforms to the English literature GCSE, children are being encouraged to read more challenging titles in years 10 and 11. Prior to our reforms, around 90% of pupils in the English literature GCSE delivered by one exam board answered questions on a single text: ‘Of Mice and Men’. Now, John Steinbeck is a great author (‘East of Eden’ is my all-time favourite book - it’s the Great American Novel) but even I doubt this short novella was deserving of such overwhelming attention.

Since September, pupils have been studying the reformed English literature GCSE for the first time, including the study of both a 19th century novel and a modern book. Instead of a strict diet of Steinbeck, pupils can read George Orwell and Jane Austen, Kazuo Ishiguro and Charlotte Bronte - and they will be reading the whole novel, not just extracts.

For now, the important point is - as Max Bygraves might have said - children wanna hear a story. If we are to deliver an

education that closes the word gap, closes the reading gap, and thus closes the achievement gap, we need to introduce our children to as many stories as we can.

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