

Thomas Buxton Junior School

Kahini

Summary

Kahini, meaning 'stories' in Bengali, was a whole-school story-telling project at Thomas Buxton Junior School, which aimed to develop imagination and oracy skills in children and promote creative approaches to literacy. From November 2004 to March 2005 the school worked with artists from performance poetry organisation Apples and Snakes.

School context

Thomas Buxton is a Junior School for around 200 children in Whitechapel, Tower Hamlets, serving an area 'characterised by pockets of deprivation, high unemployment and overcrowded homes' (Ofsted, 2002). All of the children in the school speak English as an additional language; 62% receive free school meals. The school is academically highly successful, with year 6 pupils attaining standards well above the national average, particularly in maths and science.

Promoting children's oracy has been a priority for the school for some years, and more recently it has also begun to address what deputy headteacher and Creative Partnerships co-ordinator Brian Walton terms the 'creativity agenda', developing cross-curricular and creative approaches to teaching core subjects. Kahini, a whole-school story-telling project devised with performance poetry organisation Apples & Snakes, addressed both issues. It aimed to engage children's imagination and develop their confidence and enjoyment in speaking; and to enable teachers to explore creative approaches to literacy and oracy.

This case study explores the outcomes of Kahini in the context of the Creative Partnerships objective to develop children's imaginative skills, and examines the impact of the project on the school and creative partner. It is based on interviews with storytellers from Apples & Snakes, staff and children held in March 2005. These took place towards the end of the project, but before its final celebration, when the school was transformed for a day into a story-telling bazaar for children and parents. Staff and artists had not, therefore, had the opportunity to reflect on the project as a whole at the time of the interviews.

The project

Kahini took as its starting point the theme of change within traditional stories. Three artists from Apples & Snakes led the project: Sally Pomme Clayton and Helen East, both highly experienced storytellers and performers, and Shamim Azad, a storyteller and poet who works in both Bengali and English. Shamim teaches part-time at Thomas Buxton Infants School and has recently trained as a poet-in-education with Apples & Snakes.

The school has previous experience of whole-school projects in music and art, but Kahini was its most ambitious project to date. It had broad aims in terms of the development not just of children's oracy and literacy skills, but also of teachers' creativity; it further aimed to promote change in the school, building more effective communication and teamwork. The project was launched in September 2004 with an INSET where staff shared and developed stories. It was intended that staff would lead story-telling sessions alongside the artists, maintaining the focus on teacher development throughout the project; this proved too complicated to timetable, although some teachers have created and performed stories.

Each year group took part in six story-telling sessions, shared between two artists. Children listened to a story, and then were encouraged to tell it back to the storyteller, or to each other, adding their own ideas and characters. They used props, musical instruments, body language and body percussion (sounds produced by body parts) to animate their stories, created new stories using objects as starting points, and were invited to share stories they had heard at home. Visual work was an important aspect of the project: children imagined and painted settings for their stories, and created storyboards, folded paper books they described as story-covers, and decorated story-cloths with symbols representing aspects of the story.

Members of the School Council, representing all year groups, were enthusiastic about the project. They were inspired by the artists, in particular seeing Sally 'acting as several people'. Children described some of the techniques they had learned: using actions, sounds and expressions, using dynamics – 'making our eyes big', using fingers and story-covers to remember the different parts of the story. They enjoyed the imaginative processes of the project: year 6 children described imagining themselves as an animal; a child from year 4 described the 'mind movie' he used to imagine a story. They had enjoyed talking 'more than the teachers'. Children thought the project would help them write better stories in the future: 'drawing pictures instead of sentences helps you tell the story'; 'you can take your own experiences and use them in stories'.

Teachers felt the project had met or exceeded expectations for the children. Oracy skills were felt to have improved, particularly in very shy children. The project had raised children's self-esteem: Brian Lee, a year 3 teacher, observed that children felt 'valued, listened to, encouraged to contribute' by the artists. The impact on imaginative skills was evident from the way that children generated and developed stories. Brian Walton commented that 'the stories are never the same... every time they go off on weird tangents or become more structured'. Artists observed the development of children's concentration and listening skills during the project, demonstrated by their ability to re-tell the stories. They felt that children had developed an understanding of story structure, which would help with their writing. Shamim is proud that children will now describe themselves as story-tellers, and that they have been able to explore their own cultural origins through Bangladeshi folktales. Brian Walton feels, above all, that 'every child has a story', and that their enjoyment and enthusiasm for learning has grown.

The impact of the project on teachers appears more uneven. Sally and Helen both argue that the development of teachers' creativity requires time away from the demands of the classroom. Some teachers have undoubtedly developed new skills from the project: Madeha and Maleha Al-Bayati, year 5 and 6 teachers respectively, responded with enthusiasm to the opportunity to develop their story-telling skills, which they now use in class. Brian Lee, however, saw the project as valuable but discrete, unconnected to day-to-day teaching. Embedding the project into the curriculum demanded strong partnerships between teachers and artists. The artists Sally and Helen felt that the partnerships would have been stronger had teachers been allowed to opt into the project, and more time been allocated from the start of the project for joint planning between artists and teachers.

Reflections

Brian Walton admits that Kahini has been challenging. It was planned at a time of unforeseen management changes in the school, and he was only able to take responsibility for the project after it had been set up. Despite this difficult start, however, he feels that the project has been successful in its long-term aims as well as its impact on the children: he sees it as a catalyst for change, a step towards developing creativity throughout the curriculum. Lisa Mead, Education Manager at Apples & Snakes, agrees that the project has a positive learning process; she feels it has given her a new understanding of the particular demands of a long-term residency in a school. She strikes a note of caution, however, echoed by the artists Sally and Helen: a creative residency, even long-term, cannot in itself effect profound change. In the drive to embed creativity across the curriculum, we should not lose sight of the value, simply, of exposure to the arts: a point underlined by the enthusiastic response of the children at Thomas Buxton to artists and stories.