

Children's storytelling workshops

1. Why ?

➤ PREAMBLE

I am a teacher specialising in teaching assistance for pupils in great difficulty. I'm also a storyteller. For several years, I conducted both activities independently of each other, my artistic practice not crossing my pedagogical practice. It was the meeting with the Africanist ethnolinguist Suzy Platiel that allowed me to connect them. Thanks to Suzy, I discovered how storytelling could also be an educational tool.

➤ SUZY PLATIEL'S WORKS

This researcher was sent to Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) in 1967 to study an exclusively oral culture population, the Sanan. She wrote a thesis in 1974 on the organisation and functioning of this society. She was particularly interested in their educational methods, based solely on oral transmission and without school. Suzy Platiel discovered that storytelling plays an essential role in educating children to become well-integrated adults in their society.

According to her, listening to tales and telling stories is part of the formation of being in all its human, individual and social dimensions. This allows:

- Language learning

- Acquisition of logical reasoning structures thanks to the syntactic construction of tales organised from the conclusion to which the tale leads in a succession of cause/consequence relations.
- Setting up symbolisation mechanisms thanks to the stereotypical character of the characters in the tales
- Vocabulary acquisition
- Structuring the time and use of verbs through the use of the simple past, the imperfect, the present ...
- Differentiation between narrative and dialogue, experimentation of direct and indirect style
- Exploring the relation between oral language and written language that facilitates access to writing for pupils who are far from it.

- Transversal learning

- Improvement of listening and concentration assisted by symbolic images that speak strongly to children
- Appropriate type of memorisation, not based on writing, hence the need to reactivate it regularly and collectively through the repetition of tales.
- Sensitisation to body language (gestures, voice) that allows children in difficulty to mime gestures and intonations before gradually engaging themselves in speech and trying to tell stories. Children also learn to listen to what the other person's body says, beyond words.
- Construction of mental images that scroll through the head while the story is told and serve as a support for remembrance. In addition, the ability to translate a narrative into

mental images helps to understand and produce written texts.

- Social bond building

- Space for expression, creativity where it is not a question to repeat an identical tale but, starting from its frame, to tell it with its own words, its own images, its gestures ...
- Respect for diversity because we learn to welcome the interpretation of the tale given by each person
- Solidarity because the story involves all participants: the one who tells and those who listen, ready to help punctually if necessary
- Pleasure to share the emotions (laughs, fears ...) triggered by the story, which reinforces the links between the participants
- Appropriation of an heritage common to the group (the corpus of chosen stories) belonging itself, more broadly, to the intangible heritage of humanity
- Messages conveyed by tales that question the codes related to the universal of humanity at the same time as those related to a specific society. Often the messages act in an unconscious way, but sometimes a child can verbalise the question that the story asks him and the group can then discuss it collectively.

It is for all these reasons that Suzy Platiel thought it was necessary to complement our traditional teaching based on writing by drawing inspiration from the Sanan model and to teach pupils, through storytelling heard and told, the use and mastery of oral language, which is the basis for mastery of writing.

She therefore developed a seemingly simple protocol: **make pupils regularly listen to tales** (without written support and without immediate pedagogical exploitation) and **encourage them to tell a tale of their choice**.

2. How ?

➤ A SECURE ENVIRONMENT

In order to reassure the children and encourage them to speak, many points in the organisation of the workshops that I propose, inspired by the works of Suzy Platiel, are ritualised:

- workshops always take place in the same place. The space is arranged so that each participant (adult, child) can see everyone and be seen by all. The ideal is to sit in a circle, all at the same level, either on the floor or on chairs.
- workshops take place at a regular pace, usually once a week, at a specific time of day, always the same.
- each session begins with an introductory ritual, that is, a formula accompanied by gestures. For example :

"To be able to welcome stories, I open my ears, open my heart, open my mind"

Very quickly, the formula is memorised and it is a child who says it for me, the others accompanying him by doing the gestures.

"And to open one's mind, a little riddle..."

The riddles are inserted between the stories. The children particularly appreciate them and over the course of the sessions, they, too, propose some

Each tale is also introduced by an entry small formula "*In the water of my memory, I fish stories*" and ends with an exit formula "*One word here, one word there, my tale ends there* ». This allows each child to identify the boundaries between the real world and the imaginary world of storytelling.

- each session ends with a ritual of mutual acceptance to meet again the next week to share stories again.

The respect of the word of others, the strong point of this device, is also a reassuring and encouraging element:

- for the adult animator (teacher, storyteller, educator...), it is the commitment to invite the child to tell a story heard but without forcing him/her and without intervening to correct his/her words (provided the story remains comprehensible).

- for the storytelling child, it is the opportunity to speak in front of his classmates and to assume alone the entirety of a story without being interrupted, or to ask for help to another child if he needs it. He knows that he can also rely on the repeat of chorus-parts by the collective (cf paragraph on the corpus of stories).

It is also the freedom to enrich his narrative of motifs that he invents provided he respects the plot of the tale he has heard. This prompts him to build a living speech, partly memorised, partly improvised.

- for the child listener, it is the commitment not to interfere with others' listening and to intervene only if the storyteller asks for help.

➤ THE CORPUS OF TALES

The idea is to offer a regular listening-pleasure of stories to make children want to tell without any written support (book...). It is therefore very important to choose stories that are both age-appropriate and tales that you like yourself.

The first sessions are short (no more than 30 minutes for nursery school children), two stories, a few rhymes and riddles. The time and number of stories told increases as pupils' attention span increases.

The same tale is told many times in order to allow its memorisation.

For example, for the little ones, I tell two stories the first time. I take them back to the second session. At the third session, I repeat one of the two and introduce a new one. The following sessions alternate new stories and the repetition of known stories.

The stories I choose are of varying length and complexity:

- small shapes: finger games, rhymes, riddles

- hiking tales, built on reworks and repetitions structures that facilitate memorisation. Like, for example:

"Grandpa can't get the rutabaga out of the earth.

He calls Grandma: "Grandma, come and help me! Grandma grabs Grandpa, Grandpa grabs the rutabaga leaves. They pull, they pull, but the big, fat, huge rutabaga doesn't move!

They call the boy. "Boy, come and help us! The boy grabs Grandma, Grandma grabs Grandpa, Grandpa grabs the leaves of the rutabaga. They pull, they pull, but the big, the fat, the huge rutabaga doesn't move!... etc... etc..."

Children, especially the little ones, appreciate these stories very much. When the tale is memorised, the storyteller, adult or child, only has to introduce each new character and it is the rest of the group that takes over the sequence of elements. This creates real moments of shared pleasure.

- linear tales telling the story of a hero's journey. They are more or less long and complex,

but always have chorus-parts, often sung, that chant the story and are repeated in chorus by the group.

The younger the children, the more important these chorus-parts are. But even for the older ones, they are a great help when they are starting out for the first time.

3. Impact

In all the schools where the workshops were offered over a sufficiently long period of time (a dozen sessions with me and then continued by the teachers until the end of the school year), the results were extremely positive.

➤ SOME TEACHERS' TESTIMONIES

"When my pupils want to tell something, their speech does not go in all directions. They order what they have to say." (Magalie, nursery school)

"They reuse vocabulary, some of the words memorised when they tell a tale." (Julie, nursery school)

"The ability they have acquired to create and link mental images also helps them to better understand what they read." (Simon, middle course)

"They have increased their capacity and quality of listening, even without visual aids." (Marie, nursery school - Pierre, middle course)

"The atmosphere in the classroom has changed. Pupils listen more to each other." (Magali, elementary course)

"They gained self-confidence, they gained confidence to speak in public." (Laure, preparatory course)

"They write longer texts for the school newspaper, they have much more to tell." (Odile, elementary course)

For my part, I am always struck by the pleasure and the commitment of the children in the storytelling, whether the speech is individual or collective.

It is a great pleasure to offer them, at school, a space where they do not speak to answer the questions asked by the adult but to build themselves as an individual within a group, respecting the word of the other and building on it to progress.

It is a great joy to see them rejoice in each other's successes and discoveries, far from any competitive spirit.

Suzy Platiel's words take on their full meaning:

"The tale is a wonderful tool for education, humanity and the construction of the social bond."

For more information (see also the references proposed by Marie-Claire):

Platiel, S. (1993) L'enfant face au conte. Cahiers de Littérature Orale 33 163-176. Paris, France : Publications Langues O. <http://llacan.vjf.cnrs.fr/publications/CONTE.pdf>

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